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Multiscalar and In/Formal: Infrastructuring Refugee Arrival in Disempowered Cities

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Abstract

This article explores how refugee arrival is infrastructured in declining cities in the US, France, and Germany, examining whether urban shrinkage affects local practices of facilitating the arrival and emplacement of newcomers. In doing so, it reveals how refugee arrival is infrastructured across scales and by a bricolage of actors operating on a spectrum of in/formality. While a great deal of arrival infrastructuring takes place locally, the municipalities themselves were found to be notably absent from many processes. As a result of long-term decline and limited municipal budgets, local non-governmental actors, including refugees themselves, have been found to play important roles alongside regional and national foundations in shaping arrival in the cities under investigation. While bottom-up action was found to have considerable impact through various interventions, its influence was constrained as its institutionalization was contingent upon funding from external entities such as foundations. The article introduces the concept of multiscalar arrival infrastructuring to showcase these complex interdependencies and to question the power imbalances and competing interests among actors shaping arrival infrastructures for newcomers in downscaled and disempowered places.

Keywords

arrival infrastructures; left behind places; refugee arrival; urban decline

1. Introduction

Refugees are increasingly arriving and settling in economically and demographically declining areas and places considered "left behind." They arrive through national dispersal programs, resettlement initiatives, or

by personal choice (Gardesse & Lelévrier, 2020; Martins & Davino, 2023). Recent scholarship on arrival in declining places has focused on the impact of international migration on local development (Hudson & Sandberg, 2021; Radulescu, 2021; Schemschat, 2024) and on how migration is governed in these settings (Martins & Davino, 2023; Meijer et al., 2023; Urso, 2022). This article contributes to this emerging literature by taking the downscaled positioning of cities as a starting point to examine how the scalar positioning of shrinking cities impacts how arrival infrastructuring operates. Arrival infrastructures are "places, services, institutions, technologies and practices with which migrants are confronted in their process of arrival in a new city" (Felder et al., 2020, p. 55). They are conceptualized here as a complex ensemble of actors and practices that shape arrival and inclusion at multiple scales. Our data provide insights into how the effects of institutional withdrawal and urban decline lead to the increasing significance of both bottom-up action and regional and/or national foundations in arrival infrastructuring: the result is a bricolage of infrastructuring that operates across scales and on a spectrum of in/formality.

The arrival infrastructure lens in urban migration studies has sparked insightful analyses of how arrival is facilitated locally and how it manifests socio-spatially, resulting in context-sensitive studies of refugee arrival. Studying arrival infrastructuring implies investigating the interrelations among actors, their capital, and their arrival contexts. Some of that research has focused on arrival in disadvantaged settings (see Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Phillimore, 2021; Seethaler-Wari, 2018), underlining the impact of urban contexts on arrival. For example, arrival settings marked by long-term decline often struggle with shrinking municipal budgets and social challenges, and they are often home to smaller populations of established migrants thus impacting opportunities for social and economic inclusion. Yet, so far, only a few authors have explicitly discussed the processes of arrival infrastructuring and downscaling of cities together. Notable exceptions are Haase et al.'s (2020) study of Leipzig's Inner East and El-Kayed et al.'s (2020) work on peripheral estates as arrival places. Recently, a growing number of research consortia pay attention to international migration in peripheral places, including areas experiencing decline (see, for example, Welcoming Spaces, 2024).

Urban decline is a structural phenomenon since long-term population loss transforms places both in terms of their socio-economic profiles and their built environment (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Understanding how downscaling affects arrival infrastructuring merits further analysis because "the relative positioning of a city within hierarchical fields of power may well lay the ground for the life chances and incorporation opportunities of migrants locally and transnationally" (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009, p. 189). Declining places are ambivalent places of arrival for newcomers as they can facilitate or hinder emplacement. This study follows Meeus et al. (2019) in recognizing the potentially ambivalent nature of arrival infrastructures, too, acknowledging that they can facilitate arrival and inclusion while simultaneously hindering it through policies or other restrictive regulations. This double-ambivalence calls for a better understanding of the ways in which arrival infrastructing functions across actor landscapes and scales to which this article aims to contribute. It starts from the assumption that the urban arrival context shapes local processes of infrastructuring arrival and thus seeks to understand the impact of urban decline and a city's scalar positioning on these processes and the actors involved.

Declining cities are not cut off from translocal networks of international migrants, and scholars have emphasized how migrants contribute significantly to urban processes. In her work on cities and diasporic networks, Sassen (2002, p. 217) has highlighted that the global city "operates as a partly denationalized platform for global capital and, at the same time, is emerging as a key site for the most astounding mix of

people from all over the world" and therefore becomes a site where the "incipient unbundling of the exclusive authority over territory and people… long associated with the national state" occurs. Consequently, migrant and refugee collectives have become significant actors who shape urban environments. While Sassen's work focused on global cities, smaller localities, too, have grown in importance within arrival geographies due to, for example, dispersal and resettlement programs (see Bose, 2021; Flamant et al., 2020), leading to a growing diversity in arrival settings.

Both urban decline and international migration can be conceptualized as glocal: global phenomena with local effects (Swyngedouw, 2004). A scalar approach is sensitive to this phenomenon and to how localities impact newcomers' socioeconomic capabilities, thereby providing a framework for analyzing the influence of urban processes on arrival infrastructuring. Urban decline, both material and symbolic, not only affects the social and physical infrastructure in places but also influences historically developed local identities, residents' place attachment, and attitudes toward immigration. Such economically disadvantaged areas, often with small(er) populations of established migrants, may face challenges with diminishing municipal budgets, which negatively impacts efforts to facilitate inclusion and social cohesion. Furthermore, the frequently adverse socio-economic conditions in many declining areas prioritize economic development in municipal action, resulting in the convergence of multiple policy objectives. This can also affect the domain of refugee integration; in some declining localities, cultural diversity is increasingly integrated into urban re-growth strategies (see Pottie-Sherman, 2018). The three cases examined in this study, (a) Akron, Ohio in the US-Rust Belt, (b) Nevers in France's so-called "diagonale des faibles densités" (Depraz, 2017, para. 11), a low-density region covering a territory stretching from the country's Northeast to its Southwest, and (c) Pirmasens in Germany's structurally weak Southwest Palatinate, exemplify the interconnections between diverse policy objectives, including refugee reception and integration on the one hand, and urban revitalization and place marketing on the other. These intersections result in complex actor constellations and occasionally conflicting interests. In addition to the bottom-up practices of non-governmental actors and migrant groups, the analysis demonstrates that urban decline also leads to an increased role of upper scales in arrival infrastructuring, with new actors such as foundations and other organizations entering the field. The findings of this research thus align with previous research on local migration governance in shrinkage-affected areas and the interdependency among scales (Martins & Davino, 2023, p. 868).

