

Resilience as Community-Making: Migrant Receptivity in Declining Towns

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Abstract

Declining European towns have emerged as relevant destinations for migrants, yet their structural conditions systematically constrain local receptivity capacities. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in four localities of different sizes across Germany, Ireland, and Spain, this article examines how local communities navigate migrant reception and incorporation under conditions of decline and resulting infrastructural shortcomings. We conceptualise resilience as a process of community-making and integrate it with receptivity through a heuristic of functional and relational resilience to analyse how communities organise responsibility for migrant receptivity. Functional resilience structures community-making through administrative and institutional channels, positioning migrants as conditional actors of resilience, while relational resilience does so through a broader ecology of actors and everyday social relations in which migrants become more central actors of community-making. While each configuration creates differentiated migrant pathways into community-making, both remain vulnerable to the same structural scarcity that underpins decline. By integrating receptivity and resilience, this article advances migrant incorporation as an ongoing, contested social practice rather than a fixed institutional outcome while challenging crisis-driven narratives that instrumentalise migrants as demographic or economic remedies for regeneration in declining European towns.

1. Introduction: Contextualising Migration in Declining European Towns

European towns marked by demographic and economic decline have become significant actors in migration governance. Subject to transformation and peripheralisation, they have seen their local reception capacities weakened and overburdened. The austerity-driven downscaling of responsibility for migration governance to the local level generates unequal, precarious conditions of reception (Schemschat 2024). Within this context, immigration has been framed ambivalently: it is promoted as a solution for decline, while simultaneously problematised as deepening community inequalities (Hadjimichalis 2019). While migrants play a fundamental role in sustaining local economies and everyday life, their incorporation is uneven and contested by local politics of belonging, which establish who is a legitimate member and who is an outsider (Yuval-Davis 2006; Hall 2013). These dynamics shape differential access to local communities and condition migrants' participation.

Against this backdrop, this article explores how declining towns organise migrant receptivity as a form of community-making, and how this produces different pathways of conditional or recognised migrant participation. Research on migrant receptivity has examined the place-based conditions that facilitate or hinder their incorporation and settlement (Glorius et al. 2021; Enßle-Reinhardt et al. 2024) while scholarship on resilience has analysed how localities respond to migration amid uncertainty (Zapata-Barrero 2023; Zapata-Barrero 2024). Yet, the connection between receptivity and resilience remains undertheorised, especially in settings characterised by long-term decline, and migrants' relevant community-making roles are mostly absent.

This separation creates two important limitations. First, resilience scholarship addresses migration as a shock through a crisis-response lens, overlooking decline as an enduring condition of socioeconomic peripheralisation (Haase and Pößneck 2026). Second, receptivity is often restricted to the initial welcoming of newcomers, disregarding migrants' roles and longer-term participation. Together, these approaches risk portraying declining localities as passive backdrops to migration (Cheshire and Zappia 2016; Arora-Jonsson and McAreavey 2023) and migrants as agentless actors requiring "integration" (Brovia and Piro 2020), thereby reiterating migration crisis discourses.

We build on the literature on migrant receptivity in declining contexts (Stockdale 2006; Papadopoulos et al. 2019; Schemschat 2021, 2024; Alonso-Pardo et al. 2023) and critical approaches to resilience (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Meerow et al. 2016) to define our integrated receptivity-resilience framework: resilience describes the process of community-making, including the adaptive and transformative strategies and practices through which newcomers and long-term residents negotiate and reshape their localities in response to governance challenges originating from conditions of decline; and receptivity captures the place-based capacity that enables or constrains migrants' incorporation, participation and recognition within these processes of community-making. Decline is the structural condition and backdrop whereby the relationship unfolds; and the politics of belonging reveal how recognition and participation within these processes are differentially and hierarchically distributed.

We empirically apply this framework to four localities of different scales – two small towns in Northeast Spain and Western Ireland, and two medium-sized towns in East and West Germany – that are brought together through common experiences of loss, precarity and peripheralisation. We employ an analytical distinction between functional and relational resilience to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between resilience and receptivity across diverse declining contexts. Therefore, we approach declining towns as contested sites where decline and reception are actively negotiated (Schemschat 2021; Pike et al. 2023).

