Comparative Report on Action-Research in Rural and Mountain Areas

MATILDE
Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Regions

www.matilde-migration.eu
Call: H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2019

Work Programmes:

H2020-EU.3.6.1.1. The mechanisms to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth

H2020-EU.3.6.1.2. Trusted organisations, practices, services and policies that are necessary to build resilient, inclusive, participatory, open and creative societies in Europe, in particular taking into account migration, integration and demographic change

Deliverable 5.4 Comparative report on TCNs in rural and mountain areas

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Version: 30.04.2022

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6505311
Summary

This report presents a transversal cross-regional comparison of the main results of the action-research activities carried out in the case studies of the MATILDE regions. The activities were realized with the twofold objective of testing the participatory tools developed by the project in a previous phase and at the same time contributing to a reflection at local level on the role of immigration by third country nationals (TNCs) in the processes of socio-economic development of rural, mountain and remote European regions. Through the use of participatory workshops, focus groups, social mapping, etc., the local case study working groups, composed of both researchers and local partners, have produced new information on the processes in place and the challenges to be faced in the various contexts, with the aim of bringing out possible solutions, in the direction of real possibilities for change. The report focuses on the analysis of activities and case studies, which are grouped according to the three main dimensions considered in relation to the issue of the impact of foreign immigration, namely: labour and the economy, demography and social relations, and the spatial-territorial dimension. The conclusions identify a number of thematic issues that need to be addressed in the future in the territories considered, starting from the side of concrete and bottom-up interventions, in order to fully recognise and enhance the role of immigrant foreigners for mountain and rural areas, and the role of these same territories for the overall development of their countries and the European Union as a whole.
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Introduction

The aim of the Work Package 5 (WP5) action-research has been to investigate, through a participatory approach, the local-level and territorial impact of migration in the selected 13 rural and mountainous MATILDE case study regions. The case studies reflect different spatial and socio-historic characteristics in terms of geography, migration patterns and governance, welfare systems, socio-cultural and economic systems, allowing to represent the heterogeneity of rural and mountain areas of Europe.

To achieve the goals of WP5, a Local Case Study Working Group (LCSWG) was established in each territory at the very beginning of the activities. Each LCSWG gathered together the respective country research team, the specified local partners, and other local stakeholders, favouring their active role in a bottom-up process of participatory action-research. Additionally, a trans-national Case Study Working Group (CSWG) was established to coordinate, together with the WP5 Leader, the variety of research processes run in the case studies regions. The CSWG sought to fuel mutual interaction and internal communication to guarantee the coherence of the entire research process. This group included one or more representatives designated from each of the MATILDE partners (research and local ones). Moreover, it has involved, in specific cases, representatives of other relevant actors (representing e.g. from education institutions, entrepreneurs and craftsmen organizations, local institutions, migrants’ organizations, and non-profit organizations and foundations). Furthermore in order to facilitate the exchange of methodologies and approaches among different MATILDE case-studies, and to enhance the subsequent qualitative comparison among them when coming to the main results of WP5 activities, a grouping of the case-studies was finalized on the basis of common topics identified in the original project proposal.
Group 1: Impact on labour market and local economy of rural-mountain localities through TCNs integration. Cases: Karacabey (Bursa, Turkey), Neustadt a.d. Aisch-Bad Windsheim, Berchtesgadener Land and Oberallgäu (Bavaria, Germany), Hedemora and Vansbro (Dalarna, Sweden), Kronoby, Larsmo, Nykarleby and Pedersöre (Ostrobothnia, Finland), Burgraviat (South Tyrol, Italy), Outer Hebrides (Scotland, United Kingdom).

Group 2: Impact on demographic and social revitalization of rural/mountain localities through TCNs integration. Cases: Alto Gállego and Los Monegros (Autonomous Region of Aragón, Spain), Midt-Gudbrandsdalen and Nord-Østerdal (Innlandet county, Norway), Feldkirch, Innerbraz and Schruns (Vorarlberg region, Austria).

Group 3: Impact on community-space interactions, territorialization and sense of belonging of rural/mountain localities through TCNs integration. Cases: Villach (Carinthia, Austria), Haskovo and Harmanli (Bulgaria), Lieksa and Kitee (North Karelia, Finland), Bussoleno (Metropolitan City of Turin, Italy).

Within these three thematic focuses the common goals of the participatory action-research conducted in all case studies have been to: 1) identify challenges on site, related to the arrival and settlement of foreign immigrants; 2) depict needs of local communities, in terms of enhancing the active role of migrants in territorial development and supporting their integration through innovative initiatives; 3) reflect on opportunities associated to immigration of TCNs for European rural and mountain regions with respect to the potential role of these territories within the EU. On the basis of the quali-quantitative data already collected at local level in a previous phase of the WP5 (and related to the main territorial and socio-economic characteristics of the involved territories, in relationship to the presence of foreign immigrants), and through the active engagement of different local subjects (stakeholders, migrants, community leaders, experts), the action-research was conducted around different thematic participatory activities, defined by the LCSWG.
The assumed participatory activities aimed at involving the wider local community (comprising local media and the public sphere in general) on a reflection on the concrete role of foreign immigration for local development; at the same time, the goal was to concretize innovative proposals for: a) enhancing a different public representation of migrants within local communities, with respect in particular to the different thematic focus of each case study; b) identifying possible (micro-level) strategies and concrete (small) interventions to produce effective change in the considered realms, with respect to the impact of immigrants on local life.

Within the action-research, the realization of focus-groups, involving local stakeholders (in particular some of the most relevant/active subjects already engaged in previous participatory activities), offered the opportunity for: a) collectively discussing on the processes activated and changes enhanced during research activities; b) discussing/validating the tools and methodological approach adopted during the participatory activities; c) formulating recommendations, focusing on local strategies for promoting an active role of migrants within local development processes, favouring their inclusion, also improving the local governance of migration in light of the peculiar needs and resources of rural and mountain regions. In order to conduct the different participatory action-research activities, each case study adopted specific qualitative techniques for gathering information and enhancing local participation of the stakeholders. The main techniques (previously identified during the WP2 through the MATILDE Toolbox and therefore tested on field during WP5) included: qualitative interviews, focus groups, direct observation, mobility mapping, social mapping, world café, participatory laboratories with children, visual techniques, participatory architecture/self-construction workshops and check of competences.

The action-research activities took place between June 2021 and February 2022 during different phases of the pandemic that alternated periods of increased openness and possibility of travelling, and periods of increased infection and consequent restrictions on mobility. Despite this difficult situation, the activities were carried out with continuity, mainly thanks to the LCSWG which supported the work undertaken at local level. The good level of engagement of local actors also
emerged in the involvement of local and regional media, which became the communication window for MATILDE’s ongoing activities.

This comparative report outlines the main findings of the action-research conducted in the 13 MATILDE case studies. The structure of the report is based on the three grouping of the case studies: labour market and local economy (group 1), demography and social inclusion (group 2), and community-space interaction (group 3). The three groups of case studies are presented as follows: a first section summarises each case study, with respect to its main characteristics and the activities conducted; then, a second section presents the main findings that emerged from the action-research, with a preliminary territorial comparison between the different cases, a central section discussing the findings, and a final section reflecting on the role of migrants for local development.

