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Being far away from what you need: the impact of dispersal on resettled refugees' homemaking and place attachment in small to medium-sized towns in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT
Based on semi-structured interviews with 10 families and one single person from Syria who were resettled under the EU Turkey Statement, this article looks into processes of homemaking and place attachment in small to medium-sized towns in the Netherlands. We distinguish between homemaking practices in and around the house and in the neighbourhood, and also look at the wider transnational social environment of refugees in order to understand how Syrian resettled refugees experience everyday life in the Dutch small to medium-sized towns to which they are dispersed. What constraints and opportunities do they experience in everyday life and how are resettled refugees becoming part of the community after being dispersed upon arrival? And how do resettled refugees who were identified as exceptionally vulnerable, experience the transition, upon arrival, to an integration system which relies heavily on refugees using their own agency?

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Small towns; place attachment; homemaking; refugees; resettlement

Introduction

> It was hard for us to believe what was happening when we left Turkey for the Netherlands. Some people pay so much money to go to Europe, whereas, for us, it was handed to us like a gift.

In this article, we focus on Syrian refugees who were resettled to the Netherlands as part of the EU Turkey Statement[1] and we ask how processes of homemaking evolve for them in the locations to which they have been dispersed. As Collyer et al. (2018) note, refugee resettlement offers a route of arrival which is distinct from the asylum system. However, not much is known about how resettled refugees in the Netherlands become part of the community after being dispersed upon arrival and how they develop feelings of home (COA 2013; Heuts et al. 2012; Schol et al. 2013). Although Dutch dispersal policy was implemented in the early 1990s, there is little insight into how refugees experience dispersal to small towns after the completion of resettlement

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procedures. In their study of the settlement experiences of Syrian male refugees, Huizinga and van Hoven (2018) note that 'the Dutch government currently underemphasises the interaction between refugees and place in the context of refugee spatial dispersal policy' (2018, 314).

Most research on refugees and homemaking focuses on large cities and suggests that cities, in general, offer an environment which is easier for refugees to become used to (Van Gent 2016; Larsen 2011). They also show that the multicultural atmosphere in larger cities benefits intercultural contact (Klaver et al. 2014; Larsen 2011). Research on dispersal in other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, highlights how newcomers are dispersed to socially deprived urban areas where they are more likely to experience racism and institutionalised marginality (Phillimore 2020; Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2006). Little is known, however, about how dispersal to and settlement in small to medium-sized towns is experienced by refugees, particularly by those who arrived via resettlement programmes.

Something that sets the group of resettled refugees apart from other refugees is that they have gone through a programme in which they were identified as exceptionally vulnerable and thus entitled to the so-called 'resettlement gift' or, as some people call, it the 'refugee jackpot' (Kakebeeke and Blankevoort 2011). In some country contexts, such as Canada, resettled refugees are known to fare better than spontaneous refugees in terms of integration outcomes and scholars suggests this is in part due to the fact they arrive with their case pre-decided and have better access to welfare services (Phillimore 2020).

The transition, upon arrival, however, to an integration system which relies heavily on refugees using their own agency in the process of settling in, is quite extreme. As in Denmark (Careja 2018), the Dutch Integration Act (2013) explicitly states that integration is the immigrant's *own* responsibility while the state facilitates and supports their settlement.[2] The law on Civic Integration, for instance, grants municipalities the policy freedom to introduce core Dutch values in a manner that is consistent with both local needs and the needs of the migrant[3] and encourages cooperation with non-state actors to achieve the stated outcomes. The policy freedom and the involvement of private and civil society actors not only enables the local development of tailored integration and participation programmes in the Netherlands, it also gives rise to considerable local-level divergence (Oomen and Leenders 2019). As Bonjour and Duyvendak (2018) observe, these developments in the field of civic integration form part of a wider trend affecting social policies, in which responsibility is increasingly shifted away from the state towards the individual migrant, whose successful integration is framed as something depending primarily on personal skills and attitudes. We expect the transition towards a more agentic system to be different for resettled refugees and for those housed in small towns and medium-sized towns rather than in larger cities because the support infrastructure is different with less migrant related services and smaller migrant communities. There is thus an urgent need to examine how this transition from dependent actors within the resettlement and dispersal process to active roles in a local integration programme is evolving for resettled refugees and how this is experienced in small and medium-sized towns across the Netherlands.

