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William Berthomiere, Julie Fromentin, David Lessault, Bénédicte Michalon,  
Sarah Przybyl

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# The reception of exiles in rural France: national guidelines and local variations of a dispersion policy

Authors:

William Berthomière

Geographer, CNRS Director of Research, CNRS, UMR PASSAGES, Maison des Suds, 12 esplanade des Antilles, 33607 Pessac cedex; [wiliam.berthomiere@cnrs.fr](mailto:wiliam.berthomiere@cnrs.fr)

Julie Fromentin

Doctoral student in geography, Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED), 9 cours des Humanités, CS 50004, 93322 Aubervilliers cedex ; [julie.fromentin@ined.fr](mailto:julie.fromentin@ined.fr)

David Lessault

Geographer, Researcher at CNRS, UMR ESO-Angers, Maison de la Recherche Germaine Tillion, 5 bis boulevard Lavoisier, 49045 Angers cedex 1 ; [david.lessault@univ-angers.fr](mailto:david.lessault@univ-angers.fr)

Bénédicte Michalon

Geographer, Researcher at CNRS, UMR PASSAGES, Maison des Suds, 12 esplanade des Antilles, 33607 Pessac cedex ; [benedicte.michalon@cnrs.fr](mailto:benedicte.michalon@cnrs.fr)

Sarah Przybyl

Geographer, UMR MIGRINTER, MSHS, Bâtiment A5, 5 rue Théodore Lefebvre, TSA 21103, 86073 Poitiers cedex 9 ; [sarah.przybyl@univ-poitiers.fr](mailto:sarah.przybyl@univ-poitiers.fr)

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## **The reception of exiles in rural France: national guidelines and local variations of a dispersion policy**

**William Berthomière, Julie Fromentin, David Lessault, Bénédicte Michalon, Sarah Przybyl**

### **Abstract :**

Within the European Union, the current state of international migration in recent years has turned non-metropolitan areas into key receiving places. In France, the dismantling of the Calais slum at the end of 2016 revealed a policy of dispersal relative to asylum seekers, established by authorities in a situation of emergency. Across France, the hasty opening of dedicated centres has brought to the fore localities previously little concerned by migration issues. Based on surveys conducted in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Occitanie regions, as well as the analysis of quantitative data, this article provides a geographical analysis of the dispersion of asylum seekers in rural areas. It forms part of the larger CAMIGRI research programme that, since 2016, has studied change in the French countryside within the dynamics of international migration. The programme aims to document and understand the diversity of social situations and spatial configurations that shape French rural territories, particularly those involved in the reception of exiles.

Keywords: exiles, rural areas, reception policies, citizen mobilisations, France

## The reception of exiles in rural France: national guidelines and local variations of a dispersion policy

William Berthomière, Julie Fromentin, David Lessault, Bénédicte Michalon, Sarah Przybyl

In a January 2016 memo to regional and departmental prefects, the Minister of the Interior detailed the principles and procedures for the 'Regional reception programmes for asylum seekers' (*Schéma régional d'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et réfugiés*, SRADAR). These were put into place by the French State with the intention of 'ensuring a better territorial distribution of the accommodation offer dedicated to asylum seekers'. At the same time, in successive operations to dismantle the Calais 'jungle' in 2015 and 2016, dozens of buses were hired to transport those who had accepted the State's offer to stay in one of the many Reception and Orientation Centres (*Centres d'accueil et d'orientation* - CAO) hastily opened across the country. People were thus moved from the north of France to remote locations outside the major cities. The contours of a decentralised asylum geography were thus reinforced, including in areas that had previously remained marginal in the reception of exiles (Gourdeau, 2018).

This policy of dispersing accommodation facilities, and consequently the exiles, is neither new nor unique to France. The institutionalisation of the reception initiative in the mid-1970s was based, from the outset, on a dual principle of centralising and dispersing accommodation centres across the country, guided by two criteria: foreign population density and the economic situation of the area concerned (Masse, 2001). From the outset, rural communes were thus included in the reception of refugees, particularly those from Indochina (Simon-Barouh, 1989). Developments of the initiative over the following decades retained this principle, with national distribution being coupled in the 2000s with a redistribution at the departmental and then regional level (Bonerandi, 2008).

In doing so, France adopted an approach already in use in other countries, such as in Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War to welcome members of German minorities from Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and again in 1974 for the reception of asylum seekers (Boswell, 2003). This tactic then spread across the European continent (Robinson et al., 2003). During the same period, Great Britain developed a mechanism for the voluntary distribution of a proportion of asylum seekers; the latter was made compulsory and extended to all asylum seekers in 1999 (Dwyer and Brown, 2008). Although established in very different contexts, these national measures converged around a leitmotiv, that of 'burden sharing', or the distribution of the financial, social and symbolic 'costs' of receiving asylum seekers and refugees within a given national territory. Such concerns similarly emerged at the European level in the early 1990s over how to distribute asylum seekers between Member States (Boswell, 2003). Since the mid-2010s, the so-called 'relocation' mechanism has rekindled this discussion and highlighted the neoliberal character of the transformations underway in reception management: delegation of asylum administration, increasing private sector calls for tender, cost pressures in assisting requestors, etc. (Novak, 2019; Aquilina and Bugnot, 2017).

Based on qualitative investigations conducted over a large area of southwest France and the analysis of quantitative databases, this article examines the distribution of exiles in rural areas. It seeks to understand the impact of a policy of territorial distribution on the care of exiles and citizen engagement in rural

communes. This effort forms part of the larger CAMIGRI programme that, since 2016, has studied change in the French countryside within the dynamics of international migration. The programme aims to document and understand the diversity of exile reception modalities within rural territories. What role do rural areas play in the national reception system for this population? How are asylum seekers and refugees received and settled in the countryside? Who are the actors involved and how does institutional assistance articulate with the actions of an increasing number of volunteer groups?

The first part of the article provides a geographical and multi-scalar analysis of institutional accommodation mechanisms where the latter are described and mapped at the national level (see Methodological Box 1). The multiplication of structures conceived to accommodate these populations has gone hand in hand with their increasing spatial dispersion across the country, particularly in rural areas. The analysis sheds light on the place of the French system in the larger European context, where national policies on reception in rural areas remain largely undocumented and difficult to compare (Proietti and Veneri, 2019). Based on two case studies, one in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region and the other in Occitanie, we then extend the study to the local level, revealing the diversity of reception conditions for exiles in the French countryside (see Maps 1a and 1b).<sup>1</sup> These vary according to the characteristics of the territory, the positioning of the municipalities, their modalities of cooperation with other social actors, presence of a more or less dense network of associations and the extent of their familiarity with exile assistance practices. The second part of the article delves deeper into the local social dynamics generated by the arrival of exiles. The national policy of dispersal has in fact given rise to numerous citizen mobilisations that interact in various ways with public action. Following the three main stages of the administrative and residential trajectory of exiles settled by public authorities in these rural areas, our analysis reveals the necessary complementarities established between social work and activist effort to ensure a fair treatment of exiles in the administration of their asylum claims.

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<sup>1</sup> These maps showing the regional distribution of exiled populations are based on data from different structures within the national asylum system: reception centres for asylum seekers (CADA), temporary reception and asylum service (AT-SA), emergency accommodation for asylum seekers (HUDA), reception and accommodation programme for asylum seekers (PRAHDA), reception and orientation centre (CAO), emergency accommodation centre for migrants (CHUM) and temporary accommodation centre (CPH).

## Methodological Box 1: Which statistical sources for the geographical study of exiles in France?

The study of the spatial distribution of exiled populations across the French territory is hindered by the availability of and access to geo-localised data sources, which are both rare and fragmented. The population census does not, for example, count asylum seekers and refugees. While it does record reception facilities, these are included in the broader category of 'communities' (*communautés*), thus making it impossible to assess the distribution of exiles in France using this source. As requests made to the relevant institutions for data on individual locations have thus far gone unanswered, here we use entry through the accommodation structures. For 1999, we employ data from a circular on admission procedures to the National Reception System (*Dispositif national d'accueil – DNA*).<sup>2</sup> For 2017 and 2019, we make use of DNA information provided by the French Immigration and Integration Office (*Office français de l'immigration et de l'intégration - OFII*) to the French NGO La Cimade, which includes the commune location of each centre and its reception capacity.<sup>3</sup>