1. Impact on labour market and local economy of rural-mountain localities through TCN’s integration

1.1 The case studies

The MATILDE case studies focusing on the impact of TCNs on labour market and local economy of rural and mountain localities, with a specific attention to labour integration of migrants, are six:

- Karacabey (Bursa, Turkey)
- Neustadt a.d. Aisch-Bad Windsheim, Berchtesgadener Land and Oberallgäu (Bavaria, Germany)
• Hedemora and Vansbro (Dalarna, Sweden)
• Kronoby, Larsmo, Nykarleby and Pedersöre (Ostrobothnia, Finland)
• Burgraviat (South Tyrol, Italy)
• Outer Hebrides (Scotland, United Kingdom)

**Karacabey (Bursa, Turkey)**

Participatory action-research conducted in the rural district of Karacabey intended to investigate: 1) what are the effects of “refugeeization” of the labour market on the local communities and social cohesion; 2) and which factors enable migrants’ entry into the labour market. Karacabey economically stands out with its agricultural production: the main focus of the research, conducted in close collaboration with the local partner (Support to Life) and other local public/private stakeholders, was to understand the role of migrants in the labour market, especially in agricultural sector. To this purpose, the following activities were realized: 1) field visit to see immigrants’ locations and work conditions; 2) engagement activity aiming at collection of qualitative data; 3) quali-quantitative briefing; 4) focus group, involving local stakeholders; 5) informal roundtable with stakeholders as thematic participatory activity. The research verified the negligence of the remote agricultural and rural places in the Turkish context. Agricultural sustainability, depopulation and environmental issues caused by the uncontrolled industrialisation are among the problems challenging rural development in the district. However, the strengths rooted in Karacabey’s rural places as well as the opportunities offered by immigration to meet labour-shortages and transfer know-how to the district are essential assets to be considered in local development processes. Despite their effective role in local economy, the native population do not consider immigrants as an asset for a long-term local development due to the temporariness of seasonal workers. At the same time, the wide presence of informal work (to access the labour market, temporary protection status beneficiaries need to obtain a work permit) and the language barrier are among serious challenges to prompt immigrants generate a sense of territorial belonging as well as to integrate them into education and work environments with the same rights of local citizens.
Neustadt a.d. Aisch-Bad Windsheim, Berchtesgadener Land and Oberallgäu (Bavaria, Germany)

Action-research activities conducted in the MATILDE region Bavaria, focused on the potential of TCNs to overcome the existing shortage of workers in economic key sectors. The activities targeted challenges and (possible) solutions with regard to TCNs’ sustainable employment and addressed their recruitment, the on-boarding of employees and apprentices, and the staying/retention in a company, a sector, or a rural/mountain locality. Researchers involved applied a multi-perspective approach that considered the perspectives of companies, the regional actors and the TCN newcomers as well as a place-based approach. Regarding the latter, locally relevant key sectors were focused, i.e. (health)care in Neustadt a.d.Aisch-Bad Windsheim, hospitality industry in Berchtesgadener Land and handicraft in Oberallgäu. For the recruitment, results show that recruiting agencies, personal social networks and self-applications are of utmost importance to provide access to the rural labour market for TCNs. For those, who already live on-site, trial work, internships and auxiliary jobs were also found to be established practices of entering the companies. Challenges arose from legal issues such as the issuance of visa and working permits as well as the provision of housing. With regard to on-boarding, some companies initiated a welcoming culture and provided mentors to get to know the company and the working processes. Difficulties, however, revolved around the recognition of foreign credentials and language barriers. In addition, personal problems were highlighted by TCNs, e.g., the difficulty to make friends, homesickness, waiting for family reunification. The intention of TCNs to stay in the company, the sector and the region depend on various interrelated aspects: the treatment of TCNs in the company, the (infra)structures on-site and the TCNs’ future aspirations.

Hedemora and Vansbro (Dalarna, Sweden)

Action-research activities in the case of Dalarna were conducted in collaboration with local stakeholders, focusing on employment (Hedemora) and language learning and diversity in communication (Vansbro). The action-research revolved around a business fair and workshops and a day focusing on communication practices and language including workshops. The target groups differed between the two municipalities: in Hedemora, the focus was on TCNs and local employers...
and in Vansbro on departments within the local municipality as well as other actors such as civil society working with integration related issues. This allowed for the sharing of good practice and increased awareness of the role of language and communicative practices in the integration process. The two events were seen by the stakeholders as “welcomed interventions” that led to further discussions and possible links and interactions with other ongoing activities and events in the respective municipalities. The action-research highlighted the importance of collaboration between the municipality, the education institutions, and private companies to benefit from each other in order to match students/employees with employers and learn from good practices. It showed that face-to-face interaction is essential in the job matching process since the bureaucratic language used on official web sites, web applications and matching systems, might be obstacles to find and apply for work. TNCs and employers also highlighted that the migrants’ former work experience, education and interests need to be considered and validated to a higher degree in order to secure a good job match.

Kronoby, Larsmo, Nykarleby and Pedersöre (Ostrobothnia, Finland)

This action-research considered strategies to make the TCNs staying permanently in four rural Swedish-speaking municipalities in Ostrobothnia, Finland. The region is classified as an innovative growth area with a focus on the creation of a knowledge-based and environmentally friendly economy. The selected municipalities suffer from a labour shortage: several sectors rely entirely on immigrant labour. In agriculture and fur-farming the shortage refers to unqualified and seasonal jobs, while in other sectors (e.g., ICT, engineering, or industrial design) the demand is for highly skilled workers. The employers generally perceive it difficult to attract TCN labour migrants to the case study region: one reason for this is the exhaustive paperwork which is needed when recruiting labour from outside the EU. The TCNs usually come for seasonal work and many refugees leave the area as soon as they can, even if the housing situation is good, and there are vacant jobs. In fact, for refugees with higher ambitions in life than to work in low-paid, low-productive, labour-intense, and temporal jobs the case study region can offer little. Moreover, many seasonal TCN workers leave for other seasonal jobs in other places to avoid being unemployed. The ambitions and plans of the individual refugee
determine the willingness to stay in the area. The educational attainment level among the TCNs in the studied area is generally very low. Those refugees picking up Swedish as an integration language in the (bilingual) studied municipalities are more willing to stay than those picking up Finnish, and they are also more willing to undertake vocational training to get a local job. In order to attract TCNs workers, place branding activities are needed. To work actively with the place brand signals that you exist and what you can offer for national as well as international in-movers. If the image of a place is good, people will come, and they will stay.

**Burgraviat (South Tyrol, Italy)**

The main aim of the action-research conducted in the mountainous district of Burgraviat (autonomous province of Bolzano, South Tyrol) was to identify innovative approaches and test concrete tools to improve the current situation of TCNs in relation to their integration in local labour market. Profiting from the fundamental support of the local partner, Caritas Bolzano, and the involvement of several other stakeholders (local firms, trade unions, the province, local associations, etc.), the main tool adopted and tested during the action research has been the Check of Competences (CoC): this complex tool allows to conduct in-depth job/life interviews with migrants, to bring out the soft skills and the uncertified competences they hold. At the same time, the CoC represents an occasion of empowerment for the TCNs involved in it, as they can recognize their own potential, and re-construct their informal career, favouring their self-confidence. The final output of the CoC is an enriched CV to be spent by TCNs in their seek for a job, as to be used as a basis for proceeding in further training and education parcourses. The CoC has been tested, thanks to the involvement of several structures for migrants run by Caritas, with a dozen of TCNs in Burgraviat, while other testing has been done in a big local firm (Markas) located in Bolzano, thanks to the engagement of its director and head of personnel. The action research led to a better understanding of the potentialities of the CoC tool, both in terms of its usefulness for the supply side (the world of enterprises and employment agencies) and its usefulness for the demand side (TCN workers). The work also allowed the identification of different targets of TCN workers who could benefit from the skills profile. The action research enhanced the territorial diffusion of the CoC tool not only in
quantitative terms (more subjects using it) but also in qualitative terms (new fields of application), allowing the emergence of a “job placement chain” that communicates better and obtains better results in less time by using a common tool (the CoC itself).

