

Refugee accommodation governance in Sweden

Findings and recommendations

Executive Summary

In Sweden asylum seekers may choose to stay in 'Facility Accommodation' arranged by the Swedish Migration Agency or in 'Own Accommodation' arranged by the asylum seeker. After a decision of residence permit, people in the former continue to be responsible for their own accommodation, while people in Facility Accommodation are transferred from the Swedish Migration Agency run accommodation in the reception system of a municipality. In 2016 the Swedish government introduced a Settlement Law in order to speed up this transfer and encourage the geographical dispersal of refugee reception, making it mandatory for municipalities to receive and organise accommodation for a specified number of refugees. Besides refugees who stayed in Facility Accommodation during the asylum process, the law also includes resettled refugees. Refugees who stayed in Own Accommodation during the asylum process are excluded from access to this planned housing organized by municipalities, as are family members that arrive through family reunification pathways.

Swedish accommodation approaches differentiate between different groups of asylum seekers and refugees. The entry pathway and accommodation type during the asylum process will determine access to municipal accommodation as a newly arrived refugee. Moreover, while the Settlement Law is unspecific in itself concerning what kind of (and under what conditions) accommodation is to be provided, it is also implemented differently across Swedish municipalities.

GLIMER Research draws on rigorous, qualitative research with stakeholders in the region of Skåne to reach better understanding of the dynamics and implications of on-going transformations of the reception system at the national, regional and local levels.

Our findings highlight the contentious dimensions of accommodation governance, the differential treatment of different categories of asylum seekers and refugees, and the ways in which the Settlement Law enforces the municipalities to implement measures of social homelessness in response to structural homelessness. Our findings include responses amongst different municipalities, and highlight issues of equal treatment in the reception system.

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Context

The governance of the reception of asylum seekers and refugees in Sweden is undergoing significant change. These changes were initiated in response to the number of asylum seekers arriving to Sweden in 2015. While a law for a new structure of the reception system is currently underway, measures were taken to reduce refugee immigration and to disperse refugee reception across the country.

Refugee arrival

Sweden received a total of 163,000 asylum seekers, including 35,639 unaccompanied minors, during 2015. Following on the pressure this created on the reception system, and the development of the issue in Europe more generally, the government introduced measures to curb the arrival of asylum seekers, including a temporary law on ID controls at the border to Denmark, temporary residence permits and restrictions on family reunification. At the same time a decision was taken to increase the reception of resettled refugees, although this group remains comparatively small. As these measures were taken, a governmental inquiry was charged with proposing a new system for the reception and settlement of asylum seekers and refugees, so called 'newly arrived'. This new law is still not in place.

The governance of accommodation

A major issue in this development revolves around accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees. The proportion varies but each year significant numbers of asylum seekers stay in either Facility Accommodation arranged by the Swedish Migration Agency, or in Own Accommodation arranged by the asylum seeker him/herself. Following a positive residence decision, refugees who stayed in Facility Accommodation are moved to the municipal reception system, while refugees in Own Accommodation remain responsible for their accommodation.

In March 2016 a new law, the Settlement Law, enforcing municipalities to receive resettled and Facility Accommodation refugees, was implemented with the purpose to speed-up the transfer and to achieve a dispersal of refugee reception across the municipalities. The Swedish Migration Agency calculates and decides the numbers of refugees that shall be settled into each of Sweden's 21 regions. It is then up to the regional County Administrative Board to negotiate with its municipalities and decide the number for each municipality.

Local variation

The calculation of how many refugees the regions receive is primarily based on estimations of future work opportunities, balanced against prior levels of reception. Notably, access to housing is not part of the calculation. Yet, access to housing varies greatly between municipalities, consisting of both urban population dense areas with a housing shortage, and rural areas marked by depopulation and a housing surplus. The possibilities and challenges of refugee reception differ widely on the local level. The GLIMER team report on accommodation governance in Sweden is focused on the national level, the region of Skåne and two municipalities in this region, Malmö and Eslöv.

GLIMER is informed by a combination of rigorous policy analysis, qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders, and secondary analysis.

This policy brief is informed by ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with refugees and representatives from civil society organisations and public agencies on the local, regional and national level.

In this research we have focused on the municipalities of Malmö and Eslöv; two municipalities in a close geographic distance and part of the Öresund region that connects Sweden to Denmark and continental Europe.



Findings

The enactment of the Settlement Law in 2016 required municipalities to organise accommodation for refugees within two months after a decision had been made on allocating people. While the political and administrative will to find sustainable solutions is crucial, so are local conditions and dynamics. In comparison with other European countries, the civil society stakeholders are not strong partners in the field of accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees, as this issue is deemed to be a municipal responsibility.

Forms of accommodation for refugees

The municipalities generally experience difficulties in finding accommodations, particularly accommodation suitable for families with children. The Settlement Law does not contain any regulation or guidance on what accommodation the municipalities are expected to provide, and the standards of and costs for accommodation vary both between the municipalities as well as within each municipality.

Many municipalities have arranged contracts with public or private housing companies, and sublet through a 'social contract' to the refugee, or the 'newly arrived' as is the administrative term. The length of tenant contracts varies; a minimum of two years is stipulated by law, four years is common but what also occurs that refugees are offered first-hand and permanent tenant contracts. Eslöv aims to convert the social contracts into first-hand contracts. In Malmö there is a time limit of four years.

The forms of housing for refugees is both private and shared (with shared cooking and hygiene facilities), and include apartments, temporary module housing units and redesigned former day care centers, homes for elderly or hospital buildings. While variations in many cases must be understood in relation to the accommodation as such, other factors, including individual human resources, health status and migration experiences, are also crucial.