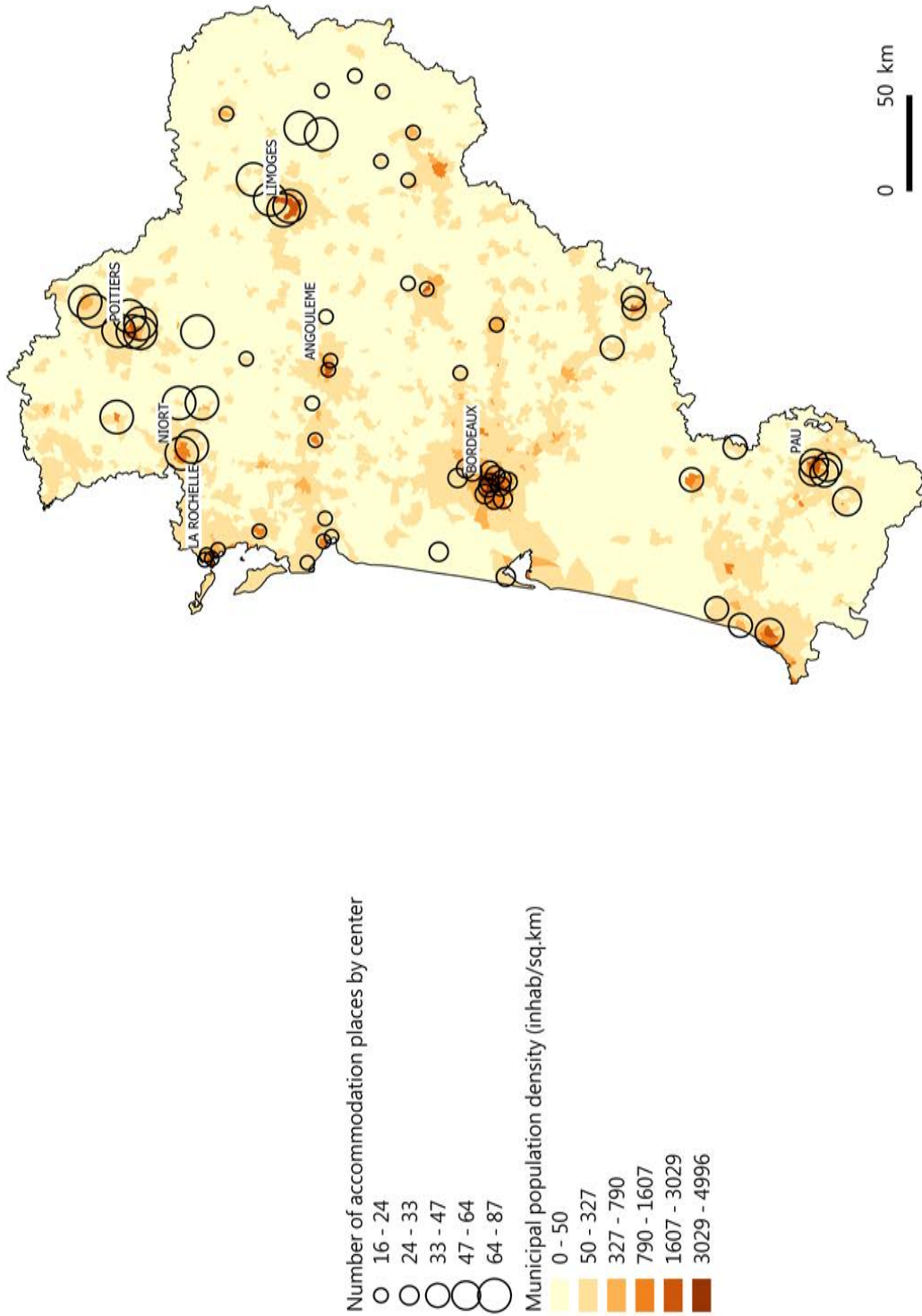
To qualify rural areas, we use a density criterion applied to the 2012 typology of living areas. A living area can be defined as the smallest territory in which the inhabitants have access to the most common services and facilities. This statistical breakdown allows to focus on areas that are not densely populated and places the question of accessibility at the heart of the analysis; it is thus a particularly relevant subdivision for analysing the establishment of accommodation structures in rural areas (INSEE, 2012). To distinguish between rural and urban living areas, we use the INSEE communal density grid aggregated at the living area level, which distinguishes between four types of areas: densely populated, intermediate density, low density and very low-density (INSEE, 2015a and 2015b). This distinction means we can explore the reception situation outside the large cities, while also differentiating between relatively dense peri-urban places or those polarised by small towns (intermediate-density living areas) and places made up of villages or small rural communes (low density and very low-density living areas).

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<sup>2</sup> Circular DPM/CI 3 No. 99-399 of 8 July 1999 on procedures for admission to the national reception system (DNA) for refugees and asylum seekers, [online]. URL: <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/fichiers/bo/1999/99-31/a0312137.htm>

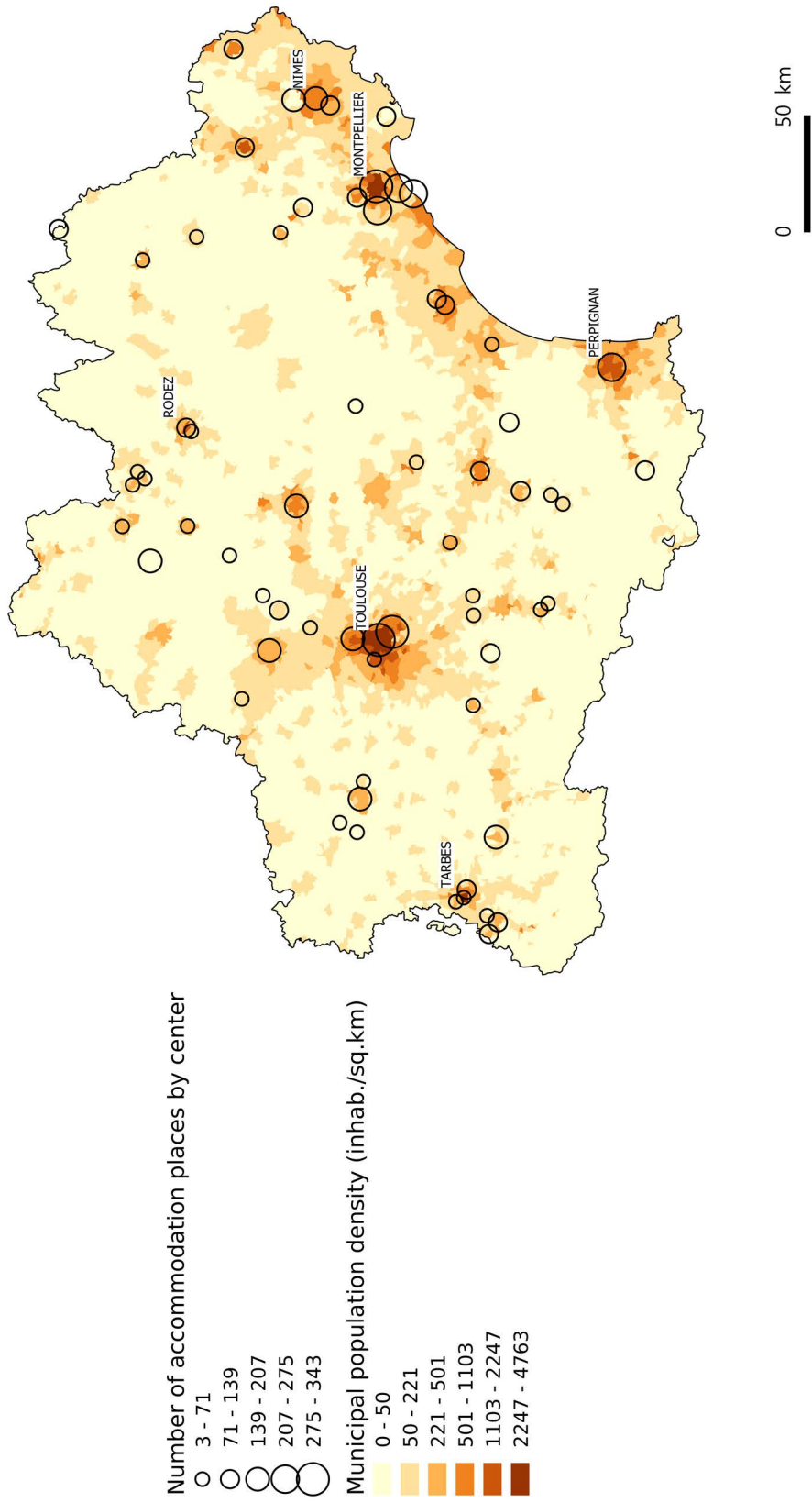
<sup>3</sup> We are very grateful to Gérard Sadik (La Cimade) and Olivier Clochard (Migrinter) for providing this information.