**Outer Hebrides (Scotland, United Kingdom)**

The action research conducted in the Outer Hebrides islands, the most western inhabited islands of Scotland, looked at the socio-economic impact of a small number of immigrants for the sustainability of the local community, focusing particularly on the experiences of migrants working in the fishing sector and considering their migration trajectories, their housing and employment paths, their inclusion in the local communities, their experience of these remote islands and the challenges brought by Brexit. Sustainability referred notably to the sustainability of local economic sectors and availability of work opportunities, the sustainability of a wide range of services, the cultural and linguistic continuity, the potential enrichment brought by migrants’ innovative perspectives. The aim of the conducted activities was to build awareness of the drivers and barriers that can favour or challenge migration and settlement of non-UK migrants, in a context of a depopulation and ageing, and of the related challenge in recruiting European workers from the continent after Brexit. The engagement of the actors involved in the action-research was mostly mediated by the local stakeholders (the Economic Development and Planning department; the Housing department; the Syrian and Afghani refugees’ resettlement program, the Scottish Refugee Council, the Western Isles Fishermen’s Association). The research showed the key role of migration in the fishing industry; within this economic sector, two main trajectories have been identified: one that describes the path of settled migrants, and the other that describes a circular migration path, such as those migrants who periodically return to their families in their home country (and back to the Isles). Each trajectory has been described in relationship to the migrants’ mobility, their relationship with the home country, the housing path, the opportunity of improving their working position and language. Migrants, although few in numbers, are essential for the continuation and the development of local key economic sectors. Major challenges have been identified notably in the recruitment since Brexit. This should lead to a proposal for a migration policy that can replace the current regulation about unskilled
workers in the fishing sector. This proposal would discuss the category of “skilled” and emphasize the peculiarity of this territory that makes it requiring a specific policy.

1.2 Comparative findings

1.2.1 The territorial and socio-economic dimension of the case studies

The regions in which MATILDE’s action-research activities were conducted seem remarkably different in terms of their local economies and the ways in which foreign immigrants are included in the labour market. Although they are all rural or mountainous areas with a different but always significant degree of remoteness, and therefore often significantly distant from the main urban-metropolitan centres in geographical but also cultural and social terms, these territories nevertheless show significant integration into national or even international economic systems.

The perceived marginality of these regions reflect less their mere geographical features, their nature and position in space, and more their situatedness and position as a social construct. The economic vitality shown in the MATILDE regions, even amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic), stem from their multiple interrelationships on a supranational scale as well as from the intertwining of local production realities and global economic flows. These observations suggest that the declination of remoteness with which these regions are often associated is first and foremost a social construct – a form of labelling that tends to reify these territories starting from their morphology and geography, omitting to consider precisely the strong external links that their economies entertain, from which they draw resources and towards which they direct their products and services. This observation is particularly emblematic in the case of the Outer Hebrides, which
show an economy based on fishing, closely intertwined not only with the distant coasts of the UK but also with the EU, therefore suffering a penalisation due to Brexit.

Looking more specifically at the different territorial economic systems, agriculture (together with forestry, livestock breeding and fishing appears as a characteristic feature in all the regions involved. In South Tyrol (Italy), and even more so Karacabey (Turkey), the agricultural economy plays a very important role representing one of the main areas of employment for foreign immigrants, whether resident or seasonal. In other regions, including Bavaria (Germany) and Ostrobothnia (Finland), we find more diversified economies, with an important presence not only in agriculture, but also in the industrial, manufacturing and handicraft sectors, as well as knowledge based industries requiring highly qualified labour. In many MATILDE regions, the personal services, care and assistance, as well as welfare sector in general appears to be decidedly developed. This represents an important labour market for foreign immigrants.

In terms of the relationship between local economies and demographic size, the regions analysed here are all characterised to a greater or lesser extent by significant and persistent population decrease, especially in the most marginalised and remote areas, or in the innermost mountain valleys. Depopulation is a constant phenomenon in these territories, as are the processes of ageing of the local population, which are accompanied by large emigration flows of young people to urban areas in search of better working conditions and training opportunities. At the same time, depopulation has created the conditions for an often significant and growing foreign presence, in relation to local economies that require workers (often low-skilled but in some cases also at higher levels of qualification) in order to maintain the vitality.

In all the territories included in the action-research, the weight of the immigrant labour force is decisively relevant with respect to the functioning of territorial economies that, although different, appears to be dependent on the immigrants. Agriculture, personal/welfare services, and tourism are among the areas in which migrants find most employment. In some contexts, such as in the Outer
Hebrids, the weight of foreign labour, even if small in actual numbers, is decisive for the very survival of activities that are central to local economies, such as sea fishing.

Despite the importance of foreign labour for these different regional economies, both migrants themselves and local actors often seem to be unaware of the role of TCNs in the economic development of territories and in contributing to overall social cohesion, thanks precisely to the performance of work tasks that are essential for the functioning of society and the economy as a whole. In this regard, the pandemic has fostered the initial awareness of this role during the last two years, precisely in sectors and cases where this foreign labour force was lacking, such as in the case of seasonal workers, blocked by anti-Covid-19 measures. And yet, foreign workers seem to live in a condition of substantial invisibility precisely with respect to their economic role, whereas sometimes greater attention seems to be paid to them in terms of social inclusion or intercultural dialogue.

In the MATILDE regions considered here, the jobs offered to foreigners, and above all to TCNs (who often lack qualifications recognised in the EU) are often of low or very low professional qualification, especially in the agricultural, tourism and personal services sectors. On the other hand, it seems difficult to attract foreigners with appropriate qualifications and to make them stay in areas where there are more qualified job offers, as is the case for example of Ostrobothnia (Finland). An ambivalent situation is thus evident: on the one hand, in all the territorial economic systems considered here there is a “glass ceiling” in the various professional sectors into which migrants enter and where it is often almost impossible for them to move to more qualified and remunerated jobs; on the other hand, in regional economies and in local sectors with a higher intensity of know-how, there seems to be a need for some form of territorial branding, in order to attract a foreign workforce that is adequately prepared and suitable for the jobs on offer. There is a need to design and develop services to foster the territorial and social rooting of newcomers, to discourage them from abandoning rural and mountain areas for more urban settings.
In several of the regions considered, asylum seekers and refugees represent a very significant proportion of foreign workers, leading in certain situations (such as the emblematic case of Bursa, Turkey) to what we can define as a refugeeization of the labour market. By this term, we refer to the occupation of a whole series of jobs (usually the lowest paid and most precarious) by refugees.

In the economies of the MATILDE regions, also the weight of foreign temporary workers is often just as significant, especially in areas adjacent to international borders, such as South Tyrol (Italy). Given their intermittent presence on the territory, in the context of circular migration, as well as being more exposed to the risk of labour exploitation, these workers face many challenges in terms of integration at the social level.

Despite the significant weight of the immigrant workforce, none of the regions involved in MATILDE’s action-research have proper formalized plans or programmes for full labour integration of foreign immigrants in local contexts. Beyond social inclusion interventions and specific training initiatives, there seems to be a lack of local or supra-regional strategies that recognize the role of migrants for the overall well-being of these territories and that focus on the extension of rights, social guarantees, and wide-ranging inclusion procedures. Rather, in almost all the regions considered, the lack of institutional strategies is partially compensated by integrative interventions, also in the economic and work field, promoted and managed mainly by non-profit and civil society subjects.

1.2.2. Findings

The local CSWG (Case Study Working Groups) played a central role in fostering the research-action processes in the field, not only by involving stakeholders and fostering relations between researchers and local communities, but often also at the level of collective reflection, elaboration of analysis and support to engagement strategies in the territory, as well as public communication. In particular, given the difficult challenges posed by the pandemic during the implementation of the action-
research and the need to involve the various territorial actors in often difficult conditions, the local CSWGs represented a fundamental element for the success of the planned activities in all the MATILDE regions analysed here.