Refugee resettlement and selections on different levels

Refugee resettlement is distinct from the asylum system in that these refugees are identified by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in countries of first asylum on the basis of their vulnerability. Different criteria apply, such as the need for legal and physical protection, survivors of violence and torture, medical needs, women at risk, family reunification, children and adolescents, elderly refugees, and a lack of local integration prospects. In the case of resettlement from Turkey, the UNHCR decides who can be resettled based on an initial selection and list from the Turkish government. When the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) receives information from the UNHCR about potential candidates for resettlement in the Netherlands, further selection is made that not only follows humanitarian principles in determining eligibility but also gives advice with regard to how the candidate would potentially be able to integrate into Dutch society. The Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) works since 2005 with the criterion 'willingness to integrate' which is defined as 'the willingness to learn the language, have labour market experience to earn an independent income, the willingness to adapt and be open to Western/Dutch norms and values and evidence that people have taken actions that illustrate this willingness' (TK 19637, nr. 1071, page 3). Criticism along the lines of cherry-picking has been formulated by politicians. The official answer to this critique has been that this criterion is useful in rejecting cases where there are 'obvious adaptation problems' and possible security threats (TK 19 637, nr 1126, 2007). Under normal asylum procedure, integration is not tested because this is not considered a criterion for needing protection. With resettlement, it is possible to set additional criteria because these refugees are selectively invited. As part of their resettlement process, resettled refugees to the Netherlands receive information about the procedure and the destination country. This pre-departure preparation supports refugees' initial steps towards integration in the country of arrival (see also Collyer et al. 2018) and informs them about what is going to happen.

Dutch dispersal policy in context

Upon arrival, resettled refugees are usually immediately dispersed and provided with housing in the Netherlands and do not have to stay in reception centres, as asylum-seekers do. However, resettled refugees are sometimes temporarily accommodated in reception centres until housing is arranged. After their allocation to a municipality, they receive a one-time housing offer by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) (Arnoldus, Dukes, and Musterd 2003; de Hoon 2017). Although there is no formal obligation to accept this offer and refugees can take up residence anywhere and find housing independently, in practice this is difficult due to tight housing markets and the refugees' lack of social networks.

In the Dutch context, dispersal therefore only applies to the allocation of housing to refugees after successful completion of their asylum procedure. In other countries, dispersal starts earlier, when asylum-seekers are still going through the procedure (Arnoldus, Dukes, and Musterd 2003; Darling 2014; Van Liempt 2011). Dutch municipalities are obliged by law to offer housing to recognised refugees and can be penalised for failing to do so. The Dutch Housing Act (2014) lays down the principles and formula

of the target setting, which is set bi-annually for each municipality by the Ministry of the Interior, based on the total population of the municipality and an estimation of the number of permit-holders requiring housing that year (Arnoldus, Dukes, and Musterd 2003; de Hoon 2017). The general philosophy behind Dutch dispersal policy for refugees is to 'spread the burden', which refers to sharing the responsibility for and the financial costs of housing refugees between municipalities in a fair, objective and transparent manner through a dispersal key. This distribution is also a way to depoliticise the presence of refugees and to avoid the risk of political contestation (Darling 2014). The concern with 'fair burden-sharing' has historically been driven by a fear that the concentration of refugees in bigger cities would result in segregation and deprivation (Arnoldus, Dukes, and Musterd 2003). It is therefore indirectly also premised on the normative idea that deconcentration helps the integration process of refugees as they are expected to immerse themselves in the host society in order to get to know their surroundings, the host culture and the social environment (Jansen 2006; Klaver et al. 2014; Larsen 2011).

Although immigration integration policies in the Netherlands changed considerably as a result of shifts in policy paradigms (see Duyvendak and Scholten 2012), Dutch dispersal policy has largely remained unchanged. The distribution key upon which the target setting for refugees is based, has, for instance, not been adjusted since 1995, after it was first implemented in the early 1990s (Jansen 2006, 126). This does not mean that the dispersal policy was not subject to criticism or public scrutiny. In recent years, the allocation procedure through which refugees are 'matched' with municipalities has been adjusted to incorporate additional matching criteria, such as the refugees' fields of work experience. The dispersal system, however, still hardly incorporates refugees' concerns, such as the availability of a preexisting social network in a specific place (Razenberg, Rozema, and Hootsen 2014, 96) or the refugees' preference for an urban or suburban environment.

In countries, such as the United Kingdom, where dispersal is applied during asylum procedures, scholars have examined how it results in 'dislocation' as dispersal affects access to justice, legal advice and representation, and therefore by extension, one's exposure to precarity (Darling 2014; Burridge and Gill 2017). In the Netherlands dispersal only happens after completion of asylum procedures. Besides, resettled refugees in the Netherlands already have legal status upon arrival. It is nevertheless important to consider different urban/rural dispersal locations (see Phillimore 2020), as well as to examine if these various applications of dispersal instruments give rise to different effects on integration outcomes and homemaking practices.