The article proceeds with an overview of the theoretical concepts mobilized and a contextualization of the case studies, followed by a presentation of the methods and data the analysis is based on. Subsequently, it presents the findings from the analysis and a discussion thereof. This article proposes the concept of multiscalar infrastructuring, particularly in the context of institutional withdrawal, and offers a conceptual framework to explore it. It contributes to the literature on arrival infrastructures in two ways: firstly, by demonstrating how spaces affected by decline can lead to a bricolage of action; and secondly, by critically elucidating the complexities associated with arrival infrastructuring beyond urban centers of growth.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is committed to critical urban and migration scholarship that employs a power-sensitive lens to examine urban processes and how they are shaped by international migration. It is situated within the growing literature that investigates arrival infrastructuring in downscaled places (e.g., El-Kayed et al., 2020; Haase et al., 2020) and utilizes the theoretical concepts of scalar positionality (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009),

arrival infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2020), and people as infrastructures (Simone, 2004). These concepts not only facilitate the understanding of international migration and urban rescaling as mutually constitutive but also underline the significant role of newcomers in urban transformations. Thinking with Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009) enables us to critically reflect on the ways in which global processes manifest locally; following Meeus et al. (2020) and Simone (2004) in their conceptualization of (arrival) infrastructuring as socio-spatial practice ensures sensitivity to the actors involved and the motivations driving their actions. Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructures further directs attention toward questions of in/formality. Bringing their work into conversation builds a firm basis for the study of arrival infrastructuring in downscaled cities.

Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2015, p. 2) propose approaching cities not in terms of their size but in terms of power. Within this power-sensitive understanding of urban positionality, global restructuring processes and territorial stigmatization drive rescaling efforts in decline-affected places. Often seen as "left behind," these places are disempowered in global inter-urban competition for human and financial capital. Çağlar and Glick Schiller thus challenge the notion of isolated urban processes and urge us to analyze places in relation to and in interaction with global power hierarchies. To them, migrants play an active role in the scalar positioning of cities.

In their work on arrival infrastructures, Meeus et al. (2020, p. 11) propose going beyond the focus on neighborhoods "as port of first entry" by focusing on the social and material infrastructures newcomers encounter upon arrival. To them, such a perspective "highlights how such situations are located within, but equally transcend, the territories of neighborhoods and other localities" (Meeus et al., 2020, p. 11). While their work thus explicitly calls for investigations into how infrastructuring can span multiple scales, these processes and how different scales of action interrelate have received less attention and merits further exploration.

Many authors (see Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2015; Fawaz et al., 2018; Simone, 2004) thus shift the analytical focus to the in/formal action of local actors, including refugees. Such a focus sheds light on how "researchers, policymakers, and urban activists can practice ways of seeing and engaging urban spaces that are characterized simultaneously by regularity and provisionality" (Simone, 2004, p. 408). Simone (2004) coined the term "people as infrastructure" and refers to how, in disadvantaged urban settings, diverse groups negotiate public spaces from which cooperation and practices of living in diversity emerge. He writes:

> This process of conjunction, which is capable of generating social compositions across a range of singular capacities and needs (both enacted and virtual) and which attempts to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements, is what I call people as infrastructure….people as infrastructure describes a tentative and often precarious process of remaking the inner city, especially now that the policies and economies that once moored it to the surrounding city have mostly worn away. (Simone, 2004, pp. 410–411)

Although in many ways different from the urban context of Johannesburg based on which Simone formulated his reflections on urban in/formality, his reflections are also fruitful for the study of in/formality in decline-affected cities. In the places studied here, local actors tried to make the most of the limited resources available, engaged in negotiations of public space and belonging, and partook in efforts to build

livelihoods under conditions of institutional withdrawal, thereby reshaping the city. Finally, Simone's writings support an analysis of in/formalities and arrival infrastructuring that is sensitive to local urban histories.

Before presenting the findings, the following sections provide an overview of the methods employed and a contextualization of the three cases studied.

3. Methods and Case Study Selection

The reflections in this article build on a qualitative exploration of refugee arrival in three cities experiencing urban decline: Akron, Ohio in the US, Nevers in France, and Pirmasens in Germany. The case studies are emblematic cases of urban shrinkage in their respective national contexts and have emerged as arrival places for refugees, making them interesting cases for the study of arrival infrastructuring under urban decline. Their differences in welfare regimes and migration governance add complexity to the "comparative gesture" (Robinson, 2011) undertaken in this article, and result in a design that follows a most similar/most different logic (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). All three cities have seen a long-term demographic decline since the 1960s and the 1970s. Selective out-migration, aging, high poverty and unemployment rates, and low tax bases are shrinkage-reinforcing factors. All countries have seen increasingly hostile immigration legislation at the national level. While challenging, this case study constellation provided rich insights into arrival infrastructuring in "left behind" places.

Collected between 2019 and 2022, mainly qualitative data were subject to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data. Additionally, data were collected via urban (virtual) walks, observations, documents, media analysis, and archival work. Interview participants were identified through purposive sampling via investigations into local administrations and actors involved in refugee arrival, upon which snowball sampling was applied to extend the pool of participants. In total, 68 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the three locales, which were enriched by informal conversations held via WhatsApp and email as well as during two walking interviews and two group discussions. The interviewee pool covers relevant actors, including refugees, long-term residents, members of local governments, policymakers in urban planning, and volunteers and representatives of organizations active in refugee arrival and integration. The interview structures varied from actor group to actor group but largely centered on the cities' trajectories of growth and decline, how refugee arrival was experienced and managed, and how newcomers perceived their declining places of arrival. The research project was conducted in large parts during the Covid-19 pandemic, rendering on-site fieldwork challenging and sometimes impossible. To address lockdown-induced obstacles, digital ethnographic approaches were employed, including virtual walks via extensive Google Street View databases and remote interviewing. The chosen methodological approach made it possible to overcome the challenges of conducting fieldwork during the pandemic and allowed for rich data that supported an in-depth mapping of actors involved in arrival infrastructuring across scales. The remainder of this article presents the results.

4. Results

The subsequent sections focus on arrival infrastructuring across scales via a broad mapping of local actor constellations based on fields of action and the scales at which actors operate. The discussion then seeks

to find answers to the question of how the identified multiscalar arrival infrastructuring practices and urban decline are related.

4.1. Local Contexts: Urban Growth and Decline, Refugee Arrival, and Emerging Fields of Action

The analysis focused on three fields of action relevant to arrival: social inclusion, economic inclusion, and arrival. The field of social inclusion comprises a variety of practices and localities. Practices include the facilitation of intercultural exchange, access to social networks, language acquisition, and legal support, and places ranged from shops to cultural centers. Economic inclusion spans action in the realms of economic integration and autonomy of refugees and economic revitalization. Finally, the field of arrival encompasses the actors involved in facilitating arrival, notably concerning housing. The power-sensitive analysis revealed sometimes conflicting interests of the actors across these fields of action.

