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System oriented design  
Design thinking  
Local participation  
Sustainable integration  
Refugees  
Social innovation

# Sustainable integration in Norway: A design thinking approach

Ian D'Armond Percy and Brita Fladvad Nielsen

## Introduction:

Norway's integration model is based on the premise that municipalities (kommuner) are the best judges of their ability to settle and integrate refugees. While in principle this free choice makes sense, the practice is unsustainable. In 2014, the Integration and Diversity Department (IMDi) was able to settle 7800 refugees, however at the beginning of 2015, over 5000 refugees were still waiting in asylum centers (mottak) prior to being settled in a municipality. IMDi predicts that 12750 refugees will require settlement in 2015. Of those 12750, IMDi is projecting that only 8300 will be settled (IMDi, 2015).

While these numbers are striking and a topic of contention in Norway, they do not address the larger problem of how to integrate the refugees. Some municipalities have very high rates of employment and educational attainment by refugees, while others seem to be unable to keep a large portion off social welfare.

How to settle and integrate these people has gained an increasing political focus throughout the country, especially after the election of a coalition government containing a nominally anti-immigration party, the Progress party (FrP). Comparisons to Sweden and Denmark's asylum and integration systems are often raised both in the media, and by national actors. Several key questions have emerged, including: whether the state or asylum seekers/refugees should decide where to settle; and how many people from a very different cultural background and educational level can an area "sustain".

A central assumption of this study is that the municipalities' perspective is underrepresented. It is difficult for IMDi and other national actors to create a holistic understanding of why municipalities fail to integrate the refugees they settle, then refuse to settle enough refugees to reduce asylum center wait times to the target of six months after asylum is granted. Acknowledging that the integration system needs a new and more holistic review, this study investigated the bottom-up perspective of this system in order to better describe its challenges. A design thinking approach (Schön, 1983, Schön, 1984, Brown and Wyatt, 2010, Buchanan, 1992, Rowe, 1991) was used to reveal insights into the settlement and integration system as articulated by the stakeholders in Austrheim municipality and representatives from two cooperation partners, IMDi and the asylum centers. This working paper explains how tools aided the interview process, gaining relevant findings,

and concluding with a recommendation to conduct an inclusive system redesign process of the Norwegian integrations system.

## Key challenges to the immigration system:

The first author is a refugee consultant in Austrheim municipality, this experience has been an ideal place to observe and gain first-hand experience with systemic challenges worth investigating. His experience suggests that the top down approach implemented by the central decision makers (IMDI, UDI) affects the relationship between decision makers and implementers within the municipality. This again affects the chances of “integrating” refugees in the local community, and the willingness to choose to receive refugees in the future.

The authors initially believed that the key factor the municipality leadership saw as relevant when they agreed to settle refugees was the congruence between refugee resettlement and the political objectives of the municipality. The refugees would be able to fill gaps in the local employment market, increase the population and sustainability of small municipalities. The authors also hypothesized that in their haste to get as many people out of the reception centers as possible, IMDi emphasized the benefits and downplayed the challenges all municipalities, but especially small municipalities face. Further, the authors reasoned that the word “integration” was not a defined concept and refugee consultants in the municipalities were often not comfortable with the term. The term is used by national and local media. They have rated the municipalities ability to “integrate” their newcomers, in addition to highlighting many cases of “failed” “integration”. Based on the first author’s experience the authors supposed that while the general public and the media focused on integration, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) and implementers in the municipality were focused on finding employment for settled refugees. This created a disconnect, which has not been addressed in either public or governmental discourses. The author posits that IMDi’s current role emphasis on “selling refugees” will have to evolve into a more holistic coaching role. This role is provided for by their charter and emphasized in their publications, but little of this is felt in the municipalities.

Academic literature within the area of refugee integration in Norway is limited to the social sciences and health. There is a focus on state policies on refugee integration from a European perspective (Valenta and Bunar, 2010), and refugee wellbeing (Fangen, 2006) including the handling of trauma (Eitinger and Grünfeld, 1966). There are also case studies focusing on the link between refugee wellbeing and their chance of integrating (Hauff and Vaglum, 1993, Van Selm et al., 1997).

Yet, there is no research focusing on the holistic sustainability of the refugee system in countries such as Norway, with a relatively small population living in very different geographical contexts, with the challenges outlined above. A stakeholder perspective focused on the users of the refugee system is needed to influence the way that refugees are integrated.