The action-research carried out, despite the limitations and impediments posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, brought to the fore the role of immigrant labour and the relevant weight of foreigners, TCNs in particular, in regional and local economies. It emerges that TCNs are not in competition with local workers, since they essentially perform the low-skilled and low-paid jobs that the inhabitants of MATILDE regions do not want to do, in the face of an often-lively labour market and local economies that rely heavily on professional services with a low knowledge content (tourism, agriculture, personal services).

Despite the differences between the various national legislations, the MATILDE regions all suffer from restrictive and limiting bureaucratic laws and regulations with respect to the full and effective use of foreign labour, especially with respect to TCNs and even more regarding asylum seekers and refugees. Despite the fact that local economies have a strong need for immigrant workers, companies often find it difficult to hire these people, precisely because of the constraints of national regulations and the long and complex bureaucratic procedures that must be faced (visa, working permit). This is the situation, for example, in the Bavarian (Germany) case studies. There are many cases of companies renouncing to hire foreign workers, thus potentially also limiting their own opportunities for expansion and the opportunities of the regions where they are operating.

In several cases (as in particular shown by the activities conducted in the Swedish case studies, related to the local job fair) the action research highlighted the importance of collaboration between the municipality, the education institutions and private companies to benefit from each other in order to match employees with employers, through face-to-face interaction that can overcome the difficulties of job matching process as the bureaucratic language used on official web sites and matching systems might obstacle to find and apply for work. It is the regulatory and bureaucratic
constraints that seem, in all the investigated regions, to be pushing towards the spread of informal – but often also unprotected and underpaid – work. Some cases are more emblematic in this sense, such as Bursa, in Turkey, where the so-called refugeeization of the labour market emerges in terms of precariousness and absence of trade union rights. Asylum seekers and refugees are among those most exposed to this form of labour exploitation, given their precarious situation and the fact that they often lack the necessary documents to be regularly employed by employers.

The issue of training and requalification of TCNs is central, both for the facilitation of the migrant career progression and their inclusion in more qualified and remunerated positions, and to develop the potential for innovation that immigrants have, and which needs cognitive tools to be able to express itself and find space in local economies, in relation to specific territorial vocations. In this regard, it should be noted that vocational trainings are very much gender biased. They are imprisoning both men and women in particular fields (for instance, female migrants are channelled towards gastronomy while male migrants are channelled towards working as mechanics) showing in many cases a gendered segregation in the labour market. Tools such as the Check of Competences (CoC), experimented in South Tyrol, Italy, aimed at bringing out the informal and transversal skills that foreign immigrants possess, can promote not only better labour inclusion but also the launch of tailor-made training courses, which can promote the empowerment of subjects and a different approach to work roles as well as career progression. At the same time, there is also a need to enhance the knowledge and skills possessed by migrants through horizontal (peer to peer) forms of knowledge transfer, circular and interactive, capable of promoting positive effects also on host territories in terms of innovation and development.

The linguistic dimension presents a crucial factor in all the territories under investigation with respect to the labour inclusion of foreign immigrants. The lack of knowledge of the local language (which in several of the MATILDE regions has more than one, e.g. South Tyrol in Italy or Ostrobothnia in Finland) is the main obstacle to integration in stable, better paid jobs with career opportunities. The lack of sufficient language competence often relegates migrants to those professions where little
or no qualifications are need and which can be carried out even without advanced language skills. Regarding language training, and more in general of the transmission of cultural tools necessary for full professional integration in the labour market, the importance of the diffusion of a welcoming culture in companies (as is the case, for example, of the regions of South Tyrol in Italy and Bavaria in Germany) is highlighted, aimed at favouring the recognition of the socio-cultural specificities of migrants, in view of their enhancement in the working environment, in diversity management strategies.

A theme that emerged in all the case studies considered here is that of the rooting of migrants in local contexts, given the great importance of these foreign workers for the functioning of territorial economies and the need to encourage their permanence in these rural and remote regions. We have seen how difficult it is to develop a sense of belonging especially in the case of seasonal workers, present intermittently, as well as asylum seekers and refugees, often waiting to move elsewhere, and in many cases wanting to reach the larger cities where they believe they will have more job and training opportunities. In general, it does not seem easy to retain this crucial workforce for long, especially if they are qualified and therefore inclined to look elsewhere for better professional opportunities.

1.2.3. The role of migrants in local development: critical issues and opportunities

The results of the MATILDE action-research clearly highlight the very important, and in some sectors fundamental, role of the immigrant labour force in the economies of rural, mountain and even remote regions, which are on the whole integrated in larger exchange and production systems but demographically weak. However, the role foreign immigrants play in these regional economies today is seldom fully recognised in the local or national policies, as well as by territorial stakeholders.
and foreigners themselves. It is this lack of recognition, together with the presence of a bureaucracy and legislation that is often unfavourable to the full and formal inclusion of foreign labour, that severely limits the potential of immigrants as a factor of local innovation. It often relegates them to professions with few or no qualifications, fuelling professional and gender segregation, reducing in so doing career and self-employment opportunities.

The difficulties (or unwillingness) encountered in most of the MATILDE regions, with respect to the full benefit of immigrant labour, tend to translate into dangerous limits for local development itself, which can remain trapped in vicious circles and unable to take advantage of the opportunities for innovation offered by foreign workers. The current territorial economic models of these regions tend to reproduce social and income inequalities, in what appears to be differential, if not discriminatory, treatment of foreign labour.

As demonstrated by the recent labour crisis in rural and mountain regions, linked to the closure of international borders as an anti-pandemic measure, the real issue to be resolved relates to the attractiveness of these regions for immigrant workers in the long term, and with respect to workers who are – or can be – qualified in the host territories. The role of immigration in the local development of MATILDE regions is therefore based on the implementation of comprehensive policies capable of combining rights and employment, residency, and social roots.
2. Impact on demographic and social revitalization of rural/mountain localities through TCN’s integration

2.1 The case studies

The MATILDE case studies devoted to analysing the impact on demographic and social revitalization of rural/mountain localities through TCNs integration were the following:

- the districts of Alto Gállego and Los Monegros (Autonomous Region of Aragón, Spain)
- the regions of Midt-Gudbrandsdalen (MG) and Nord-Østerdal (NØ) in Innlandet county (Norway)
- the three municipalities of Feldkirch, Innerbraz and Schruns (Vorarlberg region, Austria).

**Alto Gállego and Los Monegros (Autonomous Region of Aragón, Spain).**

This case study focuses on the demographic and socio-economic revitalization of rural areas in the region of Aragón. The research had a double objective: first, to analyze the living conditions and local resources in the two selected districts, with the aim of elaborating concrete proposals to enhance the revitalization of both territories thorough the integration of foreign immigrants; secondly, to assess different methodologies related to participatory action-research involving migrants. The activities conducted have collectively investigated the impact of foreign immigration, in relationship with concrete place-based strategies and initiatives of migrant integration, that aim at favouring their active role in a bottom-up process of local development. Thanks to the participation of local
stakeholders, including local policy makers and officers, NGOs, and migrants, proposals for place-sensitive and innovative responses to local challenges have been co-designed to promote improved governance of migration at the local level, capable to enhance integration of TCNs and balanced territorial development. In parallel, activities run in the case studies have tried to: 1) identify local challenges related to the arrival and settlement of foreign immigrants; 2) depict needs of local communities, in terms of enhancing the active role of migrants in territorial development and supporting their integration through innovative initiatives; 3) reflect on opportunities associated to immigration of TCNs in these rural areas. Different tools have been tested on the field, as qualitative interviews, focus groups and mobility mappings. The main outcomes from the methodological point of view confirm the relevance of action-research methods and tools capable of including different kind of local actors, starting from immigrants. The research provided some evidence on key aspects for social revitalization, such as facilitating the access of TCNs to training and housing, improving horizontal communication and develop activities that can help breaking down barriers between the different inhabitants of the areas.