For all three cases, the analysis revealed complex actor constellations in infrastructuring arrival. Volunteering and non-governmental action were important in all localities and often emerged in part as a response to the places' downscaled positioning. The socio-economic effects of decline, including limited municipal budgets, paved ways for non-municipal actors—be they non-governmental organizations, residents, refugee community organizations (RCOs), or regional and national foundations—to shape arrival infrastructures either by integrating newly arrived populations into pre-existing programs or by responding to the decline-induced challenges, such as daily transport or economic integration. The conceptual mapping of these actors in Figures 1, 2, and 3 highlights the complexities of the arrival infrastructuring across scales. The municipal governments of the places studied here were not found to play driving roles in infrastructuring arrival. Akron remains an exception as the only city that has developed a welcoming plan, which, while partly symbolic, institutionalizes the city as welcoming. The plan provides newcomers and those involved in arrival infrastructuring with a public discourse to which they can tie their action, and creates the possibility of holding municipal leaders accountable.

Former "rubber capital of the world," Akron's rapid deindustrialization led to a population loss of over 35% (US Census Bureau, n.d.). However, since the early 2000s, the city has become an important location for refugee resettlement in Ohio, making the local resettlement agency a driving actor in this field of action. The agency works with voluntary agencies at regional scales, which, in turn, cooperate with the UNHCR. Arrival in Akron is thus organized in a truly multiscalar way with actors at national and supranational scales determining the number of refugee arrivals and a resettlement agency supporting newcomers both financially and in terms of housing at neighborhood scale. The arrival of resettled refugees and newcomers from other parts of the US, driven by a growing community of newcomers, local organizations, and jobs in the service and manufacturing sectors, has mitigated the city's demographic decline (New American Economy, 2017). In Akron's North Hill neighborhood, a district significantly influenced by refugee resettlement, numerous shops, associations, and cultural centers have revitalized previously vacant buildings, and the city formalized its welcoming stance with an aforementioned Welcoming Plan in 2017. The plan centers on the economic contribution of newcomers and was developed with other local organizations, putting forward how newcomers contribute to the rescaling of Akron. Akron's arrival infrastructures are concentrated in North Hill. As a historic immigrant neighborhood, North Hill has branded itself as an international district supported by various RCOs promoting cross-cultural encounters, integration, and local cohesion. The substantial number of refugee-led organizations is partly due to

resettlement agencies' support ceasing after approximately 90 days, necessitating refugees to become self-sufficient. As a result, refugee-run businesses and RCOs actively shape social and economic inclusion at the neighborhood level. Additionally, numerous foundations support local initiatives for housing and socio-economic inclusion which are offered by, amongst others, community development corporations (CDCs). In light of the city's post-industrialization and experiences with population loss, and in line with the Welcoming Plan, many local actors promote the role of refugees in local revitalization. Figure 1 provides an overview of arrival infrastructures across scales in Akron.

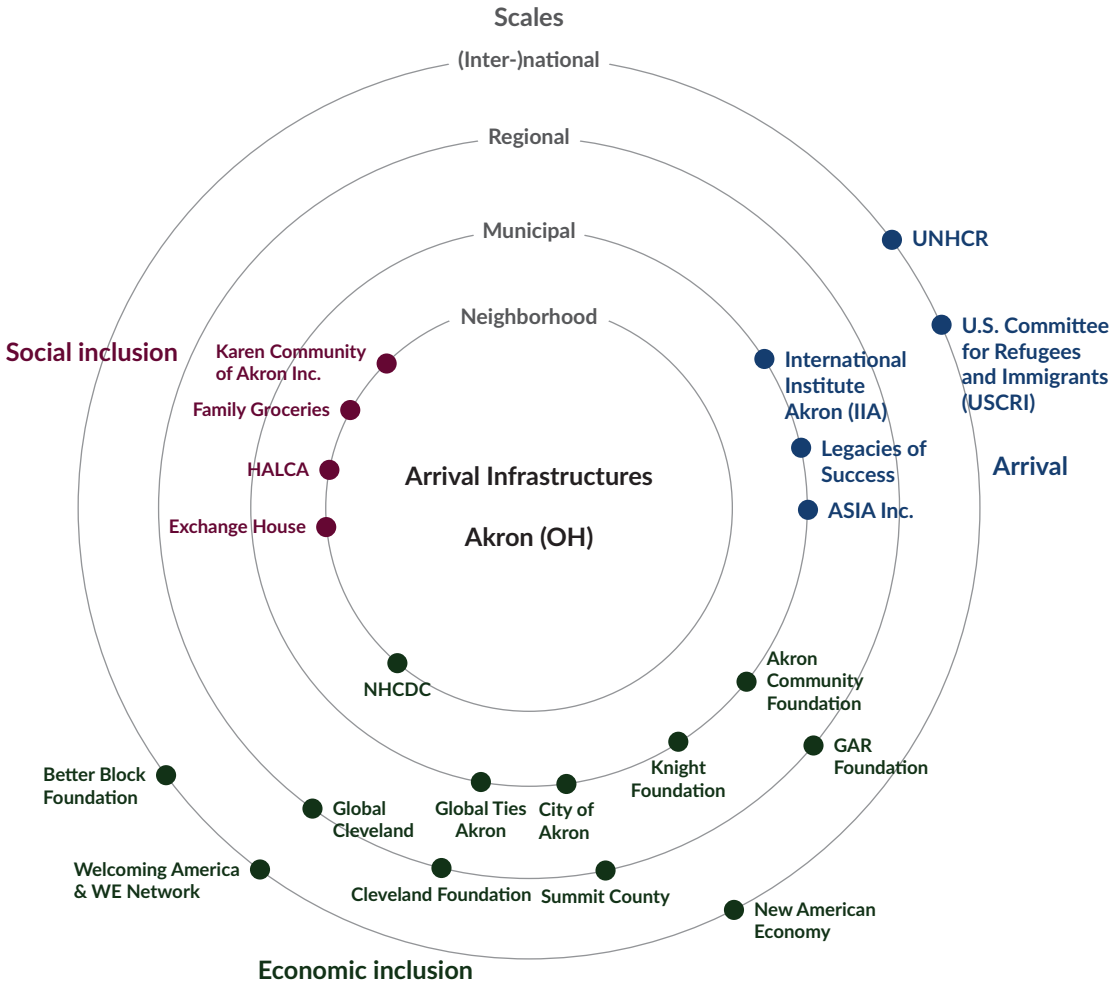

Figure 1. Arrival infrastructures across scales (Akron, Ohio).

