Pathways to rural resilience

A case study analysis of a rural municipality’s response to the “refugee crisis”

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Abstract:
In 2015, more than 160,000 people sought asylum in Sweden, twice as many as the year before and a number that far exceeded the Swedish Migration Agency’s estimation. This event tested society’s resilience capacities, as several Swedish institutions had to cope and adapt to the situation. By conducting a case study analysis of the local community’s response to the “refugee crisis” in a small Swedish municipality, this thesis aims to explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events, such as the “refugee crisis”. Drawing from Stenbacka’s (2013) work on rural resilience, this thesis identifies three converging pathways that contributed to forming a resilient rural community: 1) rural ties 2) open spaces for civil society, and 3) building on best practices. The findings illustrate how rural processes of learning and adapting to prevailing challenges help communities cope and adapt to unforeseen events and demonstrate how the prevailing planning discourse can benefit from adding a rural perspective. The findings also suggest a relationship between rural resilience and emotional citizenry, as the pathway to rural resilience enables spaces that unfold feelings of inclusion and belonging through interpersonal encounters.

Keywords: rural resilience, emotional citizenry, refugee migration, rural planning, local community
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1. Introduction

In 2015, the event that has come to be known as the “refugee crisis” occurred, with almost 163,000 people seeking asylum in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2021). The number of people seeking asylum in Sweden far exceeded the Swedish Migration Agency’s calculations, with almost twice as many applicants as the year before (Myrberg, 2019). Many of the refugees who came to Sweden ended up staying in the Swedish countryside, as the municipalities that received the most refugees per capita were all small and sparsely populated by Swedish standards (SVT Nyheter, 2015; Sveriges kommuner och regioner, 2017). Hagelund (2020) describes the event as an “exogenous shock” (p.1) that tested society’s resilience – a concept that has garnered more attention within social sciences in the last years (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Resilience refers to the ability of people, communities, societies, and cultures to cope with change and disruption, as well as the ability to use the processes of learning and adapting to prevailing and future challenges to spur innovation and renewal (Folke, 2016). In an uncertain future with changes in climate, security policies, and other events we do not know about yet, the interest in the concept of resilience and its application has increased (Iwaniec, et al., 2021).

One field of application for the resilience concept, as suggested by Stenbacka (2013), is rural planning. The application of resilience to rural areas uncovers rural processes with the potential to strengthen society in times of crisis (Stenbacka, 2016). Since the “refugee crisis” in 2015, the covid-19 pandemic has caused millions of deaths and year-long national restrictions around the world, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has changed the security politics in Europe. The future is followed by exogenous shocks and unforeseen events that are inherently difficult to plan for, hence learning from past experiences of crises and challenges is crucial.

Ekberga – a pseudonym for a small municipality with a rural character in mid-Sweden, was one of the municipalities that received the most refugees during the “refugee crisis”. Five years later, it was also one of the municipalities in Sweden where the highest proportion of people who came as refugees in 2015 had settled. Until then, Ekberga had, like many rural municipalities, experienced a population decrease in the last decades. The exogenous shock of the “refugee crisis” seems to have sparked a demographic transformation in Ekberga, as the municipality has managed to challenge the common migration pattern of relocation from rural areas to urban areas among international migrants (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Statistics Sweden, 2016).

Against this background, the case of Ekberga municipality constitutes an illustrative example of the pathways contributing to rural resilience, as the local community seems to have had the capacity to both cope and adapt to the effects of the “refugee crisis” while challenging the prevailing demographic development. This thesis will explore how the resilience concept can be applied within a rural context to illustrate pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events, using

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1 I am aware of how the term is contested and politically charged. For a discussion on the choice of using this word, see chapter 4.4.
Ekberga municipality and its local community’s response to what has come to be known as the “refugee crisis” in 2015 as the point of departure.

1.1 Aim and research questions
The aim is to explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events. This will be explored by using “Ekberga” municipality – a pseudonym for a small municipality with a rural character in mid-Sweden – and its local community’s response to what has come to be known as the “refugee crisis” in 2015.

The thesis is guided by these research questions:

- How does the local community’s response to the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga municipality exemplify pathways to rural resilience?
- What do these pathways implicate for planning in rural areas?

Before I continue to present previous literature on the topic and the theoretical concepts guiding this thesis, the following section gives a brief overview of the layout of the entire thesis.

1.2 Thesis structure
This thesis is structured into eight chapters. In the introductory chapter, I have presented the problem field of the thesis, which mainly concerns the potential of applying the concept of rural resilience to uncover rural processes with the potential to strengthen society in times of crisis. Thereafter, chapter 2 will start with a discussion on the various definitions of the term “rural”, which will be followed by an introduction of major themes identified in the academic literature to contextualize and situate the thesis in a Swedish and Scandinavian rural context. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical concepts that guide this thesis, namely rural resilience and integration and inclusion, and how the chosen concepts relate to the chosen study area. Chapter 4 introduces the case study area, an anonymized Swedish municipality with the pseudonym Ekberga. Chapter 5 presents the methods and methodology, outlining the research design and the ontological and epistemological assumptions. The chapter also presents the choice of methods, ethical considerations, positionality and the thesis’ limitations. This is followed by chapter 6, where the empirical findings generated from the semi-structured interviews are presented. This chapter outlines the three pathways to rural resilience explored within this thesis: rural ties, open spaces for civil society and building on best practices. Chapter 7 analyzes and discusses the findings and links them back to the theoretical concepts of rural resilience and integration and inclusion. The thesis concludes with chapter 8, with a summarization of the findings and some reflections and suggestions for future research.
2. Previous research on rural areas

This chapter begins with a presentation of the different understandings and definitions of rurality present in contemporary research and policy. This will be followed by an introduction of major themes identified in the academic literature, to contextualize and situate the thesis in a Swedish and Scandinavian rural context.

2.1 Defining rurality

What characterizes a rural area? Although the question might seem rather straightforward, researchers and policymakers alike have had difficulties finding one overarching definition. The definition is dependent on the context, influenced by elements such as demography, infrastructure, and history. If we, for example, apply both OECD’s and Statistics Sweden’s definition of rural area in Sweden, we get vastly different answers to what a rural area is. The intergovernmental organization OECD defines rural as a region with less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer. According to this definition, 47.8 percent of the Swedish population lives in rural areas. This is almost twice as many as the mean value of the 38 member countries of OECD, with 25.1 percent (OECD, 2022). Statistic Sweden defines a rural area as all areas that do not fit into their definition of an urban area. According to Statistics Sweden, an urban area has at least 200 residents in a contiguous built-up area with houses that are no more than 200 meters apart (Statistics Sweden, 2022). According to this definition, 12 percent of the population in Sweden live in a rural area. The great difference between OECD’s and Statistic Sweden’s definition demonstrates the difficulty of finding one overarching definition for all rural areas – its characteristics are influenced by the context, as variables such as demography, infrastructure, geography, history, and economic development create difficulties for national, and even regional, comparisons (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2021).

However, defining rurality is not only complex coming from a quantitative perspective. Qualitative researchers have argued that physical and descriptive characteristics are not sufficient to describe rural areas. Instead, they argue that the definition should consider socio-cultural characteristics, such as interactions, lifestyles and attitudes, (Hoggart & Buller, 1987). Both the descriptive and the socio-cultural approaches have been criticized from a social constructionist point of view, as neither of the understandings acknowledges the subjective and socially constructed dimensions of rurality. According to social constructionist geographers, rurality should not be defined in terms of geographical or socio-cultural characteristics, rather the question we should be asking is how actors socially construct rurality (Rye, 2006). The social constructionist understanding of rurality has in turn been criticized for disregarding the material aspects of rurality. Woods (2010) argues that rural areas’ material and immaterial aspects cannot be separated, as they form the living conditions for people living and working in the countryside. Instead, Woods is interested in how rurality is performed. The performance of rurality is influenced by both material and immaterial dimensions, as “discourses of rurality are enacted and routinized with material effects” (Woods, 2010, p. 836) and “the practices and performances of rural actors in material settings contribute to the production and reproduction of discourses of rurality” (Woods, 2010, p. 836). Woods’ perspective does
also shed light on how the researcher is an active agent in performing rurality. The rural researcher cannot be a passive observer, as rurality is performed in engagement with the research subject, research methods, and research funders for example (Woods, 2010).

These different understandings of rural create a rich and complex research field where the question of what characterizes a rural area does not have a single overarching definition. Instead, there are both material and immaterial understandings of rurality are present in contemporary research (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019). Furthermore, the term rurality is filled with meanings and connotations – both negative and positive – which adds to the complexity of the subject. These meanings and connotations often stem from an urban norm where the countryside is discussed and valued in its relation to the city (Costello, 2007; Eriksson, 2008). The urban norm reproduces rural as “the other”, inhabiting opposing traits to the city, for example, as a peaceful and beautiful idyll, contrasting the loud and busy city life (Costello, 2007), or as a backward and traditional space, contrasting the modern and progressive city (Eriksson, 2008).

Thus, the notion of “rural” is defined differently within the rural research field. There are varying, and opposing, understandings of how rural areas should be understood, and these understandings are colored by an urban-rural dichotomy, where our understanding of urban areas influences the way we approach rural areas. This thesis acknowledges that a geographer has multiple ways to approach rurality. Rurality is a relational concept, and its definition may vary depending on who is trying to define it (Halfacree, 1993), as well as where you are trying to apply this definition (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2021). Positionality and reflexivity of the researcher will be discussed further on in chapter 5.5. However, this thesis has a rural Swedish municipality as the point of departure, and the context for rural planning and development in Sweden will be lined out in the next section.

2.2 Rural planning in Sweden
Rural areas have historically been discussed as a crucial part of the construction of a Swedish identity (Löfgren, 1993). The access to natural resources contributed to the industrialization and the emergence of modern Sweden (Sörlin, 1988), and traditions such as skiing and “allemansrätten” – the freedom to roam – are seen as fundamental parts of Swedish identity (Sörlin, 1995). The thought of the countryside as a space for national identity building is still present in discussions about the Swedish countryside, as a close relationship to nature and outdoor life is seen as a key to integration into Swedish society (Singleton, 2021). In contrast, the contemporary discourse on the Swedish countryside is colored by an urban norm and a perceived urban-rural binary opposition, which reproduce an asymmetrical power relation that shapes the way rurality is understood and valued (Eriksson, 2008). Eriksson (2008; 2010) exemplifies this asymmetrical power relation with the Swedish region of Norrland, where the people of the region are portrayed in news media, politics, and popular culture as spatial ‘internal others’ (2010, p. 96). The discourse on Swedish rural areas creates an urban-rural dichotomy, where Norrland is seen as a “space of exception” (Eriksson, 2010, p. 370), a traditional and undeveloped space that contrasts the otherwise modern Sweden. Thus, the Swedish countryside is colored by both the idea of the countryside as something idyllic and inherently Swedish,
as well as a view of the rural as something stagnant and left behind – a contrast to the modern and progressive contemporary Sweden. Although these two images approach the countryside from different perspectives, both perspectives treat the rural as a traditional and homogenous space – two characteristics that are argued to conceal the heterogeneity and diversity that often characterizes the rural (Askins, 2009).

On a similar note, Hedberg and Haandrikman (2014) argue that the perception of the rural as a traditional and homogenous space is not a true representation of reality. On the contrary, the Swedish countryside is diverse and global, marked by migration processes that challenge the perception of the countryside as a homogenous and stable space. Several migration processes are taking place in the countryside, such as Dutch lifestyle migrants in search of space and nature (Eimermann, 2015), female marriage migrants from Thailand (Webster & Haandrikman, 2014), and refugee migrants, either assigned by the Swedish Migration Agency to a rural municipality or by the refugees’ own choice (Vogiazides & Mondani, 2020). These migration processes play an important part in the population development of the Swedish countryside, as “…international migration is now the only component that is contributing to population increase in rural areas” (Glesbygdsverket, 2008; Hedberg Haandrikman 2014, p. 128).