This article makes three contributions for migration studies. First, it advances the relationship between resilience and receptivity by foregrounding how resilience is enacted through receptivity practices that enable or restrain migrants' participation in community life. Second, it foregrounds migrants as active agents in community-making. Finally, by comparing localities of different scales, we extend the examination of resilience and receptivity beyond dominant rural-urban binaries, highlighting the shared structural conditions of decline within an urban continuum of transformations. The following section develops our theoretical framework. This is followed by an introduction to our case studies and methodology. We then offer a relational comparative analysis of resilience as community-making and migrants' pathways in the context of receptivity. Finally, we conclude by positioning our findings within existing literature on migration and decline and drawing out policy implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Resilience: From crisis-response to community-making

The concept of resilience has gained considerable traction in scholarship on local migration governance, where it describes the adaptive capacity of localities to manage migration under conditions of constraint (Czerska-Shaw and Kubicki 2023; Zapata-Barrero 2023). Yet this uptake has also reproduced a significant limitation, as resilience remains anchored to a crisis-response logic. In its influential original formulation, resilience refers to a system's ability to absorb disturbance and return to equilibrium (Holling 1973). Transposed to migration, this framing positions arrivals as shocks and migrants as disruptors to which communities must adapt, obscuring the structural, political, and economic processes that produce precarious reception conditions in the first place (Dines et al. 2018; Cantat et al. 2023). Communities appear as responders to migration rather than as sites where migration and decline are co-produced through long-term political choices. Through these lenses, migrants' contributions to making and transforming local communities remain overlooked and are often shaped as creating new social demands on local systems based on their cultural differences (Lundsteen 2022).

We distance our approach from this narrow, crisis-centred understanding. Drawing on a more critical conceptualisation of resilience (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Meerow et al. 2016) we treat resilience not as a system's return to a prior state but as the continuous property through which communities navigate, adapt to, and contest structural challenges over time. For our interest in migration and resilience in the context of decline, and following Schemschat (2021) who highlights the collectiveness of place-making processes where both newcomers and long-term residents negotiate the future of places experiencing decline, we understand resilience as a practice involving both non-migrants and migrants. In the context of declining European towns marked by demographic loss, economic restructuring, and peripheralisation (Pike et al. 2023; Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2024) this means attending to the adaptive strategies and practices through which local actors sustain and reshape the conditions of migrant receptivity despite scarce resources. Crucially, this perspective centres on community agency without essentialising it. The conditions under which resilience is exercised are themselves produced by broader processes of neoliberal restructuring and the political neglect of peripheral localities (McAreevey and Argent 2018).

This reframing implies that if resilience is also understood as a long-term, actor-centred process rather than solely an institutional crisis response, then what is being sustained is not simply local governance but community itself (Endreß and Rampp 2022). Importantly, communities are not neutral entities. They are organised around particular logics of membership and recognition (Berkes and Ross 2013). Resilience, in this sense, must be seen as a process of community-making: it reproduces, transforms, or contests the terms on which people are recognised as legitimate members. To understand how local resilience works in contexts of migration and decline, we therefore need to interrogate what kind of community is being sustained, and for whom.

2.2 Receptivity and the conditions for community-making

The concept of receptivity offers the analytical lens through which resilience can be understood as a process of community-making. Where resilience describes how local communities adapt to navigate structural challenges, receptivity captures how these adaptive strategies are deployed through the

incorporation, participation, and representation of migrants within community life. We see the two concepts as structurally constitutive: a local community's resilience partly depends on, and is partly expressed through, receptivity, including the everyday negotiations of belonging, participation, and shared responsibilities in community-making.