In Pirmasens, arrival infrastructures are shaped by nationally organized arrival alongside the local provision of services by associations. Having undergone large-scale deindustrialization with a loss of 30% of its population by 2021, Pirmasens saw a slight demographic increase in 2022 (Statista, 2023). A mid-sized city in Germany's Southwest Palatinate, shrinkage effects such as high residential vacancy rates and low costs of living have allowed the city to provide arriving refugees with decentralized housing, i.e., in vacant apartments scattered throughout the city. However, according to interviews, the city was quickly unable to adequately manage refugee arrivals post-2016. While the case of Akron exemplifies a local discourse focused on the benefits of refugee resettlement for declining cities, narratives in Pirmasens emphasize the strained social services in a municipality significantly affected by prolonged economic and demographic

decline. Nevertheless, Pirmasens' residents and local organizations contribute substantially to infrastructuring processes through volunteer work and charitable organizations, particularly in the domain of social inclusion. Support for newcomers relies heavily on these practices in a city where long-term decline results in many long-term residents needing support, too. Wide-spread residential vacancies and low costs of living led to the increased arrival of recognized refugees during Europe's "long summer of migration" (Hess et al., 2016). At the time of data collection, the municipal leadership was rather pessimistic regarding the positive impact of newcomers on the city: "The influx of refugees is good for Pirmasens if the newcomers contribute something and do not burden the authorities" (Pirmasens, interview, June 2021). Tied to this, there is great effort towards the economic inclusion of refugees which is largely facilitated by municipal actors, including employment agencies and a coordinator for the education of newcomers (*Bildungskoordinator für Neuzugewanderte*), who work in close cooperation with other local actors. Figure 2 below visualizes the infrastructuring of arrival in Pirmasens.

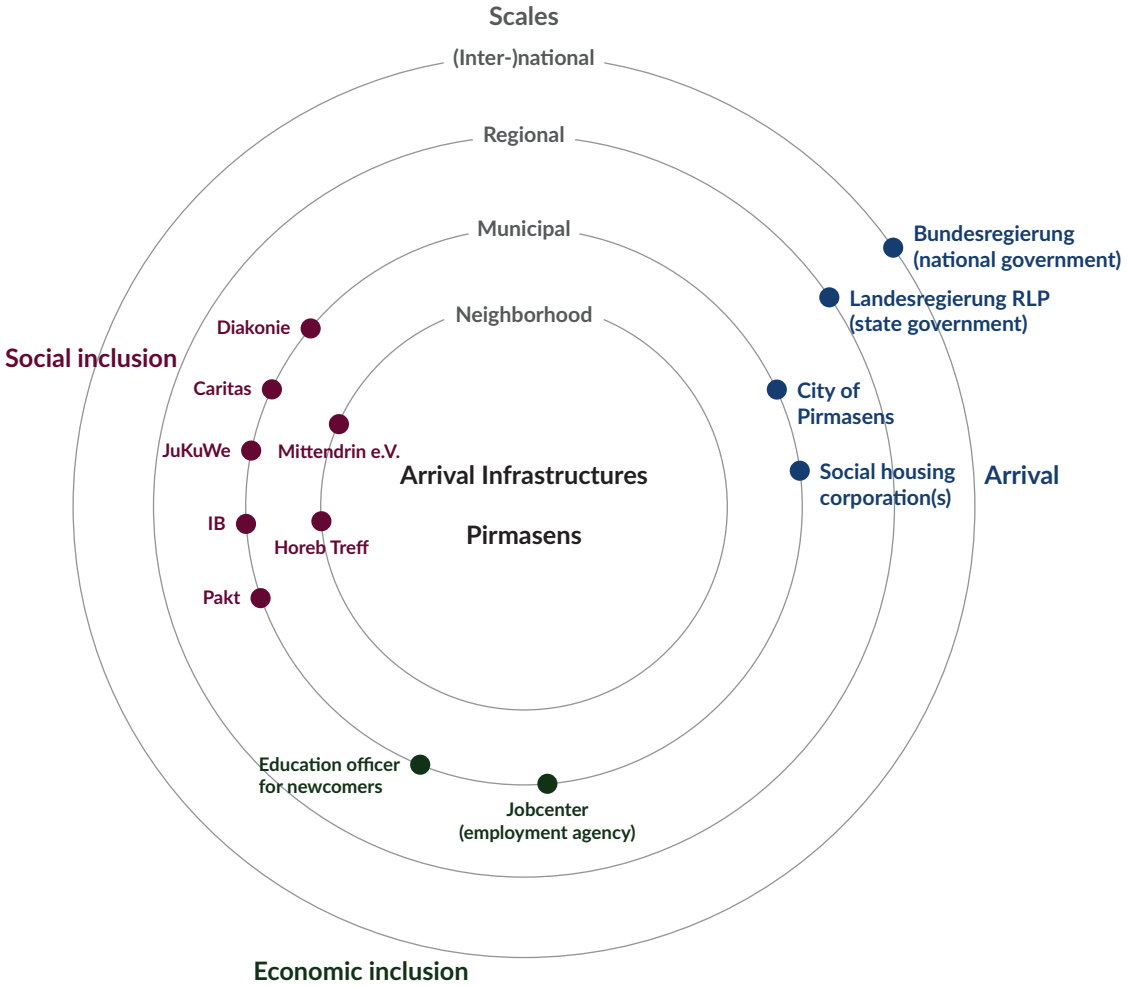

Figure 2. Arrival infrastructures across scales (Pirmasens).

Finally, Nevers is a mid-sized city in central France and the administrative seat of the Nièvre department. It has also lost almost 30% of its population since 1975; of the 45,480 inhabitants at that time, 32,284 were left in 2020 (INSEE, 2023). Refugees in Nevers arrive predominantly through the French national dispersal scheme that redirects refugee arrivals from the so-called "hot spots" to less densely populated areas in

France. The promise of dispersal, away from metropolitan areas or border towns, provides individuals with housing but often implies the deprivation of social networks concentrated in larger cities. As such, arrival remains strongly shaped by national organizations and their local partners. With regards to the latter, a local foundation is mandated by the French state to provide housing, language courses, and support for economic integration of individuals under international protection. However, the country was found to be chronically unable (or unwilling) to house asylum seekers so that residents are often involved in infrastructuring arrival informally by providing accommodation, legal support, transport across the region or clothing. While volunteers underlined in interviews both humanitarian and political motives, some also expressed that it was important for newcomers to stay in a city that has seen many of its young residents leave. Besides a government-driven part of arrival infrastructuring, there is thus a detached arm of local arrival infrastructuring that is predominantly driven by a well-organized and regionally connected network of volunteers, as can be seen in Figure 3.