International migration has thus come to be discussed as a solution to the problems following rural depopulation. Stenbacka (2013), for example, discusses the possibilities that refugee migration serves for rural development and connects global migration processes to the concept of resilience. The refugee migration is an opportunity for smaller municipalities to build on their rural resilience, as immigration may dampen the effects of depopulation, stimulate the labor market, and increase the global and transnational connections. However, international migration as a solution to depopulation is challenged. Hedlund et al. (2017) argue that a more nuanced approach is needed, as refugee migration cannot be the sole solution to rural regions’ complex demographic and socio-economic problems. High rates of urbanization and comparatively low employment rates among international migrants in rural areas indicate that international migration might not serve as a long-term reliable solution (Hedlund, et al., 2017). The rural challenges are structural and influenced by the urban norm, which, as argued by Hudson and Sandberg (2021), make refugee reception a contested hope for the future.

Although international migration is contested as a solution to rural depopulation, it is still present in local politics and policymaking in rural areas (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2016). Rural municipalities are thought to grow and develop the same way as urban municipalities, despite their very different conditions regarding for example population growth, tax incidence, and geography. There is an unwillingness among policymakers in rural municipalities to address these problems, as shrinking is a trait of little value in a growth-oriented society and is therefore thought to damage the municipality’s reputation and self-image (Syssner, 2020). From this perspective, international migration has then the potential to reverse the rural depopulation trend and add to the municipality’s growth, both in terms of economy and population. However, Syssner (2020) argues that a more long-term sustainable solution to rural depopulation is to plan beyond the growth paradigm and adapt for a future where the population does not increase. Syssner discusses
the need for local adaptation policies, where strategic plans and local welfare sectors take precautionary measures and prepare for a continuous depopulation (Syssner, 2020). However, the interest among policymakers to form these strategies and policies has been limited as the public discourse on municipal development still is centered on growth and competitiveness (Syssner, 2014). In this way, international migration is framed as a tool for economic growth and population increase (Hedlund, et al., 2017).

However, other perspectives on the potential effects of international migration to rural areas can be found within the literature on resilience and inclusion. Understanding Swedish rurality help contextualize the way we frame problems and the way we discuss possible solutions. The next chapter will discuss resilience and inclusion as the theoretical concepts that have guided the analysis of the responses in Ekberga municipality to the "refugee crisis".
3. Theoretical concepts

This chapter will introduce the theoretical concepts discussed within this thesis. The chapter will start with an introduction to the concept of resilience and then outline its development and application within social sciences. This will be followed by a presentation of the concept of rural resilience, which serves as the analytical foundation for this thesis. The section will present the concept and how it is to be understood in terms of rural planning.

The second theoretical concept discussed within this thesis is emotional citizenry. The concept will be used in this thesis as a way to explore the effects of a resilient rural community in response to the “refugee crisis”. The section starts with an outline of the concepts of integration and inclusion, moving on to present the concept of emotional citizenry and how it will be used in this thesis.

3.1 Resilience

The concept of resilience was first introduced by Holling (1973) to understand and evaluate the ecosystem. The concept has since developed and is today applied to a variety of systems and disciplines such as ecoculture, psychology, and urban planning (Arora-Jonsson, 2016; Tusae & Dyer, 2004; Pickett, et al., 2004). The core of the concept is a system’s ability to cope with change and disruption and how the process of learning and adapting to prevailing and future challenges can spur innovation, renewal, and sustainability (Stockholm Resilience Center, 2015). This broad application of resilience is in line with what Folke et al. (2010) describes as general resilience, which emphasizes the ability of any system to cope with all kinds of uncertainties or shocks. Thus, the system in question can for instance be an ecosystem, a city, or an economy, and the shock may vary from climate change to inflation or a pandemic. This definition allows the concept to be used in various disciplines, and the concept is defined differently depending on its application. Folke et al. (2010) use for example the words “uncertainty” or “shock”, while Stockholm Resilience Center (2015) uses the words “change” or “disruption” to describe the same phenomenon. Within migration research, the term “exogenous shock” has been used to describe the impact of refugee migration (Hagelund, 2020; Bourbeau, 2015), and is therefore the term used throughout this thesis as well.

Although resilience can be applied to a broad variety of disciplines, Folke, et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of acknowledging the social aspects in resilience theory. Social systems and norms are interlinked with both natural and man-made systems and cannot, therefore, be understood separately (Folke, et al., 2010). Adger (2000) exemplifies this by an examination of mangrove conversion in Vietnam and how the reduction of mangroves undermines common property institutions, which has implications for the communities living in the area. The case of mangrove conversion demonstrates the links between social and ecological resilience, in particular for those dependent on ecological and environmental resources. These links have created interest in applying resilience thinking within social science (Adger, 2000), but the application is questioned and contested, mostly because of its roots within natural sciences where a more positivistic and rational view of knowledge is accepted (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010).
3.1.1 Social resilience
The use of resilience within social sciences is more actor-oriented compared to its use in natural sciences and is, as previously mentioned, concerned with a group’s abilities to cope, adapt and transform (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Adger (2000) defines social resilience as “[…] the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change.” (p. 347). The external stress may for example be related to environmental change, such as Adger’s (2000) example with mangrove reduction, or a social change, such as urbanization and rural depopulation. Thus, social resilience can be applied in a variety of settings within social sciences.

However, the use of resilience in social science has been criticized, as the concept is thought to overlook power relations and social structures with its rationalistic approach (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010). Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013) argue that the focus on social actors, rather than a system, adds a political dimension to the concept of social resilience, as a social actor is a product of time and space, engaging in issues related to power and participation. Thus, resilience thinking can be applied in social sciences while maintaining the epistemological assumptions usually considered in social science. Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013) propose an analytical framework for social resilience consisting of three dimensions:

- “Coping capacities — the ability of social actors to cope with and overcome all kinds of adversities
- Adaptive capacities — their ability to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to future challenges in their everyday lives
- Transformative capacities — their ability to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness towards future” (p. 5).

This analytical framework constitutes the basis for the application of resilience within the field of rural geography, as defined by Stenbacka (2013; 2016). This will be further explained in the next section on rural resilience.

3.1.2 Rural resilience
The concept of rural resilience shares many characteristics with social resilience but emphasizes the rural community’s transformative capacities, particularly in the light of the social, economic and demographical problems that have followed urbanization. Stenbacka (2013) defines rural resilience as followed, which also is the definition that will be used throughout this thesis:

“Resilience is the community and municipal capacity to deal with economic and social transformation – the ability to ‘bounce back’ and challenge the prevailing circumstances. Crucial to the concept is the capacity to challenge and transform rather than returning to a state of ‘normalcy’ or making adaptations without intentional strategies.” (Stenbacka, 2013, p. 86).
This definition incorporates Keck & Sakdapolrak’s (2013) three dimensions of social resilience – coping, adaptive and transformative capacities. However, the transformative capacities are crucial, where a resilient rural community can challenge the urban norm and display alternative paths to rural development. One of these paths argues Stenbacka (2013), is refugee migration. If depopulation is the challenge and the rural municipality the system, an influx of refugees can contribute to a resilient countryside as they add to the population figures and, thus, can contribute to strengthening the labor market and the tax base. Moreover, refugee reception can contribute strengthen the local networks through cooperation, which benefits civil servants as well as the citizens (Stenbacka, 2013). Another aspect highlighted by Stenbacka (2016) is the potential of refugee migration to change the geographical imaginary of rural areas. An influx of international migrants challenges the idea of the countryside as a homogenous and stable place and enhances the plurality and diversity of rural areas. If the countryside comes to inhibit more of the characteristics usually associated with urban life, it has the potential to form a new understanding of the rurality that challenges the urban-rural binary opposition.

According to Stenbacka (2016), part of rural resilience thinking is a pragmatic understanding of reality, which expresses itself in the ability to accept and adapt to situations that cannot easily transform. An intentional strategy to adapt to the ongoing situation is in line with Syssner’s (2020) concept of local adaptation policy, where declining municipalities are encouraged to prepare and adapt for depopulation and its consequences. On a similar note, Yamamoto (2011) discusses the benefits of resilience thinking as a tool to look beyond growth and competitiveness in regional development and instead discusses efforts and policies that benefit the local development from a long-term perspective. The question of “resilience of what, to what, to whom, and at what spatial and temporal scale” (Yamamoto, 2011, p. 731) is central and should be approached with local experiences and perspectives in mind.

With Yamamoto’s abovementioned question in mind, it is worth discussing for whom and why rural depopulation is a problem or a threat to resilience. For younger generations arriving in cities for studying and starting their careers, leaving the countryside may not be a problem, as they gain new experiences and strengthen their human capital. However, depopulation is a problem for municipalities that struggle to handle the consequences of shrinking. Local commerce and public services are negatively affected by a declining population base, which in turn affects the quality of life in rural municipalities. Another aspect of depopulation is the self-image of the remaining population, where the out-migration indicates the place – or the people – to be dull and unattractive (Syssner, 2020). A consequence of this is an unwillingness among shrinking municipalities to discuss depopulation as a matter of fact, as dull and unattractive are traits they do not want to be associated with. In a society less concerned with growth, depopulation may not be considered as big of a problem as it is today.

As growth and competitiveness are cornerstones in the planning discourse, acknowledging the difficulties for rural municipalities within the growth paradigm can open the possibilities for development beyond growth with the local context in mind (Syssner, 2020). Stenbacka (2016) argues that rural municipalities should challenge the
current view of the countryside as the binary opposition to the city and vocally criticize the current discourse where the countryside is seen as a less favorable residential environment. Furthermore, Yamamoto’s question also pinpoints the need to define what problem refugee migration is thought to solve. Refugee migration may not be a long-term sustainable solution to rural depopulation, as the municipality must rely on global migration processes and national refugee policies that are out of the municipality’s area of influence. However, refugee migration to the countryside could be a way to bridge the urban-rural dichotomy as it contradicts the geographical image of the countryside as homogenous and stable, without global and transnational connections. In this way, refugee migration challenges the prevailing circumstances and can contribute to the construction of rural resilience (Stenbacka, 2016).

In sum, the concept of rural resilience incorporates the idea that a resilient community has the capacity to cope and adapt to new situations but put a great emphasis on the transformative capacities that can challenge prevailing circumstances. From a rural perspective, the prevailing circumstances are connected to the urban norm and a perceived urban-rural binary, where the countryside is discussed, planned and valued in its relation to the city. A resilient rural community has the capacity to challenge and transform this geographical imagination and use the exogenous shock to make intentional strategies for development.

3.2 Integration and inclusion

The idea of refugee migration’s contribution to rural resilience is followed by an expectation that the refugees want to settle in rural areas (Stenbacka, 2016). However, the rural as a living environment is not always deemed attractive and desirable among the refugee migrants. Herslund & Paulgaard (2021) examined how refugees in rural Norway and Denmark experience rurality, and even though rurality in the two countries looks very different, refugees in both countries shared experiences and encountered similar challenges. The weather, the darkness, the long distances, and limited public transport were enhanced as particularly challenging by the refugees in rural areas, adding feelings of stress and insecurity. Local voluntary activities and socializing with other refugees in the same situation could on the other hand contribute to a sense of meaning and belonging (Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021). Klocker et al. (2021) argue that the migrant’s well-being in the country of destination also is influenced by memories and understandings of the landscape in the country of origin. Based on their research on African migrants in Australia, Klocker et al. (2021) show how migrants’ urban or rural preferences are shaped by feelings of identity that stem from pre-migration experiences. If the policies on integration and settlement are to be successful, the policymakers need to consider the migrants’ formative experiences in the landscape of origin if feelings of inclusion and belonging are to unfold.