Structural homelessness and social contracts

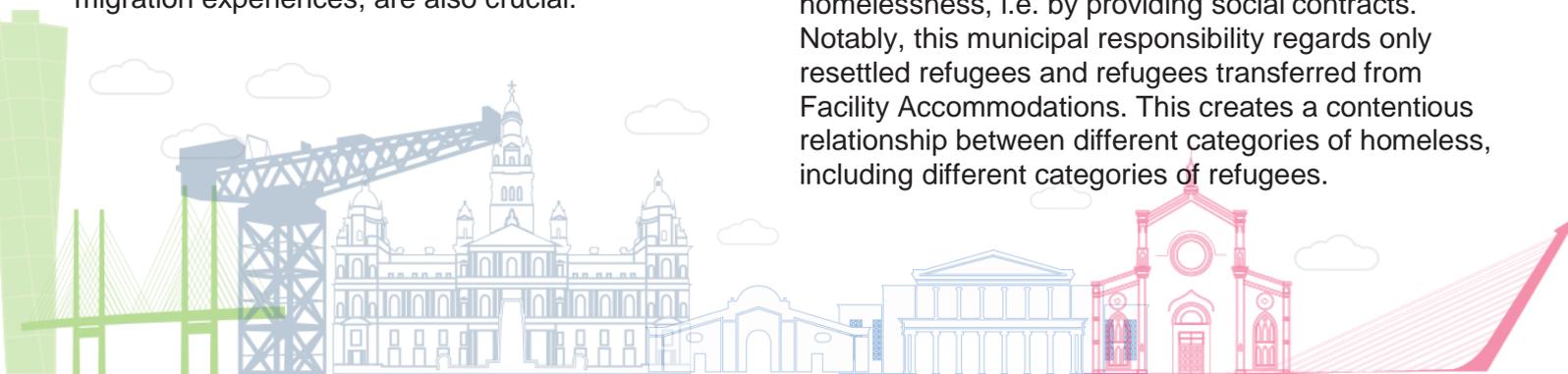
The one important factor impacting on accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees concerns the general housing situation. While Sweden, suffers from an extensive shortage of affordable housing and growing housing inequalities, the picture is different across localities. For instance, in Malmö the housing shortage is more extensive than in Eslöv. The forms of housing ownership and tenure also matters.

In order to find accommodation to allocated refugees, the municipalities approach private and/or public housing companies. This accommodation is then sublet through social contracts to Facility Accommodation (for refugees and resettled refugees).

While it might be assumed that a municipal stock of public housing would work in favour of the municipal reception of refugees, this is not always the case. The situation is more complex as the municipalities need to consider not only the availability of housing, but the use of social contracts in relation to all vulnerable groups in need of housing. This appears to be particularly true when public housing is sublet. It is in this context that we can understand that social contracts with private housing seems to be more transformable into permanent first-hand contracts between the tenant and the landlord.

Structural and social homelessness

This raises questions about the relation between solutions to structural and social homelessness. Public housing aims, at least historically, to target structural homelessness, and social contracts to manage social homelessness. While the unsatisfactory housing situation among asylum seekers and refugees, in general is understood as structural homelessness, the Settlement Law enforces municipalities to respond as if it was social homelessness, i.e. by providing social contracts. Notably, this municipal responsibility regards only resettled refugees and refugees transferred from Facility Accommodations. This creates a contentious relationship between different categories of homeless, including different categories of refugees.



Conclusions and recommendations

There is a tension between the different treatment of categories of asylum seekers/refugees, and how the Settlement Law enforces the municipalities to implement measures of social homelessness in response to structural homelessness. While this might often happen, here it is implemented by law in relation to a selected groups of tenants. Notably, the majority of these individuals reside in state-run accommodation.

Another important implication of the results points to differentiated responses in different municipalities. Needless to say, undignified accommodations cause stress and humiliation on the individual level, this is obvious from the interviews we have made. It is also likely that it delays social integration and economic independence. Moreover, this is also a quest of equal treatment and opportunities that should be considered in relation to the proposition of a new reception system.

Housing for all vs. housing for some

Most significantly, the unsatisfactory housing situation among asylum seekers and refugees mirrors a more general situation with a shortage of affordable housing and growing housing inequality in Sweden. In this sense, the issues raised in this study speak more to the political field of housing than to those of migration or integration.

Narrowing down the focus to housing for asylum seekers and refugees, our research highlights the differential treatment of different groups of asylum seekers and refugees. The introduction of the Settlement Law has, as expected, speeded up and increased the dispersal of refugee reception across the country. But – only for the refugees who are housed by the state during the asylum process.

Other – large – groups are excluded. This includes persons in Own Accommodation and persons arriving due to family reunification. These families risk acute homelessness as well as an unfavourable and uncertain situation that may delay economic and social integration, hindering participation in the Introduction Program and Swedish language education.

Knowledge gaps

This points to a need for more knowledge about why asylum seekers leave Facility Accommodation. Through our interviews we have learned that these reasons include unsuitable and geographically isolated housing.

Accommodations can be unsuitable due to health reasons or violence and threats due to gender and sexual orientation. Various forms of insecurity in Facility Accommodations can push people out of the 'ordely reception track' and into Own Housing and self-maintenance, not only during the asylum process but over a longer period if they receive a residence permit.

We strongly advocate the need for a more inquiry on the relationship between the circumstances of housing during the asylum process and during the period as newly arrived. In this, we particularly underline the relevance of a child centred perspective.

The Settlement Law does not include specifications on the standards, renting costs or the location of the accommodation provided for allocated refugees. Variation is therefore expected. In regard to this, we advocate a review of the intentions of the Settlement Law in relation to equal opportunities and how this is practised and regulated at the local level.