Receptivity is analytically useful in its multi-dimensional conceptualisation. Glorius et al. (2021) distinguish between the resources available to a locality and how these are implemented across structural, political and societal dimensions. External policies and discourses feed into implementation, shaping which resources are mobilised and how. This architecture is significant because receptivity cannot be inferred from resources and political will alone. Resource-rich localities may deploy them exclusionarily, while resource-poor communities may develop inclusive practices through social networks. It is this gap between resources and implementation that makes receptivity analytically useful.¹

Thus, receptivity is not a fixed attribute of a locality. It is a negotiated, non-linear, and co-constructed process (Enßle-Reinhardt et al. 2024) shaped by infrastructural affordances (Wessendorf and Gembus 2024; Bovo et al. 2024), institutional arrangements, and the everyday practices through which communities enact and re-negotiate themselves (Schemschat 2024). This processual character means that receptivity is sensitive to the same structural scarcity that shapes resilience more broadly. In declining towns, the erosion of public services, housing stock, and employment opportunities narrows the practical conditions under which welcome is possible; not simply because resources are insufficient, but because scarcity frames the presence of newcomers politically and socially as an additional burden rather than a community resource (Hertrich and Brenner 2024). Decline, in other words, not only reduces the resources for receptivity; it reshapes how communities implement them, often in exclusionary ways that tighten rather than open community boundaries.

At the same time, receptivity shifts analytical focus away from migrants' individual capacity to integrate (Enlund 2020) and toward the (un)readiness of local structures to include. As such, receptivity cannot be understood in purely infrastructural terms. It is also organised by the politics of belonging, which we understand as the contested processes through which communities negotiate who counts as a legitimate member (Yuval-Davis 2006; Hall 2013). We see these politics as constitutive of resilience as a community issue. When a local community mobilises to sustain itself under conditions of decline, it also does so through particular ideas about who belongs, whose presence is valued, and whose claims on community resources are considered legitimate (Menke and Rumpel 2022). Often, this leads to the racialisation and exclusion of particular groups over others (Korteweg 2017).

Neoliberal governance restructuring deepens these dynamics by moving responsibility for migration-related provision to the local level while withdrawing the resources necessary to fulfil it (Glorius et al. 2021; Glorius 2025; Kreichauf, 2023). In declining towns, this produces conditions for migrants that are particularly consequential regarding their social engagement. With limited resources and overburdened infrastructures, decisions about who is welcomed, supported, and recognised as a community member

carry heightened stakes for both migrants and long-term residents. The erosion of shared spaces reduces low-threshold opportunities for encounter and normalisation, making cultural and social difference more visible and more easily politicised (Cheshire and Zappia 2016; Egea and Kreichauf 2025).

We see these three dimensions (resilience, receptivity and belonging) as interrelated in declining contexts. Together, they allow us to approach local communities in decline not as neutral backdrops to migration but as contested sites where structural scarcity, community-making, and the negotiation of membership intersect.

Two Modes of Resilience

To employ this understanding of resilience as community-making and discern how it is organised through different configurations of receptivity, we distinguish between two heuristic modes of organising community-making under conditions of decline: functional and relational resilience. The distinction emerged from our joint comparative analysis and provides an analytical framework for comparing how communities organise resilience through different configurations of receptivity and how the politics of belonging shape migrants' differentiated pathways into community-making under conditions of decline. In the following empirical sections, we apply these two modes and bring our case study localities into conversation.

While analytically distinct, the two modes are not intended to be treated as a binary or to evaluate the degree of resilience or receptivity of towns, since, empirically, in every locality, elements of both modes coexist. Rather, we use this distinction to identify which mode is relatively more prominent. To further illustrate their coexistence and how they may interact and even reproduce one another within the same locality, we distinguish several analytical dimensions through which their predominance will be examined in the analysis section: Actors, organising logic, migrant role and limitations, and tensions (see Table 1). Functional resilience refers to the process of community-making structured through administrative, institutional, and governance pathways. This mode organises migrant receptivity around a short-term orientation focused on management and adaptation to arrivals. Its organising logic is to restore stability and continuity of essential local functions. Empirically, it is mirrored in the bureaucratic incorporation of migrants and basic service provision. Relational resilience refers to the process of community-making organised through broader networks of civic engagement, everyday participation and shared responsibility. While remaining connected to local governance, it extends beyond formal institutions. The organising logic is to meet the long-term effects of migrant settlement, the sustainability of local social relations, and the underlying structural shortcomings that affect the experiences of all members of society (Korteweg 2017). Empirically, it is reflected in more expansive forms of receptivity that facilitate broader participation in community life.