Inclusion and belonging are seen as part of integration into society (Olwig, 2011). However, integration is a somewhat contested concept (for example, see the discussion with Saharso, 2019) with underlying assumptions about the identities and characteristics of citizens and others (Samers & Collyer, 2017). Grip (2020) compares integration to the act of entering a room, where you either need the key or the allowance of one of the
“guardians of integration” to gain access (p. 871). Nevertheless, the concept is present in political discourses on international migration (Goodman, 2010) and has gained further attention after the “refugee crisis” in 2015 (Hagelund, 2020). In public discussions, integration is usually understood as “… the extent to which migrants fit into an imagined and idealized set of dominant practices and values of the citizen majority, or to their access to such material goods as housing, employment, education and health” (Samers & Collyer, 2017, p. 350). From this viewpoint, integration is closely related to the concept of assimilation, which emphasizes the migrant’s role in adapting to the values and practices of the majority population, or, to use Grip’s (2020) metaphor, the migrant’s ability to acquire the key to the Swedish society. However, integration can also be understood as a two-way process between migrants and citizens. The Council of the European Union emphasizes the two-way nature of integration where both citizens and migrants adopt traditions and values from each other, defining it as follows: “Integration is a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of the Member States” (Council of the European Union, 2004).

The two-way nature of integration is evident in Valentine, et al.’s (2009) research on Somali refugees and asylum seekers’ integration process in the UK and Denmark. They add a subjective dimension to integration, emphasizing the refugees’ feelings of belonging and inclusiveness in place. The respondents recount how they in Denmark can speak the language and adopt Danish practices and values, but their sense of belonging in Denmark is strained by a process of “othering”, where they do not fit into a Danish norm built on whiteness and secularism (Valentine, et al., 2009, p. 246). The Somali Muslim community in the UK has a stronger sense of belonging at a local level, which stems from their strong presence which has allowed them to create their own space on a local scale. The Somali Muslim community has, in contrast to the Danish counterpart, been able to define its narrative of what it means to be a British-Somali Muslim. (Valentine, et al., 2009, p. 247). Valentine, et al.’s (2009) research illustrates how integration is intertwined with a sense of belonging as well as how emotion and identity are situational – the spatial context influences the sense of belonging and feelings of integration and inclusion. On a similar note, Søholt, et al. (2018) use the term “conditioned receptiveness” to capture how the acceptance of immigrants is conditioned by expectations on how the immigrants should contribute to, and interact with, the rural community (Søholt, et al., 2018). Thus, the local rural community can operate as, to quote Grip (2020), “guardians of integration” (p. 871), who can provide immigrants with keys to society to the ones they consider fit. Nowicka et al. (2019) add to the research on how the context matter when exploring solidarity towards refugees. They argue that attitudes towards refugees are shaped by the socio-cultural and spatio-temporal contexts, where a form of “cosmopolitan solidarity” has emerged among international migrants in Germany that reaches beyond political, national, ethnic and religious belonging. Rather, it is a form of transnational solidarity based on media discourses and everyday social interactions (Nowicka, et al., 2019).

Askins (2015) has further examined the role everyday encounters have in generating feelings of belonging and inclusion. By following a befriending scheme between refugees and residents in a British town, Askins (2015) concludes that befriending takes place in
everyday spaces, enabled by quiet politics, which Askins (2015, p. 471) calls the active engagement required by both the refugees and the local residents taking part in the befriending scheme. The everyday mundane spaces become sites for emotional bonding, where interpersonal interactions contribute to an extension of the concept of citizenship beyond formal political spheres – a concept Askins calls *emotional citizenry* (2016).

### 3.2.1 Emotional citizenry

The concept of emotional citizenry was developed by Askins (2016) as a way to explore how emotions in mundane everyday spaces can unfold feelings of inclusion – or exclusion – through interpersonal encounters in spaces and places. The concept shifts thinking of integration as a formalized process to also being a gradient process made up of multiple forms of actor and in various types and scales of place. Askins’ point of departure is a befriending scheme in the UK between local residents and asylum seekers, where she extinguishes how shared emotions in everyday spaces can form stronger social relations. These social relations have the ability to broaden the understanding of the other, as “diverse residents can discover each other as multifaceted and interdependent; as individuals with simultaneously different and potentially shared positions, practices and desires” (Askins, 2016, p. 525). Askins calls for more research to explore the wider applicability, which Webster (2020) responds to by exploring the role emotions play in policy fields for migrant women entrepreneurs. Using emotional citizenry as the theoretical framework, Webster illustrates how entrepreneurs’ encounters with policies and the policy field are both an emotional and an embodied practice, as the entrepreneurs’ encounters with the policy field shape the way they perceive themselves and their work experience in Sweden (Webster, 2020).

Kale and Kindon (2021) applied the concept of emotional citizenry to a driver’s license programme for refugee women in New Zealand. The programme successfully enabled feelings of trust and support between the driving learners and driving volunteers through its consideration of each driving participant’s unique process to obtain a driver’s license. Kale and Kindon (2021) add a dimension of *time* to the framework of emotional citizenry, as the programme is structured around patience and “a quiet politics of waiting” (p. 1488), which extend the emotional encounters beyond formalized spaces.

The concept of emotional citizenry will be used in this thesis as a way to explore the effects of a resilient rural community in response to the “refugee crisis”. As emotional citizenry illustrates how certain spaces and activities unfold feelings of belonging and inclusion, the concept will serve as a lens to discuss certain unexpected outcomes of the local refugee reception in Ekberga municipality. A resilient rural community has the potential to facilitate emotions in mundane everyday spaces in a way that strengthens the local community. How the concepts of emotional citizenry and rural resilience relate to each other will be outlined and illustrated in chapter 7.
4. A local community: The case of Ekberga

4.1 Coordination and responsibilities within the local community

This thesis looks to explore the pathways of rural resilience in response to unforeseen events, with the refugee reception in a small rural municipality as the point of departure. Stenbacka (2013) has defined rural resilience as “[...] the community and municipal capacity to deal with economic and social transformation – the ability to ‘bounce back’ and challenge the prevailing circumstances” (p. 86). Stenbacka’s definition highlights how resilience is concerned with both the community’s and the municipality’s capacity and how their joint effort often is fundamental to handling unforeseen and disruptive events. In the case of the “refugee crisis” in 2015, there were indeed a variety of actors engaged in refugee reception. Lidén, et al. (2015) describes the field of the Swedish integration policy as “[...] an institutional landscape that extends both vertically and horizontally, spanning several levels of public administration and actors drawn from the governmental, regional, local, and private sectors” (p. 471).

This collaborative governance provides the institutional background upon which I aim to explore the pathways of rural resilience during the “refugee crisis”. I will use the term local community in this thesis to describe both the formal and informal networks and linkages between the actors engaged in local refugee reception. Ekberga municipality, with its geographical and administrative borders, will serve as the scale for the thesis.

![Figure 1: Illustration of the local community](image-url)
4.2 Introducing Ekberga

Ekberga is a pseudonym for a small rural municipality in Mid-Sweden. The municipality had around 9000 inhabitants in 2021, of which 60% lived in one of the municipality’s three urban areas. The remaining 40% lived in rural areas. The closest city is located around 50 km from Ekberga while it takes 1 h 30 min to travel to the regional capital.

The southern part of the municipality consists of fertile land, why a considerable share of the population has always had their livelihoods in agriculture. The forest and watercourses of the northern parts of the municipality contributed to the development of ironworks and, eventually, a large industry that came to dominate the development of the area in the northern Ekberga municipality during the 20th century until it closed at the beginning of the 21st century. During the latter half of the 19th century, the Swedish railway network was expanded, and a railway station was established in the municipality. The railway station is still in use today and helps the residents of Ekberga commute to bigger cities within the region.

Ekberga municipality has experienced a slow population decrease since the middle of the 1990s, as the population shrunk by more than 1000 inhabitants between 2003 and 2013 (Statistics Sweden, n.d.). Ekberga has since 2014 experienced a slight population increase for the first time since 1994, which is mainly explained by a high share of refugee migration to the municipality. However, the municipality sees a growth potential and aims to have a population of 11 000 by 2030.

4.3 Ekberga refugee reception

Three asylum accommodations were operating in Ekberga municipality during the height of the “refugee crisis”. The accommodations were situated in smaller villages outside central Ekberga and run by publicly financed private business owners in close collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency, while civil society engaged in different activities and events for the asylum seekers. The responsibilities of refugee reception are, after a granted asylum, transferred from the Swedish Migration Agency to the municipalities (Bevelander, et al., 2019). Thus, the municipality does not necessarily have to engage in refugee reception until the refugee has been granted asylum. However, Swedish municipalities actively design local refugee policies, with examples of municipalities with policies designed to accept refugees and municipalities with a policy designed to not accept refugees (Lidén & Nyhlén, 2016). The municipality is also an active agent in refugee reception, which adds to this group of actors that span over sectors and public administrative levels. Arora-Jonsson & Larsson (2021) describe the shift as “collaborative governance”, while Lidén, et al. (2015) use the term “hierarchical network” to capture the nature of the forced cooperation from above that characterizes the local refugee reception.

Ekberga had for a period during the “refugee crisis” three asylum accommodations within the municipality. These accommodations were procured by the Swedish Migration Agency as an ABO-facility. When arriving in Sweden, the refugees have two options for accommodation in the process to obtain a residence permit. They can either arrange for their own housing (“Eget boende”, EBO) or be accommodated by the Swedish Migration
Agency (“Anläggningsboende”, ABO). The refugees living in the countryside have in most cases been assigned to an ABO facility (Statistics Sweden, 2016), where the Swedish Migration Agency assigns the asylum seekers a temporary accommodation while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum application. The ABO facilities are apartments provided by public housing companies, or by private businesses procured by the Swedish Migration Agency (Lidén, et al., 2015). Wimark (2021) provides an overview of the accommodation situation during the “refugee crisis” in Sweden. The majority of people coming during the “refugee crisis” lived within an ABO facility, and the refugees came to Sweden at a pace where the Swedish Migration Agency could not follow and provide accommodation to all that applied for it (Riksrevisionen, 2016). This meant that the asylum accommodations were densified, where for example a room meant to accommodate two people instead got an extra bed to accommodate three people. However, these measures were not enough, and the refugees had in some instances stayed in schools and sports halls (Wimark, 2021).

Sweden changed its migration policy in November 2015 towards restricting entry for new arrivals (Hageland, 2020). The number of asylum seekers dropped sharply after this, and consequently, the need for asylum accommodations. The Swedish Migration Agency did not extend their contracts with privately operated accommodations, and the three asylum accommodations in Ekberga municipality closed in 2016 or 2017.

The asylum accommodations are often the migrants’ first experience of their new country, and the integration process is thought to start already at these accommodations while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. Children are allowed to attend Swedish schools during the asylum process and adults can join Swedish language classes for immigrants, called SFI (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). When discussing integration, SFI is described as one of the keys, as “participating in SFI gives many people the opportunity to gain elementary skills in Swedish and climb the social ladder” (Öbrink Hobzová, 2021, p. 87). However, language is not the only tool in Swedish society, research has also identified sports and recreation as activities facilitating integration (Elbe, et al., 2018). Rich, et al. (2015) describe sports as it is an arena for social bonding, intercultural learning and improving community spirit, and Singleton (2021) elaborates on how participation in outdoor activities and nature experiences are seen as a way to adopt a “Swedish” lifestyle.

4.4 The “refugee crisis” in 2015

The year 2015 has come to be known as the year of the “refugee crisis” when almost 163,000 people sought asylum in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2021). The Syrian war started in 2011 and have since forced millions of Syrians to leave their home, which in combination with other conflicts, famines, and crises in countries like Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq led to 1.2 million people seeking asylum in Europe in 2015 (Eurostat, 2016). Almost 163,000 of these people sought asylum in Sweden, almost twice as in 2014 (Statistics Sweden, 2021). The events were highly mediatized and politized and came to be known as “the refugee crisis”.

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However, the term “refugee crisis” is contested and ideologically charged. The term raises questions about who is thought to cause the crisis and who is thought to be affected by the crisis. Samers and Collyer (2017) criticize the use of the term as it has come to focus on the consequences for the receiving countries in Europe, rather than the humanitarian crisis it consists of the people fleeing their country of origin. On a similar note, Rea et al. (2019) argue that the "refugee crisis" rather should be discussed as a “refugee reception crisis” to mirror what the debate in European politics and media was about.