Homemaking and place attachment amongst resettled refugees

In the literature, it is shown that forced migration often leads to a 'roots shock' as refugees need to learn how to re-root in a new environment and feel safe again. The metaphor of 'taking up roots' (Ghorashi 2014) is often used to refer to the process by which refugees settle down somewhere and make a new home. Housing can provide refuge in a social and psychological sense and a home can bring ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1998) which is very important for refugees who have already experienced much insecurity. Homemaking can also contribute to a sense of belonging to a place, the building of a network and identity formation. Scannell and Gifford (2010) for

example argue that attachment to place is also related to identity and self-perception. For refugees, material objects and decorating the house can also be important for coming to terms with past experiences of dispossession and enable people to re-engage with everyday life (Ryan-Saha 2015).

But homemaking is also a process that costs a lot of physical and emotional energy (Dowling and Mee 2007) especially for refugees who often do not speak the language, have distinct cultural backgrounds and have suffered from unsafe situations. For those resettled refugees who have ended up in small towns, it is expected to be even more difficult as being located at a great distance from relatives or other migrant community members with whom people wish to connect has an impact on how they feel at home in their new environment (Witteborn 2011).

Home is moreover often associated with rootedness and length of residency in a particular place (Gustafson 2006; Scannell and Gifford 2010). In relation to place attachment and displacement, many authors found evidence that suggests the relevance of affect in bonding with a place (Lewicka 2011; Scannell and Gifford 2010). Rishbeth and Powell (2013) argue that gaining knowledge of the locality is also a priority in the homemaking process. In line of this thinking Capo (2015) argues that creating a feeling of home and a sense of belonging is not only bound to a person's house but is also related to the person's attachment to the neighbourhood. It is not clear to what extent the neighbourhood really matters in the context of small towns and here we agree with Amin (2013)'s critique on telescopic urbanism where specific sites, such as the neighbourhood seem to have been overemphasised by scholars who focus predominantly on larger cities.

People also tend to feel at home because of the emotions, memories and activities that are associated with home itself (Savaş 2014). For refugees who have been forced to move and who are newcomers in European societies, this is particularly relevant. They have not been living here that long and it will take them some time to develop place attachment based on length of residency (Ng 1998). What they do have is their memories from past homes and aspirations for the future that are entangled with perceptions of places, which are important in the first stage of settling in. As such homemaking needs to take the subjective dimension into account and needs to be seen as a transnational phenomenon. We move beyond the 'territorial trap' that treats small towns and neighbourhoods as 'delimited containers' (Meeus, van Heur, and Arnaut 2019) and do not restrict the scope to the current house and the neighbourhood when we discuss homemaking and perceptions of belonging amongst resettled refugees in small Dutch towns.

Methodology

To understand how resettled refugees feel at home in their dispersal location, we contacted the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), which is responsible for the housing of resettled refugees in the Netherlands. There was no other way to identify resettled refugees as they do not differ from asylum seekers in where they are housed or the support they receive after arrival. COA helped us in the recruitment process by sending a letter to 50 Syrian families who were resettled under the EU Turkey Statement. Of these, 15 people replied and consented to an interview. In the end, we conducted 11 interviews with 10 families and 1 single person (21 interviewees[4] in total (10 women and 11 men)). Interviews were done with the help of Arabic-speaking

translators. Four of the interviewees were elderly who had already reached or were approaching retirement age. Some families had adult children who were still residing in Syria or Turkey and were not included in the resettlement process. All our respondents lived in large cities in Syria with, back then, numbers of inhabitants ranging between 200,000 (Afrin), 650,000 (Homs) and 2 million (Aleppo). This is relevant, as research shows that place attachment towards particular environments is also influenced by people's personal history (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2016; Scannell and Gifford 2010). Their economic backgrounds varied, in most cases, fathers were the sole income providers in Syria. Some of them had worked in construction and car manufacturing, others as physiotherapists, carpenters, plumbers and shopkeepers. A few of the women had worked or studied in Syria in childcare or the textiles industry, but most had been involved in care work at home. The one single refugee had lived and worked abroad in Kuwait and worked there in IT. Interviewees had diverse professional backgrounds, but what they had in common is that they had all been forced to change jobs in Syria and Turkey because of war and protracted displacement.

Geographically our respondents were dispersed all over the Netherlands (see Figure 1), but most ended up in small to medium-sized towns, with the exception of one respondent who was housed in Rotterdam (see Table 1). Although size is a less complex measure than (city) scale (Schlee 2011) it is, nonetheless, a relative concept and should be understood within the Dutch context. The Dutch Central Agency for Statistics (CBS) defines small municipalities as those with a population of fewer than 50,000

Figure 1. Dispersal location of Syrian respondents who were resettled from Turkey to the Netherlands in 2016.