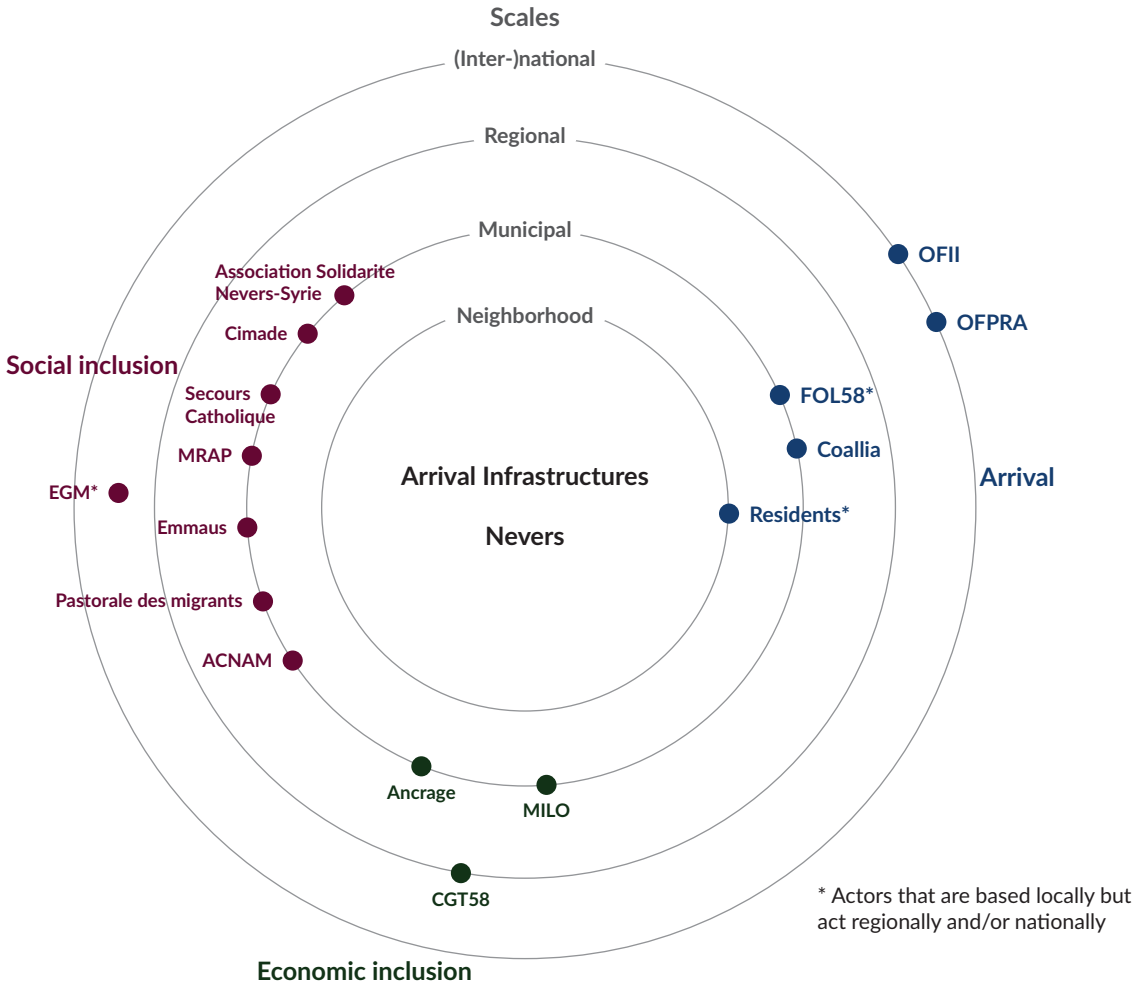

Figure 3. Arrival infrastructures across scales (Nevers).

The mapping of actors in the three localities and the reading of their actions through a scalar lens exposed both cooperation and disconnection. In all three cases, national scales continue to play important roles in arrival, as immigration continues to be governed nationally. However, social and economic inclusion was found to be infrastructured largely through non-governmental actors across scales, with a frequent concentration of

action at the local scale. Interestingly, urban decline in cities appears to have driven a process in which both regional and local scales grew in importance. The following sections will discuss this in more detail, starting with the role of in/formal practices at local and neighborhood levels.

4.2. Infrastructuring Arrival In/Formally and From the Bottom-Up

As tax revenues shrink with the cities' populations, municipalities' ability to invest in social infrastructure can be limited, rendering the engagement of residents and non-governmental organizations more important. Ročak (2020) refers to civic action as part of the software of shrinking places and emphasizes its potential role in dealing with decline. The analysis shows that they are also important for facilitating refugee arrival; in all three cases, arrival is to varying degrees infrastructured at neighborhood levels, largely by local organizations and NGOs, but also by individuals, often refugees themselves or established migrants who act as arrival brokers (Hans, 2023; Phillimore et al., 2018; Wessendorf, 2018). Such brokers provide newcomers with orientation and are crucial in places with fewer opportunity structures. Through shared experiences and language, brokers and other refugees "provide an important source of practical support and emotional backing" (Adam et al., 2019, p. 43), which are crucial in arrival infrastructuring from the bottom-up. When shrinking cities lack such established migrant populations, arriving refugees are more likely to engage in onward mobility when opportunities arise and rely more strongly on local support from other social and faith-based organizations. This could be seen in Pirmasens and Nevers, where several respondents signalized that the two cities were good places to be for the time being, lending importance to the notion of temporality in arrival.

Temporality also appears to have played a role in determining whether newcomers engaged in arrival infrastructuring: where refugee resettlement had been in progress for an extended period, there was a higher likelihood that brokers would play active roles in arrival infrastructuring. Akron, a place that looks back at 20 years of refugee resettlement, clearly demonstrates that. In North Hill, arrival brokers served as first points of contact but also functioned as vocal representatives for their communities in city-scale discussions. A notable example is Pema, a Bhutanese refugee who has resided in Akron for many years. He maintains transnational connections and is frequently cited as a point of contact for individuals who have not yet been resettled. During one of our discussions, our respondent Pema indicated that as a community leader, he regularly participated in municipal programs aimed at enhancing the wider public's understanding of local refugee communities. He is convinced of such municipal strategies and their capacity to reach larger audiences:

> They're getting it out to the public and to people who have complaints. And you know, it helps to balance out any prejudices…most of the vacant lots are gone. The city is getting a lot more money because there are many people working in the city, they're taxpayers, and homebuyers contributing property taxes. And grocery stores, I mean, a small grocery store like mine: I'm contributing thousands of dollars every year. And there are several businesses like mine in this place. (Pema, interview, February 2021)