The term “refugee crisis” is approached critically within this thesis. I acknowledge that the term is contested and politically charged but have chosen to use it as it nevertheless has become a normative way of describing the migration flows of 2015. The quotation marks used when discussing the “refugee crisis” throughout this thesis are not meant to question the sense of urgency and crisis that refugee migration serves for the people leaving their country of origin, but rather as a way to critically approach its use and acceptance in a European context.
5. Methods and methodology

5.1 Research design – a case study

This thesis has adopted a qualitative approach to give a detailed exploration of the subject of rural resilience. This research is conducted in the style of a single-case study, which allows for a detailed and intensive study of the particularity and complexity of a single case (Bryman, 2016). While the result from a multi-case study may be regarded as more robust (Herriott & Firestone, 1983), the strength of a single-case study is its in-depth analysis of a critical case, or an unusual case (Yin, 1994). Hence, using a single-case study instead of a multi-case study is a logical choice when researching the particularity and complexity of an unusual case. In the case of Ekberga municipality, it was the somewhat unexpected outcome of the “refugee crisis” that made the case especially intriguing and noticeable.

Ekberga, the selected case, was one of the municipalities that received the most refugees in 2015 and it is also one of the municipalities where a high proportion of people, who came as refugees, have settled five years after their arrival. Until that year, Ekberga had, like many rural municipalities, experienced a population decrease in the last decades. The case of the refugee reception in Ekberga municipality and its subsequent population increase did not follow this path. A population increase is seen as something positive and desirable in the prevailing growth discourse (Syssner, 2020) and refugee migration contradicts the geographical image of the countryside as homogenous and stable, without global and transnational connections (Stenbacka, 2013). Against this background, the case of Ekberga comprises several of the elements deemed crucial in rural resilience theory. Hence, this thesis is a theory-led single-case study.

The fact that Ekberga was one of the municipalities that increased the most in terms of population as an outcome of the “refugee crisis” was one of the starting points for this thesis. As one of many smaller rural municipalities that have experienced a depopulation for the last 30 years, this development sparked my curiosity in this particular case. For this reason, I am testing the concept of rural resilience to see if the theory can help explain the development in Ekberga. Thus, this thesis is following a deductive logic where I use the theory of rural resilience to illustrate how this particular theory can be applied in a real-life setting (Denscombe, 2017). Through testing the theory of rural resilience, I aim to add to a theoretical development through analytical generalization. Yin (1994) describes analytical generalization as a method where “[...] a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study” (p. 31). With the theory-led case study, I aim to explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events, such as the “refugee crisis”.

5.2 Epistemology and ontology

Panelli (2004) emphasizes how research and knowledge are constructed from somewhere (p. 23). It is, therefore, appropriate to outline the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin this research before introducing the methods and the methodological approach. This thesis is guided by an interpretivist view of knowledge,
which is based on the thought that humans are fundamentally different from objects in natural sciences (Bryman, 2016). This view contrasts the positivist approach traditionally used in science, where knowledge is only considered to be valid if it is confirmed by at least one of the senses. Blaikie (2000) describes the interpretivist as someone who applies an “insider view” rather than enacting an “outsider view” to the research object (p. 115). Thus, the interpretivist view of knowledge seeks to understand, rather than explain, human behavior (Bryman, 2016). As the aim is to explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events, the experiences and perceptions of the local community compose the data collected for this thesis.

By examining the role of the local rural community and their interpretations and perceptions of refugee reception during the “refugee crisis”, this thesis is in line with the constructionist approach of ontology. The constructionists view the social world as an ever-shifting, dynamic product of social actors (Bryman, 2016). How individuals construct the social reality is subjective, as individuals draw their understandings and interpretations from experience, background, and environment (Stake, 1995). The individuals and their perceptions of their social reality compose the main source for this thesis and through qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument for data generation (Mason, 2002). The researcher is an actor taking part in a process of gathering interpretations, generating data, and interpreting the data. This highlights how the researcher is a social actor with an understanding and interpretation of the social reality, which will influence the way the data is analyzed and interpreted. With this understanding of knowledge and the social world, Mason (2002) argues that the researcher takes part in a process of generating data, rather than collecting data.

5.3 Interviews
The data has been generated through semi-structured interviews. Yin (1994) describes interviews as an “essential source of case study evidence” (p. 85). As case studies commonly address issues related to human affairs, interviews are a logical choice of methods to generate data to provide subjective insights and perceptions. Using qualitative interviews as the research method allows the researcher to gain access to the attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of the respondents, which generates descriptions and interpretations of the respondents’ social worlds (Ritchie, et al., 2014).

To explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events, I wanted to illustrate the community and municipal capacity to deal with unforeseen events, and the processes and networks that influence this capacity. For this reason, my sample consists of actors that engaged in the local refugee reception, and not the migrants themselves. One important aspect of the sample selection was to have the respondents themselves identify the network of actors engaged in the local refugee reception. Each respondent was during the interview asked to map out the actors they consider having had a key position, with the intention to get each respondent’s perception of the ties and collaboration during the local refugee reception. This sampling strategy allowed me to get in contact with respondents I might not have considered on my own, as well as the strategy presented an opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences of the respondents’ perceptions and understandings of the involved network.
I made initial contact with three respondents who were identified at an early stage with the help of acquaintances living in Ekberga with insights into the local refugee reception in 2015. Thereafter, each respondent has been contacted after at least one of the other respondents have mentioned them as a key actor in the local refugee reception. Altogether I conducted 9 interviews with 10 different respondents. The interview with respondents 4 and 5 was conducted on the same occasion. The respondents are presented in table 1.

Table 1: List of respondents with descriptions of their role during the "refugee crisis"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>Former manager at a local refugee quarter</td>
<td>March 2, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>Project leader for an internationally funded integration project</td>
<td>March 2, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>Former project leader for a municipal integration project targeted at asylum seekers</td>
<td>March 3, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>Former chairman for Ekberga sports team</td>
<td>March 3, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>Active in local sports team</td>
<td>March 3, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 6</td>
<td>Upper-level manager at Ekberga school</td>
<td>March 5, 2022</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7</td>
<td>Former coordinator for Ekberga school board</td>
<td>March 8, 2022</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 8</td>
<td>Religious leader</td>
<td>March 15, 2022</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 9</td>
<td>Volunteer, Red Cross</td>
<td>March 22, 2022</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 10</td>
<td>Integration manager at a local refugee quarter</td>
<td>March 25, 2022</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone, or on the videoconferencing platform Zoom. It was possible in some instances to meet in person; therefore, some respondents were given the option to either meet in person for the interview or conduct the interview by phone or videoconferencing platform Zoom. Whilst there are disadvantages with distance interviewing, using an online platform or telephone has been very helpful as it has allowed me to conduct more interviews than would have been possible due to distance and time constraints if we were to meet in person. Possible disadvantages and challenges with phone and online interviews are the video and audio quality, the fact that both the interviewer and the respondent need to be somewhat familiar
with the technology, and problems with Wi-Fi-connections and cell phone coverage (Bryman, 2016). But as Archibald, et al. (2019) demonstrate, using a video conferencing platform like Zoom has many advantages, such as ease of use, cost-effectiveness and data management features, and is even the preferred medium for conducting a research interview in many cases.

The interviews were carried out in a semi-structured manner, with an interview guide covering topics such as the local refugee reception, integration, and local networks. The interview guide was emailed to the respondents in advance of the interviews, to ensure that they were allowed to reflect and recall the events following the 2015 “refugee crisis”. Before the interviews, I repeated the purpose of the interview, explained that all names and places would have pseudonyms, and ensured I had the consent to conduct and record the interview. The interviews were transcribed and to some extent translated from Swedish to English. The quotes presented in the empirical findings are all translations. I translated the quotes while carefully considering the meaning of certain words and sentences in Swedish respective English. Some words and phrases have been difficult to translate, especially colloquial expressions in Swedish that do not have a clear correspondence in English. Examples of these phrases in Swedish have been “trolla med knäna” and “glida på en räkmacka”. I have in these cases tried to capture the meaning of each phrase, while adding a footnote of the original phrase in Swedish. I have throughout the translation process added notes where I considered alternative interpretations of the translation (Wong & Poon, 2010). The original and translated quotes were sent to respective respondents to ensure the respondent felt comfortable with my use of the quote and its translation.

5.3.1 Analyzing interview data
The empirical material consists of primary data generated from interview recordings and interview transcriptions. After transcribing the interviews, the data were thematically coded to make the generated data more manageable for analysis and interpretation. The data were initially analyzed with an inductive approach by exploring common themes and topics in the transcripts. This was a way for me to get familiarized with the data and explore its relations to my research questions (Mason, 2002). Some themes emerged during this process, such as the division between formal and informal responsibilities with different actors. This was followed by a more thorough thematic analysis, where I looked for themes outlined in the chapters of previous research and key concepts; advantages and challenges of collaboration with other actors, emotional support and social inclusion, and the rural environment. The codes were then categorized into 3 themes: open spaces for civil society, rural ties and building on best practices.
5.4 Ethics
Regarding ethical considerations, Bryman (2016) has outlined four areas where ethical concerns risk arising: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception. During the process of generating data, I have carefully considered each area, particularly by ensuring the participants’ informed consent and maintaining their anonymity. For this reason, the municipality in focus for this thesis is anonymized and all the respondents have been given pseudonyms.

Regarding the respondents’ informed consent, I approached the respondents through email. I explained who I was, gave a brief background to the research topic, and explained why I was interested in interviewing them. I described what was expected of them if they wanted to participate and gave them a few examples of questions that could come up.
during the interview. Using email as the initial communication form was an intentional decision, as it gave the respondents the possibility to reflect on their eventual participation and respond to my email in their own time. In this way, the respondents were given time to make an informed decision about what they were consenting to.

After the respondents had agreed to participate, I prepared the interview questions and sent them to the respondents a few days before the interviews. The thought was to allow the respondents to reflect on the questions and give them time to recall the events of 2015 beforehand. In addition, I thought of it as an opportunity for the respondents to reflect if there was any question, or topic, they were not interested in discussing during the interview. However, as all the interviews were prepared for a semi-structured setup, I stressed to the respondents how the questions were thought to serve as a base for the conversation and that more questions could be added during the interview.

At the start of every interview, I again gave a brief background to myself and the research subject. I explained how I planned to use the data, asked for consent to conduct the interviews and if so, record the interview, and described how names and places were to be anonymized throughout the thesis. The interviews were all conducted in Swedish, which means that the quotes used in the thesis have been translated from Swedish to English. I am aware of how translation is not neutral and objective, but an interpretative and social practice, influenced by the translator’s positionality (Wong & Poon, 2010). I have tried to carefully consider alternative translations and meaning during the process of translation and will reflect on my positionality in chapter 5.5. The respondents have approved of the quotes and their translation on the occasions when it has been used in this thesis.

5.5 Positionality and my relation to Ekberga
Going back to Panelli’s (2004) notion that we all are researching from somewhere, the purpose of this section is to reflect on my positionality and research bias. Ekberga is a municipality I have a strong connection to, which is one of the reasons this case sparked my interest in the topic in the first place. Against this background, I have an insider perspective that I knew could be useful for accessing information and generating data. I had, for example, some assistance and input from acquaintances in identifying key actors in an early stage. However, I tried to approach the topic from both an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective. I may have a connection to Ekberga, but I do not live in the area, and I had little insight and prior knowledge of the municipality’s refugee reception. This helped me approach the subject with fresh eyes. In addition, my outsider perspective was reinforced during those interviews that were held on Zoom and telephone, as I was sitting in Stockholm, being a literal outsider to Ekberga municipality at that moment.

England (1994) argues that fieldwork is a dialogical process where the positionality and biography of the researcher influence the way this dialogue is conducted. I grew up in a rural area but have lived in Swedish metropolitan areas during my adult years. I explained my background and my interest in the topic before the interviews, so the respondents were all familiar with my position. Some topics, such as certain places and activities, were discussed by the respondents with a sense of familiarity, which I believe stems from their
awareness of my prior knowledge and connection to the municipality. The respondents’ awareness of my rural upbringing may have influenced the power dynamic during the interviews. England (1994) describes how there is a risk that patterns of domination are reinforced in social research where voices of “others” are interpreted by a researcher who may not share characteristics with the “others” being interviewed. As has been discussed in the previous chapters on rural planning in Sweden, there is a geographical hierarchy where an urban norm influences the way rural is framed and discussed in a Swedish context. The fact that the respondents and I had a shared experience of rural areas helped mediate the urban-rural power dynamic that otherwise could have played a role in the way the dialogue was conducted.