These organisational modes are differentiated by how the politics of belonging organise recognition, responsibility and participation. Consequently, they also differentiate migrants' roles and representation in community-making processes. In the functional mode, migrants are recognised for their labour-market

participation; their other contributions to transforming and making community are generally disregarded and sidelined from the dominant structures. They are expected to adapt to existing community norms, resulting in more marginal and conditional recognition as community-makers. In the relational mode, migrants are more broadly recognised as contributors to community-making through civic engagement, facilitating more expansive pathways to community. Nonetheless, given the importance of expansive civic engagement, this mode also generates standards for proactive participation. Migrants may be expected to initiate and actively sustain activities, creating potentially burdensome assumptions that all migrants have the capacity, resources, and willingness to contribute in these ways. Similarly, it may over-rely on civil society, potentially not accounting for fluctuating availability of residents.

Table 1
Analytical dimensions of functional and relational resilience

Analytical dimension	Functional resilience	Relational resilience
Actors	Administrative	Civil society
Organising logic	Restoration of stability and maintenance of essential functions	Shared responsibility, social continuity and everyday participation
Migrant role	Conditional community-makers, labour-market participation	More broadly recognised community-makers
Limitations and tensions	Individualised responsibility, assimilationist expectations	Expectations of participation and capacity, and over-reliance on civil society

3. The Study

3.1 Methodology

This research draws on a comparative, multi-sited qualitative design stemming from two research projects. One project, led by Author 1, focuses on the link between international migration in declining small European towns and local regeneration in Spain and Ireland. The other, led by Author 2, studies how arrival is negotiated locally in two medium-sized German towns. We see the two projects as complementary because both analyse how migration shapes (and is shaped by) local settings (Lara-García 2022). This shared analytical focus allows us to bring the cases into conversation.

Both studies are grounded in long-term qualitative fieldwork conducted independently in each site. Between 2021 and 2025, we conducted 165 semi-structured interviews: Author 1 conducted 77 interviews across the Spanish and Irish cases, and Author 2 conducted 88 interviews across the two German cases. Interviewees included refugees and migrants of various backgrounds, long-term migrant and non-migrant residents, and local stakeholders (e.g., civil society actors, business owners), while six group discussions in Ireland and Spain comprised both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of residents, allowing for a broader understanding of how community and belonging are articulated. We

also conducted participant observation in community events, language cafés, festivities, and public parks. Informal conversations with residents, encounters in public spaces, and spontaneous interactions during events further complement our data. The qualitative ethnographic methodology pursued enabled the authors to uncover local understandings, positionalities, and everyday experiences.

3.2 The case studies

The four towns – Argila (Spain), Scéal (Ireland), Darnau-Roslin and Ippenrode (Germany)² – have been selected for their shared structural characteristics of decline and peripheralisation (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). While the cases differ significantly in scale, they share characteristics of demographic ageing and economic restructuring. These common experiences provide the analytical basis for the comparison, while differences in migration histories, institutional landscapes, state and civil society engagement, and migrants' socio-political positioning offer fruitful ground for a relational comparative approach (Hart 2006). This allows for an analysis of how resilience unfolds and how receptivity is articulated under conditions of decline. The diversity of our cases challenges simplistic framings of decline as exclusively “rural” and enables us to examine how processes of peripheralisation play out differently across small towns, medium-sized cities, and regional centres (Schemschat 2024; Schneider 2024). Next, we introduce the cases.