This study is novel in that it investigates the integration system from a design thinking perspective, reconsidering the users’ perception of the system and acknowledging their importance.

This study will gain new perspectives on the challenges and structure of the settlement and integration system in Austrheim municipality, Austrheim is a typical example of a small municipality. This study will provide new insights that will be useful in the daily work of the first author, and will be a foundation for the creation of a larger study that will examine a section of the settlement and integration system and compare several municipalities.

## Methodology:

A design thinking approach was selected as a method which would allow the participants to use graphic elicitation tools to communicate their understanding of the complexities of the asylum and integration system. Central in design thinking is the desire to create systems and solutions that are purposeful. Understanding what each participant aimed for in integration was therefore central. A system that is meaningful to the different stakeholders, including the refugees it serves, is by definition a well-functioning system from a design thinking perspective.

Due to their familiarity and access to stakeholders within Austrheim the authors chose to focus on the settlement and integration of refugees in Austrheim municipality. Eleven interview participants were identified.

Stakeholder	Participant	Interview method
Austrheim municipality	- Mayor of Austrheim, Labour party	51:49, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, his office in the municipal building
	- Deputy Mayor, Christian People's Party	39:32, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, a meeting room in the municipal building
	- Leader of the opposition on the Town Council, Conservative Party	65:4, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, first author's office in the municipal building
	- Assistant Alderman	03:53 (due to technical error), Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, a classroom in the adult education building
	- Director of Education and Culture, and headmaster of Adult Education.	33:05, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, his office in the municipal building
	- Attending physician in Austrheim municipality	14:05, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, first author's office in the

		municipal building
	- Municipal leader of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)	40:40, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, her office in the municipal building
	- Headmaster of the local primary/secondary school	24:12, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, her office at the school
IMDi	- Austrheim municipality's contact person	55:09, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, his office in Bergen
Strand Asylum Center	- Settlement coordinator	24:36, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, via Skype
	- Family settlement coordinator	35:49, Semi-structured/graphic elicitation, via Skype

Three politicians, two from the ruling coalition and the leader of the opposition, as well as the assistant Alderman and Director of Education were chosen to represent the leadership in the municipality. The Municipal Leader of NAV and Headmaster of the local school were selected to represent the first line services that the refugees meet in the municipality. The criteria for selecting participants for the interview study was that they had active parts in the following processes: deciding to receive refugees (decision making influence); preparing the refugees for settlement in a municipality; preparing to receive refugees in the municipality; contributing to or determining the integration program of refugees; daily contact with and work that affects the well-being of the refugees (longer term). The participants' involvement in one or more of these processes was taken as an indication of valuable experience and input that would help us understand the flow of communication, concerns and goals. As the first author is an employee of Austrheim municipality working directly with refugee settlement and integration it was decided that participants should have positions that were senior to the first author to avoid bias.

When deciding which external actors would be included as participants, the extent of contact with Austrheim municipality and their involvement in the settlement and integration process both in Austrheim and generally was considered. Austrheim's contact person at IMDi was chosen due to his long experience at IMDi and The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), as well as his familiarity with the system in Austrheim. It was important to include an asylum center in the project. Strand was the first asylum center that sent refugees to Austrheim and was willing to be interviewed. The family settlement coordinator was initially contacted; however she recommended the settlement coordinator as she had limited responsibility for settlement of refugees in the municipalities. It was decided that both coordinators would be interviewed to give as complete a picture as possible.

Although, refugee perspectives are integral to this study it was determined that the authors' professional and personal relationships with the refugees in Austrheim would bias any results. In addition the scope of the study and the time available for data collection precluded interviewing refugees in neighboring municipalities.

The interviews ranged from 15 minutes with the Attending Physician to over an hour with the Leader of the opposition on the Town Council. The average interview time was 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a variety of locals, including classrooms, meeting rooms, offices and over skype. The majority of interviews were conducted by the first author. The first three interviews with the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Assistant Alderman were conducted by both authors, but with only one participant per interview. All interviews were taped using a smart telephone, with the exception of the interview with the Deputy Mayor.