In addition, there is a chance that the way I approached the topic of refugee reception and rural resilience influenced the respondents’ willingness to participate. When I established contact with the respondents, I presented my research topic and explained how my interest in Ekberga municipality was rooted in the seemingly successful refugee reception in the wake of the “refugee crisis” in 2015. The respondents were thus aware of how I perceived Ekberga municipality as a positive example, and this positive spin on the subject may have influenced how the respondents approached the interviews as well as how they approached me as an interviewer. They were already to some extent aware of how I viewed the subject and from what angle I was going to analyze their answers. The fact that Ekberga municipality was going to be framed as a positive example may have created a context where the threshold for participation was perceived as lower.

5.6 Limitations
This thesis’ limitations are linked to the research design of a single-case study analysis, and in particular the sample size and the question of generalizability. There is a rather small number of people who are relevant to the case, and the lack of documents and other forms of written material meant limited possibilities for triangulation (Yin, 1994). The question of generalizability is connected to the single-case study, where the results cannot be generalizable to all unforeseen events in rural municipalities. However, this thesis’ deductive approach allows for what Yin (1994) calls “analytical generalization”, where the case study data is compared to existing theory, in this case, rural resilience. As such, the single-case study can help expand and develop theories, contributing to an analytical generalization.

The concept of rural resilience explores the community and municipal capacity to deal with unforeseen events. This thesis uses the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga municipality as the launching point and explores the processes and networks that influence the municipality’s capacity to cope and adapt to this event. For this reason, the sample consist of actors that engaged in the local refugee reception, and not the migrants themselves. This sample constitute a limitation, especially when discussing the concept of emotional citizenship, where an addition of their experiences and perceptions would have been beneficial.
6. Empirical findings
This chapter will answer the research questions by presenting the main findings generated through interviews carried out during the research process. It explores answers to my research question How does the local community’s response to the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga municipality exemplify pathways to rural resilience, and what do these pathways implicate for planning in rural areas? The data has been analyzed and grouped to provide answers through three different themes or pathways: rural ties, open spaces for civil society, and building on best practices.

The first section shows pathways forged from ‘rural ties’, discusses individual responses to the “refugee crisis” and illustrates how personal relationships and place attachment functioned as a motivation for the local community to engage. The second section discusses how the organization of the local refugee reception opened spaces and enabled greater participation from civil society and the local community creating another pathway for rural resilience, while the last section discusses how wider relations and former experiences allowed the local community to build on best practices and continue with pathways of resilience. It should be noted these pathways are not mutually exclusive nor do they represent a typology of resilience. Pathways are used to explore routes identified in the case study.

6.1 Rural ties
Rural ties refer to different forms of networks and ties between people and places that are shaped by the rural context. The rural setting, with for example depopulation, long distances and a comparatively large agricultural industry, has created context-specific ties between people and places, which influences the community’s response to the “refugee crisis”. The following sections will illustrate how relationships between individuals, and ties to place and space, came to influence the refugee reception in Ekberga.

As an effect of the “refugee crisis”, respondent 2 became the project leader for a project run by a community-led local development initiative. The project aims to increase integration with the help of various network groups and the exchange of methods and experiences between the municipalities that participate in the project. The participating municipalities are of similar size and characteristics, and the project’s steering committee consists of representatives from the public sector, private sector and civil society from the participating municipalities. The goal of the project is to support former refugees in the area to move on to the next "step" towards integration. This is done through a collaboration with local municipalities, businesses and civil society, where the next step is adapted to the target audience. This means that the project engages in a variety of activities, as the next step in some instances is employment, and if so, the project assists in looking for jobs and internships. In other cases, the next step can be a conversation about traditions and customs, or a study at local social welfare offices. The project’s structure is dependent on various forms of rural ties, between individuals, but also between municipalities in the area. The ties extend beyond administrative borders and connect individuals holding different positions together.
Respondent 2 says the project’s work has been well-received in the region. Some sectors, such as health- and eldercare, are in constant need of labor and the municipalities see the work of the project as an opportunity to grow their population and reduce the number of people who receive economic support. She also describes a sort of “local patriotism” where the residents and businesses engage out of care for their local area. She describes how this mindset is especially evident in smaller villages and communities, where the population has shrunk, and commerce and services have relocated over the last decades. This development has made the villagers more protective and caring of their village, which has translated into a greater willingness to help the new residents, as long as they live in the village.

Respondent 10, a former integration manager at one of the asylum accommodations, gives an example of what this caring and protective atmosphere could look like. Respondent 10 lived in the same village as one of the asylum accommodations was located, and she describes the villagers’ initial feelings towards the newly arrived refugees as skeptical and distanced. However, she believes this came to change eventually, and she credits the local grocery store for this change in the villagers’ attitude. It is one of few businesses and stores in the village and is, therefore, an important meeting point and facility for many of the locals. As such, the store facilitated meetings between new and old residents.

A cool thing happened with the local grocery store. The storeowners had a welcoming attitude, paid attention to what products the residents of the asylum accommodation requested and learned some words in their language. And therefore, the store prospered. It became a destination for the people in the village, for both new and old residents. I believe this helped change the attitude. Not with everyone. But for some. Something happens when a person in line shows you a photo of an inflatable dinghy.

Respondent 10

The local grocery store became an important destination to both new and old residents, an everyday space that facilitated meetings and conversations in an informalized manner. The store was a symbol of how the village could benefit from the residents at the asylum accommodation, which respondent 10 believes created a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. Respondent 10 emphasized how she thinks of integration as a process of giving and taking – it is not just one group “giving” to another group, but an exchange that leads to mutual understanding. The fact that the local grocery store could increase their sales figures while accommodating the needs and wishes of the people living at the asylum accommodation illustrated how both new and old residents could benefit from the situation. Moreover, the local grocery store became a space that facilitated meetings between new and old residents, which added an emotional dimension to interpersonal meetings and conversations taking place in a rural everyday setting. Thus, the local grocery store was not only a symbol of how new and old residents could benefit financially from each other but also demonstrated the role of emotions and inclusion in the integration process.
Respondent 3, who before the covid-19 pandemic had an integration project for the municipality targeted at asylum seekers, has a similar view of integration as respondent 10. She describes integration as a “two-way process” that is built on interaction and meetings between new and old residents. From her perspective, rural ties influence the pathways to rural resilience, but not always in a desirable way.

Integration is a two-way process, and most discussions concern the newly arrived’s responsibility to integrate. But to what and to whom? I have seen so many projects, from language cafés to walks in the forest with walking sticks, but the only ones attending these events are people newly arrived in Sweden. How are you supposed to integrate with nothing to integrate to? [...] I think this phenomenon is more present in rural areas since the population is smaller. The lack of engagement from established residents becomes more evident in a smaller community.

Respondent 3

Respondent 3 problematizes the expectations on organized events, as these rarely appeal to the old residents. In a smaller setting, such as Ekberga municipality, the absence of Swedes in these types of events become even more noticeable due to the size of the population. From the perspective of respondent 3, the rural context makes the organization of projects with the sole purpose of integration difficult. This thought ties in with a reflection from respondent 4, a sports leader, who argued that already established groups and organizations have the best environment for integration, as the people participating already share an interest and a goal.

The ties between people and space created incentives for people to participate, as everyday spaces such as the local grocery store or the sports practice demonstrated how the local community could benefit from the influx of refugees to Ekberga. The rationale for engaging in the local refugee reception is the expected benefits it serves for the village and its community. Respondent 2, the project leader for an integration project, explains that this was one of the reasons why the asylum accommodations opened in Ekberga in the first place.

One of the reasons the refugees ended up in Ekberga in the first place is that we have available housing. For example, one of the asylum accommodations used to be a hotel, and I think they had trouble attracting visitors for a time period. Restructuring the business to become an asylum accommodation became a way for them to continue their operation.

Respondent 2

The refugee reception set the tone and permeated the local community’s approach to the “refugee crisis”. Local businesses, organizations and individuals saw how the new group could contribute to the development of the area, which created incentives for the local community to participate. Respondent 8, who was a leader in a religious community in Ekberga at the time of the “refugee crisis”, connects this pragmatic view to a mentality
where rural dwellers are used to checking in on each other, rolling up their sleeves and
doing things on their own.

   It is a way we think here. It is a mindset of ‘oh the next-door neighbor
   has problems; his tractor is broken, and it is time for harvest. I guess
   he can borrow ours’. And I think this mindset was applied to the
   people coming during the ‘refugee crisis’.
   Respondent 8

The rural ties between people have created a pragmatic and solution-oriented approach,
which respondent 8 thinks translated into the local community participation in the local
refugee reception. People may not always ask for help, but there is a habit and tradition
of checking in on each other and helping out when it is needed, which respondent 8
believes was applied during the “refugee crisis”. An example of how this mindset played
out was how the asylum accommodation supported the sports team by driving players to
away games. The sports club had a problem with away games when the team grew with
many new players who seldom owned a car. The asylum accommodation owned a bus,
which the team could borrow when needed.

The local community that engaged in the refugee reception formed a network in which
people helped each other, as the example with the sports team and the asylum
accommodation. Respondent 8, religious leader, believes the size of the municipality
helped create a strong network. As the municipality is small, the network becomes
recognizable, not only among the people in the network but also to people outside. The
rural setting made most people recognizable to each other – if you do not know someone
personally, your parent, partner, or friend probably does. This setting made it easier to get
in contact with people and know how to reach them. Respondent 1, former manager at
one of the asylum accommodations, makes a similar reflection of how the small-town
setting facilitates meetings and helps establish personal relationships.

   I usually say that if I need to work together with someone, I just go
down and spend some time at the central square. There is always one
relevant person walking by. I joke that it is easier to get in contact
this way than through email.
   Respondent 1

Respondent 1 believes that the familiarity one can find in a smaller municipality also
influenced the local refugee reception. The local community managed to form a
recognizable network for the asylum seekers, who they could turn to for questions and
support. Respondent 10, former integration manager at an asylum accommodation,
develops this thought and describes how a small but recognizable network is both a
potential strength and weakness within smaller municipalities. The network becomes very
dependent on the individual relationship, which is a strength if there is a sense of ‘right
person at the right position’. A network consisting of personal relationships has the
potential to be strong and effective if the relations are built on mutual trust and shared
visions. However, it is a rather vulnerable system, as a change in relations or a change in
staff can change the whole dynamic. In a rather sparsely populated area with a limited supply of skilled workers, the more person-oriented network is potentially a weakness.

The rural ties between people and spaces shaped the local community’s response to the “refugee crisis”. The care and concern many of the Ekberga residents felt for the landscape and its villages created a more inclusive atmosphere where some spaces, such as a local grocery store, came to illustrate how the municipality could benefit from the new residents at the asylum accommodation. Therefore, one rationale for engaging in the local refugee reception was the expected benefits the refugees could provide for the village and its community. Rural ties between people and spaces served as a motivation for civil society to engage when the municipality took a step back.

The respondents also discussed how different forms of rural ties between people influenced the local refugee reception. The rural and small-town setting has created various modes of operation that encourage people to check in on each other and help when it is needed. The respondents describe how a pragmatic and solution-oriented attitude characterized the refugee reception in Ekberga, where the size of the municipality worked in their favor. The relatively small size created a familiar setting, which enabled contact between people within the local community. A sense of “everyone knows everyone” made communication and cooperation between different sectors and people more manageable in this particular case. However, the respondents reflected upon how the network becomes very dependent on individuals and their dynamics, which makes the system more vulnerable.