Map 1a: The population in Nouvelle-Aquitaine and the distribution of the National Reception System\* by commune in 2017



\* including CADA, AT-SA, HUDA, CAO, CHUM and CPH  
Sources : La Cimade, IGN. Map by A. Pedron and F. Penot with QGIS, 2019

Map 1b: The population in Occitanie and the distribution of the National Reception System\* by commune in 2017



\* including CADA, AT-SA, HUDA, PRAHDA, CAO, CHUM and CPH.  
Sources : La Cimade, IGN. Map by A. Pedron and F. Penot with QGIS, 2019



# The National Reception System (*Dispositif National d'Accueil - DNA*) for exiles: a policy of territorial dispersion

Initially managed by associations, the accommodation of exiles became a government prerogative in 1975 (Masse, 2001). This domain of State intervention was expanded in 1991 with the creation of Accommodation Centres for Asylum Seekers (CADA - *centres d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile*), distinct from the Temporary Housing Centres (CPH - *centre provisoire d'hébergement*<sup>4</sup>) that were reserved for people who had obtained protection from the State. Since then, the initiative has been somewhat irregularly deployed, though it has always been based on the same guiding principle: namely, that of countering a concentration of exiles in a few urban areas. This has been attempted through a policy of accommodation structure dispersal across mainland France—the aim being to 'equalise' the situation between areas. The State therefore has, in theory, a means of influencing the distribution of exiles, notably through the reception system, though the limits of the latter have been constantly highlighted in its successive reforms. It is through the reconstruction and analysis of this policy that we identify the place conferred to rural areas.

## Mobilising all the departmental and regional territories

From the outset, the initiative was only able to accommodate a proportion of asylum seekers and refugees. Though, the 1990s saw a doubling of the number of available places (1,829 in 1992, 3,781 in 1999<sup>5</sup>). For the most part, these new places were created in buildings previously used for other purposes.

The rise in the annual number of asylum applications and the considerable lengthening of the time needed to process claims increased the duration of stays in the centres. Meanwhile, the share of exiles who could not be accommodated grew steadily over the years. From the 1990s on, the development of the system has therefore always been closely intertwined with outside accommodation and the time needed for the administrative procedures.

A first response to this situation was given in the early 2000s with the steady opening of new centres 'in line with the political will for a more balanced distribution of CADA places across the country'.<sup>6</sup> By 2003, all

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<sup>4</sup> For details on the types of structures, see the typology established by La Cimade (2019), '*Typologie des dispositifs d'hébergements des personnes migrantes*, [In French; online]. URL: [https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Typologie\\_hebergement\\_migrants\\_Cimade.pdf](https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Typologie_hebergement_migrants_Cimade.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Court of Auditors (2000) *Rapport au président de la République suivi des réponses des administrations, collectivités, organismes et entreprises*, [online]. URL: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/24533-cour-des-comptesrapport-au-president-republique-suivi-des-reponses-2000>

<sup>6</sup> Circular DPM/ACI 3 No. 2003-605 of 19 December 2003 on the decentralisation of the planning of CADA places at the regional level and the management of admissions to CADA, p. 2, [online]. URL: <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/fichiers/bo/2004/04-12/a0120984.htm>

metropolitan departments, with the exception of two, had CADAs. The State, however, continued to create places, introducing a procedure of regionalisation of asylum that included the planning of future places.

The number of CADA spots continued to increase in the following years, quadrupling between 2001 and 2011, from 5,283 to 21,410 places.<sup>7</sup> By 2012, CADAs had been established in all the metropolitan departments.<sup>8</sup> Yet, issues of an insufficient number of places and the mismatch between the location of the exiles and that of the reception centres persisted. The regionalisation of applications for residence from asylum seekers also had the effect of concentrating requestors in the main towns of the region, which was not sufficiently counterbalanced by the principle of distributing applicants among the CADAs of the same region.<sup>9</sup>

The notion of reinforced central management subsequently emerged. The administration saw this as a way to strengthen the reception initiative, once again with the aim of achieving a 'rebalancing' between departments and regions.<sup>10</sup> Above all, the State was to implement a more 'proactive' distribution policy, which would henceforth focus on individuals and not only on accommodation structures—a practice long in force in other European countries, including Germany. This would make 'reorientation' an integral part of State provision.

The main working principles outlined here were finally put into law in the mid-2010s.<sup>11</sup> In 2016, the implementation of a national reception system for asylum seekers, based on quantified objectives for the development of CADA accommodations by metropolitan region, was announced.<sup>12</sup> It was subdivided into regional plans for the reception of asylum seekers drawn up by the prefectures. The distribution of accommodation facilities took into account criteria such as the 'vitality of rural places (shops, schools, etc.)', 'accommodation accessibility, particularly in terms of public transport networks' and 'housing opportunities'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> OFII (April 2013) *Rapport IGF, IGA, IGAS* [extract].

<sup>8</sup> IGF, IGA, IGAS (avril 2013) Report on accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers (*Rapport sur l'hébergement et la prise en charge financière des demandeurs d'asile*), Annexe II, p. 5; Annexe III, pp. 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> National Assembly (April 2014) Information report on the evaluation of the reception policy for asylum seekers (*Rapport d'information sur l'évaluation de la politique d'accueil des demandeurs d'asile*), 164 p.

<sup>10</sup> IGF, IGA, IGAS (avril 2013), *op.cit.*, Annexe II, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> The so-called 'directive' exile guideline was implemented in Law No. 2018 778 of 10 September for a well-managed immigration, an effective right of asylum and a successful integration (*pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d'asile effectif et une intégration réussie*) and by Decree No. 2018 1159 of 14 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of the Interior (25 January 2016) Information on regional reception schemes for asylum seekers, 3 p. + annexes.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

The two regions studied here adapted these broad guidelines somewhat differently. Occitanie, created in 2016 by the union of Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées, sought to harmonise accommodation capacities between the departments of the former regions. Meanwhile, in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the goals have been more demographically based, with a marked orientation towards the less densely populated departments of the region. The 'Regional reception programmes for asylum seekers' (*Schéma régional d'accueil des demandeurs d'asile et réfugiés* - SRADAR) also call for consideration to be given to service provision. Thus, in Occitanie, the proximity of health establishments and airports is a criterion for the development of the initiative.

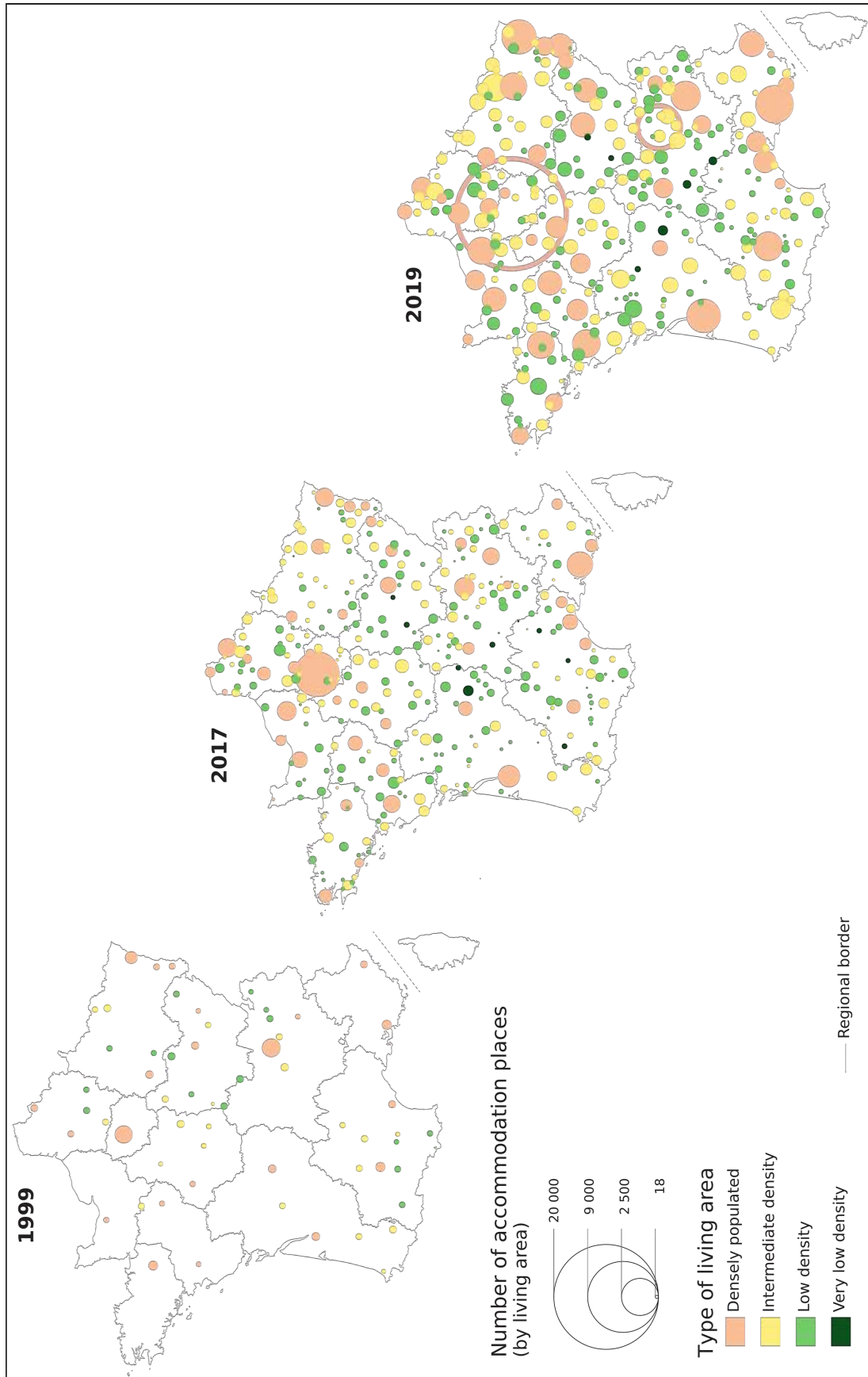
In the context of rushed accommodation openings, the availability of housing, notably that owned by the State, has been a determining factor. A functional approach to space thus emerges, where the evaluation of resources favouring the socio-economic and social inclusion of these accommodation structures seems to be of secondary importance.