Argila (population approximately 2,500), located in north-eastern Spain, is a small town shaped by post-1990s rural industrialisation. Migrant settlement began through the recruitment of low-wage labour by agribusiness, meat-processing and manufacturing firms, initially drawing workers from Eastern Europe and Morocco, followed by Latin American and Sub-Saharan migrants. Today, migrants comprise around 25% of the population, well above the national rural average. Despite this demographic significance, there is a striking absence of formal integration policy, a gap shaped in part by Spain's decentralised governance structure, which delegates integration responsibility to autonomous communities and municipalities with limited dedicated resources. Support for migrant receptivity is primarily organised through general municipal services and voluntary actions with no targeted migrant integration policy.

Scéal (population approximately 2,750), in north-western Ireland, presents a different trajectory. Migrants make up approximately 50% of its population. The town has attracted economic migrants since the 1970s, particularly from Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Eastern European backgrounds, and has also been a key site for the Irish State's asylum seeker dispersal strategy via a privately managed International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centre since the 2000s. Ireland's nationally managed dispersal policy, operated through private-sector contracts with limited local consultation, has shaped the particular character of reception in this context. These dual processes (long-term settlement and state-mandated dispersal), together with unsuitable policies and wider structural inequalities, have resulted in a socially diverse but fragmented community. Civil society plays a pivotal role in integration efforts, yet resources are limited.

Darnau-Roslin (population approximately 75,000), a post-industrial, medium-sized town in Eastern Germany, has long-standing infrastructures for the reception and integration of newcomers. The city's

history of migration is connected to German history: formerly in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), guest workers from other communist countries like Cuba or Vietnam are part of local history. Today, the town's population is in general decline, 25% lower than 30 years ago. The current migrant population is diverse; many Afghans and Syrians arrived in 2015, and Ukrainians in 2022. The local university also attracts international students, especially from India, a rather secluded group whose experiences differ substantially from those of refugees and labour migrants. Migrant integration efforts are hindered by strong populist politics. Germany's multi-level governance system, which distributes refugees to municipalities through federal and state-level allocation quotas, means that reception is locally shaped but structurally determined elsewhere. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) holds a majority in the local council. Consequently, much of the actual integration work occurs through informal networks.

Ippenrode (population approximately 50,000), in Western Germany, represents a case of progressive institutionalisation. Located within a broader urban region, this medium-sized town has hosted guest workers since the 1960s and experienced several subsequent influxes of immigration, including post-2015 refugee arrivals and Ukrainian displacement. It is currently developing more formalised integration structures. Long-term voluntary support is supplemented by municipal engagement, such as the recent creation of an integration policy, and the first local migrants' council, elected in 2025. Nevertheless, the bulk of everyday reception relies on a small but very engaged civil society.

Overall, we adopt a relational comparative lens to analyse how towns in decline organise migrant receptivity and community-making modes of resilience under different local conditions. Building on the distinction introduced above, we structure our findings under the concepts of "relational" and "functional" resilience. This distinction is not treated as a dichotomy, but rather as a heuristic device that brings our cases into conversation, cutting across country context and town size. Accordingly, we assign each case to the mode that is more prominent in the empirical material: functional resilience is more dominant in Argila and Darnau-Roslin; while relational resilience is more salient in Scéal and Ippenrode. We use the concepts as ideal types to focus on processes rather than outcomes, recognising that both modes may coexist, reproduce one another, and interact within the same locality. This allows us to discuss specific practices, while acknowledging that both approaches are subject to overall conditions of decline.

4. Analysis

4.1 Decline as a common condition across cases

Before turning to the particularities of functional and relational resilience, we contextualise how decline becomes tangible in our cases. Across all four towns, long-term processes of demographic and economic decline provide a common reference point for how residents interpret change and evaluate migration (in line with Schemschat 2021; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Pike et al. 2023). Residents narrate the present through a temporal contrast that foregrounds loss. In Darnau-Roslin, for example, German reunification frequently marks the point after which restructuring, outmigration, and the erosion of public

life accelerated. In Ippenrode, the decline of the local mine is a common reference point. Similarly, in Argila and Scéal, narratives of loss stem from large outmigration since the 1970s. Together, references to more prosperous times establish a backdrop in which scarcity becomes a perspective to assess social change in terms of diminished local capacities (Willett 2025). These conditions, in turn, prime migration to be read as an additional demand on already strained infrastructures (Hertrich and Brenner 2024).