Table 1. Description of the dispersal municipalities of respondents.

Town	Size	Municipality	Size	% population non-Western ethnic minority	Degree of urbanity (*Stedelijkheid*)	Nearest hospital in km	Nearest high school in km	Nearest station in km
Lekkerkerk	7680	Krimpenerwaard	55,204	0.03	4	11.2	3.6	10.9
Musselkanaal	7235	Stadskanaal	32,252	0.04	4	5.6	3.0	18.6
Rotterdam	634,660	Rotterdam	634,660	0.38	1	2.8	1.1	2.9
Nibbixwoud	2420	Medemblik	43,604	0.03	5	13.7	5.3	8.8
Nistelrode	5270	Bernheze	29,880	0.02	5	7.3	4.8	8.1
Nieuwekerk/Ijsel	21,595	Zuidplas	41,468	0.08	2	7.1	3.0	3.4
Rijnsburg	15,840	Katwijk	63,633	0.03	2	2.9	0.7	4.8
Ter Apel	9300	Vlagtwedde	16,212	0.07	4	16.5	1.5	16.8
Wapenveld	6115	Heerde	18,556	0.02	5	6.6	5.1	7.2
Wassenaar	25,885	Wassenaar	25,885	0.10	3	1.7	1.9	4.4
Wijk bij Duurstede	17,515	Wijk bij Duurstede	23,384	0.06	3	8.6	1.2	11.0

Source: CBS (2017).

residents. Some of these places were very small, such as the village of Nibbixwoud with its 2420 residents; however, this locality is part of a municipality with approximately 42,000 residents. The size of the locality, in other words, is not the same as the size of the municipality. As Barberis and Pavolini (2015) note, it is not only size that matters because the meaning of 'size' can vary widely according to the urban system in which the 'small' town is inserted. Social and financial support provided to refugees, after their dispersal, is the responsibility of the municipality, which is given considerable discretion as to how this support is provided. Integration opportunity-structures (see Phillimore 2020), are not only linked to local area conditions, such as services, but also to institutional arrangements of the municipality.

During two of the 11 interviews, a volunteer from the Dutch Refugee Council was present. The interviews were conducted between 7 and 14 months after people had moved to their municipality. In the invitation letters and calls interviewees were invited to suggest an interview location. As respondents suggested that the interview takes place in their homes, we checked during follow-up phone calls and with the help of interpreters for a social desirability bias and reiterated the possibility of alternative locations. An advantage of conducting interviews in respondents' homes is that homes are expected to be a safe and familiar environment which could lead to more in-depth conversations (Valentine 1997). Another advantage was that we were temporarily part of their daily life. During the interviews, we drank tea, listened to music, watched TV and sometimes ate pastries together. The opportunity to take a look inside the homes of the participants also resulted in the interviewers being able to identify and discuss the different homemaking rituals and practices while sharing that space. Many respondents talked about how they had to invest a lot of time and effort into decorating the house in the beginning – how they physically had to redo the house, put down a floor, paint the walls etc. All our respondents, except one family who were housed in a temporary place, were proud to show us their house and give us a tour. Some emotional moments were encountered during the interviews as we spoke about the war and material dispossession, family members who were lost and family still in war-torn areas, as well as about feelings of discrimination both in Turkey and in the Netherlands. We were careful to protect their integrity and to not force them to talk about traumatic experiences by offering them comfort or the use of a break in the interview.

In elaborating on our findings we start by discussing the migrants' preparation for resettlement in Turkey, then move to their reception and dispersal in the Netherlands; we finish by analysing several constraints faced by and opportunities for Syrian resettled refugees in the homemaking process in small Dutch towns. As they were all in the initial phase of settling in they generally focused on learning Dutch and on familiarising themselves with Dutch rules and regulations, institutions and services. None of our respondents were working (either paid or voluntary) at the time our interviews were conducted.

Preparing for a new 'home'

For many of the respondents, the story of their resettlement began when they turned to doctors to seek medical support or to Turkish municipal authorities to raise concerns about their housing or work conditions. In this search for support, they had been made aware of the resettlement programme. After their arrival in the Netherlands,

most interviewees reported on how lucky they have been and referred to the system as a 'lottery'. Everybody knew someone with a similar story who was not selected for resettlement, so they considered themselves to be extremely fortunate. When asked about the selection procedure, most people explained that they did not know the exact reason why they were selected for resettlement. In terms of the resettlement process, they talked about the practicalities involved, such as the number of interviews required to complete the resettlement process. Many praised the fact that travel and hotel accommodation were arranged and emphasised that this form of travel is in sharp contrast with the way in which asylum-seekers generally travel, often in uncomfortable, hidden and dangerous ways.