## A recent roll-out of the DNA in sparsely populated, rural and peri-urban areas

The French government's policy of deployment of accommodation for exiles since the 1990s remains somewhat difficult to understand in concrete terms (see Methodological Box 1). The use of data on the location of the various facilities at the commune level and their accommodation capacity in 1999, 2017 and 2019 nevertheless allows us to assess the most recent dynamics and compare them with the state of the system in the late 1990s (Map 2).

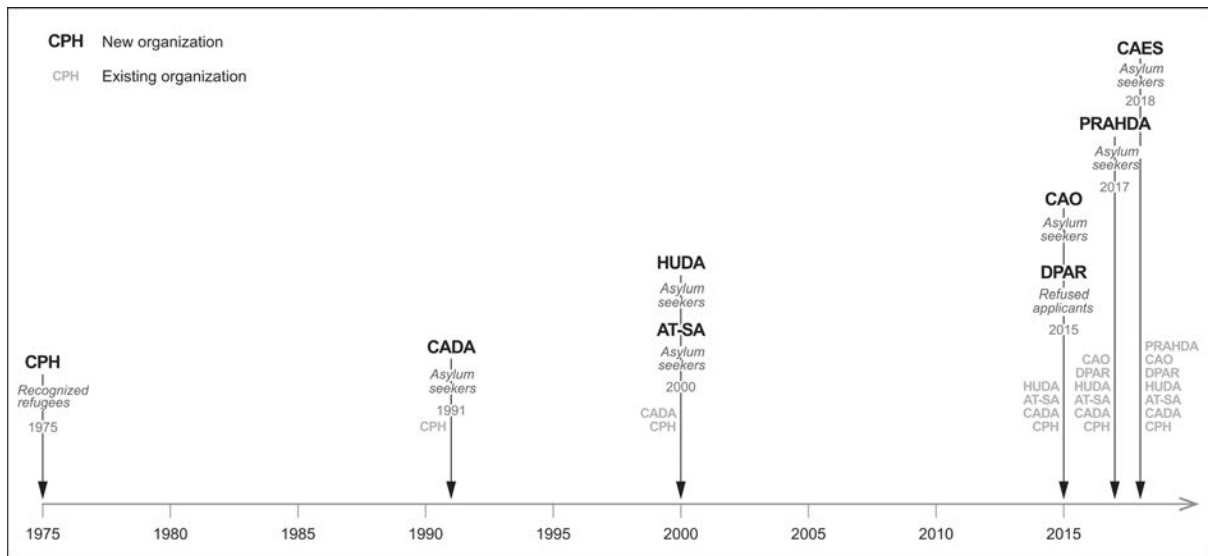
There are notable regional differences in the distribution of the DNA facilities. In 1999, the system was mainly deployed in the south-west of France and in the north-eastern half of the country. Rural and peri-urban areas were essential to its diffusion. Two thirds of the living areas with accommodation infrastructure were of intermediate or low density, located particularly in the aforementioned areas. Although the large cities have greater accommodation capacity, the dispersion of the facilities beyond the major metropolises has been evident since the late 1990s. Moreover, the deployment of the system has been based on two logics: increasing reception capacities in already equipped territories and creating structures in new areas. Thus, between 1999 and 2017, the share of densely populated living areas with at least one facility doubled up to 96%, while the share of intermediate density or (very) low density areas rose from 2% in 1999 to 19% in 2017. Thus, in 2017, half of the living areas with infrastructure(s) were of low density, and one third were of intermediate density. During the 2000s and 2010s, the system was therefore largely deployed in peri-urban and rural areas. The more recent period, between 2017 and 2019, was characterized more by an increase in reception capacities in living areas that already had facilities—notably linked to the diversification of the types of infrastructure (Figure 1)—than by the creation of structures in new areas. While urban centres with more than 200,000 inhabitants were particularly mobilised in this perspective, there was also a significant increase in the reception capacity of extra-urban living areas.

Map 2: Evolution of the spatial distribution of the National Reception System between 1999 and 2019 according to the type of living area



Sources: OFII, La Cimade. Construction: Logiciel R, O. Pissot, CAMIGRI Project, 2019.

Figure 1: Diversification of accommodation facilities connected to the DNA



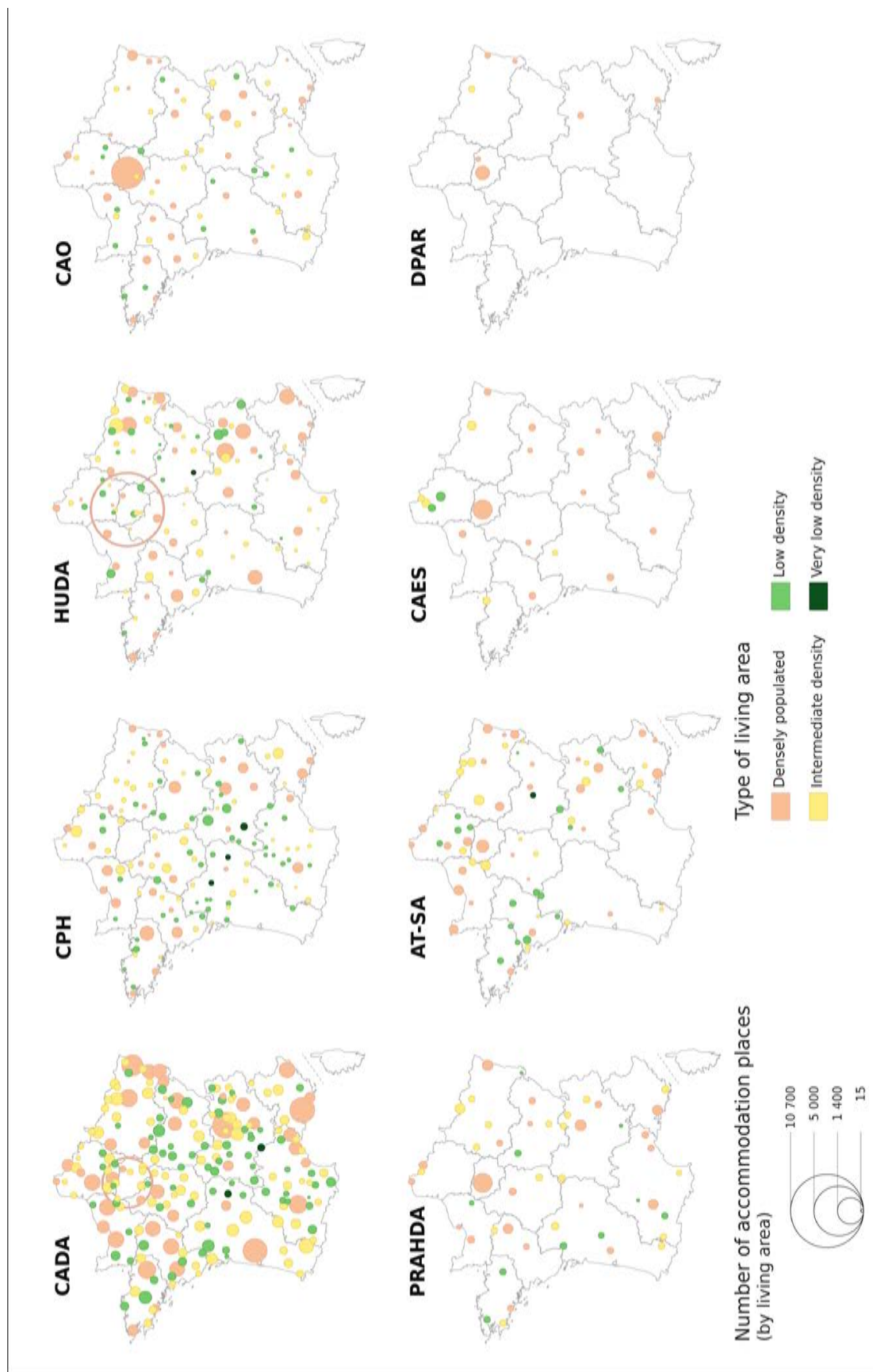
Source: Code of Entry and Residence of Foreigners and the Right to Asylum (*Code de l'entrée et du séjour des étrangers et du droit d'asile - CESEDA*). Construction: O. Pissot, 2019.

