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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Skaptadóttir, U. D., Innes, P., & Wojtyńska, A. (2024). Migrants' Inclusion in Rural Communities. *Social Inclusion*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8407>

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Migrants' Inclusion in Rural Communities

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Submitted: 4 April 2024 **Published:** 7 May 2024

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Migrants’ Inclusion in Rural Communities” edited by Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (University of Iceland), Pamela Innes (University of Wyoming), and Anna Wojtyńska (University of Iceland), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i411>

Abstract

This thematic issue examines migrants’ inclusion in rural communities, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex realities informing migrant experiences and processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural localities. The studies presented apply different theoretical approaches, all using various qualitative methods, to shed light on daily life experiences and views in rural locations. This editorial discusses the questions raised in the studies and outlines the main arguments of the different contributions assembled in this thematic issue.

Keywords

exclusion; inclusion; migration; rural areas; social encounters

1. Introduction

Commonly, rural areas have been associated with low population density, limited public services, relatively homogeneous economic activities, and close-knit relations among inhabitants, creating a particular context for incoming populations (de Lima, 2012; Woods, 2007). Therefore, the incorporation of migrants in rural areas may differ from urban areas (de Lima, 2012). Like urban areas, many sectors of rural locations have been transformed by their gradual integration into the global economy and neoliberal restructuring (Rye & O’Reilly, 2021). The growing body of research in rural areas has illustrated how migrants have commonly replaced out-migrating local populations and helped maintain necessary services and local economic activities (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; McAreavey & Argent, 2018). The participation of different kinds of internal and international migrants, such as those arriving as workers, refugees, and lifestyle migrants, is causing rural areas to become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous places inhabited by transnational populations.

The studies in this thematic issue contribute to understanding the complex realities informing migrant experiences and processes of inclusion and exclusion in rural localities affected by contemporary migration of transnational populations. They go beyond many former studies that focus on specific migrant groups or inclusion in the labor market by giving more attention to social encounters in daily life. Because of the multi-sited embeddedness of migrants, they have social obligations in more than one place, which may affect their participation in the rural villages.

The articles cover geographical areas in seven countries in various parts of Europe and one from Canada. The authors use various qualitative methods and theoretical perspectives to elucidate complex and multifaceted processes of integration and belonging in their research locations. Most of the studies focus on the point of view of the in-migrating populations, though the perspectives of long-term local populations are included in some. By presenting a range of views, the authors attend to the agency of multiple actors while also shedding light on local, national, and transnational structural constraints. Although various theoretical perspectives are applied, an important theme running through this collection is integration or inclusion and processes of exclusion. This emerges from the contributors' close examination of various aspects of social life, such as work, participation in leisure and voluntary activity, homemaking, and being seen. In this way, the articles shed light on important questions regarding the integration of newcomers, as well as the social positioning of rural populations more generally.

2. Contributions to the Thematic Issue

In her article, Pietka-Nykaza (2024) examines how different types of social relations do or do not develop among rural residents of various immigrant backgrounds and the locals of the Scottish Highlands, where family and being "local" play an important role in inclusion. The article highlights that although migrant participants experienced convivial relationships with "local" residents, closer relationships were not easily developed. Instead, social integration was facilitated through instrumental and intimate relations with people of other in-migrating groups.

Social relations and the role they play in social inclusion also are a focus of Hayfield's (2024) article, in which the concept of citizenship is applied to examine "everyday relational and spatial experiences at various levels of society." Her interviews with international migrants in the Faroe Islands shed light on the structural and social hindrances they encounter when trying to gain access to and recognition from social networks. As in the Scottish Highlands, being "local" and having family ties plays an important role in this. A lack of access to social ties contributes to the hindrance that leaves migrants on the margins of the labor market and society in general.

Sætermo et al. (2024) apply the concept of "being seen" to get a more nuanced understanding of immigrants' experiences with settling in and finding their place in rural areas. Based on interviews with immigrants living in a rural, coastal community in Norway, they explore their perceptions of rural integration and experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the local community. They show how "being seen," on the one hand, points to more personalized relations and support, while on the other, it points to concerns by immigrants that locals see them as "others." Thus, this is a complex process that they navigate daily.