Pema's account is exemplary for a distinct narrative that ties refugee presence in North Hill to the neighborhood's revitalization. In relation to the city's history of urban decline, Pema spoke on multiple occasions during our interviews about the challenges that newly arrived refugees encounter, particularly regarding employment opportunities. As an intermediary between residents, local organizations, and the

municipality, Pema not only serves as a frequently consulted community leader by local organizations but also operates as a local business proprietor; Unable to obtain familiar Bhutanese goods, he established his own store when the commute from Akron to Cleveland became excessively burdensome: "Since the refugee population [was] growing and the needs [were] growing, the demands [were] growing, and so we thought: 'How about we collect all the food and get it all in one place? How about we open a store?' " (Pema, interview, February 2021). Beyond providing access to goods, his grocery store emerged as a significant space for the local Southeast Asian refugee community, as it transitioned into a space of encounter and an information hub during the pandemic. This transition also underscores the social role of migrant entrepreneurship in such settings. To that end, several migrant-led organizations providing services ranging from social care and translations to intercultural exchange accompany Pema's shop as part of the local arrival infrastructure. Particularly in contexts with disadvantageous opportunity structures for immigrants, migrant organizations, RCOs, and other NGOs are essential due to their proximity to the community and quasi-institutional character (de Wit & Koopmans, 2005). Interview participants in Akron emphasized the significance of these organizations, as national support via local resettlement agencies ceases after 90 days. Consequently, several RCOs and other local organizations frequently operate with considerable autonomy from the city administration, with numerous organizations established by members of the South Asian refugee community, as our respondent Pema illustrates. Examples include ASIA Inc., the Ka'ren Community of Akron, and HALCA. In certain instances, culturally sensitive services are provided to all refugees, irrespective of their national background. ASIA Inc. has been cited by multiple interview participants as playing a driving role in arrival infrastructuring and was a partner in the development of the municipal Welcoming Plan. This positions the organization strategically between the city and neighborhood scales.

In Nevers, infrastructuring arrival at the neighborhood and city scales is carried out largely by a local foundation tasked with the implementation of national policies: FOL58. It coordinates housing locally and regionally and provides language courses and other training to facilitate social and economic inclusion. It partners with various local and regional actors, including social housing corporations, NGOs, and organizations from the business sector. As their services reach only individuals who are seeking asylum or who are recognized as refugees, other local NGOs and residents provide support for individuals who fall outside these categories. One of them is the AFPLI, which offers alphabetization and language courses to newcomers, regardless of their recognition status. As an open space for learning and meeting others, the organization supports refugees in their attempts to overcome structural barriers. It is also a member of the regional chapter of the EGM, a countrywide network of volunteers and NGOs, which I will return to in the next section. Local action in Nevers is thus a good example of local arrival infrastructuring and how it exists on a spectrum of in/formality with state-mandated NGOs, smaller organizations, and residents participating in infrastructuring refugee arrival (sometimes cooperatively).

In Pirmasens, a migrant council forms an institutional link between the local population of migrants on the one hand, and the municipality on the other. Further, so-called *Quartiersbüros* (neighborhood centers) build important spaces for residents to profit from programming and services, including language courses or fostering encounters. One of the centers' managers emphasized the co-productive nature of these centers saying:

> [We] attached great importance to the fact that the citizens are aware that [the office] is something that is built up together with them and not something that is imposed on them from above, as is often the

> case with social projects, where a person comes and says "I know what is good for you". (neighborhood center, interview, December 2020)

Both the council and *Quartiersbüros* function as formal intermediaries between newcomers and the city. More significantly, however, the local network Pakt plays a crucial role in infrastructuring arrival through the coordination of various volunteering initiatives. As articulated by a member of the network:

> Pirmasens would be lost without voluntary work. That's also why the Pakt exists….Before, volunteering has always remained an area aside: in Pakt, it can all come together—for Pirmasens. And I think this is also highly appreciated by the city leadership. (Pakt, interview, May 2021)

The case of Pakt is noteworthy insofar as the pronounced effects of long-term decline have led to the proliferation of self-help practices and volunteering over time, which was subsequently coordinated and institutionalized within the network. Such coordination facilitates an integrated approach to volunteering, which benefits a large range of vulnerable residents. While not targeted exclusively at refugee populations, Pakt has become a crucial element in the local arrival infrastructures in Pirmasens, particularly post-2015 when refugee arrivals increased. As confirmed by our quoted respondent, support from local political leadership is crucial and underlines the necessity for municipal governments support to sustain such activities. Through its open structure, the accessibility of the coordinating office (which relocated from the city hall to one of the city's more severely decline-affected neighborhoods), and multiple programs, Pakt significantly shapes local arrival infrastructuring via the inclusion of refugee populations into its existing programs and services: be it the distribution of clothing or afternoon activities for children, most activities were made accessible to refugees as well. The network further employed newcomers as mediators with specific language skills. However, as the network is funded through donations and faces chronically tight budgets, translation and mediation support provided by newcomers remain underpaid or unpaid, contributing to precarity among refugees. As such, Pakt's practices also exemplify the ambivalences inherent in arrival infrastructuring (Felder et al., 2020).

The local actor constellations in all three cases exemplify Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure: Urban decline has driven the increased prevalence of non-governmental local action ranging from informal practices to almost institutionalized action that is, in certain instances, significantly influenced by bottom-up practices. In some cases, local action has garnered attention from actors at higher scales.

The analysis through the lens of scale provides insights into how actors at regional and national scales get increasingly involved in local action, which will be further examined in the subsequent section.

4.3. Arrival Infrastructuring Across Scales: Non-Governmental Actors Infrastructuring Arrival From Afar

Regional actors, notably foundations and organizations promoting economic development, were found to be influential actors in infrastructuring refugee arrival under conditions of decline. While the role of NGOs in facilitating arrival has been discussed in the literature (Sidney, 2019; Steigemann, 2019), the role of regional and national foundations in arrival infrastructuring has been subject to less scrutiny. The findings of this article contribute to the collective efforts to fill this gap.

Starting with Nevers, local volunteers operate beyond the local scale, owing to their organization within the aforementioned EGM network. Its members provide first-hand legal assistance, informally coordinate housing opportunities, and provide mobility support across the region. Thus, they stem a large bulk of arrival infrastructuring, and they do so from the intimate scale of the home to the regional scale. Organizing under the EGM umbrella allows small organizations in Nevers to tie their action to nationwide operations, including protests or festivals. Regional employment associations were also found to be involved in arrival infrastructuring through cooperation with FOL58. This cooperation consisted, for example, of concerted efforts to match newcomers with vacancies in so-called "*métiers en tension*," job sectors with labor shortages: "We know the industries where there is a shortage of manpower, you see? And we know that the companies in Nièvre mainly need flat welding, for example" (local foundation, interview, May 2021).

In Pirmasens, Pakt collaborates closely with municipal entities, including education coordinators for newcomers (*Bildungsbeauftragte für Neuzugewanderte*), whose responsibility is to enhance municipal processes in the economic integration of refugees. According to the coordinator in Pirmasens, "part of this federal coordination was to bring the actors together and to see where there might still be deficits, where we can make a difference" (coordinator for education, interview, October 2020). Municipal entities thus continue to influence bottom-up action in Pirmasens. However, the network was also supported and technically assisted by a prominent German think tank whose comprehensive evaluation of the network resulted in a widely disseminated publication that provided the network with visibility at the regional and national levels thus elevating local action across scales. The evaluation additionally facilitated the transfer of experiences to other municipalities.