The evolution of the National Reception System since the end of the 1990s seems to have been guided by a logic of distribution across the country, reflected in a strong dispersion of accommodation facilities between regions and between types of areas. Although this distribution is already long-standing, the recent increase in accommodation centres has led to spatial distributions differentiated by type of structure and has reinforced the role of rural and peri-urban areas as territories favoured by the policy of decentralisation at the national level (Map 3).

In 2019, the Reception and Administrative Situation Examination Centres (*centre d'accueil et d'examen de situation administrative - CAES*) and Preparation for Return Facilities (*dispositif de préparation au retour - DPARs*) were characterized by their predominantly urban placement. Recent in nature and having a transit function towards other structures or other countries, they are mainly found in large conurbations, with the exception of the Calais area for the CAES. The other types of facilities are less urban-centric. For example, many Temporary Reception – Asylum Service centres (*Accueil temporaire – Service de l'asile - AT-SAs*)<sup>14</sup> are located in intermediate density or sparsely populated areas, generally in small towns. They are also principally found in the north of France and in the south-east; much less so in the regions of Nouvelle-Aquitaine and Occitanie.

<sup>14</sup> Following the circular of 31 December 2018 on accommodation facilities for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, the AT-SA become Emergency Accommodation for Asylum Seekers (*hébergement d'urgence pour demandeur d'asile - HUDA*) through the devolution of the management of these centres to the regional level. The transformation of AT-SA into HUDA was therefore underway in 2019.

Map 3: Spatial distribution of the different types of accommodation facilities connected to the DNA in 2019, according to living area type



Sources: OFII, La Cimade. Construction: Logiciel R, O. Pissot, 2019.

Two types of facilities stand out for their strong presence outside the major cities: Accommodation centres for asylum seekers (CADAs) and Reception and Orientation Centres (CAOs). Only 20% of living areas with CADAs and 24% of those with CAOs are densely populated. Many CADA are located in the peri-urban communes on the outskirts of the Paris and Lyon agglomerations, in small rural towns in central France and in the sparsely populated rural communes in the south-west and the Massif Central. This spatial distribution of CADAs has changed in recent years, with an increase in accommodation capacity in already covered living areas, especially outside large cities between 2015 and 2017, and then more within large conurbations between 2017 and 2019. New CADAs have also opened in living areas that did not have any, especially in Brittany, the Massif Central and Rhône-Alpes. This spatial distribution and its recent evolution reflect the long-standing policy of dispersing institutional accommodation for exiles across the country and the continuation of this trend.

The CAOs, for their part, constitute a salient example the geographical effects of the latest policies. Their mission is to disperse the exiled population from certain locations, which leads to their varied spatial distribution: they are present in every region except Île-de-France, and at the sub-regional level they are sometimes absent from regional metropolitan areas (e.g. Bordeaux, Nice). They are strongly present in rural areas: 40% of the living areas with CAOs are low-density or very low-density living areas. More precisely, these are isolated rural communes in the Limousin and Massif Central areas, and small rural villages in the centre of the country and the Pays de la Loire region. Finally, in the northern half and south-east of France, CAOs outside the major cities are mainly located in small towns in intermediate density living areas.

## Diverse local reception conditions in rural areas

Our analysis now turns to two specific study areas, chosen so as to account for the diversity of rural areas and the historical dimension of the logics and practices of exile reception in such places (see Methodological Box 2).

In Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the establishment of an emergency accommodation facility for asylum seekers (HUDA - *hébergement d'urgence pour demandeur d'asile*)<sup>15</sup> in 2015 coincided with the dismantling of the Calais 'jungle' and the dispersal movement through the DNA. It is situated in a small town in a rural and agricultural area in demographic decline, far from the main communication routes and large urban centres (one hour by car). The area struggles to keep the younger generations from leaving, whose access to employment has been diminished by the gradual closure of industrial activities since the 1980s. The HUDA is located in one of the peripheral neighbourhoods, within a 1970s suburban area. Surrounded by two buildings and on a dead-end street, the building overlooks a closed car park. The building's position and its lack of signage in the public space makes it relatively discreet. The strong media coverage of the centre's opening, by both the local and national press, thus contrasts sharply with its invisibility in the landscape.

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<sup>15</sup> Initially opened as an AT-SA (see Table 1), the status of this institution changed in 2019 following the publication of the circular of 31 December 2018 (see above).

In Occitanie, the CADA examined here, opened in a remote low mountain area, has just celebrated its twentieth anniversary and attests to a collective experience of reception over time. The demographic situation is only slightly deficient in that a migratory influx, significant since the 1970s, has compensated for the consequences of an ageing population. The area has notably been touched by various waves of ‘neo-ruralists’—often linked to social protest, particularly the civil unrest of May 1968; youth protests over the first employment contract (*contrat première embauche* – CPE) in 2006; or a more recent desire to break away from urban and consumerist lifestyles—whose successive arrivals have contributed to diversifying local socio-professional profiles, economic settlement projects and lifestyles. It stands out for its spirit of welcoming or openness towards ‘non-native’ populations.

#### Methodological Box 2: Understanding the local dynamics of reception in contrasting rural areas

A same methodological protocol implemented in both Occitanie and Nouvelle-Aquitaine aims more to understand these exile reception centres in relation to their social environment than their functioning per se. This approach allows to identify issues linked to the socio-spatial features of rural territories and the implications of their geographical localisation for the modalities of care and, ultimately, the accessibility of specific resources needed by exiles (administrative procedures, language learning, access to healthcare especially).

In order to understand the local conditions of the areas where the accommodation facilities have been set up (e.g. demographic decline or closure of local services), we produced a statistical and socio-economic portrait for each of the reception territories.<sup>16</sup> Interviews were conducted with the mayors in order to retrace the history of the establishment of the centres and the extent of municipality involvement. We also investigated the entities in charge of managing the reception centres. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with all relevant professionals (directors, social workers). We further complemented our study of the reception centres with site visits, an analysis of the local press, and neighbourhood surveys. The impact of the local environment on the way the social mission has been carried out was systematically explored. Finally, in both of the cases studied, the presence of the exiled population has generated citizen, association and volunteer initiatives. We reconstructed these collective dynamics by monitoring association activities and identifying the networks of relations at play. Biographical interviews were also carried out with individuals involved in exile support and accompaniment.

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<sup>16</sup> See the programme's website: [www.camigri.hypotheses.org](http://www.camigri.hypotheses.org)



Table 1: CAMIGRI Surveys 2016-2020

| Actors  | Methods  | Sample  |
|---|--|---|
| Public action representatives   | Thematic interviews<br>+<br>Monitoring of the local press  | 2 elected officials (mayors)<br>1 department prefect<br>2 officials responsible for migration affairs in the prefecture |
| Accommodation facility management entities (e.g. Coalia, Adoma, France Horizon, etc.) | Indirect observations<br>+<br>Biographical interviews  | 2 accommodation centres<br>3 centre directors<br>7 social workers   |
| Activist associations and collectives   | Observation of practices and monitoring of activities<br>+<br>Individual biographical interviews | 8<br><br>24 volunteers  |

The distribution of exile reception facilities is decided at the national level after the prefectures have submitted proposals for the opening of centres formulated by the management organizations. Local elected officials are involved to varying degrees in this initial phase of the process; in some cases, they are only approached once the decision has been made. The CADA in Occitanie and the HUDA in Nouvelle-Aquitaine exemplify two distinct positions on the part of mayors regarding the opening of an accommodation facility. Though both municipalities shared the fact of having had to deal with the decision to set up an accommodation facility taken at the prefectural level, they have reacted rather differently—one by turning it into an opportunity, the other by maintaining a clear distance from this decision.

In Occitanie, the opening of the CADA served to support municipal action. The village council readily accepted the prefecture's request to transform premises initially intended to be a residence for young workers (*Foyer de jeunes travailleurs* - FJT). This change of use of the building was immediately seen as a way to stabilize the local population (of a just few hundred inhabitants), to maintain two important public services (the post office and the police station), and to create a few jobs. The arrival of asylum seekers has also allowed the school to expand thanks to the opening of an additional class. In the general mechanism of accommodation structure dispersion, the orienting of families towards this centre has thus become a priority in the support provided by the city council, as well as in the action of the centre's professionals. Furthermore, the centre's location in a rural environment is perceived by all of our interlocutors as posing particular challenges that only family life would allow to mitigate.

The mayor's support has continued beyond the initial establishment of the CADA to become a common theme in municipal policy and social work. He reports being in 'permanent' contact with the centre's management and his interventions are linked to the rural context. For example, the village council has, on occasion, been involved in rehousing people who have reached the end of their stay at the CADA. It also participates in the transport system for asylum seekers, i.e. school pick-up, weekly shuttles to larger communes for everyday purchases. Furthermore, an agreement has been signed for use of the municipal bus, with funding shared between the village council and the CADA management organization.

In Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the distancing on the part of the mayor can in part be explained by his quasi-accidental knowledge of the decision to open the centre. The municipality was planning to create a new leisure centre on premises previously used to accommodate adult vocational training (AFPA- *Agence nationale pour la formation professionnelle des adultes*). After having informed the sub-prefect of this project, the latter told him that the centre had just been selected for the opening of an accommodation facility for asylum seekers. Beyond the inconvenience for the municipal team, this decision was far from universally supported by the local population. During the public information meeting, led by the mayor and the sub-prefect, many media outlets reported the tensions and controversies caused by this announcement. The mayor declared to the press that he 'would not necessarily have been in favour of the creation of an accommodation centre for asylum seekers', and that he would expect 'the favour to be returned' with the State being 'attentive to the town and its requests'.<sup>17</sup>

This event occurred in a socio-political context that was not very favourable to the arrival of foreign populations. Initial hostility to the opening of the centre was expressed through the distribution of leaflets in the neighbourhood and a demonstration organised by the far-right political movement, Génération Identitaire, at the doorstep of the accommodation centre. At the initiative of a member of The Republicans (a liberal-conservative political party), a petition was supported by many people, and reported in the national media. Yet, as we shall see, beyond these initial reactions, the gradual arrival of the exiles has, on the contrary, aroused a surge of solidarity, partially formed by the local associative fabric.

Since the opening of the centre, the municipality has shown a certain reserve. The three changes in management that HUDA has undergone since 2015 have no doubt made forging strong linkages a challenge. In contrast to the situation studied in Occitanie, the establishment of the centre has been marginal in terms of the small town's demographic dynamics (just over 1% of the total population). The potential spillover effects on local development have also been perceived as more limited. According to the mayor, the integration of the centre and its residents into local life is the responsibility of the voluntary sector. The municipality has thus limited its support to the allocation of additional resources to the French charity, Restos du cœur. At the end of 2019, it acceded to a request from the exile solidarity collective, created upon the opening of the centre, allowing it to use municipal premises to carry out its activities. Between its moderate support for associations and its mission to maintain order in the neighbourhood

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<sup>17</sup> Source: local press, 21 June 2015.

where the centre is located, the municipal team keeps a close eye on the social dynamics generated by the reception facility.

## Supporting exiled populations in rural areas: towards a local convergence of spheres of action?

The distribution of asylum seekers among all the reception facilities of the DNA is the responsibility of the French Immigration and Integration Office (*Office français de l'immigration et de l'intégration* - OFII), and is carried out at two levels, national and regional.<sup>18</sup> This dispersal dynamic goes beyond the territorial issues raised by the redistribution of asylum seekers engineered by the authorities. The institutional mechanisms rely in particular on the organizations that manage these centres and indirectly on local activist groups. The commitment to solidarity has above all a pragmatic dimension aimed at minimising the isolation of exiles and facilitating the full exercise of their rights. Indeed, how could rural territories, characterised by increasingly reduced accessibility to government services and growing remoteness from decision-making centres (Aquilina and Bugnot, 2017; Lethbridge, 2017), constitute a reception space without the mobilization of local experiences and know-how? The policy of dispersing the asylum demand also raises the issue of the social isolation of exiles. The latter has in fact a considerable impact on their accompaniment, which is characterised by interdependencies between social work and voluntary support. We identify three moments in which the relationship between these two is particularly strong—arrival, waiting, and then leaving the facilities—and which show how the localisation in the rural context is conceptualised by the actors involved in supporting exiles.

### Managing reception in a rural context

The rhythms of the DNA, punctuated by the placement and displacement of exiles, highlights the multiple conditions of presence in the rural setting. Reception in these facilities is generally accompanied by an unawareness on the part of asylum seekers as to their place of arrival. They cannot, in fact, choose the latter, and the rural location of certain facilities seems at first to be little to their liking, or even feared by some due to the social isolation it would generate. Location is therefore generally concealed by the OFII, and constitutes a major issue when social workers take over.

The social workers make initial contact in local train stations where new residents arrive, often after having stayed temporarily in a large city (Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, etc.). Once they have reached the accommodation facility, they are helped to settle in. The first steps follow a formalized reception protocol. In both Occitanie and Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the social workers described their activities to us as: preparing the newcomers' room, issuing a residence contract in the applicants' native language and putting together an arrival kit including basic necessities (hygiene, food, etc.). The presentation of the team and a brief welcome meeting

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<sup>18</sup> Following the breakdown of the OFII's territorial divisions.

with the structure's management are also steps in the reception process that aim to help the exiles identify the available human and material resources.

The local context of reception plays a determinant role in arrival dynamics. In Occitanie, this first stage is crucial. Social workers must deal with the sometimes marked anxiety and loss of reference points of new arrivals who previously stayed in distant French regions and are rarely aware that they would be housed in a village far from any major urban centre. The first step in the support process is thus to build trust and to highlight the advantages of the facility. This is quickly taken over by the residents already present, who provide a more informal welcome and integrate the new arrivals into community life. The impossibility of shopping for food on site is typically compensated for by a first meal prepared by the co-residents, who then re-explain to the newcomers the organization of daily life in the village.

In the case of this CADA, reception is also facilitated by a long-established, dense associative network, reinforced by the events of 2015. The intervention of numerous activist groups during the waiting period, and particularly on weekends, helps the new arrivals to find their bearings. For families, the essential role played the school in the settlement process also comprises the extracurricular activities offered there.

While observations revealed a supportive environment in Occitanie due to the long history of ties forged locally with activist groups, at the HUDA, social workers initially faced hostility from some of the population. In an interview with the previous director of the accommodation facility, she recalled, based on her experience in several reception structures, that asylum 'always creates a stir in the countryside'. Such tensions should be considered not only in the light of local political colouring, but also of the history of places in which a tradition of reception could be forged. Today, in addition to the know-how deployed by social sector professionals, reception cannot be managed without the support of local associations.

In Nouvelle-Aquitaine, the roll out of the HUDA immediately led to the search for local resources to meet the needs of asylum seekers and to partly compensate for the isolation of the centre. Learning French quickly emerged as an activity conducive to the socio-spatial integration of asylum seekers. A local association with a solid reputation in fighting illiteracy for some thirty years was among the first to welcome residents of the centre. Thanks to the combined action of residents showing their solidarity with these new arrivals, and the centre's partner organizations (the French employment agency (Pôle emploi), the French Red Cross, Amnesty International, etc.), an increasing number of asylum seekers requested the services of the association. Learning was motivated by a desire to acquire the basics of the French language as well as an interest in easing the burden of waiting,<sup>19</sup> enhanced by feelings of isolation (Kobelinsky, 2010).

The arrival of this different profile of individuals has impacted the association in several ways. On a functional level, it has necessarily had to account for this new situation and partly reframe its objectives around more targeted actions (French courses, daily life in France, administrative procedures). On a

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<sup>19</sup> Asylum seeker average length of stay in an accommodation facility was 423 days in 2017, with a regional gradient ranging from 379 for Occitanie to 514 days for Pays de la Loire (Forum Réfugiés and Cosi, 2018: 136).

structural level, the team has taken on a salaried individual on a subsidized contract, the sustainability of which depends on regularly negotiated regional funding. The official establishment in 2016 of the large region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine through the merging of three smaller regions has reinforced the peripheral position of our study area. In fact, the association has found it increasingly difficult to adapt its missions to the broader regional guidelines. Furthermore, the development of an appropriate reception is entangled in a game of territorial scales, where local asylum-seeker issues do not always align with the larger budgeting concerns of the new region.

Locally, the associative sector is a precious source of support and the mobilization of the population has rallied new energy. The opening of the HUDA and the arrival of asylum seekers have led many inhabitants to volunteer to give French lessons. As opposed to the global action of the afore-mentioned association, this group has largely mobilized solely in favour of asylum seekers and is, as perhaps expected, composed mostly of retirees, sometimes involved for the first time in the associative sector. That said, others have contributed their professional skills, acquired in the social or medical sector.

Today, such support underpins the actions of the social workers. Some of the association's volunteers have, moreover, developed a mission to accompany asylum seekers in the framework of appeal procedures. In taking on in this particularly time-consuming and technical administrative aspect of the asylum-seeker process, they act as assistants to the social workers. While a necessary support for the formulation of appeals for asylum seekers, it also creates a certain degree of tension. A confrontation of professional and activist opinions can be delicate in the small social framework of the town. Talk of these tensions is listened to attentively by the municipality, as activist engagement, such as the decision to welcome individuals who have been refused asylum into their homes, places the elected officials in unprecedented situations.

National dispersion therefore entails social assistance and a management of reception, where the ad hoc responses set forth by associative mobilizations underline the limits of a governmental policy deployed in territories where resources must be contrived to manage the arrival of exiles and their settling in, as well as the repercussions on local life.