The interviews were semi-structured and aided by a graphic elicitation tool, (Bangoli, 2009; Crilly et al., 2006). Participants were asked to identify which of 30 key stakeholders in the settlement and integration system in Austrheim and nationally represented their understanding of the system. The identified stakeholders were divided into four categories: green for volunteer organizations, yellow for municipal employees and institutions, blue for national and regional governmental organizations, and white for the refugees themselves and write-ins. The identified stakeholders were printed on colored paper rectangles, color-coded with the appropriate category, and spread before the participants. The participants were encouraged to use the rectangles to create a diagram to illustrate the settlement and integration system as they perceived it.

The participants also had the option to add additional stakeholders they felt were relevant to the system. Only one participant did not feel the need to contribute an additional stakeholder.

The authors and participants collaborated in the creation of the diagrams. Follow up questions and the spontaneous use of a limited number of prepared questions in collaboration with the physical task of creating the diagrams were used to create a dialogue between the authors and participants. This approach can encourage participants to reflect more on their own ideas, and decreases the likelihood of misunderstandings. The use of visual diagrams stimulates the communication of thought processes and can increase the understanding between the authors and participants (Bangoli, 2009; Crilly et al., 2006). The use of graphic elicitation in a systemic approach stimulates the participant to think about decisions and reflect on ideas in relation to the components of the system. This approach has inclusive research qualities as it lets the participant create their own diagram as an image of the holistic system.

After each interview, the author(s) reflected on the interview and wrote their impressions and key statements made by the participants. After data collection was completed, the first author began transcribing the interviews using Van Manens' method of selective or highlighting approach (Magrini, 2012).

## Findings:

One of the more surprising findings was the degree of consensus on the components of successful integration. Nearly all of the participants highlighted the importance of volunteer activities, or "participation"; some mentioned them as the key to gaining acceptance in the

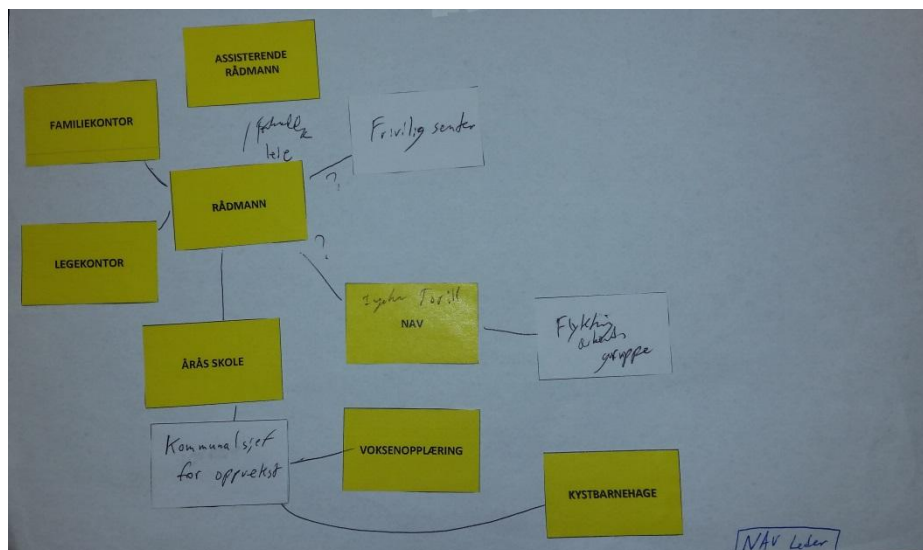
community. Many of the participants also mentioned the importance of learning Norwegian, and many emphasized the necessity of “not sewing pillows under their arms”. In other words, encouraging self-sufficiency, or not disincentivizing them through overly generous economic subsidies and services. Those working with refugee settlement predictably emphasized the importance of timely settlement, something that has been shown to be a vital component of successful integration in the municipalities. Long waiting times in the asylum centers for refugees after they have received asylum is anecdotally correlated to decreased motivation and poorer results when the refugees are eventually settled in a municipality. Those working directly with the refugees emphasized the importance of work, while the politicians and attending physician did not specifically mention the importance of employment to successful integration.

