



## Burden, benefit, gift or duty? Dutch mayors' framing of the multilevel governance of asylum in rural localities and cities in Zeeland

Sara Miellet

**To cite this article:** Sara Miellet (2022) Burden, benefit, gift or duty? Dutch mayors' framing of the multilevel governance of asylum in rural localities and cities in Zeeland, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 10:3, 426-444, DOI: [10.1080/21622671.2021.1999314](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1999314)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1999314>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 26 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 889



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Burden, benefit, gift or duty? Dutch mayors' framing of the multilevel governance of asylum in rural localities and cities in Zeeland

Sara Miellet 

## ABSTRACT

This article engages with critiques of multilevel governance (MLG) perspectives on asylum governance and identifies two additional points of concern. First, it highlights the importance of empirically grounding reflections on the limits of the MLG approach, beyond the activism of city actors, by examining local asylum dynamics from the vantage point of mayors in *rural and small urban* municipalities. It examines how Dutch mayors in rural and small urban municipalities in the Dutch province of Zeeland experienced and framed asylum governance in a multilevel setting between 2015 and 2016. Second, this article brings into focus internal dynamics, interactions between mayors and municipal actors within the municipality, alongside external interactions and pre-existing local and regional challenges, such as rural crisis. It argues that even in the context of cooperative modes of governance, mayors navigate various challenges. In terms of framing, this article shows how mayors in this multilevel context commonly framed municipal involvement in asylum governance as a duty rather than as a burden or benefit to their localities. It argues that this framing reflects a local 'politics of consensus' rather than 'local pragmatism'.

## KEYWORDS

mayors; multilevel governance; asylum; rural crisis; framing; forced migration

**HISTORY** Received 7 September 2020; in revised form 11 October 2021

## INTRODUCTION

Locked between the Belgian border, the North Sea, and the provinces of South Holland and Brabant lies the Dutch province of Zeeland. It is the smallest province of the Netherlands in population size and number of municipalities. Many of these are rural, but the region is also home to several medium-sized towns and small cities. The province consists of six former islands linked by dams and bridges and with its 490 km of coastline; it is a popular tourist destination. This article, however, zooms in on another type of international 'guest' whose arrival has garnered much public attention since 2015. When the Dutch Minister of Interior called on municipalities to organize crisis and emergency shelters after a sudden increase in asylum applications

## CONTACT

 s.e.miellet@uu.nl

School of Law and Governance, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands; and University College Roosevelt, Middelburg, Zeeland, the Netherlands.

in 2015, provincial and local officials in Zeeland were quick to respond. Under the watchful eye of the province's governor, all municipalities became momentarily involved in the organization of 'crisis shelters'.

Their involvement marks a momentary rupture in Dutch asylum governance, as asylum and refugee reception are an exclusive competency of the Dutch central government. As Larruina, Boersma and Ponzoni observe, the sudden increase in refugee arrivals in Europe in 2015 disrupted the ecology of organizations working within refugee reception and meant that a multitude of new actors were introduced to the field (Larruina et al., 2019, p. 53). Scholars suggests this governance crisis created a 'window of opportunity' for municipal involvement, experimentation and innovation (Geuijen et al., 2020) and for sharpening urban leadership (Bazurli, 2019). This research emphasizes actors and approaches in urban settings, while the dynamics of asylum governance in smaller towns and rural municipalities have only recently garnered more scholarly attention (Glorius, 2017; Schammann et al., 2020).

Besides the urban focus, this scholarship highlights how local inclusionary approaches to irregular and forced migration vis-à-vis increasingly restrictive national policies often feature 'institutional activism' (Fernández-Bessa, 2019), 'municipal activism' (Spencer & Delvino, 2019) or 'municipalism' (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). In the European context, research on the local turn in migration governance often draws on multilevel governance (MLG) perspectives that investigate the role of different levels of government, non-state actors and the various *negotiations* between these actors across multiple scales (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Scholten, 2013; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017). That said, some scholars criticize the emphasis on 'negotiated order', cooperation and coordination in theories of MLG. They argue that the actual dynamics of asylum governance, as the work on city activism highlights, is better understood as a 'playing field' or 'battleground' where different actors come together with different interests, values and frames (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

Recent empirical investigations of these local asylum battlegrounds examine the tensions and interactions between civil society and state actors. This means that tensions *within* the local state (municipality) and horizontal interactions between municipalities remain comparatively under-explored. This article contributes to this debate on the conceptual limits of MLG theories by empirically investigating the dynamics of asylum governance in a multilevel setting. In this case, from the vantage point of mayors in smaller towns and rural municipalities in the province of Zeeland. The Dutch mayoral office presents an interesting research opportunity for migration scholars with an interest in mayors, local leadership and MLG. Dutch mayors are appointed rather than elected and often perform collective and consensus-oriented leadership roles, which are in danger of being overlooked in comparative research (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). The research question that this article seeks to answer is: How mayors in Zeeland perceived and framed the dynamics of asylum governance in this multilevel context between 2015 and 2016?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section engages with recent criticisms of the MLG approach and outlines two additional points of concern. Subsequently, I present the methodology of this study and introduce the cases (municipalities). After outlining the general contours of Dutch asylum governance, I discuss the findings and conclude with three suggestions for future research.

## FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING ASYLUM GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS

This article takes recent scholarship that interrogates the limits of MLG approaches to studying asylum governance as a point of departure (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). The development of MLG theories is linked to the work of political scientists (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Migration scholars have used MLG broadly and descriptively to

describe ‘the process of dispersion of authority away from the nation state and across interdependent, and yet autonomous, public authorities and non-public organizations placed at different levels of government’ (Hooghe and Marks 2001, as cited by Adam & Caponio, 2019, 27).

This study engages with the analytical approach of Scholten (2013) that differentiates between (1), top-down (‘centralist’), (2) (‘localist’), (3) de-hierarchized (‘multilevel’) and (4) ‘decoupled’ relations or dynamics, to signify different modes of governance and constellations of interests across tiers of government. In Scholten’s framework, ‘centralist’ approaches assume a top-down intergovernmental relationship in which local governments mostly implement and national governments hold primacy in policy development. ‘Localist’ approaches refer to governance modes that involve devolution or decentralization to regional and/or local governments, in which the latter also set the agenda and are not simply ‘policy followers’ in a hierarchical intergovernmental relationship. ‘Decoupling’ refers to modes of governance where local governments follow a very different logic of policymaking than their national counterparts, resulting at times in open conflict. ‘Multilevel governance’ refers to a particular mode of governance that involves coordinated action between governmental levels, a recognition of the multilevel character of a problem and, to varying degrees, depoliticization and technocratic modes of cooperation (pp. 220–221). MLG, as a concept, is used analytically by Scholten rather than descriptively to refer to asylum governance in a *multilevel setting*.

Migration scholars are increasingly interrogating the conceptual parameters of MLG approaches (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Garcés-Masareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). Campomori and Ambrosini argue, for instance, that MLG perspectives emphasize cooperation and coordination, while the actual governance of asylum reception is better understood as a playing field or battleground where different actors come together with different interests, values and frames (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020, p. 1). They argue that horizontal, local interactions between public (state) actors and civil society have not received the same attention as vertical intergovernmental dynamics (p. 15). To overcome this, their work offers a typology of horizontal dynamics that differentiates between dynamics of closure, tolerance, institutional activism and cooperation (p. 1). The latter ‘dynamics of cooperation’ is also described as ‘positive governance’ and, like Scholten’s ideal type of MLG, exhibits a certain level of cooperation between public and private actors, who engage in an attempt at collaboration (p. 15).