Most respondents were positive about the pre-departure orientation course and the information they received about their rights and duties in the Netherlands. They explained that being informed about the resettlement process and what to expect in the Netherlands helped them to deal with any insecurities at the start of their new adventure in a new country. Collyer et al. (2018) also found, in their study with resettled refugees in the UK, that a solid pre-departure preparation in the refugees' first country of asylum is of great support for their initial steps towards integration in the country of arrival.

First arrival in the Netherlands and experiences with dispersal

Even though people were generally informed that they would first stay in reception centres and that they would be allocated a house shortly after, they often lacked information about what this stay in reception centres and dispersal to private accommodation would mean for them. When asked about his first impressions of the Netherlands, Khaled, for instance, explained that they were transferred at night to the reception centre where his family stayed for seven days – which, according to him, 'felt like seven years' because of what he described as 'prison-like circumstances'. Interviewees also explained that they did not expect to stay in such a place after having been selected for resettlement.

Something else which caused a lot of anger and distress was that our respondents had not anticipated that it would not always be possible to be located close to family members. When people have family members already living in the Netherlands, the COA strives to allocate people to a municipality within 50 kms of these relatives (Klaver et al. 2014). Oubaida, a middle-aged plumber from Al Hasakah who was resettled with his wife Zahra and their four daughters, described how, initially, he had hoped to be resettled in the town where his brother lives. Oubaida explained:

> My brother has a car and has lived here for nine years, he could have helped us during the move with many things. But they didn't listen and didn't help us.

Instead, he received an accommodation offer in a small town in another province, approximately two hours away by public transport. Whereas Oubaida lamented the lost opportunity to live close to his brother and to benefit from his practical support during their move, others expressed concerns about having been resettled in a different town to their sons and daughters. They explained that living far away from relatives can be a burden because travel is often expensive and time-consuming. This means

that they cannot visit as often as they would like. Some respondents contrasted this with previous experiences with living in close proximity to, or even in shared houses with, first-degree relatives during their time in transit and in the country of origin. What also seemed particularly vexing for many was that they had been resettled in the Netherlands together and sometimes even travelled as a group together but were, nonetheless, dispersed to different locations.

Different perceptions of belonging

When we asked people about their first impressions of and experiences in the small to medium-sized towns to which they had been dispersed, most were grateful and felt safe there: 'We are happy to be here, it is safe and quiet'. As was pointed out earlier, ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1998) is an important element of homemaking practices for refugees. Starting an 'ordinary' life again and being able to offer their children an education was very important to our respondents.

> We were so happy when we heard we had got a house. Our children could finally go to school and we could start our life again.

Most of the families we talked to had children who had not attended school for quite some time, neither in Syria because of the war nor in Turkey because of the lack of schooling in Arabic and, in some cases, of discrimination. Some families had lived in such bad economic conditions that they felt forced to send their children out to work and earn some money to survive.

It is important to point out that feelings of belonging in small towns differed greatly amongst our respondents and that there was not one view alone. Some respondents described their town as beautiful, green or peaceful, but we also observed differences *between* and *within* families. The following account of our conversation with Khaled, Rezan and Yassin in their home is illustrative in this regard. When we sat down with them, Khaled commented that he likes living in a village. His son, Yassin (18), who lives with them, immediately responded that he would like to move to Rotterdam, to a city where things are happening. However, Khaled nodded and shook his head in disagreement. Meanwhile, Rezan also joined the conversation. Yassin, who translated for his mother, explained that she would also like to move to Rotterdam:

> It is too quiet here, much too quiet. At six o'clock in the evening everyone is indoors, and the streets are quiet … The people are nice, but it's too quiet.

Apart from differences between people's preferences we also observed that interviewees were aware that the level and quality of support for refugees and access to education or work, varies substantially according to the municipality.

Barriers to the process of homemaking

Some of our respondents complained about their location as they felt isolated and alone. Others like Rezan pointed out that they miss the buzz of city life. Supermarket where they could find ingredients for home cooking were also mentioned as important places in the

process of homemaking. If these places are not to be found in their direct environment it has an impact on their identification with that place. Savaş (2014), for example, shows that feeling part of a specific cultural group can mean that some places – such as ethnic supermarkets – become significant whilst these places have no special meaning for other cultural groups.

For other respondents, the feeling of isolation was related to the fact that there were no, or hardly any, Syrian families in the vicinity. Not being able to profit from potential support networks is a barrier which also impacts on people's process of homemaking. These difficulties cry out for further consideration, especially given the relatively small element of the local population with a non-Western ethnic-minority background in the municipalities they were dispersed to (see Table 1), which makes support from diaspora or migrant organisations less likely.