It was surprising that none of the politician or employees of Austrheim municipality mentioned an economic incentive for taking the refugees. Each refugee settled in a municipality based on an agreement between the municipality and IMDi releases a substantial grant from IMDi, over \$100,000. Each new inhabitant also releases a standard grant from the national government for social and educational services. Many municipalities use a portion of these grants to plug existing holes in their budgets. As the first author is a municipal employee responsible for refugee settlement and integration, the first author has direct knowledge of the grants budget. In 2014 a portion of the IMDi grants were used for other activities than those directly related to refugee settlement and integration. It should be noted that this is standard practice among many municipalities and that grant receiving municipalities are free to disposition resources as they see fit. None of the participants mentioned an economic incentive, which could be due to embarrassment at seeming greedy or callous. Many mentioned their civic duty to help the vulnerable in society. The first authors’ personal and professional relationships with the participants could have contributed to the reticence to mention potentially “cynical” economic motivations.

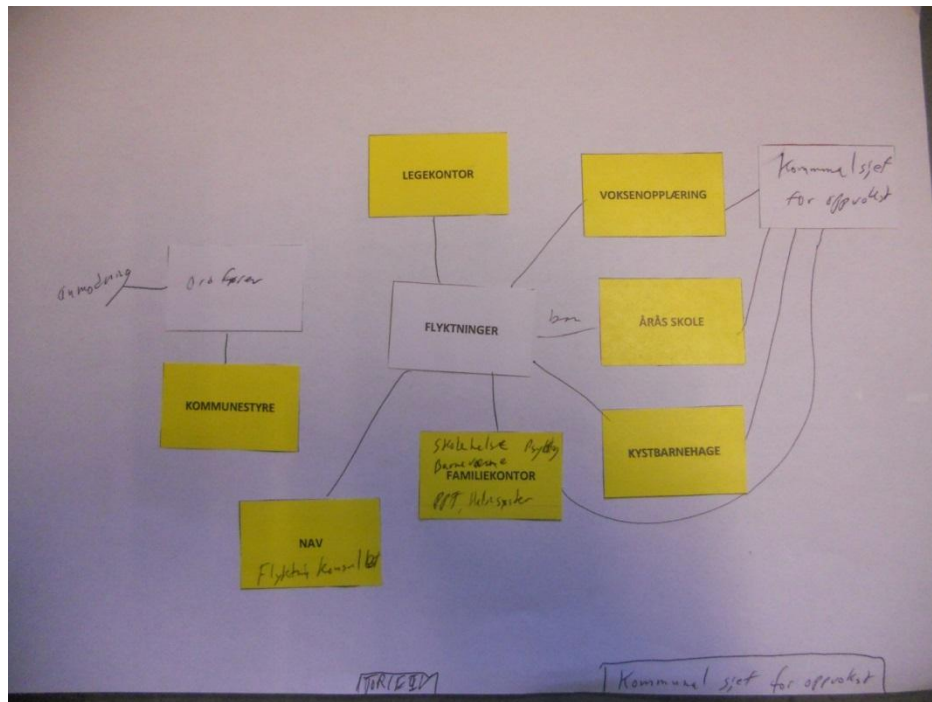
A problem identified through the first authors work as a refugee consultant is the divergence between the quantity and quality of information provided by the various asylum centers about the refugees to be settled in the municipalities. In the course of the interviews with IMDi and the Strand asylum center, it became clear that there were neither standards nor guidelines for required experience or education of the staff who gathered the information. One of the participants from Stand asylum center, when asked about the quality of information replied, “They get the information they should.” despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary. Austrheim municipality has received incomplete and incorrect information including about health issues, mental health issues, employment and the actual number of refugees to be settled. The participant from IMDi pointed to lackluster cooperation between IMDi and UDI who have oversight of the asylum centers.

A main division identified among all participants, was between the municipal leaderships’ understanding of integration as long term settlement in the municipality, versus a country wide perspective of successful integration expressed by other participants. The mayor, deputy mayor, assistant alderman, director of education and culture and the headmaster of the local school all tied the concept of successful integration to long term settlement in Austrheim. The mayor, deputy mayor and assistant alderman spoke of the two previous occasions when Austrheim municipality settled refugees, in the 1990s and early 2000s, as failed attempts at integration. Those settled refugees moved to more populated areas after approximately 2-5 years. In contrast, the participant from IMDi and the municipal leader of NAV both expressed successful integration as the ability to

Not one participant expressed a thorough knowledge of how the system functioned as a whole, nor all salient parts of the system. The leader of NAV and the director of education and culture were able to identify a greater number of the departments within the municipality that worked on these issues:



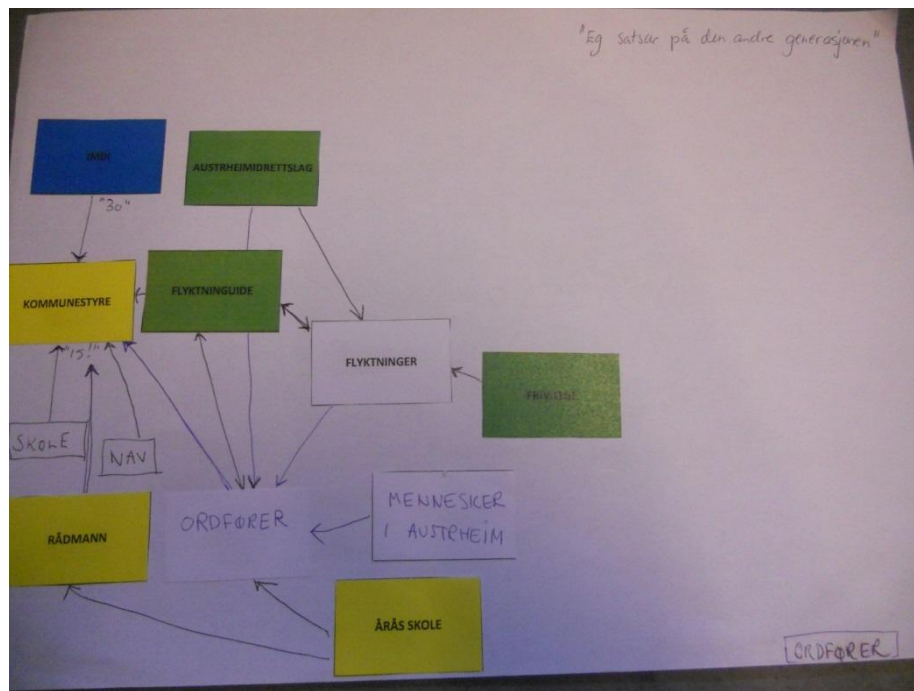
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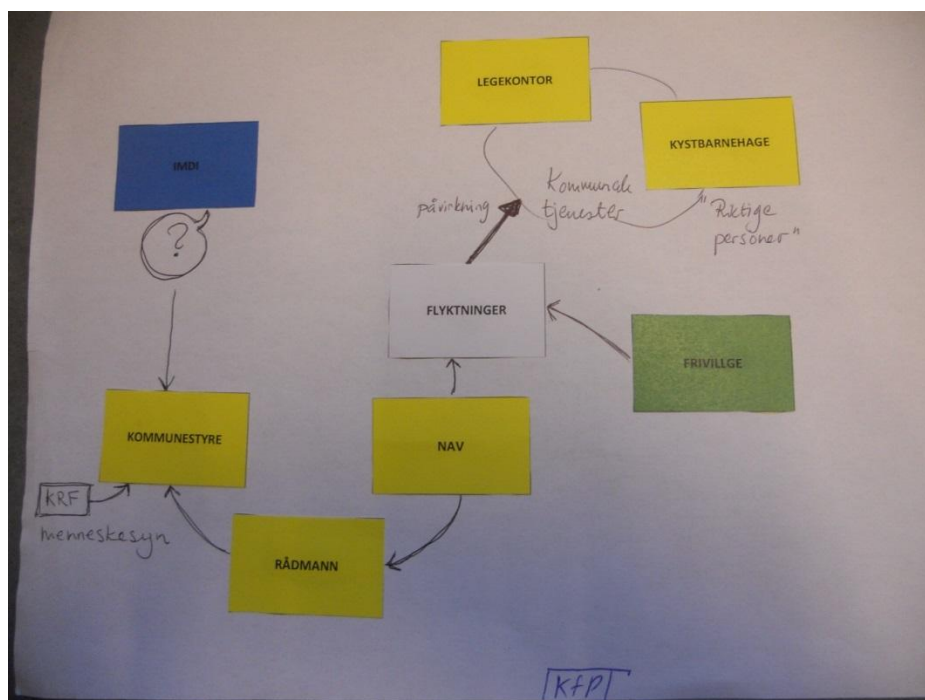
Director of Education and Culture

However, neither participant displayed knowledge of how the national actors affected or were involved in settlement and integration work within the municipality. Other participants, such as the attending physician and headmaster, hadn't considered the system in Austrheim much beyond their particular positions and professional arenas.

The Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Austrheim displayed a more holistic knowledge of the system and their role in it. This is encouraging as they are integral in the decision to settle more refugees. Although, they are not directly involved in the administration of the settlement and integration system, so their influence is limited. It should also be noted that this level of knowledge was not shared by the leader of the opposition.



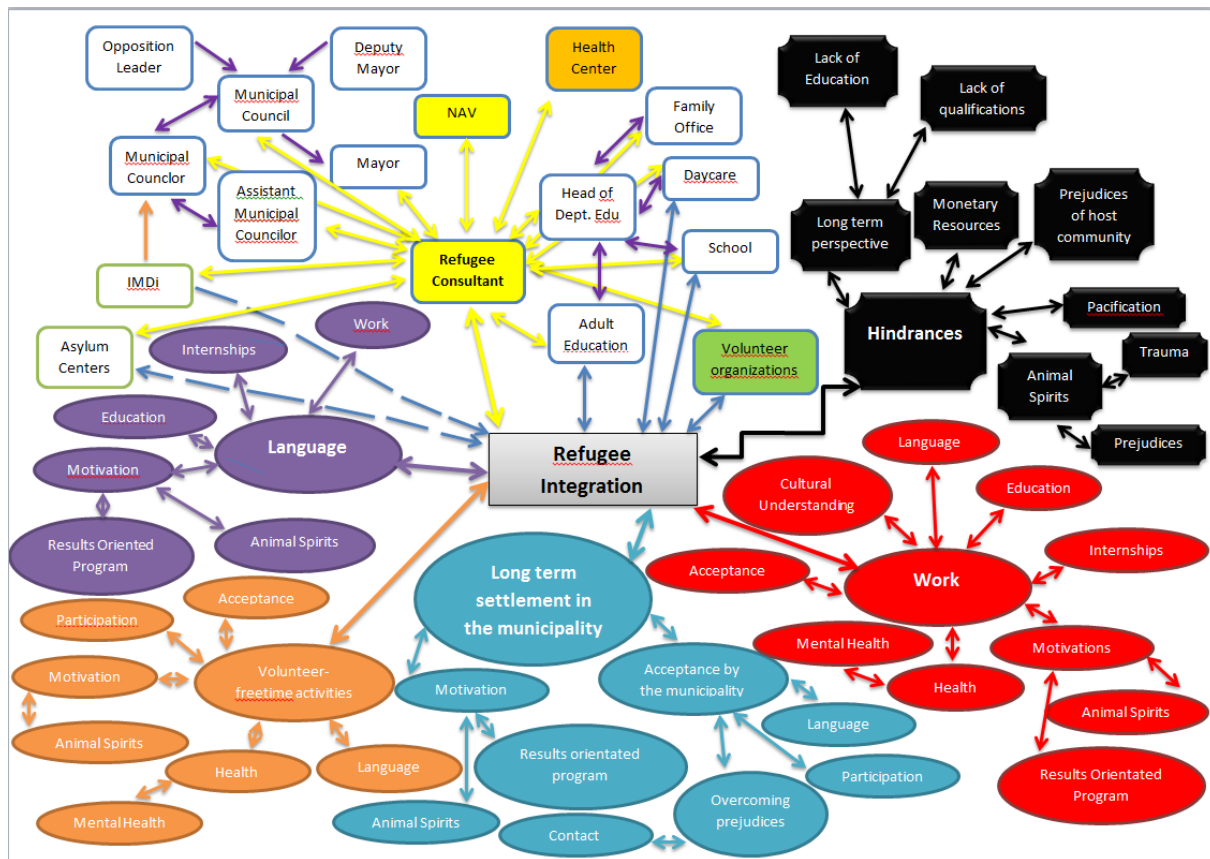
Mayor



Deputy Mayor

Below is a GIGA map which attempts to map the four most important determinants of integration as identified by the participants in ovals of different colors: language, volunteer activities, work and long term settlement in Austrheim. The hindrances to integration are also presented in black. In the rectangular boxes a map of the settlement and integration system in Austrheim and its relations is presented with the refugee consultant at the center.

Note: animal spirits is an economic term which describes the intangible motivations and choices of people in group settings.