This article develops these criticisms in two directions. To examine the usefulness of this understanding of local asylum governance as a playing field beyond the involvement and activism of local officials in large-scale cities, I draw on recent work on asylum governance in rural localities, such as the research of Whyte et al. (2019, p. 1955). This study shows, for instance, how local responses to the opening of asylum centres in Danish rural localities are linked to ‘pre-existing local problem fields’, such as rural crisis and framed in relation to ‘state others’ (central government), rather than ‘migrant others’ (p. 1955). The analysis draws on and develops these insights to move beyond the urban bias conceptually as well as empirically (in terms of case selection).

Second, while MLG theories examine intergovernmental dynamics, this article argues that the *local state* is often portrayed as a monolithic, unified actor, even when this research acknowledges the involvement of specific local state actors, such as mayors. Given that MLG sets out to challenge state-centric approaches to studying migration governance (from government to governance), it is not surprising that the horizontal dimension of MLG is often seen as revolving primarily around state–(civil)society relations.

To be sure, migration scholars have developed various agency-oriented and actor-centred approaches (Pettrachin, 2019) and examined the role of different local actors within and beyond MLG settings. Research on mayors and migration governance points towards their role in local policy design, as well as policy implementation (Garcés-Masareñas & Gebhardt, 2020). It highlights mayors’ involvement as mediators between different levels of government (Glorius, 2017),

mobilizers of public support (Haselbacher, 2019), advocates of legal reform (Myrberg, 2017), local or national coalition-builders, (Bazurli, 2019), transnational networkers and as political entrepreneurs of local identity and local reception and integration models (Driel & Verkuyten, 2019). Still, much of this scholarship considers mayors' intergovernmental relations, rather than relations among local government officials, and focuses on urban mayors as situated trans-local actors, while other aspects of their (local) situatedness are comparatively under-explored. Another point of contention is the assumption that local actors are better equipped to respond to the presence of forced migrants because they are seen as guided by a logic of 'pragmatic problem-coping' that makes them better placed to overcome "silo thinking" in policymaking' (Wolffhardt, 2019). However, as Caponio, Scholten and Zapata-Barrero, note, 'the thesis for a local preference for pragmatic accommodation on migration-related issues is contradicted by cities' policies of exclusion' (Caponio et al., 2019, p. 182).

Research on the nexus of political geography and migration offers interesting alternatives to these binaries (state–society) and to these normative perspectives on local pragmatism. This work suggests, for instance, to decipher 'how these key government officials view themselves and view the *state*', as it 'opens up a layer of productive research that refuses to take the everyday, situated state for granted' (Gill, 2010, p. 633). It points towards alternative conceptualizations of the state, as a 'performance of potentially conflicting forms and fractions of statehood by different actors, spaces and materials' (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 17). These approaches resonate with recent scholarly work of migration scholars that examines how policy actors are involved in framing processes.

Framing processes are processes in which policy actors make sense and interpret situations, define and categorize issues and link these to proposed courses of action (Spencer & Delvino, 2019). Research on rural localities offers contextualized understandings of such framing processes. This work suggests, for instance, that national debates often oscillate between polar ideological positions that refer to *migrant others*, while the framing of local pragmatic approaches in rural Danish localities tends to refer to the local community and its relation to *state* others (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 1965).

To conclude, this section outlined a tentative framework for examining internal and external interactions and dynamics between different local actors, alongside discursive dynamics (framing) and local contextual dynamics (problem fields) to contribute to research on asylum governance in a multilevel setting.

## APPROACH

### Data and methods

To examine how mayors in small cities, towns and rural municipalities experienced asylum governance dynamics in a multilevel setting, I draw on fieldwork conducted from the spring to the autumn 2018 in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Zeeland is interesting because of its small number of municipalities and their size, in terms of population, and because of the relatively high number 'shrinking' municipalities experiencing population decline. Demographic prognoses of the Dutch central government predict population decline in the near future in the port cities of Terneuzen and Vlissingen and in the rural municipality of Veere included in this study.

This study was part of the broader exploratory and collaborative research project *Cities of Refuge*.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of the involvement of mayors, while theoretically informed from the start, emerged from the data as the principal focus later on. This is reflected in the case selection, which focused on selecting *municipalities* of varying size, geographical location and migration histories, rather than the *characteristics of mayors* in them. For this research four municipalities (Noord-Beveland, Veere, Vlissingen and Terneuzen) were selected to reflect that the province is home to smaller rural localities, towns and cities (Table 1) with different refugee reception

**Table 1.** Democratic and political characteristics of municipalities in Zeeland included in this study.

Municipality	Population, 2020 <sup>a</sup>	Rural urban index <sup>b</sup>	Type of refugee reception facility <sup>c</sup>	Mayor political party affiliation	Period in office in the municipality
Noord-Beveland	7392	5	Crisis shelter	VVD	2015–18
Veere	21,880	5	Crisis shelter	CDA	2006–present
Tholen	25,757	5	Crisis shelter	VVD	2014–20
Schouwen-Duiveland	33,839	5	Crisis shelter	Independent without a party	2009–20
Goes	38,082	3	Long-term emergency shelter	CDA	2010–17
Vlissingen	44,360	2	Crisis shelter; a long-term asylum seeker centre was planned	D66	2013–17
Middelburg	48,822	2	Crisis shelter and regular long-term asylum seeker centre	VVD	2012–present
Terneuzen	54,426	4	Long-term emergency shelter	PvdA	2003–20

Note: <sup>a</sup>Statistics Netherlands (CBS).

<sup>b</sup>Urbanity indicator (CBS): 1 = highly urban, 5 = non-urban.

<sup>c</sup>During this period, *crisis shelters* were only operational for a few days (on average 72 h) and often located in local sports hall facilities. Some municipalities, such as Goes and Terneuzen in Zeeland, organized longer term *emergency shelters* for several months. Lastly, there were ‘regular’ *asylum seeker centres* (Middelburg).

CDA, Christian Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*; D66, Democrats 66/*Democraten 66*; PvdA, Labour Party/*Partij van de Arbeid*; and VVD, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy/*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*.

experiences. As Table 1 shows, some rural municipalities (e.g., Schouwen-Duiveland) consist of a dozen villages and so their population size does not differ much from smaller urban municipalities (e.g., Goes), which is why size was not the main criterion. Another thing taken into consideration was that short-term crisis shelters were opened in four of these municipalities (Vlissingen, Veere, Schouwen-Duiveland and Noord-Beveland), while in other municipalities longer term facilities were already operational (Middelburg), organized (Terneuzen and Goes) or planned (Vlissingen). The extent to which these municipalities, and by implication their mayors, were involved in refugee reception between 2015 and 2016 therefore differed.

The four interviewed mayors belonged to different parties: the Labour Party/*Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) in Terneuzen; Democrats 66/*Democraten 66* (D66) in Vlissingen; Christian Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) in Veere; and the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy/*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) in Noord-Beveland. Each had previously worked as a public official in another municipality and had dealt with asylum governance before the 2015 refugee governance crisis. While two of them had been in office in the municipality for approximately three years, the other two mayors were in office for 12 and 15 years at the time of this research. In the case of Vlissingen, we interviewed the former interim mayor (2013–16), who, in 2018, had already moved on to become an interim mayor in another



municipality. This was a disadvantage of the interviews taking place two years after the 2015–16 developments. The other three mayors had remained in office within the municipality. An advantage of this timing was that we could draw on evaluations of asylum governance during this period that were published in 2017.