Midt-Gudbrandsdalen and Nord-Østerdal (Innlandet county, Norway)

The participatory action-research activities in these two territories revolved around world café workshops organized as two-day events in each region, with migrants and participants from the public, private and third sector. The world cafés resulted in five concrete ideas for integration and inclusion of TCNs across three thematic areas in Midt-Gudbrandsdalen; and six concrete ideas across three thematic areas in the region of Nord-Østerdal. The workshop in Midt-Gudbrandsdalen highlighted problems and needs related to 1) transport and logistics; 2) more flexible public services aimed at migrants; 3) sponsors or mentorship schemes for migrants. The workshop in Nord-Østerdal addressed the importance of 1) mitigating barriers for work inclusion for migrants; 2) communicating local/regional initiatives and events in different languages; 3) creating spaces of encounter for socializing and networking among different social groups.
The action-research conducted in Vorarlberg aimed at better understanding processes and patterns of social integration with regard to forced migrants and local inhabitants, focusing on three rural and mountainous municipalities, in the southern part of the region. The main research interest laid in the identification and analysis of local structures and their potential to enable and support social integration activities. Action-research activities were started through a process of institutional mapping of relevant actors and initiatives of social integration. This process included interviews and focus groups with local actors, in order to identify relevant activities provided at local level. The multitude of local actors involved was decisive throughout the process as they acted as gatekeepers who initiated first contacts between researchers and forced migrants. These contacts enabled in the second phase the realization of a set of social mappings, involving different groups of forced migrants. The outcomes revealed that local structures offer a variety of opportunities to promote the establishment of social contacts, while in each municipality initiatives and networks developed differently. However, basis of almost all the activities of social integration seems to be voluntary work, while social integration processes are heavily influenced by timing and the status of the asylum procedure. Initial reluctant attitude of many locals can be mitigated particularly through enhanced visibility of forced migrants, in order to facilitate them to be active in the community. Gatekeepers with good relationships and inclusion in wider social networks could ease contacts to relevant positions in the hosting society.

2.2 Comparative findings

2.2.1 The territorial dimension of the case studies

All the three case studies presented here have different territorial characteristics. The Spanish and the Norwegian cases show a broader spatial focus (two comarcas/districts in Spain, and two regions in Norway) while the Austrian one concentrates on the dimension of the small municipality (three
municipalities involved, ranging from 1,000 to 6,500 inhabitants each). Furthermore, the Norwegian action-research has considered two similar and interlinked regions while the Austrian has adopted the criterion of differentiation, including territories/municipalities with different socio-economic characteristics, also following the hypothesis that these differences have led to different migratory processes and different local inclusion strategies. In Spain, the comarca of Alto Gállego, located in the mountainous area of the Pyrenees, shows a service-oriented (tourism and ski resorts) economy, with industrial activities only in the capital city. The more extended comarca of Los Monegros covers a flat area at the end of the Ebro Valley, with the great majority of the land used for agriculture, the main economic activities being based on the primary sector, including livestock farming.

In the Austrian case study, the three rural municipalities have distinct socio-economic and territorial characteristics too. Frastanz is a vital market town with an industrial history in close proximity of the district’s capital; Innerbraz is a small mountain village; and Schruns is a small market municipality relying heavily on tourism. The two Norwegian regions, Midt-Gudbrandsdal and Nord-Østerdal, are more similar and tied together through various inter-municipal collaborations in different public service areas, such as integration and refugee services. Both regions have regional councils that are committed to developing shared regional policies and strategies, as well as to promoting regional development across municipalities. Issues related to immigration and integration are thus largely of inter-municipal concern. For this reason, the participatory action-research was organized at regional level rather than centred on single municipalities. Both these regions are largely mountainous with agriculture and forestry as main economic activities, showing low population density and aging.

Findings

Immigration flows can have a real demographic impact and enhance social revitalization in rural and mountain communities if the inclusion processes are based on adaptive and flexible strategies to counterbalance the tendency of local systems towards institutional rigidity and bureaucratisation.
This search for flexibility should be applied to the different areas of the reception system. **Refugee aid should be integrated with the voluntary sector**, that seems to be the very pillar of the reception system, in a perspective of mutual interaction and synergy.

Suggestions arrive from both the Austrian and the Norway case studies. Since refugee services are public initiatives, there are regular working and opening hours, while migrants often have problems and difficulties in the evenings or weekends, when access to help and support is limited. Thus, a flexible approach could be reached developing a closer collaboration between the institutionalised municipal refugee services and the more informal volunteer sector, within a complementary strategy of support. A concrete opportunity for facilitating such collaboration could be to physically co-locate the municipal services and the volunteer centre in the same place. The municipalities generally fund positions to run volunteer centres, and those running the centres are involved in the recruitment and coordination of volunteers, together with the development of new initiatives. Supporting and enhancing voluntarism by local institutions can therefore help fostering activities on a long-term period, within a continuative and structured framework. Another example of flexible integration involving institutions and voluntary sector is related to the driving lessons for migrants. As formal driving lessons are costly and often not affordable for people with very limited resources like refugees, formal lessons needed to pass the test could be reduced if those under training can practice driving with skilled volunteer drivers.

**The accompanying system should offer different forms of mentorships, better if the mentors have a migratory background.** It is necessary to develop a more flexible system corresponding to the different needs of migrants and to the different stages of inclusion in which migrants find themselves. Relationships and synergies with the voluntary sector are also in this case very important. For example, in the Norwegian case study (Midt-Gudbrandsdalen and Nord-Østerdal, Innlandet county) different professional profiles have been identified that could be developed and tested: a “Welcome coordinator”; a “Midtdals-guide”, when a new employee in a workplace is supported by a mentor (better if with a migratory background); or a “Mentor and language buddy”
that could offer guidance on how to cope and get settled in the workplace and daily life in the community.

The regulatory system should be more flexible. Again, in the Norwegian case study, it has been suggested the introduction of driving licence courses also in migrants’ languages and/or online. Driving is an issue of particular concern for the integration of newcomers in rural and remote regions with geographically dispersed populations. Access to qualified teachers, speaking the languages of the migrants, could be easier in urban areas, that present larger ethnic groups of inhabitants: so, collaborations could make it possible to offer online classes for migrants living in different parts of the country, profiting from urban teachers. Overcoming the language barrier would allow new mobility strategies (for work, leisure, access to services) with potential effects of greater inclusion. This increased private mobility would also allow migrants to live outside the city, in rural and mountainous areas, overcoming the limits often imposed by public transportation to those living in remote regions.

The housing and rental system should be more flexible. As emerged especially in the Spanish case study (Alto Gállego and Los Monegros, Autonomous Region of Aragón), the rental system must also target migrants and not only tourists (as it happens in many mountain villages), offering more affordable prices and flexible rules for an inclusive access to housing. Considering that tourists are only temporary/intermittent residents, while migrants can settle down with a medium to long-term perspective, in rural and remote areas housing reveals a prominent problem for newcomers: it is often too expensive or in very poor condition, making the market inaccessible for immigrants and the population with lower salaries, unless an intervention by the public sector is put in place.
2.2.3 The role of migrants in local development: critical issues and opportunities

The main benefit connected to the migration phenomenon in rural and mountain contexts is related to the possibility of a socio-economic revitalization of these territories and their communities. As already stressed, MATILDE regions are characterized by depopulation and ageing, with many inner areas and small municipalities where the lack of attractive job opportunities and socio-cultural life make it difficult the settlement or the long-term stay of newcomers. For this reason, the majority of immigrants tend to live in (or to come back to) the main towns, where job, leisure, and socio-health opportunities are greater. In addition, the general lack of decentralized services and public transportation in rural/mountain areas makes it necessary to have a private car: migrants, especially women, usually lack one.