## Discussion:

The following three points about the “users” (the actors and deciders) of the settlement and integration system in Austrheim municipality, as represented by the participants in this working paper, are the most significant issues that arose during the study, and which should be explored further.

### 1) Users of the system are also the political influencers

In small municipalities such as Austrheim, the decision to take in more refugees is a political decision. Although, it is influenced by the users’ perception of the system’s success based on their own criteria of successful integration. Based on the experience of the first author as a user of the system, there is strong emphasis placed on long term settlement over all other considerations of success. The municipal council placed the greatest emphasis on long-term settlement during the deliberations to settle refugees. This perception is not shared in the bureaucracy. While long term settlement in the community is a priority it is not given more weight than the functioning of the current. In the spring of 2015, there will be a new discussion and decision by the municipal council on whether to settle more refugees. In a recent meeting of nearly all department heads of the municipality, the bureaucracy was unanimously in favor of continuous settlement. It will be interesting to investigate whether this assuages the doubts of the municipal council. The system in Austrheim is too new to have any refugees who have finished the two year introduction program. The question emphasized

by the political leadership, “Will they live here after two years?”, will not be answered before they decide to settle more refugees.

## **2) Users perception of the success of integration is based on:**

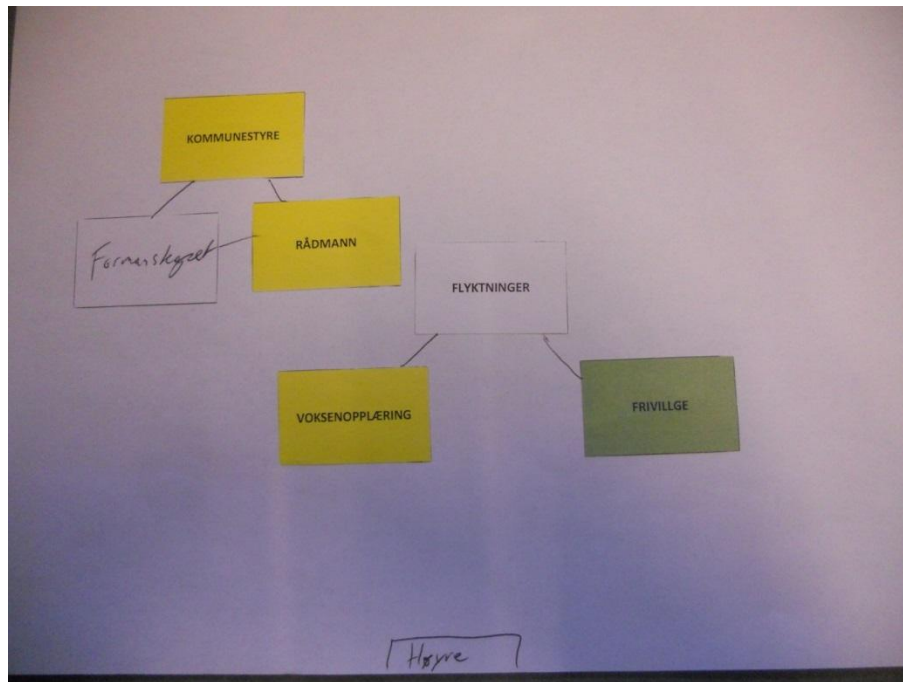
The users of the settlement and integration system in Austrheim municipality were divided in their perception of integration. This was a reflection of their positions within the municipality. Those most connected to the municipality and responsible for it, such as the political leadership, were very concerned with long term settlement. While those users employed by the state, the participants from IMDi and NAV, defined integration as functioning within Norwegian society, not a geographical area. The leaders of the bureaucracy varied to the degree they expressed a desire for long term settlement. Given the relative youth of the system in Austrheim it will be interesting to see if perceptions of success change as more refugees are settled and finish the program. This of course presupposes that the municipal council will agree to further settlement without proof of long term settlement.