In collaboration with University College Roosevelt student researcher Jasper Valent and members of the Cities of Refuge team, interviews were conducted in spring 2018 with local and provincial governmental officials, including the mayors of these four municipalities. During the interviews, the mayors were asked about their experience of the dynamics of asylum governance in this multilevel setting between 2015 and 2016. In addition, we interviewed two senior civil servants working at the provincial government on refugee reception and integration, a provincial minister and the King's Commissioner, the presiding member of the provincial executive. This study draws on eight interviews conducted in Dutch, recorded, transcribed and analysed (in the original language) with the use of NVivo, following informed consent from interviewees. In discussions on the internal dynamics within municipalities, some interviewees requested the names of other municipalities and mayors they mentioned to be anonymized. This is reflected in the analysis, as some sections offer more detail than others. After an initial phase of open coding focused on mayors' and provincial actors' general perceptions of asylum governance dynamics and the broader context (municipal council and municipal documents) in which refugee reception was framed, axial coding strategies were used to identify mayors' perceptions of challenges involved in these asylum governance dynamics. The study compared, for instance, how mayors explained the *context* of municipal involvement in asylum governance, in various texts, in interviews in this study and in public media, social media, municipal council proceedings, etc.

I complemented and contrasted the interviews with mayors with the perspective of provincial actors. As provincial actors and the four interviewed mayors also spoke about municipalities that were not included in the interview analysis, the scope of the content analysis was broadened to include municipal documents and (social) media output. In total, I analysed municipal documents, such as policy memos and municipal council proceedings of eight municipalities out of the 13 municipalities in the province with QSR NVivo. These eight municipalities include the aforementioned four municipalities, and selection criteria were the geographical location and size of the municipalities.

I accessed the materials for this content analysis through the municipal council archives of these municipalities and selected these materials based on relevant keywords and date of publication, from mid-2015 to December 2016. A content analysis of social media and press interviews of mayors (eight municipalities) was conducted to obtain a complete view of public statements of municipal officials and it was inspired by ethnographic work on the state that examines everyday practices of local bureaucracies and officials alongside the discursive construction of the state in public culture (Sharma & Gupta, 2009, p. 212).

## MAYORS AND MUNICIPAL INVOLVEMENT IN DUTCH ASYLUM GOVERNANCE

In the Netherlands, the central government takes full responsibility for asylum seekers throughout the asylum procedure (Glorius et al., 2019). The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), an independent administrative body, is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers. Local governments are responsible for access to primary and secondary education and childcare for asylum-seeker children. These limited competencies in asylum governance stand in stark contrast to their responsibilities in the field of refugee integration, as municipalities provide accommodation and social support to recognized refugees. Municipal involvement in the reception of asylum seekers is therefore minimal, mostly indirect and often connected to the competencies of the mayor.

Mayors give shape to the process of negotiating an Administrative Agreement with the COA and they are responsible for the communication with residents and other local stakeholders before new refugee reception centres are opened. Their involvement stems from their responsibilities in maintaining public order and safety. Another core task of Dutch mayors relates to what is often described as their role as *burgervader*, which translates as ‘father of the citizen’ (Karsten et al., 2014).<sup>2</sup> This role is relevant for local asylum governance, as it requires mayors to informally act as ‘first citizens’, and as leaders during crises and disasters (Karsten et al., 2014). Dutch mayors monitor the quality of local decision-making and safeguard the ethics of the local administration (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017, p. 168). They chair the city council and the municipal executive board. The latter operates as a formal collective decision-making body, so mayors have little individual decision-making power and for the execution of most of their tasks they depend on the support of the municipal executive board and council (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017).

Dutch mayors are administrators and are not elected but appointed by royal decree by the central government. Scholars have examined Dutch mayors’ leadership roles in relation to Dutch political culture and consensus democracy and point towards their collective, facilitative and consensus-oriented leadership roles (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017). Investigations of Dutch mayors’ involvement in migration governance have mostly focused on their discretionary influence on municipal support to refused asylum seekers (Terlouw & Böcker, 2019).

### General developments in Dutch asylum governance between 2015 and 2016

In 2015, the sudden increase in refugee arrivals meant that the COA had to organize refugee reception on an ad hoc basis. The usual modus operandi and the division of responsibility that had underpinned Dutch refugee reception governance since the mid-1990s was temporarily disrupted. That said, some Dutch municipalities already had longstanding experience with organizing shelters and support to irregular migrants and refused asylum seekers. The 2015 governance crisis was, therefore, neither the first nor the last ‘window of opportunity’ for municipal involvement in asylum. Both the pre-2015 arrangements and these crisis measures relied on voluntary implementation mechanisms, such as Administrative Agreements.

When municipalities started to organize short-term ‘crisis shelters’ and longer term emergency shelters late 2015, the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) negotiated an Administrative Agreement with the central government. While not legally binding, it outlined how the central government, provinces and municipalities would continue their approach to the asylum governance crisis and laid down compensation schemes and the division of responsibilities. The preamble of the agreement set the tone, urging ‘to stand shoulder to shoulder to jointly face the challenge’ and the covenant included practical interventions, such as the creation of regional coordination platforms. One element turned out to be of particular relevance to the province of Zeeland. The Administrative Agreement included a target setting for all provinces that stated that each province should arrange for the long-term accommodation of 2500 refugees by 1 February the next year. In other words, it tasked each province, irrespective of its size, with the same assignment.

The Administrative Agreement – on paper at least – signalled a temporary shift away from the otherwise centralist Dutch mode of governance in which the central government has exclusive competence over asylum, towards a more complex multilevel setting. In contrast to other European Union (EU) countries where reception facilities were partially organized by civil society or welfare organizations, asylum governance in the Dutch post-2015 context was organized by various public and semi-public authorities (COA), including local government officials, such as mayors. The following analysis examines how mayors and provincial actors in Zeeland experienced and framed the dynamics of asylum governance in this multi-level setting.



## ANALYSIS

### Mayors' general reflections on asylum governance in a multilevel context

In Zeeland, 12 out of 13 municipalities organized crisis shelters, when the Dutch Minister of the Interior called on Dutch municipalities to assist in the asylum governance crisis. The remaining municipality did not organize a crisis shelter because it was already hosting a longer term emergency shelter. The provincial governor in Zeeland, also known in the Dutch context as the King's Commissioner, explained that he saw it as his responsibility to appeal to the mayors of all municipalities in Zeeland to 'take joint responsibility'. The minister had also appealed to the King's Commissioners to assist. According to the King's Commissioner, the scale of the province of Zeeland, with its small number of municipalities, both necessitated and enabled a collective and coordinated response. He wanted to prevent a situation in which mayors would hesitate, wait, 'look around and point at each other'.

The mayors in Zeeland responded to this call to action and decided to entrust the coordination of the crisis shelters to the safety region. Safety regions are public bodies established to facilitate regional multidisciplinary cooperation in dealing with disasters, crises and disruptions of public order. The Mayor of Terneuzen, who chaired the safety region network, commented that this placed experienced civil servants in the lead who were used to collaborate in crisis management. The practical and administrative matters were arranged by this team under the guidance of mayors' deputy assistants and town clerks. Mayors' involvement stemmed from their competences in the field of local crisis management and public order and safety. They were often present as part of their public role in informing the municipal council and residents.