## Administering the wait for a decision on refugee claims in rural areas

After the arrival and settlement of the exiles, the management of daily life and administrative procedures in ill-equipped and underserved rural areas prolongs the collaboration between social workers and volunteers. Indeed, the rural context has important repercussions in terms of the work of professionals and the support provided by volunteers. It requires a strong involvement in the management not only of the exiles' mobility, but also that of the social workers and professionals outside the centres. The wait for decisions on refugee claims and its administration primarily revolve around this issue.

*'What is typical here is the physical accompaniment. We're a bit like taxis. Surely, you won't find this in city'. (Interview, 19 February 2019)*

In this CADA, located in a village in Occitanie without access to public transportation and with no grocery store, all daily life activities and monitoring of the asylum procedure require travel. However, the vast

majority of the people housed do not have their own means of transport. Though the centre has two minibuses and a convention with the village council to facilitate making trips, these means are still insufficient, to the point that the residents who do have a vehicle are encouraged to carpool with other residents.

In 2015, the managing organization, which was also running a HUDA in a neighbouring commune, requested that this second structure be transformed into a CADA. Approval of the request means that the enlarged CADA is now located in two places. The second commune is better equipped in terms of shops and services. A system of shuttles running multiple times a day provided by the social workers was set up to 'guarantee equity between the residents'.<sup>20</sup> Trips for shopping and humanitarian services are scheduled according to a weekly schedule, or even monthly if the dates are further away.<sup>21</sup> A time schedule of administrative and medical appointments is drawn up every week at a team meeting, which allows to account for the individual needs of the residents and allocate vehicles among the social workers. Managing the exiles' mobility is therefore central to the centre's activities, both in terms of meeting the needs of the residents and the practices of the professionals.

In the small town in Nouvelle-Aquitaine hosting the HUDA, access to local services and leisure activities is easier. Everyday life can be managed, to some extent, on foot or by bicycle. The donations, loans and free repairs of bicycles offered by volunteers facilitate these local mobilities. However, access to medical care, administrative procedures or social visits require a car or bus journey to the nearest main towns, between 50 and 100 kilometres away. At this distance, and even if they are sometimes taken care of by charitable associations, the cost of transportation is high and the trips onerous. Autonomous travel is largely conditioned by language skills, knowledge of the transport system and the ways in which administrations or health care structures operate.

The issue of mobility also very directly interferes with the practice of social work, as one such professional explained:

*'Sometimes it's a choice to accompany the family for whom you are the referent, sometimes it's a choice not to accompany them and have someone else do it. And this is really interesting, it's sort of one of the particularities. We don't just do interviews in the office, which is a somewhat formal setting, we also sometimes do very informal interviews in the car and this also allows us to get to know all the families a bit [...]. With the crazy turnover we have now, it sometimes helps us'.*  
(Interview, 19 February 2019)

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, 19 February 2019.

<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, there are regularly scheduled visits to the centre on the part of certain medical workers (psychologist, midwife and nurse).

This comment shows to the extent to which the movements of the housed exiles go beyond the simple problem of transport organisation. It furthermore reflects certain changes in social work with asylum seekers: the so-called policy of ‘comprehensive support’ (*accompagnement global*),<sup>22</sup> a principle of ‘self-empowerment’ of the ‘sheltered’, and the reduction in the number of management staff.

Travel accompaniment represents the equivalent of one day's work per week for each of the CADA's social workers; hours seemingly lost for the social and legal support that form part of the establishment's mandate. Yet, most of our interlocutors valued the hours spent in transport. Travelling offers a particular time-space to establish a relationship of trust. ‘Comprehensive’ assistance thus makes the most of the need to transport exiles to support asylum claim applications.

These trips, which bring exiles and professionals together, also contribute to defining the limits of social work. Not all the travel requests made are accepted. Social workers also see these trips as influencing the empowerment of the ‘beneficiaries’. According to them, the difficulties of travel force ‘people into a situation of dependence’.<sup>23</sup> The establishment of a reception facility in a rural area thus deprives, in their view, the exiles of some of their autonomy.

The functioning of the managing organizations can also have an impact on the social work and tasks of the personnel. The geographical scattering of the facilities or housing dedicated to reception in rural areas has the effect of dispersing the activity of professionals. In the two establishments studied here, the directors are responsible for two to four other structures, which forces them to divide their work hours and presence, to travel extensively and to delegate certain tasks to social workers. The administrative management of the centres in rural areas is all the more complicated due to their isolation, which makes it difficult to attract staff. Indeed, applications to job openings are few, and contracts are frequently broken at the initiative of the employees.

At the HUDA, this difficulty is strongly felt due to the low number of social workers (three) relative to the maximum capacity of reception (ninety people). The combination of the small staff and the geographical isolation of the centre has contributed to transforming local solidarity into a form of delegation of responsibility for trips related to the administration of asylum.

Indeed, a very large portion of the numerous trips to government services or nearby hospitals depend on the assistance provided by local associations. The association formed at the time of the HUDA's creation now spends half of its budget on the transport of residents. Most requests for transportation are referred by social workers who ask for volunteers after having established an order of ‘priority’. During association meetings, a call is often made for more availability on the part of volunteers to take on these trips. This is,

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<sup>22</sup> After having targeted the work of social service providers by ‘sectors’ according to their expertise, the policy of ‘comprehensive support’ now consists of a ‘referent’ taking charge of an asylum seeker's entire case. The CADA surveyed has been operating under ‘comprehensive support’ since 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, 19 February 2019.

in fact, the main request made to the association by the centre's managing organization. Yet, this investment requires a certain reactivity according to more or less urgent needs and close cooperation between the centre's professionals and the volunteers. Moreover, this transportation 'mission' was underestimated or even ignored by most of the volunteers, who thought they would primarily engage in local activities more easily accommodated in their daily schedules. The overload generated by this task has ended up limiting the number of volunteers. Less than a quarter of the association's volunteers are involved in travel support. Though they too are learning to value these moments of togetherness. Each administrative appointment is an opportunity for a prior exchange with a competent volunteer about the purpose and objective of the latter and then for discussions while on the road. Without this (hard-to-implement) support, the administration of asylum would be impossible. Indeed, in these rural areas, the absence or inadequacy of public transport in terms of meeting the time constraints of administrative summons can only be mitigated by the engagement of volunteers.

## Negotiating the exit: 'keeping' exiles?

While the government's decision to settle asylum seekers in the countryside was notably driven by the availability of suitable buildings, at the local level, the possibility that they might stay long term seems to have encouraged certain communes to engage in their reception. For some elected officials, the settlement of exiles represents an opportunity for demographic and economic revitalization. That said, exit from the accommodation facility is a delicate phase. It requires, in fact, access to independent housing and/or employment. Once again, in the rural areas studied here, support for this step in the exiles' journey involves as close collaboration between social workers and volunteers.

Once a person has obtained refugee status, s/he theoretically has a period of three months (once renewable) to leave the facility where s/he has been housed during the asylum application process. In practice, this exit is managed by professionals, where the possibilities of rehousing can vary. Although an effort is made to find rapid solutions, the social workers of the two facilities face a similar situation, summarized by one of the directors as: 'these people want the big city'.<sup>24</sup> One of the challenges in providing support is thus dealing with a perceived or expressed desire to settle in a large metropolis, knowing, however, that these cities have saturated social rental housing (*parc locatif social*). Social workers tend to be unable to obtain places for refugees, with waiting periods that can last for years. A part of the accompaniment is therefore devoted to explaining these difficulties and to underlining the benefits of choosing to settle instead in small and medium-sized towns in the host departments. The situation is often presented as follows to the exiting refugees: if they agree to stay in the department, they will be supported in their search for housing or even employment; if, however, they maintain their plan of moving to a distant metropolis, this same assistance cannot be extended.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, 13 March 2019.



The CADA studied in Occitanie is located in a department where access to social housing is easier than elsewhere due to the demographic decline of many communes. Solicited by the CADA's social workers, the integrated reception and orientation service (*Service intégré de l'accueil et de l'orientation* - SIAO), providers of social housing, and the family allowance fund (*Caisse d'allocations familiales* - CAF) work together to find housing for those granted protection within the legislated timeframes. The professionals emphasize the advantages of working in rural areas, where interpersonal relationships are more numerous and closer, and social networks more dynamic. Yet, the activation of professional networks assumes that the exiles agree to stay in the department. Negotiations between professionals and exiles over available housing therefore involve a reorientation of the refugees' residential paths towards the department's small and medium-sized towns. Far from unfolding only in rural communes, the geography of reception consequently connects different types of spaces.