Applying a similar concept, Giannetto and van der Maarel (2024) present a study of the everyday experiences of labor migrants from Romania and West Africa in a small, rural town in Sardinia. Their article focuses on divergent meanings of integration and inclusion between migrants and residents. White, Romanian migrants who settle and take part in public activities are considered, and consider themselves, to be integrating. Non-white migrants from West Africa are never truly included and remain invisible to residents until they are thought to cause problems. Thus, they feel neither included nor integrated, despite the fact their employer and town administrators praised their participation in the labor force.

Also focusing on the position of labor migrants, the article by Skaptadóttir et al. (2024) sheds light on their different positionality and belonging to rural communities. The article highlights the importance of considering how social stratification and hierarchy affect migrants' experiences of inclusion. The results demonstrate that migrants' and locals' conceptualizations of relatedness and otherness both reflect inherited ideas of Europe and contemporary divergent geopolitical positions and are used to rationalize differentiations between and across migrant groups.

Examination of the effects of legislatively divergent social positions forms the basis of the research presented by George et al. (2024). Despite having only temporary contracts, migrant agricultural workers' migration is often cyclical. Although they are important for the local economy and spend a long time in these communities, they do not have access to services provided for other newcomers. Being excluded from entitlements like labor mobility reinforces the precarity, subordination, and exclusion of migrant agricultural workers.

Lynnebakke (2024) explores how locals and migrants view leisure practices as methods and markers of inclusion. Variation in what kinds of practices were central to local identity in the localities indicates the importance of considering "the local" in studies of migrants' inclusion processes. For some Norwegian interviewees, local leisure activity involvement was foregrounded, with national discourses about civic engagement only offered as being of secondary importance, placing local participation ahead of national constructs. A comparison of the two locations also demonstrated that "inclusion processes in one locality should not by default be seen as representative of what is transpiring in a nation-state." This supports the argument that theories and methods used to examine internal and international migration may benefit from greater congruity.

Weidinger et al. (2024) move beyond the common model of migrants as recipients of volunteered services. Their examination of how and why migrants are volunteering reveals the importance of opportunity structures and social networks that allow them to fill this role. Their article examines several of the reasons and ways that migrants volunteer in their communities, revealing a range of internal and external motivations. They find that the act of volunteering provides migrants with a means of demonstrating their connection and dedication to their community as agentic actors.

Applying Bourdieu's theoretical perspective of social capital in their study of urban better-off Hungarians to rural Hungary, Tomay and Berger (2024) show a different side of inclusion into rural areas. Their exploration of the different spatial habituses of long-term locals and recent incomers demonstrates that the gentrifiers' spatial habitus retains markers of middle-class distinction that create a novel "ruralising disposition." This facilitates middle-class rural gentrifiers' defiance of the idea that incomers are required to integrate and work to become included in their new community of residence.

Unlike most of the other articles that focus on migration into one or a few rural locations, Solimene (2024) examines how Bosnian Roma refugees maintain transnational connections with their lost homeland. Though they currently occupy a shanty on the outskirts of Rome, many invest in and maintain houses in rural villages of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Solimene examines narratives about these houses and the practices of his Roma interlocutors to illuminate and unravel complex issues embedded within the transnational trajectories of the Bosnian Roma.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the editorial team at *Social Inclusion*, particularly Mariana Pires, for their careful guidance throughout this thematic issue's publication. Also, we thank the authors for their contributions.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir is a professor of anthropology at the University of Iceland. Her main research interests are in the areas of international migration, transnationalism, and borders. She has conducted research among diverse groups of migrants in Iceland and has published widely on immigration issues, including the labor-market participation of migrants, gender, language learning, the position of refugees, and immigrant parents who have children with disabilities. Recently, she has conducted research on migration into rural areas in Iceland.



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Anna Wojtyńska is an anthropologist, working currently as postdoctoral researcher at the University of Iceland. She has been studying migration to Iceland, with a special focus on migrants from Poland. Her main interest is migrants' transnational practices, labour market participation of foreign citizens, and inclusive public spaces as sites for intercultural communication. Recently, she was taking part in a project looking at processes of migrants' inclusion and exclusion in rural areas of Iceland.