## **3) Users perception of the system as a whole**

There is a pervasive lack of understanding of the components of the system by the participant users. Systemic thinking is absent among the bureaucrats that comprise the most important implementing part of the system. The only participants which showed a broad understanding of the diversity and range of salient actors were the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. This could point to a lack of dissemination of knowledge from the political leadership to the bureaucracy, or a problem of motivation and prioritizing among the leadership of the bureaucracy. Many departments in the municipality, and participants from Strand asylum center, thought of themselves as an island, and had little to no “buy in” in the settlement and integration process. They were not aware of how their position affected the larger project of settlement and integration. The complexity of taking sometimes uneducated and inexperienced people from very different cultures requires an understanding of the “bigger picture”. A systemic understanding of how the different parts of the system work would enable them to coordinate their actions and ensure a united and coherent approach to settlement and integration with the least possible “hiccups”. This might be less of a concern if the time perspective were longer. The “Introduction law” of 2003 provides a two year period where refugees, often without formal schooling or multicultural experiences, have to learn Norwegian, understand Norwegian culture well enough to find fulltime employment in one of the most educated and complex employment markets in the world.

## **Methodological lessons:**

The participants varied in their comfort with using diagrams to explain the settlement and integration system. The mayor was easily the most confident using the graphic elicitation tools. He mentioned that this was because he had recently participated in the research project of a master’s student who used similar design methods. The other participants could be divided into two groups, those who adapted to the tool and those who did not use it effectively. The four participants who did not utilize the tool as much are easy to discern when comparing the diagrams. If you compare the four above to the one below of the leader of the opposition, it is clear which participants were more comfortable with the tool.



The leader of the opposition on the municipal council

The leader of the opposition had asked for detailed information about what the interview would be about prior to participating. He came with his own presentation and drew diagrams and seemed to have thought a great deal about the issues discussed. The two participants from Strand asylum center did not appear to be comfortable describing the settlement and integration system beyond their role and their impressions of what good integration entails. The headmaster of the local school and the attending physician were focused on their own departments, the physician's interview was spontaneous and rushed, as he suddenly appeared in the first author's office when he found a hole in his schedule.

The first author's position as a user of the system surely biased some of the responses of the participants. There were some skepticism and doubts about the system and integration itself that during the course of the first author's work have been highlighted, which were not mentioned during the course of the interview. As a corollary, it was surprising that none of the participants spoke about the decision to settle refugees in economic terms despite having said this before in other occasions. The reticence to be overly self or systems critical or seem "greedy" was likely affected by my personal/professional relationship with the participants.

One comment stood out from the participants from Strand asylum center, "They get the information they should". This was in response to a question about the quality of information given to municipalities about refugees immediately prior to their settlement in the municipalities. This information varies in both quantity and quality. It is unclear if this statement is a reflection of a reticence to be overly critical of the participants own work activities to a recipient of those activities, or if it was sincere. The participant who made the comment was the participant from Strand whom the first author had not had previous collegial contact with, and therefore cannot comment of his own experiences.

This study was undertaken as a pilot for a larger and more thorough study which will hopefully be conducted in the future. The insights gained through this project are numerous, including how to conduct an interview using graphic elicitation tools and how to record information during and after the interview. In a subsequent study the authors would include more stakeholders, especially refugees, but also more direct implementers like teachers, other NAV employees, not only management. It would also be very interesting to record the insights of several refugee consultants. Including perspectives from UDI, FFKF (Professional Forum for Municipal Refugee work), the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, and from KS (The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities).

It would be ideal to conduct the study on a municipality in which the first author did not work directly as integral users of the system to be studied. It would also be a strength to devote more time to such a study. This study was conducted while both authors were already engaged more than 100% in their jobs and other activities.

### **Conclusion and opportunities for further research:**

There is a general consensus on the key components of successful integration: employment, language, and volunteer activities or engagement with the local society. What is missing is a systemic approach to achieving this. This research shows how disconnected many of the different parts of the settlement and integration system in Austrheim are. Despite much talk of inter-municipal cooperation, working groups and other communicative forums there is a clear gap in systemic understanding and thinking in all of the participants understanding. The first author's anecdotal experience is that this situation is the same if not worse on a national perspective. A participatory design process including all municipal, governmental, and private stakeholders could be a way to standardize and ensure a higher rate of "success" in the integration of refugees in Norway. The findings from this study while interesting, need to be expanded upon especially given the variation in structure and implementation of the "integration" process in different municipalities.

The authors also suggest that it would be interesting to compare Norway's approach to settlement and integration with Denmark, Sweden, and the American approach, especially in the context of Somali refugees and asylum seekers. There is a small amount of literature comparing the different systems, and a comparison would give a frame to further investigations in Norway.

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