A specific complaint about the remoteness of locations for resettled refugees concerned their worry in case they needed medical assistance. Health issues had been important selection criteria for resettlement and most families had at least one family member who was suffering from health problems. One family whose son was sick was very upset that they were not dispersed to a location closer to a hospital and worried about the lack of medical support.

> We are very happy in the Netherlands, but we came here because of medical reasons and since we have been here we have not seen a doctor.

In this early phase of their settlement, our respondents did not speak Dutch and therefore still depended on the support of interpreters. A lack of access to interpreters was something we came across regularly during our fieldwork.

> We hope to have a translator when we go see the doctor. The hospital asked us to arrange a translator ourselves.

The current Dutch regulation only covers the cost of interpreters whilst people are still going through the settlement procedure or staying in an asylum reception facility (Essink-Bot and Suurmond 2016). Following the logic of newcomers taking responsibility for their own integration, this also means that people now need to arrange their own translator – which is not always easy in small towns due to the absence of co-ethnics. This is also problematic in terms of privacy, when children are involved to translate for their parents. Although there is a support infrastructure that prepares resettled refugees for their new life, we observed in our study that many people felt that they had been somewhat left on their own.

Another issue we encountered was that our respondents expressed their concerns about having difficulty in making themselves useful in the small towns to which they were dispersed. Many interviewees said that they felt they were a burden and that they wanted to contribute to Dutch society. In this sense, the idea of resettlement as a 'gift' sometimes puts pressure on people to prove they can also contribute and want to 'give something back'. Some of our more isolated respondents contrasted the situation whereby they were 'only receiving benefits', with life in a city, where they see more opportunities to contribute. Our respondents evaluated their current localities by comparing them, drawing both from their own lived experience and memories of towns in the

country of origin and from their perceived and imagined qualities of other localities, particularly cities.

> In other municipalities, refugees receive more support, such as higher compensation for the cost of furniture and support from the food bank. I do not understand why municipalities differ in terms of the financial and social support they provide, such as support for participation in sports and arts and culture or practical support when seeking medical care. By now we have become used to this situation, but we are concerned about our future and are considering moving to another municipality.

Interviewees were not only concerned about local support, but also about differential access to social rights, such as education and work. Jawad (18), the son of a couple from Aleppo that we spoke to, joined in the conversation to tell us that he was upset and disillusioned having just heard that his municipality expects him to find a job. In Syria Jawad and his sister had been forced to work to help their family and he, therefore, hoped to get an education. These experiences also stand in stark contrast to the initial phases of the resettlement process where almost everything was decided *for* resettled refugees and a lot of support was given to them. This raised their expectations and made it even more difficult for them to cope with the lack of support upon arrival. Whilst some respondents told us they were considering moving to a larger city, it is too early to know whether they will eventually do.

Sociabilities and everyday contact in small towns

Most respondents spoke about their everyday concerns about the consequences of the language barrier they were facing – in particular about how these language barriers impeded their communication with their neighbours. Haneen describes how her gestures are sometimes also not accepted.

> We would like to welcome our neighbours but find it difficult to make contact. I offered flowers from the garden to our neighbours and invited them for coffee, but they didn't accept the invitation. Not everyone greets you in the street. It is difficult here.

In our conversations about such moments – when greetings were not reciprocated, and neighbours were keeping a certain distance in the eyes of our respondents – they shared their disappointment but also their determination to make an effort. One of the respondents explained that his relatives, who had already settled in the Netherlands years ago, urged him to 'set the right example' by responding in 'a calm and composed manner even when you are facing discrimination or degrading treatment'. These stories also point towards the importance that interviewees attached to such everyday sociabilities. 'Sociabilities' can be defined as social relations that provide pleasure, satisfaction and meaning by giving actors a sense of being human. Lofland (1985) already showed in her early work that everyday sociabilities can turn casual informal meetings into ongoing affective relationships linking them to urban spaces. As such sociabilities are crucial in the process of homemaking, something that our respondents also suggested. Gaining language skills is therefore a priority as sociabilities are mainly about conversations and other forms of social interaction (Rishbeth and Powell 2013; Tuan 1991). Glick Schiller and Çağlar note that sociabilities emphasise 'domains of commonality rather than difference in social relations' (2018, 30).