In press interviews, mayors emphasized the need for a coordinated response and for cooperation between municipalities, the province and (semi)-public bodies (safety region and the COA). The four interviewed mayors and provincial actors saw the joint coordination of crisis shelters as a successful instance of cooperative and coordinated asylum governance in a multilevel setting. The 'crisis shelters' were mostly organized in sports halls and were only operational for several days (on average 72 hours). The King's Commissioner added that Zeeland was the only Dutch province in which all municipalities organized crisis or emergency shelters. Even so, interviewees also spoke of challenges and tensions that lurked behind these otherwise cooperative dynamics.

The successful organization of the crisis shelters stands in contrast with the challenges mayors faced as part of their assigned task to organize long-term emergency and regular refugee reception facilities. The King's Commissioner kept oversight by setting deadlines for municipalities to propose suitable locations. In his letters to municipal councils and public interviews, he emphasized the importance of a coordinated regional response, also described as the 'Zeeland offer'. He organized a meeting with all the mayors and provincial officials during which they agreed on taking joint action and on creating a regional coordination platform.

This regional platform had no decision-making power but supported municipal actors in their efforts to develop coordinated responses to refugee reception and integration. While regional coordination platforms were established in all Dutch provinces during this period, often only those mayors that chaired the safety regions participated in them. The Administrative Agreement had outlined that provincial authorities were required to monitor progress, even if they had no formal decision-making power. The role of the King's Commissioner, as head of the province, differed between the various regional platforms in the Netherlands.

In Zeeland, the King's Commissioner coordinated the platform, and three participating mayors played a key role: the mayors of Middelburg, Terneuzen and Noord-Beveland. They represented the mayors and municipalities in three different regions of Zeeland and were tasked

with ensuring that other mayors in their region stayed ‘tuned in’ to collective efforts. In a nationwide evaluation of these regional platforms, one Zeeland respondent commented it was not always easy for a delegate ‘mayor’ to remind other mayors of their responsibilities (ACVZ, 2017). One of the provincial administrators in this study explained that cooperation between the province and the municipalities is more intensive and frequent than in other provinces, because of the small number (13) of municipalities in Zeeland.

While mayors had been very visible during the coordination of the crisis shelters, their involvement in the search for suitable locations for long-term (emergency) reception facilities was less public, and according to some, initially also less ‘political’, as this quotation illustrates:

First, we looked on a very large map for the zoning plans, the possibilities to build, putting emotions aside for the moment. Looking at, where we, municipality or province, own land that we could potentially use. Putting the sensitivities aside for a moment. It was my task to make sure the other mayors stayed tuned in. This was not the political part of the process, that came later – when we discussed how to create popular support. (Mayor of Noord-Beveland)

The Mayor of Terneuzen, who was also a regional representative on the coordination platform, had a different perspective on this process. He described how COA representatives showed up with maps from the province with potential sites, ‘often focusing on spatial aspects and not on the objective, why are we going to help these people’, something he missed. The King’s Commissioner urged mayors and municipal actors to focus on potential local benefits of reception facilities instead of on ‘numbers’, such as the number of asylum seekers. Even so, some municipal council discussions on long-term facilities focused almost entirely on numbers and even included municipal calculations and proposals for the desired, ‘proportional’ number of refugees in the municipality. Interestingly, this functionalist orientation and technocratic mode of cooperation resonates with Scholten’s understanding of the (ideal type) of MLG (Scholten, 2013, p. 220).

While some mayors struggled with the technocratic tendencies of others, particularly the COA, they did not discuss the technocratic dimensions of their own involvement in the regional coordination platform and other governance networks. To illustrate, in December 2015, municipal representatives, mostly the mayors, voted on the Administrative Agreement between the VNG and central government in a parliamentary assembly of the VNG. Of the eight municipalities in this study, in only three (Goes, Sluis and Terneuzen) did the municipal executive decide to consult the municipal council to discuss how the municipal executive board would vote in the VNG assembly. That said, the VNG reported that in general the majority of the municipal councils (85%) are not consulted on votes in VNG assemblies and linked this to broader debates about local politics and administrative and managerial cultures.

This emphasis on coordination within the VNG and regional networks resonates with what Dutch scholars call a ‘double decentralization paradox’ where decentralization increases collaboration on a regional scale, particularly in the case of smaller municipalities. This also affects mayors, who increasingly spend their time ‘away’ participating in regional boards and platforms, which influences local politics (Boogers & Reussing, 2018, p. 21). While this is therefore not unique to asylum governance, it is a reminder that the actions of mayors and municipal executives are not always clear or visible to the municipal council, and, by extension, to the public.

### Mayors’ ‘minor’ and ‘major’ manoeuvres in a multilevel context

For the mayors and provincial actors, the key question was not whether technocratic modes of cooperation undermine local democracy and the local politics of asylum, but if these governance modes resulted in effective approaches to refugee reception. Interviewees contrasted the success of the coordination of the crisis shelters with the more challenging governance dynamics involved in the search for long-term reception facilities. By the time the deadlines set by the province

passed, only a handful municipalities had consulted the COA on the suitability of their proposed locations. Eventually, mayors, along with their municipal executives, in four out of 13 municipalities proposed locations for long-term facilities in accordance with the criteria communicated by the central government and the COA. The Mayor of Noord-Beveland, for instance, suggested using the public waterways by organizing refugee shelters on a ship that would then dock in several of the province's municipalities with ports. Two provincial officials commented that some of the other mayors were playing a game of 'hide and seek' by offering proposals for facilities that were bound to be turned down by the COA because they did not meet reception standards.

There were no instances in which mayors or other members of the municipal executive explicitly pushed back against the Administrative Agreement or refused intergovernmental requests. In other words, there was no explicit defiance, as scholarship on cities and forced migration governance often highlights. One explanation for this is that the general tone had already been set by the Administrative Agreement and the province's lobby for a coordinated Zeeland approach. Interviewees did point towards *minor manoeuvres*. Sometimes municipal actors stated having no knowledge or having misunderstood the COA's criteria for reception locations even when these criteria had been explicitly communicated. In other cases, municipal actors relied on functionalist, procedural arguments, claiming that they had not been informed on *time* by the COA that locations within their municipality were being examined. These functionalist arguments often deflect from political questions and choices, as has been documented elsewhere (Marchetti, 2020, p. 253). Another tactic to slow down processes was to remain silent, even if this meant not delivering on deadlines. Sometimes silence and inactivity were possible because a mayor was not participating but represented by another mayor in the regional coordination platform. A nationwide study of the MLG of crisis asylum shelters similarly shows that some mayors used this arrangement of the regional coordination platforms to remain inactive (ACVZ, 2017). These examples of minor manoeuvres also resonate with research on the 'minor acts and politics' involved in sanctuary city initiatives (Squire & Darling, 2013) and scholarly debates on implicit and explicit discretionary strategies used by local authorities in migration governance (Oomen et al., 2021).

The mayors and provincial actors also spoke of what they considered exemplary instances of individual and collective leadership. Two mayors and three provincial actors explained that mayors' commitment and approach (reactive/proactive) often made a difference to whether long-term facilities were planned and realized. They spoke with great admiration of mayors who had taken a particularly proactive stance. The stories about mayors who stood out, in a context dominated by cooperative dynamics and consensus politics, focused on challenges that these mayors navigated. The following discussion examines how mayors navigated challenges and conflicts as part of their involvement in asylum governance in this multilevel setting. First, I discuss *external* pressures and challenges, followed by *internal* pressures and challenges and lastly challenges linked to particular *pre-existing regional and local problem fields*. I conclude with an analysis of how mayors framed municipal involvement in asylum governance.