Migrants’ needs seem therefore similar to those of locals: housing, work, access to essential services (school, transport, health), for themselves and for their children. However, migrants in MATILDE regions have to solve also other specific problems: first and foremost, language (which in many ways hinders the process of work inclusion but also the effective participation to the social sphere at local level); at the same time, cultural diversity (with different lifestyles and values) and the lack of social capital (in particular with respect to the linkages with diversified local networks), represent potential obstacles to the concrete integration of migrants, where specific policies are not put in place to valorise differences and create new social bridges. In spite of all this, some of the difficulties are positively faced in rural and mountain territories thanks to an efficient and ramified public reception system, together with the local associations and volunteers. What emerges clearly from the different case studies, concrete solutions should never come from above but develop on the basis of a mutual cooperation involving the migrants themselves and the locals; a bottom-up approach to the global governance of these territories that can have also positive effects on more general migration policies at different levels.
3. Impact on community-space interactions, territorialisation and sense of belonging of rural/mountain localities through TCN’s integration

3.1 The case studies

MATILDE case studies devoted to analysing the impact on community-space interactions, territorialisation, and sense of belonging through TCNs integration were the following:

- the municipality of Villach (Carinthia, Austria)
- the region of Haskovo and the municipality of Harmanli (Bulgaria)
- the municipalities of Lieksa and Kitee (North Karelia, Finland)
- the municipality of Bussoleno (Metropolitan city of Turin, Italy)

Villach (Carinthia, Austria)

Considering the city of Villach and its rural surrounding, action-research activities were focused on the integration processes of TCNs, in particular forced migrants and refugees, since the 1990s. These groups of foreigners have been also compared to high-skilled migrants, resident in the region, with a
peculiar focus on migrant women. In total, seven activities were performed. The mixed-methods approach includes participatory observations, focus groups, social and intercultural mappings, participatory photo talks, and (with the help of the online tools Mentimeter and MURAL-board), sociometric, live voting and brainstorming sessions, with live clustering. Through the involvement of more than 500 people (participants and stakeholders), the results show that the integration processes changed since the 1990s and became more institutionalized and more formal, often reducing informal contacts with locals. In addition, while high-qualified migrants in Carinthia are supported by the CIC, refugees mainly depend on short-time funded projects and initiatives, carried out by NGOs or volunteers. Above all, the action research contributed to the empowerment of the participating women. Their voices and interests need to be heard in the future even stronger and inclusion measures have to be tailored to the individual needs.

**Haskovo and Harmanli (Bulgaria)**

The action-research conducted in the region of Haskovo and in the city of Harmanli had purpose of applying the innovative tools and approaches from the MATILDE Toolbox in order to investigate how local development is impacted by the presence of TCNs as well as to run intercultural participatory activities which aim at impacting on community-space interactions through TCNs integration. The implementation of the thematic participatory activities planned was related to the initiative “Intercultural Gardens as Green Bridges” conducted in Harmanli and the region, and the thematic week “Diversity and Migration” at NBU. The research confirmed the need to provide an accurate information regarding the migration phenomena at territorial level, in order also to avoid instrumentalization by nationalist and xenophobic political parties; at the same time the presence of migrants on these rural territories appears to be an antidote against the depopulation and a way for local communities to positively reconsider their regions as place of living. Moreover, thanks to the interaction with migrants some local organizations have better identify their needs and started seeking opportunities for cooperation and mutual support.
**Lieksa and Kitee (North Karelia, Finland)**

The main objective of the North Karelia case study, focused on the rural municipalities of Lieksa and Kitee, was to examine the meaning of language in the everyday life of TCNs and how the knowledge of different languages affects the impact of TCNs in rural areas. The research team has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork, which consists of interviews, focus groups, photo-shooting, ethnographic observations, and social mapping. Data were collected through the involvement of local NGOs, church employees and immigrants themselves, adopting co-research methods, that actively involved researchers and representatives from JoMoni (the local partner). Activities involved two different multicultural associations in the region: Aljans, in the Kitee region, which promotes Russian language and culture, but also better integration of the Russian speaking community; and the Lieksa Somali Family Association, together with the Metka community house where they operate, offering a platform for different kinds of activities devoted to the multicultural population. The research also engaged the Lutheran Church of Lieksa and folk high schools. The **outcomes** indicate that, in North Karelia, multicultural associations are an effective and often innovative mean to foster the positive recognition of migrants as well as the development of their language skills. Both the associations involved also provide working opportunities and practical assistance for migrants. While Aljans is concentrating on Russian language and culture, to increase its impact on the local community more co-operation with locals would be needed. The biggest challenge in Lieksa is that the Lutheran church and Metka do not seem to be co-operating so much in terms of multicultural work.

**Bussoleno (Metropolitan City of Turin, Italy)**

The case-study of the Metropolitan City of Turin centred on the impact of TCNs on the territorial dimension, focusing on housing and socio-spatial transformation of mountain villages, and considering in particular the small municipality of Bussoleno (Susa Valley), close to the main city of Turin. The action-research devoted to 1) investigating, with participatory tools, the spatial distribution of the foreign population together with the meanings and use of public spaces, both by local community and newcomers; 2) co-defining and co-constructing a new public space in the village, as
a place of encounter for the different populations insisting on this territory. The action-research involved a wide network of local stakeholders (NGOs, migrant organizations, schools, local administration, parish, single citizens), through the use of different participatory tools as social mapping and mobility mapping. A residential four-days architecture workshop was realized, involving TCNs, local population and students (also coming from other regions, responding to a national call organized with the support of Camposaz national association) in building of a convivial wooden structure (Fig. 1). The activities realized led to the engagement of TCNs and local actors in a redefinition of local public spaces, realizing the role that they play for social cohesion in mountain and rural areas. This became evident also with respect to the development of territorial rootedness and sense of belonging; a role even more important for TCNs, as they have usually less economic resources and relational networks.

Figure 1. Workshop of participatory architecture, Bussoleno, Italy, Photo: A. Membretti
3.2 Comparative findings

3.2.1 The territorial dimension of the case studies

These four case studies have very different characteristics. Among these, their demographic size, the percentage of migrants and the local economic structure. The largest case studies from a demographic point of view are the city of Villach (about 60,000 inhabitants) and the city of Harmanly (about 30,000 inhabitants): the population of Villach increased from 47,140 inhabitants in 1961 up to 63,236 in 2021, with a total growth of 34.1%. This growth is strongly due to international immigration: while Villach’s native population are slightly decreasing (3% since 2002), migrants have more than doubled since 2002 from 7,348 to 13,130. This demographic growth is also due to the economic floridity of the area (high-tech sector, technology park, microelectronics cluster, a University of Applied Sciences, a business incubator). The municipality of Harmanli (Bulgaria, Haskovo region) is characterized by a multi-sectoral economy. Harmanli (around 30,000 inhabitants) has increased its population between 2011 and 2019 with 966 people (5.2%). However, it must be said that this growth is also a result of the administrative pressure over humanitarian or refugee status holders to have an address registration in order to obtain an ID card. In fact, Bulgaria has the fastest declining population in the EU and the region of Haskovo experiences a high demographic decline as well.

The other two case studies here considered represent smaller territorial realities, having respectively 10,000 inhabitants (the two Finnish cases) and around 6,000 inhabitants (the Italian case study). Both of the chosen Finnish municipalities represent small rural towns that have struggled in the past decades with quickly changing demographic structure. Since 1980 the population of Kitee has decreased almost by a third and the population of Lieksa has been reduced by almost half. However, while population of North Karelia has been decreasing in the last few decades, both the share and absolute number of immigrant background people have grown constantly. In 1990 there were less than 700 residents (0.4%) with foreign background in the region: by the year 2000 the
number had reached over 2,000 (1.2%) and in 2020 the number was almost 6,700 (4.1%). The economic structure of North Karelia is service based with manufacturing being diminished over the last decades.