The role of non-governmental actors at regional and national scales emerged most prominently in Akron, as illustrated in Figure 4. Foundations have historically increased in significance in the US Rust Belt: as a former industrial region, there have been periods of substantial capital accumulation, from which influential regional foundations emerged. The increasing importance of such non-governmental actors can be further explained by the historically conflictual relationship between States and cities in the Rust Belt, which is harshly felt in Rust Belt cities that have downscaled and face increasingly tight budgets. As mayors of many Rust Belt Cities lost power, local CDCs emerged as political actors, funded through foundations and other private capital,

Figure 4. Regional and national foundations involved in infrastructuring emplacement (Akron, Ohio).

with a significant influence on local arrival infrastructuring. Foundations continue to impact local action in the present day. In Akron, a total of five foundations and three think tanks (circled in Figure 4) were found to influence arrival infrastructuring through various means and occasionally from distant locations, notably in the domains of economic inclusion. A significant portion of these foundations' activities involve raising awareness of the benefits of newcomers and cultural diversity for cities experiencing population decline and promoting research that underlines the economic contributions of newcomers.

Notable examples are the Knight Foundation, GAR Foundation, and Akron Community Foundation with their funding and technical support for various local actors, including the NHCDC and its Exchange House, the CDC Legacies of Success, and ASIA Inc. The story of how the Exchange House emerged is noteworthy when discussing the cross-scalar operations at play in arrival infrastructuring under decline: the building's revitalization goes back to a temporary use project in 2015 organized by a Dallas-based NGO that conducts place-making projects in cities across the US. In interviews, members of the NHCDC explained that the building was initially acquired by said foundation for their activities but then transferred to NHCDC. Today, the Exchange House is an integral part of infrastructuring arrival in North Hill. Similarly, Cleveland-based foundation funds the CDC Legacies of Success. Another Cleveland-based actor is Global Cleveland, which has shown itself interested in other Rust-Belt cities' stories of refugee arrival and refugee-led revitalization. The organization focuses on networking and community engagement while promoting stories that exemplify the advantages of immigration for declining US cities. In Akron, they support amongst others ASIA Inc. The involvement of Global Cleveland and the Cleveland Foundation underlines the political nature of arrival infrastructuring in a region where cities have an interest in retaining newcomers but often stand in political opposition to conservative State governments. These foundations' funding thus also allows local actors to continue their work, even if regional or national politics pursue opposing agendas or when municipal budgets are too tight.

In the following section, we will discuss these socio-political dimensions of infrastructuring arrival in declining cities in more detail.

4.4. Socio-Political Dimensions of Multiscalar Infrastructuring

As indicated in the previous sections, arrival infrastructuring in the studied locations manifested differently in space, contingent upon historical and social contexts as well as local politics. For instance, the complexity of the concerted infrastructuring of arrival in Akron can be attributed in part to historically entrenched racial inequalities. These can result in conflicting positions associated with the differentiated needs and experiences of newcomers in relation to long-term residents that belong to marginalized groups. This is in line with previous research by Franklin (2019) which found that Black residents are disproportionately affected by the effects of urban decline in US shrinking cities. In such settings, questions regarding resource allocation have emerged as crucial conflict lines as numerous residential groups feel in need of support or experience disadvantage. Consequently, migrant organizations, as institutionalized networks, play a crucial role and facilitate political integration in (super)diverse contexts (Eggert & Pilati, 2014, p. 872).

Conflicts also emerged as a theme from interviews in Pirmasens, where long-term residents were reported to express disapproval of support directed towards refugee populations. The historical trajectory of its growth and decline has shaped the local population. During the city's prosperous shoe and leather industry

period, manufacturers actively recruited in schools and factory work provided a stable income for many household members. Workers occasionally earned sufficient income to acquire second homes, which they would subsequently rent to families affiliated with the local US military base. Consequently, the local working class experienced financial stability despite their low educational attainment. The contemporary class structure in Pirmasens is significantly influenced by this history of industrial growth and deindustrialization-driven decline, with a substantial base of low-income households dependent on social welfare today. As a result, awareness of this local identity has emerged as a key factor in establishing trust and has become an integral element in arrival infrastructuring by actors such as the Pakt or *Quartiersbüros*. While local action is often driven by the logic of charity—which is often individualized and informal—the close cooperation between the Pakt and municipal actors led to collectivization and formalization of bottom-up action in Pirmasens that acknowledges the widespread need for support among the population.

This socio-demographic and socio-economic configuration differs significantly from that of Nevers, where the informal nature of arrival infrastructuring practices can be best understood as part of a broader political contestation against national legislation on immigration, which was frequently described by interview participants as *politique de non-accueil* (unwelcoming politics). In numerous instances during the interviews, Nevers' history as a socialist stronghold was emphasized, including representations of the region as *terre d'accueil* (welcoming territory). As put by Philippe, a volunteer and member of the local chapter of the EMG network:

> Here, I think there is a tradition, right? I think that we should put it in perspective with how the department [important intermediate governance level in France] is structured politically and with its political history, which has a socialist side, with an Avenue de Bérégovoy [referring to Pierre Bérégovoy, French socialist, mayor of Nevers from 1983–1993 and prime minister from 1992–1993]. Rather welcoming. Now over the last few years, I don't have enough hindsight, but we can observe in the apartment blocks racist reflections in the stairwells…. But, the last elections have shown that Bourgogne Franche-Comté remained socialist and that there has not been this tipping over [to the right] as we had feared. (Philippe, interview, November 2021)

Similar to other members of the local network of volunteers and activists, Philippe is politically engaged, close to retirement age, and middle-class. The network predominantly comprises former teachers, managers, and directors of local associations, constituting part of the local petite bourgeoisie (Guéraut, 2021). Informal conversations with volunteers indicated a conflict between them and the municipal government over establishing Nevers as a welcoming city. Volunteers, as seen in the previous quote, often tied their action to the regional socialist past and local identity. However, in their recent work, Guéraut and Warnant (2022) investigated Nevers' "socialist crisis" and interpret local conflicts as result of the city's restructuring. After benefiting from decentralization efforts and the relocation of public jobs and local authorities in the 1980s and 1990s, Nevers, like other cities in France, has been confronted since the 2000s with the necessity to reduce public expenditure. The local middle class was particularly affected by these reductions, resulting in "structural tensions" (Guéraut, 2021, para. 2) between them, the local government, and other social groups. This also suggests that the struggle over Nevers as welcoming space is part of wider efforts to contest austerity measures and their exclusionary effects.