## External challenges to cooperative dynamics

Officially, we were not allowed to organize activities outside the shelters. But then I heard that people were going on long walks to nearby beaches. I became worried about people getting lost and was reminded of the Rotary's offer to fund activities. So, I asked them to arrange busses so asylum seekers and volunteers could go for a stroll on the beach. Years ago, when we organized a shelter in another village, a local school contacted us to invite some of the youngest refugee children to join their classes. That school was happy and so were the children. I wonder why all this is prohibited. Beach visits and education, we'll just take care of it and the Hague will simply have to live with that. (Mayor of Veere)

A common theme in conversations with these four mayors on the crisis shelters related to navigating dilemmas resulting from rigidity of national asylum regulations. The mayors reflected on the minimal standards of shelter conditions and mentioned how they sometimes struggled with tensions that arose between the austerity of top-down imposed asylum regulations and citizen-led integration initiatives, as this quotation highlights. They expressed sympathy for how the COA, the Red Cross and municipal actors organized these shelters for groups up to 200 refugees, under time pressure. That said, three of the four mayors described conditions in crisis shelters as inhumane and degrading. The frequent transfers between municipal shelters, after every 72 hours, lack of privacy and austere conditions were cited as principal sources of this overall condition. Two of the mayors spoke of practical interventions in which they were involved, such as requesting the transfer of especially vulnerable persons from crisis or emergency shelters to regular reception facilities. Another theme that featured in their reflections was how to deal with uncertainty and *information precarity*, with not knowing when, who and how many asylums seekers would be transferred to these shelters.

Mayors were not only in this struggle. In the early stages of the governance crisis, the ministry tasked every province with the organization of emergency shelters for 2500 refugees. However, it was not immediately clear to everyone whether this shelter should be modelled after the only long-term emergency facility at that time: a large-scale camp facility in the city of Nijmegen. As one provincial administrator explained, ‘this camp was built on [a] hilltop near Nijmegen on sandy soil which is altogether different than Zeeland’s clay soil’. There was relief when they heard that they could organize smaller reception facilities. Provincial and municipal actors in Zeeland therefore grappled with information precarity when dealing with the intergovernmental request and these external challenges also gave rise to very specific local and regional concerns about shelters, soil composition and spatial planning.

The mayors did not describe these challenges linked to information precarity in this multi-level setting as local or regional. They linked them to the inability of Dutch reception authorities to respond to the sudden increase in refugee arrivals in 2015. The regional platform helped to address some issues, but mayors also mentioned advocating to raise awareness about the plight of refugees in crisis and emergency shelters and the dilemmas encountered by municipal actors. These four mayors and the provincial governor agreed that the planning of long-term facilities was more affected by these challenges, in particular the uncertainty and information precarity they experienced in the communication with the COA.

After weeks of preparations and efforts to create social support for the reception facilities, the Mayor of Vlissingen and the Mayor of Borsele received news that the planned and long-debated long-term reception centres in their municipalities would no longer be required by the COA. What was particularly vexing, according to the Mayor of Vlissingen and provincial officials, is that the COA did not first contact and inform the municipality about this decision, but that they read about it in regional press. The kKng’s Commissioner explained he had to lots of ‘healing’ in these two municipalities. These stories also travelled, the Mayor of Noord-Beveland, for instance, mentioned hearing of other municipalities where the plans for reception centres were cancelled even after facilities had been especially built and commented that ‘it makes you think twice, as a municipality, about becoming involved in refugee reception’.

The mayor of the rural municipality of Veere also drew on these stories to explain his at times reactive, rather than proactive, leadership style, and described how some colleagues in other municipalities ‘jumped into action’, but that he and his colleagues decided to ‘wait and see how the discussion develops’. He emphasized the element of personal risk and referred to the struggles of the Mayor of Borsele, who had become the target of asylum protests and had received threats after taking a stance in favour of a refugee reception facility. Risks, as he explained, resulted from the uncertainty and information precarity that mayors struggled with as part of

vertical dynamics, but in some instances, albeit rarely, were also related to locals' protests against refugee shelters and asylum centres.

Only two of the 13 municipalities in Zeeland saw coordinated political mobilization of residents who opposed the opening of reception facilities. The four mayors interviewed in this study had not faced such protests, but they had faced criticism and concerns about plans to open shelters. They emphasized the importance of maintaining popular support by engaging in public debates. Whereas most mayors in Zeeland appeared regularly in the local press to comment on refugee shelters, four mayors also used Twitter and Facebook for public statements about refugee reception. Sometimes social media discussions posed challenges. Some mayors publicly expressed their concerns with groups on social media that depicted refugees or reception facilities as a threat to local communities. The Mayor of Terneuzen stressed the importance of timely media responses to and the debunking of fake news on social media.

### Internal challenges to cooperative dynamics

Sometimes the challenges mayors navigated during the process of searching for locations for refugee shelters or reception centres arose as a result of power dimensions within the state, either *within* the municipal executive or *between* the municipal executive and the municipal council. While crisis shelters fell primarily under the mayors' responsibilities, the planning of long-term reception facilities was a collective effort and the responsibility of mayors and municipal executives responsible for spatial planning. Provincial officials explained that some municipal executives may have been more reluctant, because unlike mayors, they could be held directly accountable by passing a vote of no confidence in the council. The Mayor of Terneuzen mentioned that a mayor in a nearby municipality was very committed to realize a long-term refugee reception centre, but that he was pressured by his municipal executives who were not 'on board' with his plans.

More common were instances in which the municipal executive board, the mayor and municipal executives faced opposition to plans for new asylum centres from parties in the municipal council. In the municipality of Sluis, a majority of the municipal council voted down a proposal of the municipal executive board to grant the COA's request to open an asylum shelter in the municipality. The municipal council turned against the municipal executive board after a public consultation meeting had escalated. Over 500 people attended this meeting, and all the 50 registered speakers opposed the plans, which took municipal actors by surprise. According to two mayors and regional officials, these protests were partially a result of the specific sentiments of local communities, but also linked to the communication strategies used by mayors and municipal executives.

In two rural municipalities, the municipal executive board, including the mayor, faced criticism from both opponents and supporters, after only tentatively outlining its position on a refugee reception facility in the municipality. After long debates in one of these municipalities (Schouwen-Duiveland), the municipal executive agreed to involve a research organization to measure popular support for a refugee reception facility. One of the provincial administrators explained that he wondered to what extent such municipal council decisions were diversionary tactics to shirk municipal responsibility. The mayor, as the quotation illustrates, was also not convinced by this proposal to measure social support:

The moment we have locations in mind, we can start the talks with neighborhood residents. *We can* have a scientific investigation carried out first to measure popular support, commitment and capacity. ... *You* are representatives of the local population. *You* provide the framework. So, yes, I can have a whole scientific study carried out by a research organisation and then a year will have passed. *We cannot* wait for that.