6.2 Open spaces for civil society
The refugee reception in Ekberga municipality was also shaped by open spaces for civil society, which forms the second pathway. The open spaces came from an expectation that the municipality would take on a more active role in the local refugee reception, an expectation that many respondents felt was not fulfilled. This section will discuss how the lack of engagement from the municipality opened spaces for the civil society, who took on a greater commitment and more responsibilities related to the local refugee reception. Civil society refers to an arena that is separated from the state, the market and the individual household, where people organize and act together in common interests (O’Connell, 2000). As such, civil society consists of for example sports teams, religious communities and voluntary organizations. Civil society was present during the local refugee reception in Ekberga, and the lack of engagement from the municipality opened new forms of participation from the civil society. The open spaces for civil society helped create more informal meeting spaces, which eased contact and communication between the local community and the refugees.

During the height of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015-2016, three asylum accommodations were active in Ekberga municipality. The accommodations were run by private companies procured by the Swedish Migration Board. Respondents 1 and 10 were both employed by one of the asylum accommodations in Ekberga. According to them, Ekberga municipality seemed reluctant in spending time and money on the refugees as they thought they would only be temporary residents in the municipality. Once they were
granted a residence permit, they would leave Ekberga for a more urban environment. The respondents describe how they made several efforts trying to initiate collaboration with the municipality, without any results. Respondent 1, a former manager at an asylum accommodation, recalls how the accommodation wanted to establish a common ground and a platform for collaboration, as their knowledge and experience could have assisted Ekberga municipality and eventually save both time and money.

We contacted the municipality and told them how we could help. We said that ‘we can do something you cannot do. We know the residents; we can easily find out their professional backgrounds. Let us know what you need in terms of labor, and we can help you match that need.’ But no. They were not interested.

Respondent 1

Some civil society actors also had problems when they sought contact with the municipality. Respondent 4, a board member of a local sports team, reached out to the municipality and asked for assistance. The team had grown with 60 new players during 2016, all newly arrived refugees staying at the local asylum accommodations. Respondent 4 describes how the sports team came to function as a support to the refugees, with questions varying from where to find the closest pharmacy to where they could find information about other sports teams in Ekberga. As a small association where much of the work is non-profit, they argued the municipality could have assisted them in their work.

We brought a list to the municipality, suggesting different things they could do to help. We thought for example that they could help us gather information about other teams and associations in the area. Not everyone is interested in sports. But nothing happened. We did not hear anything from them.

Respondent 4

The municipality did not take an active role in the refugee reception at that time, at least not to the extent that the local community expected of them. This thought was also echoed by the municipality’s own employees, where for example representatives from the school department described how they felt alone in a situation that was completely new to the students and teachers. Respondent 6, an upper-level manager within the school department, describes how the schools found themselves in an unusual logistical and emotional situation. One school within the municipality had for example around 100 pupils coming and leaving during an academic year. Respondent 6 describes the situation as challenging for both students and teachers, as the school had to provide room and material for the new pupils, the student health care had to focus on questions they were not used to and the school had to recruit language supporters, which turned out to be a challenge as the school experienced difficulties in finding staff with the right skills. The situation was somewhat eased with the help of the staff at the asylum accommodations, in particular, the largest one in the village that had hired personnel with the sole purpose to work for integration. Respondent 6 describes how she and the manager at the asylum
accommodation, respondent 1, established good communication where they could help each other. Respondent 1 could help the school to reach out with information to the parents, discuss problems and prepare families for what the Swedish school expects from pupils and their parents. This way of work coincides with rural ties, where the relationships between individuals had a key role in the local refugee reception

Respondent 1’s role at the asylum accommodation was unusual, at least within the municipality where the other two accommodations did not have a corresponding role. Respondent 1 reflects upon his position and recalls how the owner who hired him as manager had explicitly high ambitions – they aimed to be the best asylum accommodation in Sweden. They made a conscious decision to call their facility “integration accommodation”, instead of the more commonly used “asylum accommodation”, to signalize their goal of giving their residents the tools to live a good life in Sweden. The accommodation saw the potential of involving civil society at an early stage and contacted for example the Red Cross to ask if they wanted to manage a second-hand sale of clothes and toys at their accommodation and were encouraged different sports and voluntary organizations to operate on their accommodation. Eventually, the integration accommodation had difficulties coordinating the different initiatives and activities at their accommodation and therefore hired respondent 10 to manage and plan for the different activities and actors engaging in the integration accommodation. The accommodation had for example different language classes, outdoor activities for children and families at the accommodation, a swimming school in the summer, and groups helping children with homework. Some activities were organized by the staff at the accommodation, some were voluntary initiatives. In addition to the different activities, respondent 10 believes that the dining hall served as an important meeting space for both residents and staff. Everyone ate together in a common dining hall, which helped establish trust and understanding.

The fact we had all meals together contributed to good relations between the staff and the residents. We could answer questions, help sort out all the papers from the Swedish Migration Agency and talk about their migrant routes. Everyone had photos from their routes, they were so strong, that they could have been on the front cover of any paper.

Respondent 10

The asylum accommodation facilitated different forms of informalized meeting spaces, where residents and staff alike could meet, talk and sort out problems. An effect of the municipality’s absence was a greater engagement from the civil society. A lot of the functions the respondents expected the municipality to have in the refugee reception ended up in their hands instead, such as translating documents, looking for potential internships and jobs, and helping to search for housing once the refugees obtained a residence permit. These tasks engaged civil society in the local refugee reception to a greater extent than they might have anticipated. This seems to have created an informal setting for meetings between locals and the newly arrived refugees where relations developed, and feelings of inclusion unfolded.
A common theme throughout the interviews was integration and how it is best practiced in informal and natural settings, such as sports practices, classrooms or workplaces. Respondent 10, the former integration manager at one of the asylum accommodations, describes how she believes integration is best performed in settings where integration is not the sole purpose of the meeting or the activity, while respondent 2 describes integration as a two-way process that calls for engagement from both new and old residents. Using already established institutions and meeting spaces is a way to have old residents engage in the process of integration. Respondent 4 describes how a shared interest does not always need a spoken language.

*Motorcycle, photography, football… whatever interest it may be, I believe voluntary organizations have the best environment for integration, as people already have a common ground, a shared interest or goal. [...] I wished the municipality had supported the voluntary organizations, provided us with the information we needed so we could have created an even better environment for integration.*

Respondent 4

Although the respondents were disappointed with the lack of engagement from the municipality, there was also a belief in the role civil society could have in facilitating integration and providing a good refugee reception. However, what seems to have been lacking in the case of Ekberga was support and a sense that everyone was working towards the same goal. Many of the respondents had taken on more than was formally expected from them – the managers at the integration accommodation did more and spent more than the procurement asked of them, leaders and board members of the local sports team were not just expected to plan practices and coach the team, but also assist individuals in their case at the Swedish Migration Agency and the schools found themselves in an unusual logistical and emotional situation where around 100 pupils came and left during an academic year. In this light, many of the respondents were disappointed and wished the municipality could have shown some appreciation and support for their work. Respondent 5 is active in the same sports clubs as respondent 4, whose work eventually came to gain some media attention. He describes how it felt like all the responsibilities ended up in the hands of the voluntary sector, with no recognition from the municipality.

*We did not hear anything from the municipality, except for the time when we had politicians from Stockholm visiting. They wanted to learn more about our engagement with the refugee reception and the municipality came to our clubhouse and sort of wanted to have success without putting in the effort*. That was the one time I feel the

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2 This is a translation of the Swedish phrase “glida på en räckmacka”, which roughly translates to “to have everything handed to you on a plate”. The phrase is used to describe when someone has had things easy due to luck or circumstances.
municipality showed us some interest and praised our work. Respondent 5

However, the respondents also reflect on how the “refugee crisis” also changed the attitude of the municipality. The growing population figures showed that smaller municipalities in a rural setting could be an attractive living environment for international migrants. Ekberga municipality has since the “refugee crisis” reworked its comprehensive plan, now with an explicit goal to grow the population in the following years. Respondent 1, the former manager at an asylum accommodation, believes the municipality is in a different position today, as the refugee migration from Ukraine during spring 2022 has brought the question to the fore again. He sees a new awareness and readiness in questions concerning refugee migration and its potential contribution to the municipality’s development.

6.3 Build on best practice

Building on best practice refers to experiences and various forms of social and institutional learning that can be found in rural areas. These experiences do not necessarily have to be connected to previous experiences of refugee reception, but rather a way of work and a form of learning that has been shaped by rural conditions, such as depopulation and long distances. The following section will outline how the local community used best practices in the local refugee reception and how this illustrates a pathway to rural resilience.

Ekberga municipality is a small municipality with less than 10,000 inhabitants and a population that has steadily shrunken since the 1990s. These demographic phenomena have given the Ekberga residents an experience and knowledge of working and operating in an area with limited resources and a small population. The respondents describe a way of work where one has to be creative and willing to “make a silk purse of a sow's ear”3. These experiences have led to social and institutional learning which translated into practice during the “refugee crisis”. When asked to identify success factors with Ekberga’s refugee reception, respondent 8, religious leader, suggests that former experiences played a key role:

Ekberga has a history of being a refugee receiving municipality, and I think there is a habit and an experience in reorganizing and adapting to new situations, perhaps especially among voluntary and sports associations. Sports life is often very rich in the countryside, and they are used to having to work hard in order to get things done. [...] They are used to being creative; they have to in order to survive.

Respondent 8

Respondent 8 put the “refugee crisis” in a wider historical context, where Ekberga municipality has received refugee migrants for many years, in particular from the Balkans during the 1990s. There are still memories and experiences from this time within the

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3 The expression they use in Swedish is called “trolla med knäna”, which means that someone manages to do something seemingly impossible.
municipality, which respondent 8 believes somewhat eased the reception during the “refugee crisis”. Some of the respondents were in different ways participating in the refugee reception in the 1990s and brought knowledge and learning from this time to the 2015 “refugee crisis”. However, these memories and experiences also contributed to the disappointment many of the respondents voiced for the lack of engagement from the municipality, as discussed in chapter 6.1. There was a memory of how the community dealt with the reception the last time, which created an expectation that each sector would take on the same responsibilities, even though the organization around the asylum accommodations had changed.

However, respondent 8’s reflections also highlight how experiences that are not specifically related to refugee reception have shaped the local refugee reception in Ekberga. The rural context, characterized by a low population density and long distances between households, creates an often challenging setting for voluntary organizations. Respondent 8 describes how creativity is a requirement for organizations that want to operate within the area, as the organizations are often rather small, with few active members and an often limited economy. This put the organizations in a more vulnerable position, which has forced them to adopt a more creative and adaptable approach.

Respondent 8 exemplifies this creative and adaptable approach with the local sports team in which respondents 4 and 5 are active. They were at an early stage during the “refugee crisis” visiting one of the asylum accommodations in Ekberga, and their visit helped the club grow with almost 60 new players. The respondents active in the local sports team also reflect on how their small and flexible organization resulted in a freedom that they believe is rarely found in larger organizations. Respondent 4 explains how this freedom was significant for their sports club to participate in the local refugee reception.

It is probably thanks to the fact that we are a small organization that we without fuss could visit the asylum accommodation and invite them to our club. You must organize, hold meetings, and decide in the correct order in a larger organization. It must be neat and tidy. And being neat and tidy has never been our organization's strong suit.

Respondent 4

Respondent 4 explains how “being neat and tidy” is a requirement in larger organizations, which makes them slow and rigid. The size of their club made them more flexible, but also facilitated an understanding among active members as to why it was important to the club to invite new players. This indicates that there is a form of social learning from past experiences in Ekberga. These experiences were shaped by rural depopulation, which has affected the work of voluntary organizations and modes of operation within the municipality. It has made it more acceptable to work outside the frames and adopt a new way of working.

Respondent 10, former manager at an asylum accommodation, also highlights how it is not only social learning in the area but also a form of institutional learning that comes from being active within a voluntary organization. There is a tradition and experience of
seeking financial support from national sports federations and investment funds aimed at association life.

Voluntary and sports associations are really important. They already have an established organization where you can find a certain form of support and camaraderie. They also have a tradition to apply for funding and economic support, which we could learn from.