The municipality of Bussoleno also suffers a general loss of population (similarly to quite all the mountain territories of Piedmont region): the population was 6,602 in 1993 while today it is 5,806 (-12%). The increase in the number of foreigners (actually 6.8% of the total population) has partially counterbalanced this trend, but in recent years immigration has decreased and some migrants who had settled in Bussoleno have moved to France. Bussoleno’s economic role is historically linked to being a railway junction on the line to France, and to be a cotton and steel industry centre for a long time. Towards the end of the 20th century the situation changed: with the great cutbacks in the railways and the crisis in textiles, the city lost much of its weight, and the closure of the main activities led to a slow decline that continues to this day. This brief overview on the socio-economic characteristics of the selected case studies shows some similarities, firstly related to the demographic decline and the parallel increase of foreign immigrants’ percentage. However, it is precisely the diversity of the cases that constitutes the richness of this study, which allows us to highlight a greater number of models, critical points, and new practices.

3.2.2. Findings

The four case studies devoted to the impact on community-space interactions, territorialisation, and sense of belonging of rural/mountain localities through TCNs integration have developed this topic each from a different point of view. Common to all are two main findings:

1. The migratory phenomenon in rural regions is characterized by a growing complexity and should be analysed taking into account this complexity: first of all, considering the differences between first and more recent migratory waves (Villach, Austria), between first and second generation migrants (Bussoleno, Italy), between high and low skilled migrants (Villach, Austria),
or to consider the gender differences (Villach, Austria), language knowledge differences and the corresponding roles and positions in the community (Lieksa and Kitee, Finland);

2. Territorial inclusion and sense of belonging of migrant populations can be enhanced in different ways but common to all the case studies is the call for more socio-political representation: migrants tend to be invisible, to live apart with respect to local communities, not appearing in the social texture (when not even socially segregated, as in some cases); their voices are definitely not as loud and frequent as the other voices of the rest of the community. Action-research outcomes show that this lack of representation can be overcome in different ways: an accurate communication and science-based information regarding the migrant presence in the region as a preventive measure against populism and xenophobia (Haskovo and Harmanli, Bulgaria); the design, co-creation, joint use and maintenance of public spaces by migrants and locals (Bussoleno, Italy); a new common narrative, enhancing positive representations from which culture and skills of migrant women can emerge (Villach, Austria); online and social narratives developed by migrants themselves to promote “their” local territory (Haskovo and Harmanli, Bulgaria); or, finally, a more active role of local multicultural associations, in offering voice and representation to migrants as citizens (Lieksa and Kitee, Finland).

Considering the first point above-mentioned (complexity), the action-research in Villach (Austria) shows that the integration processes have changed concerning integration support services and labour market integration since the 1990s. The integration support services have become more institutionalized, increasing bureaucratic procedures (especially affecting women with children), while the informal and direct contacts and relationships with the people decreased, reducing the capacity of listening to the needs expressed by different categories. In addition, the concrete experience of the integration process differs between high-qualified migrants and low-skilled refugees. The first are more supported by local networks, the second less, even if they try to rely on their informal community network to support each other.
In the case study of Bussoleno (Italy), territorial consciousness and sense of belonging to the place seems to considerably change, passing from the first to the second generation of migrants: first generation in fact shows considering and concretely using public spaces of the village taking into account their country of origin (comparing their current situation to what they used to do in their motherland) while second generation migrants, who have lived their whole past in Bussoleno, reveal to use (and even conceptualise) public spaces on the basis of a sort of heritage map of their childhood, already built in this mountain area.

In the Lieksa and Kitee case study (Finland) migrants appears in a way connected to their language-based groups, but at the same time there is huge diversity between people who belong to the same language group. The position (and opportunities) in local labour market (mainly related to services, agriculture, and industry) is in many cases connected to the effective knowledge of Finnish language.

Focusing on the second point (lack of representation), in the Haskovo and Harmanli case study (Bulgaria) public communication and the spread of accurate information regarding the effective migrant presence in the region serve as a preventive measure against the dissemination of unsubstantiated data and fake news for populist and xenophobic purposes. The science-based information here collected through the participatory action-research constitutes a valid counterargument to the claim that migrants “come to breath our air and to eat our food”. It also offers objective data for disproving the hypothesis circulating in Bulgarian society that the refugees were sent to the rural regions to massively populate them and to subsequently take it over.

To tackle the lack of socio-political representation in Bussoleno (Italy) migrants together with locals and professionals have co-designed and co-realized a wooden architecture (Fig. 1), rethinking a public space as generative of concrete citizenship and social recognition for the different local communities. TCNs do not often have the means and opportunities to realize that they live in a mountain village and do not usually frequent outdoor spaces. The action-research intended precisely to realize a public outdoor space, aiming at facilitating this shared use and a new awareness (a re-appropriation, to some extent) about the local landscape. In this way, the space-making process become a sense-
making process, with a construction of shared meanings through the creation of space and future negotiations between different communities of users. In Villach (Austria), during the Arabesc summer festival, migrant women engaged put off for a while their headscarves and wore tight-fitting clothing, with heavy gold jewellery. The result was a diverse mix of women with long and short dresses, with and without headscarf, traditional to modern dressed. The action-research enabled some kind of empowerment with respect to the women engaged; they were recognized as “experts of their lives”, of their integration process, including in it the challenges they face, and the experienced discrimination. The action-research gave the women a voice, that should be listened to by the whole local society.

Another voice is that of the online and social narratives developed by migrants themselves to promote “their” Bulgarian territory (Haskovo and Harmanli): within the case study region, in fact, many of the TCNs show a strong digital presence on different social media that connects them to the local community and to the wider community of compatriots in Bulgaria. The internet is used both as means to (try to) better integrate into the local community and to promote the living region outside and even abroad. Finally, in Lieksa and Kitee (Finland), the work conducted by the multicultural associations appears an effective practice to foster the positive overall impact and recognition of migrants as well as the development of their language skills, in a multilingual environment. The three local associations involved in the action-research are planning to continue their co-operation and potentially develop common activities after the MATILDE project has come to an end.

3.2.3 The role of migrants in local development: critical issues and opportunities

From the outcomes of the action-research conducted in the case studies above analysed, it emerges that there are two critical elements to consider while locally approaching the integration of migrants in rural and mountain areas:
1. **Beware of excessive institutionalisation of services and processes.** Such institutionalisation does not always lead to the solution of problems but can contribute to the rigidity and bureaucratisation of a system. Rigidity tends to put migrants at a disadvantage when accessing services (e.g., because of linguistic, cultural, or normative barriers) and also weakens the interaction between migrants and local communities.

2. The arrival and the long-term integration of migrants in rural and mountain areas often expose these territories to the **risk of developing populist (or even xenophobic) attitudes and movements**; to counteract this trend, it is fundamental to produce and disseminate adequate and science-based information, fighting fake news with the use of reliable data; and to promote face-to-face meetings and confrontations, involving locals and migrants.

Considering the main territorial opportunities connected to foreign immigration in these contexts, it is possible to add that:

1. Migration can foster the **repopulation of rural and mountain regions**, increasing to some extent their attractiveness and the provision of essential services, especially where specific policies are put in place for the governance of this phenomenon. At the same time, dealing with migrants and their territorial integration can enable the acquisition of a better understanding by locals with regard to their birthplace, considering more carefully local resources and eventually **rethinking their hometown or village as a good place to live in**.

2. The presence of migrants in these territories has prompted several organizations of the civil society to seek opportunities for cooperation and mutual support, supporting the **creation of local platforms** for continuing interactions between different actors in the future. This represents an opportunity for **increasing the social capital of the territories**, in order to face new challenges.