While municipal actors in interviews and public meetings stressed the importance of popular support, they often disagreed on the extent to which this support was to be 'found' or 'built'. Some mayors spoke of how they pre-empted internal challenges and coped with concerns



about popular support. The Mayor of Vlissingen explained that she and two other municipal executives collaborated in the planning of a long-term refugee reception centre to build popular support. She explained that they had divided tasks, such as communication with the municipal council and regional coordination platform between three municipal executives, commenting that ‘if you do this alone as a mayor, you’ll become detached from the entire political sphere’.

Interviewees also gave examples of municipalities where municipal council parties unsuccessfully attempted to pressure the municipal executive, including mayors, to adopt a more proactive and welcoming approach. Neither the mayors nor the provincial officials interviewed in this study linked proactive or reactive leadership styles, reluctance, or commitment to mayors’ political party affiliations. Instead, one mayor suggested that experiences often played a role, the mayors and municipal actors who adopted a proactive approach in the search for long-term facilities often, but not always, represented municipalities that already had experience with hosting long-term refugee reception centres.

### Regional and local problem fields

These four mayors often explained differences between municipalities with reference to specific local and regional problems. The Mayor of Terneuzen stated that the crisis shelters, because of the small size of the municipalities, made a considerable demand on their administrative capacity. To overcome this challenge, the mayors decided to work together with the aforementioned safety region to jointly organize the crisis shelters in such a way that municipalities would take turns, rather than organize shelters simultaneously. This construction, as the mayors of Terneuzen and Veere explained, enabled a *learning curve* and ensured more efficient use of personnel.

As the smallest municipality of Noord-Beveland did not have a suitable building available for a crisis shelter, it collaborated with a neighbouring municipality (Veere). The mayors of Vlissingen and Terneuzen invited local residents to visit the crisis and emergency shelters before the first refugees arrived. The Mayor of Vlissingen explained she worried about the popular support for refugees. Some residents who visited the shelter during the public meeting mentioned that they had the feeling asylum seekers were ‘all looked after’ when they had to ‘manage all on their own’, ‘feeling abandoned’ by the central and local government. She explained that residents’ doubts often dissipated after these meetings and that these encounters showed her the importance of constantly involving local residents to maintain popular support for asylum governance.

Still, some of the mayors struggled to maintain popular support due to specific pre-existing local problem fields. In the case of Vlissingen, this problem field was one of pre-existing urban decline, linked to high concentrations of unemployment, poverty and unsustainable levels of municipal debt. In Noord-Beveland, the mayor worried about popular support for and the practical feasibility of long-term reception facilities due to the small size of the municipality (7300 inhabitants), its poor accessibility by public transport and access to basic services (schools, hospitals and shops). These concerns hint toward broader debates about rural crisis and the challenges of keeping rural localities viable. As the quotation highlights, the municipality could not use the few available (tourist) infrastructures due to the competitive prices in this ‘prime’ tourist location. These different concerns are reflected in the ambiguous position of the mayor in his negotiations with the COA. He captured this ambiguity in a municipal council meeting by stating ‘the door was neither opened widely, nor was it shut’.

The problem of Noord-Beveland was to create public support. Look at a map, you’ll see that we have approximately 7,500 inhabitants spread out over a relatively large surface area. The island consists mostly of polders and sea, which are useless for refugee reception. In summer, the island is packed with tourists. All holiday homes are booked and expensive due to the prime location. We don’t have a police station on the island and there’s no train station. There are some small shops, but no supermarkets. Noord-Beveland



is accessible via public transport during the day, but not during weekends or evenings. [A refugee shelter] ... can you envision it? (Mayor of Noord-Beveland)

### Beyond 'burden', 'benefit' or 'gift' frames: administrative duties and the politics of consensus

Scholarship on the framing of refugee reception points towards positive and negative discourses, solidarity and self-interest, and understandings of refugee arrivals as involving a threat, burden or benefit to localities. This study, however, found that mayors in Zeeland mostly framed refugee reception neutrally, as an administrative duty vis-à-vis state others. This is not to say that public discourses did not feature frames that presented refugees or reception facilities as a threat or a *burden*, but that mayors in official communication, (public) interviews and on social media generally opted for 'neutral' frames. Often, they spoke of crisis shelters and the search for long-term facilities in connection to joint action ('Zeeland offer') and the Administrative Agreement with the central government, emphasizing '*administrative duties*'.

In a few cases, mayors framed municipal involvement as a historical or a moral duty. On social media, two mayors stated their gratitude to the local volunteers who assisted in the organization of the crisis shelters. This emphasis on gratitude resonates with studies that highlight how asylum is increasingly understood as a '*gift*' rather than a human right (Ignatieff, 2017). Given that this analysis focused on a province with rural municipalities and small towns, some of which are experiencing depopulation, rural crisis or urban decline, it is interesting that refugee reception was rarely framed as a *benefit* to localities. Scholarship, after all, suggests that mayors have described refugee reception as a benefit elsewhere (Betts et al., 2021). One explanation is that refugee reception, under non-crisis circumstances, is centrally coordinated by the COA, who invites bids for services in multiple reception centres. It is unclear to what extent local firms could benefit from reception facilities, especially short-term (emergency) facilities. Municipal councillors in Goes raised this question, so this may be a partial explanation. The Mayor of Noord-Beveland offered another clue. He stated that even if it would be beneficial for the municipality to consider refugee reception and integration as a solution to rural decline, he did not expect to ever get political support for it. He said he would therefore never explicitly state this because of the general political sensitivity of debates on 'shrinking regions'.

Some migration scholars suggest that problematization, the process in which actors analyse a situation and define it as a problem, 'works via the use of metaphors, which suggest causes and consequences without naming them' and that 'metaphors are employed to symbolize threat and danger, and the risk of losing control' (Schrover & Schinkel, 2013, p. 1133). This study observed a different use of metaphors by mayors who used metaphors and figurative speech to keep the 'calm' in local debates. Some municipal and provincial officials referred to the figurative speech of the Administrative Agreement, the 'shoulder to shoulder' image, to describe joint efforts to find locations for long-term reception facilities. This concerted effort was sometimes also framed by mayors and provincial officials as a 'homework assignment' of municipalities. This metaphor captures the inter-governmental oversight and the monitoring role of the province. If mayors used metaphors to stir emotions, it was to express their frustration with 'state others', the COA or the Minister of Migration, rather than the '*refugee other*'.

These findings resonate with scholarship on asylum governance in rural localities (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 1967) that shows how local pragmatic responses to asylum governance in rural Danish localities concerned 'itself with the local community and its relation to *state others*' and 'the centralizing process and general retreat of the welfare state, which more than ever marginalizes them in the Danish national community'. The suggestion of Whyte et al. (2019) to be more attentive to how asylum is framed vis-à-vis pre-existing local and regional problem fields speaks to the reflections of mayors and provincials officials in Zeeland and the examples from Vlissingen

and Noord-Beveland. But there are also stark differences between their discussion of such local rural pragmatism and this study's findings. Their research points towards a distinct local *rural pragmatism*, as asylum seekers were not the objects of concern, 'as would typically be the case within the national public debate', but were 'experienced by locals, as a means to something else – the securing of the socio-economic base of the small rural community' (Whyte et al., 2019, p. 1966).