Respondent 10

The community-led local development project that respondent 2 initiated in 2017, is one project where this practice of applying for funding has been used outside the world of sports. Another form of institutional learning is what respondent 6, an upper-level manager at the school department describes when talking about the school’s experience of the “refugee crisis”. Although the municipality does not have any formal responsibility for refugee reception until they have obtained a residence permit, several of the municipality’s areas of concern were affected by the influx of refugees. The schools received many new students and respondent 6, employed at Ekberga municipality’s school department, recalls how they were completely new situation.

We were so busy just holding our heads above the water. We could have used some help organizing and structuring the situation. Everything was new to us. We could have hired someone, but it is challenging to find someone with the right skills.

Respondent 6

Respondent 6 describes how Ekberga as a municipality had experienced a rather extensive refugee migration before, but this reception has mostly been concentrated in the schools in central Ekberga. During the “refugee crisis”, it was mostly the schools in the smaller villages within the municipality that received the most pupils with a refugee background. Although the situation for the village schools was challenging, there was institutional knowledge within the school department that was helpful at the time. Respondent 6 recalls how she reached out to colleagues with more experience regarding children with refugee backgrounds and asked them for support in organizing the teaching. However, in retrospect, respondent 6 wishes the municipality would have established a central “reception unit” that could provide an overview of the refugee reception within the municipality. As the situation was in 2015, the schools struggled logistically to keep up with the influx of new pupils. Some classes grew to become twice as large; the school underwent a renovation, and it was a challenge to recruit language supporters with the right skills. A reception unit would ideally have established contact with the families and the staff at the accommodations, assist the schools in coordinating the arrival of new pupils, provide information, and answer questions about the Swedish school system and society. The reception unit would then allow the schools to focus on their main responsibility – teaching and education.

The school situation in Ekberga demonstrates how institutional learning contributed to the schools’ capacity to cope with the challenges that followed the “refugee crisis”. Respondent 6 describes the value of using experienced colleagues to help with the
situation and suggests that this knowledge and experience should be more accessible to the people working with refugee reception. Respondent 6’s reasoning demonstrates how the experiences of the “refugee crisis” also add to the institutional learning for future challenges, and she already has suggestions on how the situation could be improved. The experiences from the “refugee crisis” add to the method of best practices, which strengthen their resilience towards future crises and transformations. Respondent 10, former manager at an asylum accommodation, compares the situation in 2015 to the refugee migration from Ukraine during the spring of 2022. She believes that the experiences from 2015 are helpful for today’s refugee migration, explaining how the municipality is more prepared after the “refugee crisis”.

I believe the asylum accommodations have had a great impact on Ekberga and the people living here. We have collected experiences in a way that has prepared us for what is to come [regarding the refugee migration from Ukraine]. The asylum accommodations brought something good to Ekberga. Like I mentioned the local grocery store earlier, it is still open and running.

Respondent 10

The quote from respondent 10 illustrates the impact of the “refugee crisis” on Ekberga municipality. Despite a logistically and emotionally challenging situation, respondent 10 believes the event brought something good to Ekberga, which she exemplifies with the local grocery store and how it is still open and running. Ekberga municipality seems to have both managed to cope and adapt to the situation, but also “collect experiences” that will be helpful in future crises and challenges. As such, the “refugee crisis” will be added to the list of experiences that help Ekberga prepare for future crises and challenges.
7. Discussion

This thesis aims to explore the pathways of rural resilience in a small Swedish municipality in response to unforeseen events. This was done by exploring the case of Ekberga municipality and its local community’s response to the event that has come to be known as the “refugee crisis” in 2015. This thesis uses Stenbacka’s (2013) definition of rural resilience, which she defines as follows:

“Resilience is the community and municipal capacity to deal with economic and social transformation – the ability to ‘bounce back’ and challenge the prevailing circumstances. Crucial to the concept is the capacity to challenge and transform rather than returning to a state of ‘normalcy’ or making adaptations without intentional strategies.”

(Stenbacka, 2013, p. 86).

Working from this definition, this chapter will analyze and discuss the findings of this thesis and link it back to the theoretical concepts of rural resilience and integration and inclusion. I will demonstrate the links between the findings to help build a picture of how rural ties, open spaces for civil society and building on best practices contributed to rural resilience as illustrated by the “refugee crisis” in 2015 in Ekberga municipality.

This thesis’ empirical findings have shown three pathways that contributed to rural resilience in the case of Ekberga: rural ties, open spaces for civil society and building on best practices. The findings identify how pathways to resilience also relate to the concept of emotional citizenry, which describes how emotions in mundane everyday spaces can unfold feelings of inclusion through interpersonal encounters. The findings illustrate how rural resilience and emotional citizenry converge and relate to each other.

These three pathways will serve as a point of departure for a discussion on what these findings implicate for planning in rural areas. The findings will here be linked to previous research on rural areas and the current discourse around rural planning and the urban-rural dichotomy.

7.1 Multiple pathways to rural resilience

Rural resilience refers to the coping, adaptive and transformative capacities of a community or a municipality to deal with economic and social transformation. The transformative capacities are crucial to the concept, as the transformative power can challenge the urban norm and contribute to a discussion where rural areas are not valued in relation to urban areas (Stenbacka, 2013). The case of Ekberga municipality during the “refugee crisis” illustrated a community that in different ways was prepared to handle the transformation that followed the “refugee crisis.

When exploring the pathways to rural resilience in Ekberga in the wake of the “refugee crisis”, one of the most commonly occurring sentiments was disappointment with the lack of engagement from the municipality. This feeling of disappointment reveals the role of emotional citizenry in understanding rural resilience. Regardless of whether the respondents participated in the refugee reception as representatives from the public sector, private sector or as civil society, the overall opinion was that the municipality could have
taken on a more active role. However, the municipality’s absence seems to have created an opportunity for civil society to engage to a greater extent. The respondents recall how their everyday spaces such as the local grocery store, the workplace, the sports practice also became spaces where new and old residents of Ekberga could meet, talk and support each other. For example, returning to respondent 10, who describes how “something happens when a person in line shows you a photo of an inflatable dinghy”, and this sentiment captures what Askins’ (2016) describes as emotional citizenry. Emotional citizenry refers to how emotions in mundane everyday spaces can unfold feelings of inclusion through interpersonal encounters, as “diverse residents can discover each other as multifaceted and interdependent; as individuals with simultaneously different and potentially shared positions, practices and desires” (p. 525). The civil society’s engagement meant that the refugees were welcomed to the everyday spaces in Ekberga, as the various sports clubs and voluntary organizations invited them to take part in their weekly operations. Grip (2020) compared integration to the act of entering a room, where you need to be handed a key in order to be let in and this was clearly shown in the results where multiple forms of spaces and places were identified. To continue Grip’s metaphor, the open spaces for civil society became a way to provide more keys. Civil society’s engagement helped create a more informal setting for new and established residents to interact and discover different and potentially shared positions, practices and desires. Sharing everyday spaces became a key for facilitating the meeting between new and old residents, which the abovementioned quote aptly illustrates, and demonstrates how rural resilience occurs through multiple pathways and settings.

The municipality’s absence opened spaces for civil society to participate to a greater extent. Their participation was shaped by rural ties that connected people and spaces in a way that influenced the local refugee reception, which is the second pathway to rural resilience identified in this study. Rural ties refer to the various forms of networks and ties between people and places that are shaped by the rural context. The rural setting, with for example depopulation, long distances and a comparatively large agricultural industry, has created context-specific ties between people and places, which came to influence the community’s response to the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga. The ties between people and space created incentives for people to participate, as everyday spaces such as the local grocery store or the sports practice demonstrated how the local community could benefit from the influx of refugees to Ekberga. This finding ties in with Søholt, et al. (2018) notion of “conditioned receptiveness”, which they describe as an attitude where migrants are accepted and valued in relation to their contribution to the local economy and population growth.

The respondents also discussed how rural ties between people influenced the local refugee reception. Respondent 8, religious leader, described how people within the agricultural sector are used to lending equipment and helping each other out, and this way of work translated into the building of a strong and solution-oriented network during the “refugee crisis”. The small size of the municipality also helped facilitate contact between different actors, and their ties were often strengthened by personal connections. Most people knew each other, or knew about each other, before the “refugee crisis” which eased the communication within the network.
The third finding shows how building on best practices formed a third pathway to rural resilience as illustrated by the “refugee crisis” in 2015 in Ekberga municipality. The respondents recount a form of social and institutional learning that has been shaped by rural conditions, such as depopulation and long distances. This learning is, in some instances, connected to previous experiences with refugee migration in Ekberga, which also shaped the involved actors’ expectations of the division of responsibility within the local community. There is also another form of learning, concerned with the local organization of sports and recreational activities, which helped strengthen the refugee reception. Attributes such as depopulation and long distances have created a somewhat challenging environment for many voluntary organizations. This environment pushes the organizations to find creative solutions to continue to operate. Thus, engaging in the local refugee reception can be seen as an example of how an organization can stay active and find new ways to survive – this can be seen as an illustration of the coping and adaptive capacities that are thought to characterize a resilient community (Stenbacka, 2013). Ekberga had the capacity to deal with the transformation that followed the “refugee crisis”, but also demonstrated their ability to adapt and use past experiences to adjust themselves to the new situation.

The voluntary organization had an important role in the integration process, as there are various forms of knowledge and experiences within the organizations that were helpful during the “refugee crisis”. The respondents highlighted how the organizations have experiences in applying for external funding and a tradition of voluntary and non-profit work. These two phenomena are also present within the process of refugee reception and made it helpful to have that form of knowledge within the network. In addition, it was argued that different voluntary organizations where participants gather around a shared interest are unmatched when it comes to gathering new and old residents in a shared space. It was contrasted with planned events where the expressed purpose is to gather residents of diverse backgrounds. Respondent 3, integration leader, explained how these events often fail to appeal to more established residents, and this becomes especially obvious in a rural and sparsely populated area. Rural ties may influence organized integration projects negatively, but they influenced civil society and already established sports organizations to participate to a greater extent.

The findings show that the rural ties, open spaces for civil society and building on best practices each formed converging pathways that made Ekberga municipality resilient towards the transformation that the “refugee crisis” meant for their community. The three pathways are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the pathways are interrelated and mutually supportive. Rural ties created incentives for civil society to engage in the local refugee reception, while the municipality’s lack of engagement opened spaces for civil society to participate. The rural context, with depopulation and long distances, contributed to a way of work and a form of learning, which provided a method of best practice. These three pathways contributed to forming a resilient rural community that had the coping, adaptive and transformative capacity to process the social transformation that the “refugee crisis” meant for their community.
Stenbacka’s (2013) definition of rural resilience emphasizes the importance of the transformative capacities, the community’s ability to “‘bounce back’ and challenge the prevailing circumstances” (p. 86). Six years after the “refugee crisis”, Ekberga was one of the municipalities in Sweden where the largest share of people who came during the “refugee crisis” had settled. Population growth is generally considered to be something desirable (Syssner, 2020; Stenbacka, 2013), and coming from this perspective, Ekberga has, at least temporarily, managed to reverse its population development. In addition, the findings illustrate the pathways’ transformative capacity. The municipality’s absence in the local refugee reception opened spaces for civil society to participate to a greater extent, a development that helped facilitate spaces for emotional citizenry (Askins, 2016). This pathway does not only illustrate the community’s capacity to adapt to the new division of responsibilities regarding the reception, but also the capacity to transform and challenge prevailing circumstances – the open spaces for civil society helped unfold feelings of inclusion and belonging, which might serve as an explanation to why Ekberga is one of the municipalities in Sweden where the highest share of people who came during the “refugee crisis” have settled.

The findings of this thesis illustrate the coping, adaptive and transformative capacities that contributed to forming a resilient rural community in response to the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga municipality. As such, the findings align with Stenbacka’s (2013) definition of rural resilience. However, the findings also suggest a relationship between rural resilience and emotional citizenry, as the pathway to rural resilience enables spaces that unfold feelings of inclusion and belonging through interpersonal encounters.

7.2 Implications for planning in rural areas
The previous sections suggested that rural ties, open spaces for civil society and building on best practices contributed to making Ekberga municipality resilient to the transformation that followed the “refugee crisis”. This section examines the question of rural resilience from a wider perspective, discussing what the identified pathways implicate for planning in rural areas.