Under complex socio-political conditions, contesting exclusionary politics and infrastructuring a welcoming place was often bottom-up and migrant-led, facilitating newcomers' agency in shaping their arrival

environments. In the case of Akron, a significant degree of organization among refugees was observed, which can be attributed to both temporal and institutional factors. Resettlement has been ongoing for a considerably longer period than in Pirmasens and Nevers, and the US resettlement system entails a rapid withdrawal of government support for newcomers, necessitating self-reliance. In addition to this, some local RCOs were founded by Bhutanese refugees who demonstrated their organizational capacities well before resettlement (Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021). Bottom-up and informal infrastructuring led by RCOs occasionally built on the welcoming narrative of the city. However, respondents also expressed concerns regarding a perceived disparity between action taken at different scales, which were considered by some as insufficiently connected. This perception elicited frustration among certain refugees, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

> We are celebrating Welcoming Week this week. One of the biggest shocks to me was that if you go to our city website, there's nothing….That got me thinking, "They were the first people to advertise their Welcoming Week, but what are they doing to inform the community about it?" It's all about putting the stamp without doing the work. There's a big gap that needs to be filled…it is easy to be informed, it is easy to organize conferences where…they have a lot of research and many books and think they understand, but they haven't understood anything. (Gloria, interview, September 2022)

> You know, I sometimes feel like the city and North Hill are two different cities, you know? We don't communicate very clearly or very often. Sometimes, if we have an event in North Hill, the city government has no idea what's going on. (Sonam, interview, September 2022)

These interviews thus indicate that while the multiscalar nature of arrival infrastructuring can facilitate cooperation among actors across scales, it can also result in a disconnect between them. The observed disconnect, in conjunction with the reliance on external funding, confirms previous findings by Gonzalez Benson and Pimentel Walker (2021) that RCOs frequently experience financial instability and are excluded from urban governance processes. And yet, more than actors in the fields of social and cultural encounter, RCOs operate in a complex sphere of welfare provision at the local scale, spanning various activities from case management to healthcare provision, which places them alongside institutional actors such as resettlement agencies (Gonzalez Benson, 2020). Our study confirms this and places RCOs as actors firmly embedded in arrival infrastructuring. Such a disconnect between the local and other scales was also observed in Nevers, where the informal infrastructuring of arrival occurred in opposition to an exclusionary national stance on immigration. In stark contrast, arrival infrastructuring in Pirmasens was integrated into local support structures at the municipal level, which were already well established in response to severe shrinkage effects. Following the German urban planning approach Soziale Stadt (Social City), local social action is coordinated among several actors at neighborhood and city scales, leading to close cooperation. All local infrastructuring appeared to operate via the Pakt, institutionalizing and formalizing volunteering activities, and complicating urban in/formalities as a result. Contrasting these local conditions thus demonstrates that arrival infrastructuring occurs on a spectrum wherein formality and informality are neither fixed states nor always distinctly separable.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article investigated arrival infrastructuring in cities affected by a long-term urban decline through the lenses of scale and urban in/formalities. Emphasis was placed on local actor constellations, how action was related to urban decline, and the scales at which actors operated. In proposing the concept of multiscalar infrastructuring and offering a conceptual framework to explore it, the article contributes to the literature on arrival infrastructures by exposing how urban decline leads to a bricolage of action, and by critically engaging with the complex arrival infrastructuring beyond urban centers of growth. This approach allowed for an investigation into the complex scalar interrelations between actors and fields of action and elucidated the political dimensions of infrastructuring in decline-affected urban environments. The decline was found to significantly influence arrival infrastructuring, both in its formal and informal shape. It not only resulted in local conditions that rendered arrival and its infrastructuring more challenging but also limited the capacities (and/or willingness) of municipal governments to sufficiently support refugee populations. For all municipal governments studied, economic recovery remained a primary objective, sometimes resulting in the intersection of economic development and refugee integration. Consequently, many local actors involved in infrastructuring arrival were also found to be committed to economic development, with refugee arrival often presented by local actors as either an opportunity or risk for the city's efforts to halt economic and demographic decline.

In the three contexts examined, refugee arrival remains nationally regulated. However, the significant involvement of non-governmental actors at multiple scales suggests that arrival is infrastructured both formally and informally. While arrival infrastructuring relies heavily on non-governmental actors everywhere, urban decline leads to an increasing dependence on external funding, which was found to be provided by regional and national foundations. As tax revenues and local budgets shrink due to long-term decline, foundations emerged as crucial entities with significant power to shape local arrival infrastructures. With significant financial capacities they offer much-needed resources, and thus inhibit great power in shaping local action in places struggling with the effects of decline. This was particularly the case for Akron which also happened to be the only city in this study that adopted official welcoming strategies. This means that even if a city adopts a welcoming stance, it may not have the capacity to finance local action, thus relying on external funding from, for example, foundations. While facilitating much of the observed local action, their involvement also exposed the dependency of disempowered cities on external funding. Parallelly, bottom-up actors grow in importance, too. In both Nevers and Pirmasens, volunteers and local organizations filled the gaps left by shrinking municipal budgets, actively infrastructuring arrival from below. In obtaining funding from regional or national foundations, some of these actors received what Benson Gonzalez (2020) referred to as organizational legitimacy.

We were able to identify a paradoxical situation: a significant number of interventions occurred (as to be expected) at the local level; however, the municipalities were notably absent (Figures 1, 2, and 3). While residents demonstrate considerable impact through their interventions, their influence was constrained as the institutionalization of their actions was contingent upon funding from external entities such as foundations. As these processes are shaped by the effects of long-term decline, we observe that arrival infrastructuring operated on a spectrum of in/formality and across scales. We can thus confirm that the effects of institutional withdrawal and urban decline indeed shape arrival infrastructuring in shrinking places, underlining the shift from "government to governance" (Harvey, 1989) also in arrival infrastructuring—with all the complexities such a shift entails.

As social cohesion and refugee inclusion emerged as issues that were addressed, sometimes informally, from the bottom-up, local and intimate scales can be expected to be particularly significant in downscaled cities. Further research could explore these aspects in greater depth. The findings from this study also underscore the necessity for critical analysis of the (political) motives and objectives of various actors engaging in infrastructuring "from afar". This analysis should encompass investigations into their relationship to national or municipal politics, as well as their potential as catalysts for progressive action from the bottom-up. Such research should also examine more extensively the role of national contexts in these dynamics. Beyond the scope of this article is a more elaborate study of the experiences of refugees in settings of urban decline. Future research should interrogate how newcomers become entangled in the bricolage of arrival infrastructuring identified in this study. Finally, while addressed in part in previous research (see Schemschat, 2024), how arrival in disempowered places is lived and experienced merits ongoing exploration at the nexus of urban and migration scholarship.

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