As this analysis suggests, these pragmatic 'benefit' frames were not common in debates on asylum governance in Zeeland. Some of its mayors incidentally offered general political advice to 'state others' (central government) about early 'selection' and 'separation' of 'real' 'deserving' refugees from 'economic refugees' and 'asylum seekers from safe countries'. In rare moments, a few mayors gave political commentary on far-away developments, such as the EU–Turkey statement in public interviews. These instances contradict the often-romanticized understanding of local actors as inherently pragmatic and exclusively focused on practical solutions rather than political debates. The responses of mayors involved in the dynamics of asylum in this multilevel, small town, rural and Zeeland context are best understood as an instance of a local '*politics of consensus*' rather than a local '*politics of pragmatism*'.

This 'politics of consensus' emerged within a multilevel setting, against the backdrop of a tradition of 'consensus politics' and as a direct response to national developments such as the Administrative Agreement. However, it was also shaped by the scale of and pre-existing challenges in Zeeland province: the small number of municipalities, their size and capacity, the close intergovernmental and municipal contacts, and the emphasis on regional collaboration, shared responsibility and the joint 'Zeeland Offer'. 'Consensus' captures the emphasis that mayors and provincial actors put on (vertical) intergovernmental coordination and the (horizontal) concerted efforts of mayors. It reflects the collective and consensus-oriented leadership styles that mayors in Zeeland adopted during the coordination of 'crisis' shelters and, to a lesser extent, during the search for locations for long-term facilities. It also reflects their framing of asylum as an 'administrative duty' vis-à-vis 'state others'. 'Politics' in the context of this understanding of the 'local politics of consensus' highlights the challenges, tensions and struggles that these mayors navigated, even in the context of cooperative multilevel asylum governance dynamics. It also points towards the minor contestations and discretionary strategies that are part of this politics.

## CONCLUSIONS

How did mayors in the Dutch province of Zeeland experience and frame asylum governance in a multilevel setting between 2015 and 2016? This analysis sought to answer this question and, in doing so, to contribute to scholarship on mayors, migration governance and MLG perspectives on asylum governance. First, by empirically grounding reflections on the conceptual limits of MLG approaches, beyond the involvement and activism of city officials, and by examining the dynamics of asylum governance from the vantage point of mayors in rural and small urban municipalities in Zeeland. This analysis, while actor centred, considered local and regional factors, or 'problem fields' drawing on research on asylum in rural settings. To render a more comprehensive account of the actual dynamics of asylum governance, I argued it is important to understand the local state as disaggregated, to examine internal and external dynamics and challenges, and how mayors frame municipal involvement in asylum. The key findings of this study can be summarized as follows.

This analysis suggests that mayors and provincial actors agreed that the organization of the crisis shelters and search for locations for long-term reception centres involved cooperative dynamics. They pointed towards extensive intergovernmental cooperation (vertically) and joint municipal coordination (horizontally). The analysis pointed towards differences between mayors in terms of proactive and reactive leadership styles and towards 'minor manoeuvres' in a

multilevel setting. Although mayors and provincial officials were effective in the joint coordination of crisis shelters, there was less 'concerted action' involved in the search for long-term emergency shelters and regular refugee reception centres.

Mayors and provincial actors explained the dynamics of asylum governance in Zeeland with reference to their own involvement, as well as national developments (Administrative Agreement). They also referred to specific intergovernmental configurations and challenges of the Zeeland context, such as the small scale of the province and the size and capacity of its municipalities. None of the mayors explicitly pushed back against the soft powers of the Administrative Agreement or the province's lobby for a joint 'Zeeland offer'. They adopted collective and consensus-oriented leadership styles and most often neutral frames, highlighting *duties* vis-à-vis state others, instead of framing asylum as a 'burden' or 'benefit' to the municipality or as a 'gift' from the locality.

So how do these findings speak to scholarly work on the MLG of asylum and debates on the conceptual parameters of MLG approaches? The technocratic considerations that were recurring motifs in municipal and provincial officials' reflections on the dynamics of asylum governance in Zeeland resonate with Scholten's (2013) ideal type of 'MLG'. Interviewees had different views on the advantages and disadvantages of technocratic approaches. Broader questions about the political importance and implications of this regional collaboration for smaller rural and urban municipalities, in light of the 'decentralization paradox', did not feature in their accounts.

This study found that cooperative asylum governance dynamics were far from straightforward, or without contradictions and ambiguities, as mayors pointed to different types of challenges. These dynamics can be described with reference to the official motto of the province of Zeeland, *Luctor et Emergo*, Latin for 'I struggle and emerge', although struggles were often shared, and solutions found collectively. Recent understandings of asylum governance as characterized by conflictive realities (Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020) and as 'playing field' (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020) thus also capture the complex interplay, contradictions and conflictive realities involved in modes of governance, that on first sight, exhibit a considerable degree of intergovernmental and horizontal municipal cooperation.

The analysis identified three types of *challenges*. First, interviewees pointed towards challenges mayors experienced as part of external dynamics, often in their interactions and negotiations with central government actors (COA). Second, they pointed towards internal dynamics, challenges that arose through negotiations within the municipality and sometimes within the municipal executive, often on the topic of popular support for asylum. Lastly, mayors' reflections point towards local and regional 'specifics', 'pre-existing local or regional problem fields' to borrow from Whyte et al. (2019), such as rural crisis and urban decline, that shaped mayors' responses to and involvement in asylum governance.

Returning to the province's motto *Luctor et Emergo* and questions about the broader relevance to scholarship on mayors and migration governance, this article highlighted various struggles (*Luctor*). I also discussed how mayors adopted collective and consensus-oriented leadership styles focused on joint actions and solutions (*Emergo*), such as the organization of crisis shelters. This leadership orientation of mayors was reflected in their *framing* of asylum governance, as they generally opted for neutral frames, duties vis-à-vis 'state others' and Administrative Agreements, rather than frames that presented 'refugee others' and refugee reception as a 'benefit', 'burden' or 'gift'. To theorize this framing of asylum, I argued that such practices are best understood as a contextualized '*politics of consensus*' rather than local or rural '*politics of pragmatism*'.

In the context of Zeeland, provincial officials and administrators collaborated closely with mayors due to the province's small scale and gave an interesting perspective on the struggles involved in and the emergence of asylum dynamics in this multilevel setting. That said, during my fieldwork, I observed that there are also practical challenges to examining the interactions and negotiations between local state actors within the same municipality. Although interviewees

pointed towards challenges and conflicts within their own municipalities, they found it easier to address troubled relations with outsiders, such as centralized reception authorities. Future research could further investigate how migration scholars can render a more complete account of these tensions and conflicts and deepen engagement with anthropological research and ethnographies of the state.

In the spring of 2021, municipal and provincial actors in Zeeland once again put their heads together to work towards a joint ‘Zeeland Approach to Asylum Governance’. The long-term effects of these momentary ruptures or ‘windows of opportunities’, the multilevel and joint municipal coordination that emerged in the 2015–16 ‘governance crisis’ and how these networks may be reactivated later, rather than simply reinvented, therefore also beg further consideration.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all those who gave their time and shared their ideas on this research. Special thanks to Jasper Valent and Barbara Oomen for their collaboration, constructive comments and support. This paper has also benefited enormously from the suggestions of two anonymous reviewers and the constructive commentary of Els de Graauw, Andrea Pettrachin, Marieke de Wilde, Moritz Baumgärtel, Tihomir Sabchev and Elif Durmuş – my thanks to you all.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## FUNDING

This study was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research [grant number 453-16-001: ‘Cities of Refuge: Local Governments and the Human Rights of Refugees in Europe’] awarded to Professor Dr Barbara Oomen.