Previous research on rural areas has illustrated how rural areas are understood in relation to the city and the urban norm (Eriksson, 2008). The urban norm contributes to an urban-oriented planning discourse, where rural municipalities are thought to grow and develop the same way as urban municipalities, despite their very different conditions regarding for example population growth, tax incidence, and geography (Syssner, 2020). Furthermore, the urban norm contributes to creating an urban-rural binary, which results in a narrative where urban and rural are given opposing traits and characteristics. News media, politics, and popular culture often portray cities as global, diverse, and dynamic, which means rural areas are given contrasting traits, such as traditional, homogenous, and stable (Eriksson, 2010). The narrative of the urban-rural binary distinguishes how both areas share traits and characteristics, as rural areas, just like cities, are marked by global processes and international migration (Askins, 2009; Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014). And indeed, the “refugee crisis” illustrate how global processes and international migration join the local development of rural areas such as Ekberga, where the local refugee reception contributed to population growth and the survival of local businesses.
However, focusing on growth, both in terms of population and economy, follows an urban- and growth-oriented discourse that Syssner (2020) argues is harmful to the development of rural areas. The depopulation and decline many rural municipalities have experienced in the last decades indicate structural challenges where refugee migration only serves as a temporary short-term solution (Hudson & Sandberg, 2021) that does not change national migration patterns (Hedlund, et al., 2017). According to Syssner (2020), a more sustainable and long-term solution to the effects of rural depopulation is to plan for a future where the population does not increase. These thoughts correspond to what Stenbacka (2016) describes as a pragmatic understanding of reality. Part of rural resilience thinking is the ability to accept and adapt to situations that cannot easily transform. On a similar note, Yamamoto (2011) discusses the benefits of resilience thinking as a tool to look beyond growth and competitiveness in regional development and instead discusses efforts and policies that benefit the local development from a long-term perspective.

Returning to the definition of rural resilience, Stenbacka (2013) emphasizes the resilient community’s transformative capacity, as “crucial to the concept is the capacity to challenge and transform rather than returning to a state of ‘normalcy’ or making adaptations without intentional strategies” (p. 86). Stenbacka (2013) argues that rural refugee reception is a way to bridge the urban-rural dichotomy as it contradicts the geographical image of the countryside as homogenous and stable, without global and transnational connections. Rural refugee reception can thus contribute to transforming and challenging the narrative where the countryside is seen as a less favorable residential environment. The role of rural areas during the time of crisis and unforeseen events has since the “refugee crisis” returned to the public debate, for instance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Åberg & Tondelli, 2021) and the discussion about the lack of shelters in Sweden (Sandström, 2022). The debate challenges the narrative of the city as the most favorable living environment, as these discussions shed light on the advantages of rural areas in times of crisis.

The findings of this thesis indicate that the rural context has contributed to the community’s capacity to cope with change and unforeseen events. The open spaces for civil society, rural ties and building on best practices each formed converging pathways that made Ekberga resilient in response to the “refugee crisis”. The pathways are interrelated and mutually supportive, illustrating how rural processes of learning and adapting to prevailing challenges help rural communities cope and adapt to transformations and unforeseen events. As such, rural resilience is affirmed as a process that combines traditional and well-known practices with the potential for societal transformations (Søholt, et al., 2018).

The findings of this thesis illustrate how the rural context can serve as a learning ground for rural communities in coping with challenges and transformations. Living and operating in rural areas have provided rural dwellers, businesses, and organizations with experiences of having to be creative and find ways to “make a silk purse of a sow’s ear”. The social and institutional learning was translated into practice during the “refugee crisis”, an unforeseen event that tested the capacity of the local community and its
institutions. In a future with changes in climate, security policies, and other events we do not know about yet, learning from past experiences is one of few ways to prepare for the unknown. It is inherently difficult to plan for the unforeseen, but the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga demonstrated how former experiences and building on best practices contributed to the capacity to both cope and adapt to the situation.

The findings suggest that these practices do not necessarily have to be related to former experiences of refugee reception but rather demonstrate how learning serves the rural context in grounding the ability to cope and adapt to a somewhat challenging situation. From this perspective, rural communities hold valuable experiences in times of crisis and unforeseen events. Despite their potential, rural perspectives tend to be forgotten in a planning discourse centered on urbanization and growth. Highlighting the role rural perspectives and experiences can have in times of uncertainties adds to an alternative narrative of rural areas, with the potential to challenge the urban norm and advance the importance of the unique rural context.

Furthermore, open spaces for civil society have been identified as one pathway in this thesis’ findings. The reason for these open spaces stems from an expectation with the municipality to engage to a greater extent than they did. Open spaces do not necessarily mean that the local government should not participate in the community’s response to unforeseen events, on the contrary, the respondents believe their work would have been strengthened with the municipality’s support. However, what these findings indicate is that civil society plays an important role, where their knowledge and experiences of operating in a challenging context are helpful in times of crisis. Previous research has identified sports and recreation as an important arena for social bonding, intercultural learning and improving community spirit (Rich, et al., 2015), and findings illustrate how sports organizations in rural areas are experienced in being flexible in finding creative solutions. Rural communities can prepare for unforeseen events by prioritizing and supporting local voluntary organizations and ensuring there are open spaces for civil society to engage and participate in times of crisis. Thus, a strong and dynamic civil society can strengthen its resilience and coping and adaptive capacities.

This thesis illustrates that communities can prepare to be more resilient despite increasing uncertainties. Applying the resilience concept to rural communities illustrates how rural processes, such as the pathways explored within this thesis, can contribute to strengthening society in times of crisis. In an uncertain future with changing climate and security policy, rural resilience demonstrates an alternative planning ideal, looking beyond growth and competitiveness. Instead, the pathways highlight how the rural context provides a valuable learning ground for coping with challenges and transformations. Furthermore, focusing on the strengths and advantages of the rural context is a way to shift the perspective of the rural as the “other”. Framing rural communities as resilient challenges the narrative of the city as the most favorable living environment and advance the importance of the unique rural context (Syssner, 2020).
8. Conclusion

In the final chapter, I will conclude my findings and discuss the implications these may have for planning in rural areas. The final section is a suggestion for future research.

This thesis has explored how the rural context can create pathways that lead to a more resilient community. The concept of rural resilience (Stenbacka, 2013) has been applied to Ekberga municipality’s response to the “refugee crisis”. The findings of this thesis illustrate three converging pathways that contributed to forming a resilient rural community: rural ties, open spaces for civil society, and building on best practices. The first pathway, rural ties, created incentives for civil society to engage in the local refugee reception. The rural setting, with for example depopulation, long distances, and a comparatively large agricultural industry, created context-specific ties between people and places, which influences the community’s response to the “refugee crisis”. The second pathway identified how the organization of the local refugee reception opened spaces for civil society to participate to a greater extent. The open spaces for civil society helped create a more informal everyday setting for new and established residents to interact and discover different and potentially shared positions, practices, and desires. The third and final pathway, building on best practices, comprises the social and institutional learning that has been shaped by rural conditions, such as depopulation and long distances. Living and operating in rural areas have provided rural dwellers, businesses, and organizations with experiences of having to be creative and find ways to “make a silk purse of a sow's ear”. The three pathways are not mutually exclusive – on the contrary, the pathways are interrelated and mutually supportive, illustrating how rural processes of learning and adapting to prevailing challenges help communities cope and adapt to future transformations and unforeseen events. As such, the findings align with Stenbacka’s (2013) definition of rural resilience, which includes the capacity to cope and adapt to new situations, but also suggest a relationship between resilient rural communities and Askins (2016) concept of emotional citizenry.

However, Stenbacka’s (2013) definition of rural resilience emphasizes the transformative capacity, where a resilient rural community has the ability to challenge the urban norm and display alternative paths to rural development. This thesis’ findings demonstrate how the prevailing planning discourse can benefit from adding a rural perspective. The identified pathways are admittedly linked to a rural context, but that does not mean that a strong civil society and the method of using best practices cannot be translated to urban areas. In a future with changes in climate, security policies, and other events we do not know about yet, learning from past experiences is one of few ways to prepare for the unknown. Many civil actors in rural areas have practical experience in operating in a context that often forces them to be creative and pragmatic, and by utilizing their knowledge and experience, communities can prepare to be more resilient despite increasing uncertainties. Additionally, focusing on the strengths and advantages of the rural context is a way to shift the perspective of the rural as the “other”, with the potential to challenge the urban norm and advance the importance of the unique rural context (Syssner, 2020).
The findings add to the literature on rural resilience by applying the concept to a real-life setting, namely Ekberga municipality during the “refugee crisis”. The contribution of this thesis lies in the illustration of the complex interrelations, rural processes, and the social and institutional learning with the local community that precedes and contributes to rural resilience. This thesis explores the community and municipal capacity to deal with the “refugee crisis” in Ekberga municipality, and the processes and networks that influence this capacity. For this reason, the sample consisted of actors that engaged in the local refugee reception, and not the migrants themselves. A suggestion for future research is to look more into the migrants’ perspectives and experiences of the local refugee reception, especially to shed light on spaces and processes that enable emotional citizenry.
9. References


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Appendix 1
The interview guides were based on the following template. However, each guide was slightly modified to directly address the specific area of expertise or role of the interviewee.

Swedish in bold, and translated to English thereafter:

- **Kan du berätta lite om dig själv och din bakgrund?**
  Can you tell me a little about yourself and your background?
- **Kan du berätta lite om din roll under flyktingströmmarna 2015?**
  Can you describe your role during the “refugee crisis” in 2015?
- **Hur upplevde du denna tid?**
  What were your experiences of this time?
- **Hur påverkade ”flyktingkrisen” er verksamhet?**
  How did the “refugee crisis” affect your operation?
- **Fanns det några ni hade regelbunden kontakt med för att stärka flyktingmottagandet? I så fall, vilka?**
  Were there actors you had regular contact with?
- **Hur upplevde du samverkan mellan er och andra aktörer?**
  What were your experiences of cooperation with other actors?
- **Hur upplevde du det lokala engagemanget? (Gällande t.ex. volontärer, det lokala näringslivet, osv)**
  How did you experience the local interest and involvement? (For example, volunteers, local businesses, etc.)
- **Finns det några du i efterhand önskar ha varit mer delaktiga?**
  As time goes on, are there any actors you wish would have been more involved?
- **Vad anser ni är ett framgångsrikt flyktingmottagande?**
  In your opinion, what do you consider a successful refugee reception?
- **Vilka aktörer anser du bör vara med för att skapa ett gott flyktingmottagande?**
  In your opinion, which actors do you believe are needed to create a good refugee reception?
- **Hur upplevde ni att diskussionerna gick i Ekberga kring kommunens asylmottagande?**
  How did you experience the discussions in Ekberga concerning the municipality’s refugee reception?
- **En jämförelsevis stor andel av flyktingarna har fem år senare valt att bosätta sig i kommunen, hur tror du det kommer sig?**
  A comparatively large share of the refugees from 2015 have five years later still living in Ekberga. Why do you think that is?
- **Ekberga är en förhållandevis liten landsbygdskommun. Hur påverkade det ert arbete med flyktingmottagning och integration?**
  Ekberga is a comparatively small rural municipality. How did this influence your work with refugee reception and integration?
• Anser ni att flyktinginvandringen påverkat Ekberga som kommun på något sätt?
  Do you think the refugee migration has changed Ekberga municipality in any way?
• Vad anser du är viktigt för att personer som kommer som flyktingar ska vilja stanna kvar på landsbygden?
  What do you consider important to retain refugees in rural areas?
• Hur skulle du utvärdera kommunens arbete med flyktingmottagning såhär 6 år senare?
  How would you evaluate the local refugee reception today, six years later?
  o  Vad fungerade bra?
    What worked well?
  o  Finns det något du hade velat göra annorlunda?
    Is there anything you would have like to do differently?
• Vilka lärdomar tar du med dig?
  What have you learned from this time?
• Vilka andra personer anser du var viktiga for kommunens flyktingmottagande?
  Who else did you consider to be important for the local refugee reception?