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2016) also suggest that proximal sociabilities, that involve encounters around the house or in the neighbourhood can lead to both sociability and hostility. Despite their wide-ranging experiences in terms of contact with their neighbours, our respondents shared the underlying belief that good neighbours and good contacts are important for a sense of feeling at home. Exchanging greetings seems to give people a sense of commonality even when they have not yet mastered the language. As such our respondents *did* talk about social encounters with their neighbours with much enthusiasm, although some also noted that they found Dutch people rather distant and not easy to start a conversation with. Language and cultural differences sometimes discourage people and groups from maintaining an outward-looking view so that bridging capital is hard to develop (Nannestad, Svendsen, and Svendsen 2008) and settling in takes more time.

Gardening as a way in

Although the Syrians whom we interviewed in this study had only recently moved, we often encountered freshly tilled soil and recently planted flowers, plants and herbs upon our arrival. These gardens, and the everyday practice of caring for these plants, alone or aided by neighbours, turned out to be a recurring motif in conversations on homemaking. Gardens and gardening were described by several respondents as examples of the positive aspects of their lives in new living environments. Our respondents enjoyed talking about and showing us around their gardens. They spoke about the future and their plans for the garden, but also about the gardens of the past in their country of origin. These findings resonate with Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling's (2006) study of migrants' experiences of public urban green spaces in which they observed the importance of memory, nostalgia and the ways in which plants can become a 'starting point for stories' and 'small vignettes about home life' (2006, 287). Many of our respondents emphasised the significance of particular plants – such as mint, tomato plants or jasmine – which they associated with gardens and landscapes in their place of origin and which evoked happy memories.

The gardens and gardening also featured prominently in conversations on their present situation and their experience of settling into new surroundings. When we arrived at Abdo and Nabeela's house for their interview, for instance, we found Abdo sitting on a small terrace next to a vegetable garden drinking coffee. Later he explained that he often greets his neighbours from his garden or in the street, although communicating is still very difficult because of the language barrier. Gardens and gardening, however, seemed to have enabled some of our respondents to establish contacts with their neighbours. These observations resonate with research on experiences of refugees in public urban green spaces that show how minor activities of sociality, such as greeting or 'doing alongside' can be significant moments of connection, even in the absence of interaction (Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019).

During one of the interviews conducted in the small village of Nibbixwoud with Ali and Mara, Martin, a social worker from the Dutch Refugee Council was also present. When the conversation turned to the garden, Martin explained:

> During the move, the family worked very hard and I'm proud of them. They also did something very clever. They started with the garden and made it tidy. The neighbours, of course, were happy to see this and they immediately bonded with them.

This quote also illustrates how these reflections on gardening – as an everyday form of homemaking and as a form of sociability – cannot be separated from normative ideas about integration and 'good' neighbour relations. Research on the settlement experiences of refugees in other countries also shows that different views about proper gardening represented a common source of conflict between refugee newcomers and their neighbours (Larsen 2011, 148; Strunk and Richardson 2019). In this instance, the refugee worker Martin, reminded the family that urban dwellings often do not include gardens. Other families also noted that they were lucky with their gardens, having heard stories from friends who were dispersed to cities and living in flats with no green space at all. Gardens and gardening in our conversations were therefore also understood as compensatory and emblematic for the particular affordances of small(er) towns, in terms of opportunities for homemaking.

Cooking and sharing Syrian food were also often mentioned as ways to feel at home in an unfamiliar environment. The smell and, most of all, the taste, evoke memories and provide people with a feeling of belonging. Respondents took pleasure in offering us Syrian coffee or tea during the interviews, making us part of the micro politics around homemaking practices in their houses. In his study of the politics of food and hospitality and the homemaking practices of Syrians in Belgium, Vandevoordt (2017) suggests that we read the sugared tea and candy which are offered to us during interviews as a 'subversive act through which they create a temporary microsphere in which all apparent social roles are reversed' (2017, 609). We agree that there are strong political and symbolic meanings around the act of offering food (and of accepting or refusing it) and that these instances enable a departure from the receptivity and passivity that is often associated with the experiences of resettled refugees. They also offer the potential for agency and the development of less hierarchical connections that researchers have also examined in other public spaces (see Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019, 129).

Conclusion

Syrian refugees who were resettled from Turkey to the Netherlands under the EU Turkey Statement experienced an abrupt transition from a selection system based on needs and vulnerability to a situation where inclusion is managed through refugees taking responsibility for their own integration. Their positive experience of being given much information in Turkey about their future residence in the Netherlands stands in stark contrast with the lack of information they received about dispersal and their limited access to support and to social rights, such as education, that they considered essential to settlement in (small) Dutch towns.