## NOTES

1. ‘Cities of Refuge’, a five-year research project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, explores and explicates the relevance of international human rights, as law, praxis and discourse, to how local governments in Europe welcome and integrate refugees (<https://citiesofrefuge.eu/>).
2. In recent years, the term *burgermoeder*, which translated as ‘mother of the citizen’, has emerged as an equivalent synonym for mayor. It is increasingly common synonym for mayors in vacancies and appointment procedures alongside the term *burgervader* and was added to dictionaries around the mid-2000s. The Dutch word for mayor (*burgemeester*) is gender neutral.

## ORCID

Sara Miellet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1346-5320>

## REFERENCES

- Adam, I., & Caponio, T. (2019). Research on the multi-level governance of migration and migrant integration: Reversed pyramids. In A. Weinar, S. Bonjour, & L. Zhyznomirska (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook on the politics of migration in Europe* (pp. 26–37). Routledge.

- Advies Commissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken (ACVZ). (2017). *Pieken en Dalen: naar een duurzaam systeem voor opvang van asielzoekers en huisvesting en integratie van vergunninghouders*. Report for the Ministry of Justice and Security.
- Agustín, Ó., & Jørgensen, M. (2019). Solidarity cities and cosmopolitanism from below: Barcelona as a refugee city. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 198–207. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.2063>
- Bazurli, R. (2019). Local governments and social movements in the 'refugee crisis': Milan and Barcelona as 'cities of welcome'. *South European Society and Politics*, 24(3), 343–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2019.1637598>
- Betts, A., Memişoğlu, F., & Ali, A. (2021). What difference do mayors make? The role of municipal authorities in Turkey and Lebanon's response to Syrian refugees. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 491–519. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa011>
- Boogers and Reussing. (2018). *Devolution, size and local democracy: a research summary on the impacts for roles and positions of local officials and for effectiveness and democracy*. Report commissioned by the Dutch House of Representatives. University of Twente.
- Campomori, E., & Ambrosini, M. (2020). Multilevel governance in trouble: The implementation of asylum seekers' reception in Italy as a battleground. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00178-1>
- Caponio, T., & Jones-Correa, M. (2018). Theorising migration policy in multilevel states: The multilevel governance perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(12), 1995–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341705>
- Caponio, T., Scholten, P., & Zapata-Barrero, R. (2019). *The Routledge handbook of the governance of migration and diversity in cities*. Routledge.
- Driel, E., & Verkuyten, M. (2019). Local identity and the reception of refugees: The example of Riace. *Identities*, 27(5), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2019.1611075>
- Fernández-Bessa, C. (2019). A theoretical typology of border activism: From the streets to the council. *Theoretical Criminology*, 23(2), 156–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480619827522>
- Garcés-Mascareñas, B., & Gebhardt, D. (2020). Barcelona: Municipalist policy entrepreneurship in a centralist refugee reception system. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(15), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-0173-z>
- Geuijen, K., Oliver, C., & Dekker, R. (2020). Local innovation in the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands: Plan Einstein as an example of multi-level and multi-sector collaboration. In B. Glorius & J. Doornik (Eds.), *Geographies of asylum in Europe and the role of European localities* (pp. 245–260). Springer.
- Gill, N. (2010). New state-theoretic approaches to asylum and refugee geographies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(5), 626–645. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132509354629>
- Glorius, B. (2017). The challenge of diversity in rural regions: Refugee reception in the German federal state of Saxony. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, 66(2), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.15201/hungeobull.66.2.2>
- Glorius, B., Oesch, L., Nienaber, B., & Doornik, J. (2019). Refugee reception within a common European asylum system: Looking at convergences and divergences through a local-to-local comparison. *Erdkunde*, 73(1), 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.3112/erdkunde.2019.01.04>
- Haselbacher, M. (2019). Solidarity as a field of political contention: Insights from local reception realities. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.1975>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2001). *Multi-level governance and European integration*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ignatieff, M. (2017). The refugee as invasive other. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 84(1), 223–231.
- Karsten, N., & Hendriks, F. (2017). Don't call me a leader, but I am one: The Dutch mayor and the tradition of bridging-and-bonding leadership in consensus democracies. *Leadership*, 13(2), 154–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016651711>
- Karsten, N., Schaap, L., Hendriks, F., Zuydam, S., & Leenknecht, G. (2014). *Majesteitelijk en magistratelijk. De Nederlandse burgemeester en de staat van het ambt*. Tilburgse School voor Politiek en Bestuur.

- Larruina, R., Boersma, K., & Ponzoni, E. (2019). Responding to the Dutch asylum crisis: Implications for collaborative work between civil society and governmental organizations. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.1954>
- Marchetti, C. (2020). Cities of exclusion: Are local authorities refusing asylum seekers?. In M. Ambrosini, M. Cinalli, & D. Jacobson (Eds.), *Migration, borders and citizenship* (pp. 237–263). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meeus, B., van Heur, B., & Arnaut, K. (2019). Migration and the infrastructural politics of urban arrival. In B. Meeus, K. Arnaut, & B. van Heur (Eds.), *Arrival infrastructures* (pp. 1–32). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Myrberg, G. (2017). Local challenges and national concerns: Municipal level responses to national refugee settlement policies in Denmark and Sweden. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 322–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852315586309>
- Oomen, B., Baumgärtel, M., Miellet, S., Durmus, E., & Sabchev, T. (2021). Strategies of divergence: Local authorities, law, and discretionary spaces in migration governance. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab062>
- Petrachin, A. (2019). *Making sense of the refugee crisis: Governance and politicisation of asylum-seekers' reception in Northern Italy* (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSCAS, 13).
- Schammann, H., Bendel, P., Müller, S., Ziegler, F., & Wittchen, T. (2020). *Zwei Welten? Integrationspolitik in Stadt und Land*.
- Scholten, P. W. (2013). Agenda dynamics and the multi-level governance of intractable policy controversies: The case of migrant integration policies in the Netherlands. *Policy Sciences*, 46(3), 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-012-9170-x>
- Schrover, M., & Schinkel, W. (2013). Introduction: The language of inclusion and exclusion in the context of immigration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(7), 1123–1141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783711>
- Sharma, A., & Gupta, A. (2009). *The anthropology of the state: A reader*. Wiley.
- Spencer, S., & Delvino, N. (2019). Municipal activism on irregular migrants: The framing of inclusive approaches at the local level. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 17(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2018.1519867>
- Squire, V., & Darling, J. (2013). The 'minor' politics of rightful presence: Justice and relationality in city of sanctuary. *International Political Sociology*, 7(1), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12009>
- Terlouw, A., & Böcker, A. (2019). Mayors' discretion in decisions about rejected asylum seekers. In P. Minderhoud, S. Mantu, & K. Zwaan (Eds.), *Caught in between borders: Citizens, migrants and humans. Liber Amicorum in honour of Prof. Dr. Elspeth Guild* (pp. 291–302). Wolf Legal Publishers.
- Whyte, Z., Larsen, B., & Fog Olwig, K. (2019). New neighbours in a time of change: Local pragmatics and the perception of asylum centres in rural Denmark. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(11), 1953–1969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1482741>
- Wolffhardt, A. (2019). *Operationalising a comprehensive approach to migrant integration*. RESOMA Policy Brief.
- Zapata-Barrero, R., Caponio, T., & Scholten, P. (2017). Theorizing the 'local turn' in a multi-level governance framework of analysis: A case study of immigrant policies. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 241–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316688426>