3. The undertaken participatory activities have offered to the locals and to the migrants the occasion to reconsider their sense of belonging and the inclusion of newcomers as new citizens within the hosting communities; this has led, in several cases, to consistent attempts of breaking down prejudices and **making rural/mountain communities more pluralistic and multicultural**.
Conclusions

The action-research activities carried out in the case studies of the MATILDE regions involved a diversified set of territories, which differ in terms of size, history, culture, country, as well as economy and social organisation. The aim of the participatory action-research was to leverage this socio-territorial diversity in order to engage different communities, within a process based on shared methodologies (a toolbox to be tested concretely in the field, together with local stakeholders) and aimed at achieving common objectives, in terms of social participation as well as of collectively acquired and disseminated knowledge for enhancing some kind of concrete change at local level (both in terms of perceptions and actions).

In spite of the many difficulties encountered by the national teams in conducting activities in times of pandemic – and the subsequent need to often quickly change approaches and ways of managing work – it was possible to carry out the research substantially within the planned timeframe and according to the set objectives. The participatory nature of the action-research conducted became manifested in the ability to involve local actors (NGOs, public administrators, citizens, informal groups, etc.) through local CSWGs not only in the production of knowledge about the phenomena under investigation, but first and foremost in the creation of the conditions (relational, logistical, of mutual trust, etc.) that made it possible to collect information and manage the participatory processes themselves. As we have seen from the presentation of the various case studies above, the many differences between the regions involved should not overshadow the points in common between them and the elements of contact, on which it is possible to read a dialectic between the territories involved, in relation also to possible trans-local policies.

With respect to their general characteristics and main socio-economic trends, these territories share the following factors:
- they are all territories that seem experiencing some form of “remotization”, a process of increasing physical and symbolic distance between and within rural/mountain and urban areas and their populations in both geographical and symbolic-cultural terms) with respect to the main economic and social centres of the nations to which they belong;
- their demography is characterised, on the one hand, by a downward trend in the resident population, with correlated phenomena of youth outmigration and ageing; and, on the other hand, by significant inflows of foreign immigrants, who tend to partly compensate for depopulation, as well as constituting a fundamental component of the labour force needed locally;
- the economies of these regions appear responsive, even in the face of the crisis triggered by the pandemic. These are often characterised by a mix of sectors (agriculture, services, tourism, industry) that are in turn interconnected with similar productive spheres at higher levels. Despite their perceived remote geographical position, the investigated regions show a good overall level of economic integration in broader systems.

Considering the initiatives and policies already in place or that could be activated to promote the inclusion of foreign migrants along with local development, the action-research carried out favoured the emergence of numerous elements of reflection, and some concrete proposals, which can be summarised in relation to the three macro-dimensions investigated, namely: labour market and economy; demography and social revitalization; community-space interaction.

**Labour market and local economy**

- foreign immigrants and refugees are a crucial factor for the vitality of the local economies in the rural and mountain regions here considered: however, their efficient, productive and respectful integration into local job markets requires overcoming restrictive and limiting bureaucratic laws and regulations that now have created the conditions for informal work and illegal exploitation (e.g. the "refugeeization" of the labour market in terms of
precariousness and absence of rights), often pushing companies renouncing to hire foreign workers, thus limiting also the opportunities for expansion and growth of local systems;

- **collaboration between local municipalities, education institutions, NGOs and private companies** is fundamental in order to match employees with employers (also through face-to-face interaction that can overcome the difficulties of job matching process) and to create a cooperative environment, involving the different local actors in building shared scenarios of development;

- **training and requalification of migrants** appears to be a central issue, both to facilitate their career progression and their inclusion in more qualified and remunerated positions (also avoiding gender segregation), and to develop the potential for innovation that immigrants have, and which needs cognitive tools to be able to express itself and find space in local economies, in relation to specific territorial vocations. Training needs to start from recognising the **informal and transversal skills** that foreign immigrants possess (e.g. through the use of tools as the Check of Competences) and should aim also at the overall empowerment of the subjects involved, promoting their **agency**;

- due to the crucial role of the **linguistic dimension** with respect to the labour inclusion of foreign immigrants (even more in multi-linguistic regions), it is fundamental to invest on language training, and more in general of the **transmission of cultural tools** necessary for full professional integration in the labour market (e.g. enhancing the diffusion of a **welcoming culture** in public and private companies).

**Demography and social revitalization**

- foreign immigration can produce a demographic impact and social revitalization on rural and mountain communities if the inclusion processes develop more **adaptive and flexible strategies** to counterbalance the tendency of local systems (within national legislations) towards rigidity and bureaucratisation;

- the refugee/migration aid system should be more integrated with the volunteer/NGO local system, in a perspective of mutual relations and synergy, **avoiding excessive**
institutionalisation of the procedures and enhancing platforms for the co-operation between different actors that can also increase the social capital of the territories and reduce the socio-cultural distance between services and users;
- the accompanying system for the inclusion of migrants should offer different forms of mentorships, considering the role of mentors with a migratory background and enhancing forms of peer-to-peer guidance;
- the housing system should be more flexible and inclusive, while the rental system should target also migrants, offering more affordable prices and flexible rules for accessing the housing (public and private) market, even more in rural and mountainous touristic locations, where renting prices are unaffordable for several social categories;
- Migrants' social needs are those of locals to many respects (housing, work, access to essential services, etc.), while they have to deal also with other difficulties, as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, discrimination, and the lack of social capital. Local solutions to these problems should never come from above, but need firstly to consider the migrants themselves, within a bottom-up perspective of governance of the territories in which they live together with locals.

Community-space interactions
- Engagement and even empowerment of migrants can take place through a mindful (re)configuration and use of public spaces, that can play an important role for social cohesion and mutual recognition in rural and mountain communities, especially for TCNs, as they often have fewer economic resources, relational networks and spaces of encounter;
- engaging migrants into the creation, use and maintenance of public spaces together with locals can translate into rootedness and sense of belonging for the involved people (space-making as sense-making and community building process) while, at the same time, it offers the opportunity of rethinking the village/territory as a good place to live in, given certain conditions of shared care for it;
- public space-making can offer the concrete opportunity for answering to the often-unspoken need of public/civic representation expressed by those migrant citizens that, otherwise, tend to be invisible, as usually confined in domestic or workspaces (women, in particular, who risk to live only the domestic sphere) and often lacking basic political rights.

The action-research participatory activities described and analysed so far constitute the core of WP5, representing the concrete implementation of the set of conceptual and methodological tools developed by the MATILDE project. Through the long months of participatory engagement in the various selected case studies, facing the many difficulties of field research (definitely increased by the pandemic situation in which the activities were carried out), the local teams were able to compare the data already collected with the perceptions and dynamics expressed by the different categories of people who live daily in the territories investigated. In this way, the action-research represented a valuable opportunity for self-reflection for the researchers themselves and for the various partners and local stakeholders. Thanks to the involvement of the media in the various territories – with dedicated articles, blogs, interviews, and reports to MATILDE’s activities – the research-action had a wider echo, reaching large sectors of public opinion in these rural and mountainous regions: public opinion that is often influenced by populist and xenophobic political propaganda, or by the spread of fake news and false data, which tend to foster distrust or even fear of foreign immigrants.

In the wake of what MATILDE proposed to do, since the project proposal, the research-action activities carried out in the different case studies have been an important opportunity to try to put back at the centre of local debates and political agendas the role of foreign immigration for the economic and social development of rural, mountain and remote European areas. At the same time, thanks also to the involvement of the media and to the numerous resonances that the activities carried out have had at the national level in the various countries involved, MATILDE’s action-research has given its contribution to the re-thematization of these marginalized and remote territories as one of the continent’s engines, on which it is certainly worth investing for the future of the entire European Union.
Thanks to the establishment of local CSWGs, and the construction of alliances and forms of territorial cooperation that include and represent the various local actors (public institutions, civil society, NGOs, private companies), we have the reasonable expectation that the results of the action-research processes conducted in the various regions will last over time, giving rise to **concrete and enduring processes of change** at the territorial level.