The emphasis that is put on refugees' willingness to integrate through the Dutch orientation course and resettlement selection process is something which our respondents had incorporated when we talked to them. This desire to be useful also resonates with the experiences of spontaneous refugees elsewhere and is also linked to past

experiences with waiting during procedures (see Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019). In this case, it is also connected to the Dutch integration policy and its emphasis on individual responsibility. Respondents in this study however above all linked it to resettlement, as they emphasised their awareness of being amongst the lucky few who were selected for resettlement, which also implicitly gave them a sense of duty to 'give something back'. This resonates with what Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011) observed as a form of *migrant rescaling* through the 'reproduction of a form of neoliberal subjectivity that reinforces the ethos of the self-reliant, enterprising individual' (2011, 16). The fact that resettled refugees, however, could *not* be actively involved in nor shape the outcomes of their own resettlement and dispersal to small towns is making it more difficult for them to take on this responsibility.

We observed that respondents associated larger cities in the Netherlands with greater opportunities to find work or complete (higher) education and with the presence of co-ethnics, relatives and friends. Dispersal policies are based on the assumption that people seek permanent residence and that they will not move again. Our findings, nevertheless, suggest that some people might move on in the near future, especially those who were less satisfied with the smaller locations and feel the urge to fix the mismatch between dispersal and their (dis)location (Burridge and Gill 2017, 36). Research already indicates that most refugees in the Netherlands regroup, after a while. After two years, one in five refugees has moved to another region than that to which they were originally dispersed; within ten years, half of the refugees had moved (Gerritsen, Kattenberg, and Vermeulen 2018). This indicates that pathways to permanency are not the only outcomes of dispersal as also suggested by Meeus, van Heur, and Arnaut (2019, 6).

By examining resettled refugees perceptions of belonging to the resettled location we included structural conditions, such as resettlement and dispersal procedures, locality through our discussion of support levels and arrival infrastructures in dispersal municipalities, as well as individual experiences such as place preferences and local practices and experiences. Interviewees told us about their own efforts and homemaking practices, but also commented critically on the responsibilities of local and reception authorities and opportunities for and constraints to homemaking arising from refugee resettlement and dispersal procedures. We found that everyday proximal sociabilities (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016, 2018) should not be underestimated. Small talk or 'doing alongside' (Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019, 129) in and around the house and in the neighbourhood is perceived important support for resettled refugees and provides them with a sense of belonging and a feeling of acceptance, especially in the early phase of settlement. Even simple gestures such as a greeting or 'nodding relationships' (Kohlbacher, Reeger, and Schnell 2015, 449) can make individuals feel recognised and gives them a place in society, even when they worry for not being able to find a job and might consider moving onward in the near future. Our research indicated that gardening turned out to be an important 'domain of commonality' (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018) in small Dutch towns. It was found to be a relaxing, stress-reducing activity and an opportunity to reach out to neighbours even when language skills were not well enough developed. These everyday shared sets of experiences, emotions and aspirations emerge from a desire for human relationships (Glick Schiller and Irving 2015; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011, 415). Apart from enabling sociabilities based on proximity (with neighbours) that do not require extended conversations, gardens and gardening

also evoked memories of homes and gardens left behind or lost, and sometimes lead to feelings of nostalgia and sense of familiarity. It is therefore important to understand that the significance of gardens and gardening as explained by our respondents involves more than a simple attachment to a specific site around the house and includes an important transnational, or translocal dimension.

Although many respondents said that they felt comfortable and safe in their new house and the direct environment, these comments were somewhat overshadowed by the general feeling that they were still 'far away from what they need' and 'who they need'. This feeling was both the result of their experiences with the lack of support and services available to them in their dispersal locations, but also stemmed from their ideas and perceptions of opportunities elsewhere, particularly in bigger towns and cities. It was often related to the wish to be useful, able to practice more Dutch or socially more active; the relative distance from first-degree relatives dispersed elsewhere in the country was also a big concern that limited people's support networks. Like Collyer et al. (2018), we found that both bridging and bonding relationships were significantly correlated with overall wellbeing for refugees and both were equally important. Making new contacts is important, but also reconnecting with one's 'own' friends and family is crucial for homemaking. The concerns of some respondents about unresolved uncertainties over family reunification which were, to a large extent, beyond their control, weighed heavily on their wellbeing and on feeling at home. This therefore also points to the need for future research to further examine the complexities of such transnational connections within the context of refugee resettlement.

Notes

1. The one-for-one regulation under the EU Turkey Deal only applies to Syrians.
2. As is laid down in the 2012 Amendment to the Law on Civic Integration in Arts 3, 5 and 6 on the civic integration requirement. At the time this article was written the Dutch Civic Integration Act was subject to legal review, the new Civic Integration Act is expected to be implemented in 2021.
3. As explained in the explanatory memorandum of the Amendment to the Civic Integration Act (2013).
4. These 21 interviewees are without counting the children who were sometimes present during the interviews.

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