In the HUDA, the management of places, considered to be 'poor' by the director of the centre— recall that this is the responsibility of the OFII and not that of the facilities—leads to an under-occupation of the facility. Yet this difficulty allows individuals granted protection from the French State to benefit from a certain degree of tolerance on the part of OFII with regard to the organization of their exit. The authorities allow them, in fact, to remain beyond the time limits set by law. Though this prolonged stay once again highlights social workers' difficulty in finding rapid accommodation solutions. Rehousing is hampered by access to local employment, once refugee status has been obtained. Occupational integration is a major issue here, a reminder of the importance of local conditions for the integration of refugees into the labour market (Herman and Rea, 2017). In the territory surrounding the HUDA, the agricultural sector has become a major provider of seasonal employment. In constant search of manpower for harvesting work, farmers may see refugees as an employment source. While initiatives are multiplying in neighbouring regions (Pays de la Loire and Centre-Val de Loire), employment location can represent an obstacle for beneficiaries leaving the facility. In fact, there is scarcity of places in social rental housing, and the accommodation offer rarely coincides with the places where refugees work. As one social worker explained, making a choice between housing and employment is difficult in the support process. For refugees, though employment is a barrier to exiting the facility, it is a first step in acquiring financial independence. There are rare exceptions, often used as examples by social workers and certain volunteers to emphasize that local integration is possible. For example, a former Eritrean resident of the HUDA recently obtained a permanent job as a waiter in a nearby restaurant, which now regularly calls on other people housed in the facility for temporary jobs.

Legislative requirements can also interfere with local processes of integrating asylum seekers. Illustrative to this regard is the experience of a young woman housed in the CADA in Occitanie. During the months she spent waiting for the results of the asylum application for herself and her children, she developed relationships with members of local solidarity associations and participated in voluntary activities on a farm. This dynamic social integration, co-constructed during the waiting period and through local encounters, led to a job offer in a shop a few kilometres from the CADA. She was, however, unable to accept, despite having obtained protection status, as required participation in language training courses, as

part of the ‘republican integration contract’ (*contrat d’intégration républicaine* -CIR<sup>25</sup>), combined with the distance to the training location, forced her to give up on the village where she wanted to settle.

In addition to the difficulty of reconciling housing and employment opportunities, there is also a mismatch between the accommodation offered to refugees and their expectations. Some statutory refugees refuse housing that they consider to be too small. This is interpreted as a sort of ‘caprice’ by social workers in the HUDA, which has been subject to coercive measures on the part of the OFII. The reception contracts now explain that any refusal on the part of the refugees leads to their expulsion from the facility. The reluctance expressed by some might also be interpreted as the expression of ‘oversight fatigue’. Indeed, such reactions may be a backlash to the numerous moves experienced before, during and even after the procedure, which often far from align with the individual or family aspirations of the refugees.

In order to increase awareness among asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection of the housing reality upon leaving the facility, the managing organizations have begun to work with partners specialized in finding social housing. The HUDA has asked a social partner in a nearby town within the same department to organize information sessions on access to housing. Each workshop is organized in the form of two half-days, during which information is shared not only on the local real estate context, qualifying conditions for accessing housing and available aid, but also on the pitfalls to avoid, the steps to take when entering accommodation and its budget management. According to a social worker at the HUDA, these workshops are important for at least two reasons. They show residents, who largely tend to look towards the big cities, the financial advantages and the ease of access to independent housing that they will not necessarily have elsewhere. Such sessions are also an opportunity for social workers to exchange information and practices, and thus for a wider (extra-local) mobilization of the resources and skills necessary to access independent housing.<sup>26</sup>

Though the social integration of asylum seekers may seem to be the responsibility of social workers, the situations observed in the field reveal the non-negligible role of local associations. In Occitanie, an association was created in 2014 by professionals all having (had) social activity experiences with asylum seekers; the aim being to promote encounters and exchanges between CADA residents and the local population. It was, in fact, thanks to this mediation that the young woman described above was able to volunteer for a farmer living near the CADA.

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<sup>25</sup> The signing of the CIR and therefore commitment to the Republican integration process requires foreigners to reach a proficiency in French equal to the A1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), requiring anywhere from 100 to 600 hours of French language training.

<sup>26</sup> Support for refugees who have been granted protection is today addressed by various initiatives on the part of different providers of social housing. For example, ‘as part of the national policy for the reception and integration of refugees, in 2018 Adoma developed ten follow-up services for asylum seekers who have obtained refugee status and whom Adoma rehoused in its social rental accommodations. The aim is to support them in their integration process and in the personalized projects they have developed with Adoma’s social workers to prepare for their exit towards housing’. (Source: ADOMA, 2018 *Rapport d’activités 2018*, p. 22).

In contrast, the more recent opening of the HUDA and the less dense associative network does not allow for this integration dynamic, even if things are changing. After three years of existence, interspersed with moments of tension with different senior management that succeeded one another in heading the HUDA, the local association providing assistance to migrants has begun to reflect on ways to reorient its activity towards helping with local integration.

*'Thanks to the municipal premises that we have just obtained, we could set up a permanent office for people who have just been granted refugee status and who want to settle here. We could connect with social workers to see how to help with next steps'. (Interview, 13 December 2019)*

Particularly these last few words, expressed by the head of the association, are important insofar as the workload of the social actors and the staff turnover in this facility have made it difficult to support the 'continuation projects' of beneficiaries of asylum.

In Nouvelle-Aquitaine, upon being notified that their refugee claim has been refused, rejected asylum seekers spontaneously leave the facility to go to nearby cities. It remains difficult to know their fate given the relatively recent establishment of the reception facility. That said, local initiatives modelled on 'One 100 for a 1 Roof' (*Cent pour un Toit*) schemes,<sup>27</sup> already well developed in Occitanie, highlight the opportunities that are being created in this region.

Meanwhile, the above-noted proximity of the actors in Occitanie also benefits rejected asylum seekers: the CADA is at the heart of many volunteer accommodation initiatives. The facility's long history makes it possible to incorporate rejected asylum seekers into a structured associative system, which organises their lodging through the provision of accommodation or reception in the homes of association members.<sup>28</sup> The CADA staff see searching for a place to live for rejected asylum seekers as fully falling within their remit. As soon as an asylum claim application is rejected, social workers thus contact these activist groups, or even the village council, in an effort to find a housing solution for them. This positioning is all the more clearly expressed in that it forms part of a social environment characterised by a tradition of reception (Berthomière and Imbert, 2019).

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<sup>27</sup> The 'One hundred for one' scheme was initiated by the Emmaus movement. It is based on monthly contributions from groups of 100 people meant to finance housing for those in precarious situations. It is now implemented in various regions of France, including our two study areas.

<sup>28</sup> The various interviews conducted on the issue rejected asylum seeker assistance clearly reveal that the associations are now trying to limit the number of home receptions as much as possible. Indeed, previous experiences have often proved to be complicated (undetermined duration of the stay, lack of privacy, etc.), or even painful (conflictual relations, expulsion of the families).

## Conclusion

Based on the study of two reception centres located in rural areas, this article sheds light on some of the effects of the French policy of dispersing exiles. Though rural areas have recently been mobilised by the authorities in emergency situations to move exiles out of higher concentration areas (Calais, Paris), this dynamic of dispersal towards the countryside is actually much older. It dates back to the 1970s, was institutionalised by the national reception system and has been strengthened since the mid-2000s. The multiplication of the types of reception structures makes the system more complex and confusing, while also reinforcing the dynamic of distribution across the country.

A qualitative investigation based on our surveys reveals that rural areas face the same general problems of reception of asylum seekers, though with certain specificities unique to this context. On the one hand, a lack of clear communication between the authorities and local elected officials and a decline in the number of social workers and funding granted are particularly salient in the small towns and villages observed here. On the other hand, the rural location gives a somewhat different tone to reception management. Specifically, the issue of mobility is a fundamental concern in the provision of social support. Helping with travel can affect social work, as well the relations between managing organisations and volunteers. In this equation, the important question of the role public services and municipality involvement arises. The attention paid herein to the role of mayors reveals their influence on the overall structuring of reception actions.

These reception modalities contribute to changes in rural areas. From a socially diversified associative fabric (particularly in terms of socio-economic characteristics and personal backgrounds) emerges a commitment to solidarity that contributes to building reception places based essentially on values of solidarity and hospitality. Recent support groups, more structured associations, individual profiles, local histories and political sensitivities reveal rural territories marked by a plurality of positionings and dynamics. The limits of the action of these groups are set by the boundaries drawn by the law through the question of the fate of rejected asylum seekers and the future prospects that may be offered to them in these isolated, and sometimes in decline, territories.<sup>29</sup>

At a time when the issue of asylum reception generates the creation of a network of territories and towns that define themselves as ‘welcoming’ (e.g. through the National Association of Welcoming Towns and Territories [*Association nationale des villes et territoires accueillants*] - ANVITA), the predominance of the urban model in France—in social science research and in institutional thinking—highlights the persistent invisibility of rural communes in contemporary debates. Yet, in the heart of small French towns and villages, both pioneering places as well as those that are newer to asylum reception can be found. In rural

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<sup>29</sup> In Occitanie, there are associations that sponsor exiles in urban areas after they have obtained refugee status, as they view ensuring the social integration of these individuals in the villages near the accommodation centres where they applied for asylum to be more difficult.

areas, the diversity of initiatives and engagement reveals a reception know-how being developed through interactions with the authorities, management bodies and exiles.

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