Decline is also tangible in the built environment and local infrastructures. Town centres hollow out in different ways (Cocola-Gant 2023). In Argila, the tourism expansion has displaced residents through the establishment of short-term rentals. In Scéal, the centre is characterised by former commercial buildings turned into temporary accommodation. In Ippenrode, the centre is the only district that resembles a town; other districts lack the infrastructure and resemble villages. Across cases, essential services like banks, public transport, health care, and social services have declined and fail to match local needs. Interviewees in Darnau-Roslin and Scéal describe how the disappearance of neighbourhood shops makes everyday life harder, especially for older residents. In all cases, inadequate public transport makes private cars a de facto precondition for participation.

Economic dynamics further highlight the tension between local economic activity and social needs. Against the backdrop of decline, across cases, employment opportunities are limited and often concentrated in a narrow set of sectors that connect local economies to globalised markets while reproducing local inequalities (MacKinnon et al. 2022). In Scéal and Argila, the expansion of meat-processing depends heavily on cheap migrant labour. Yet the industry's low labour standards, together with its spatial peripherality, keep migrants largely outside the towns' self-images even when their work is central to economic stability. This contradiction is reflected in the following account from a political actor in Argila who expressed concern over the unwillingness to address political responsibilities regarding meat workers' dangerous journeys to work across a heavily transited road:

I have talked to the town council, to the company, to state-level road authorities [...], and all I find are impediments. [...] Ultimately, every party involved turns its back and says that it is the responsibility of workers themselves to come to work safely. (Argila, political actor, personal communication, 2025)

In Ippenrode, a factory in the surrounding region requires a lot of manual labour and attracts many migrant workers. However, poor public transport makes access to employment conditional on car ownership. Similarly, in Darnau-Roslin, despite migrants' broader presence in the community, their participation is often evaluated primarily for its economic utility.

These accounts reflect a selective economic functionality that structures local contexts of receptivity: migrants are simultaneously positioned as an indispensable workforce and socially marginal. This combination is central to how "functional" and "relational" resilience takes shape in the four towns. The distinction between "functional" and "relational" cases does not lie in tight housing markets or precarious labour conditions. Rather, it lies in how local communities mediate these conditions through their practices of receptivity (Glorius et al. 2021). In the following, we first address how receiving

communities organise resilience as community-making and then explore how this affects migrants' settlement experiences and participation in community-making.

4.2 Functional resilience: Argila, Darnau-Roslin

Argila and Darnau-Roslin showcase a predominance of “functional” resilience. While both towns present relational practices, these are often informal and tied to individual initiatives. In fact, most strategies deployed locally to manage migration are organised around minimum legislative requirements in work and bureaucracy, while civic recognition and everyday belonging remain conditional on migrants' willingness to abide by strict norms. The politics of belonging privileges labour, adaptation and conformity. Therefore, under conditions of decline, migration is incorporated as an economic and demographic necessity but not acknowledged as a matter of community membership. Migrants appear as workers and administrative cases before they can become neighbours.

In Argila, migrants are widely recognised for stabilising an ageing population and sustaining the growing meat production sector. Yet this necessity rarely translates into a political agenda of inclusion. In Darnau-Roslin, residents similarly emphasise “integration” as tied to specific demands: language acquisition, employment, and conformity to strict behavioural norms become the criteria through which community membership is evaluated. Here, given the historical context of the GDR, nostalgia for strict rules for guest workers from communist countries serves as an implicit standard for evaluating current migrants. It is important to note, however, that these expectations do not apply uniformly to all groups categorised as “migrants”: the experiences of refugee families, international university students, and long-settled labour migrants differ markedly, even as they are subject to similar discursive framings. For example, residents often subject both refugees and labour migrants to the same strict evaluative framework. Students, however, are absent from residents' accounts, often subsumed under a common reference to “the students” or “the university”, which is located outside the city centre. Relational forms of resilience emerge in the ways that the host population tolerates and often facilitates and participates in events organised by and for international students in the town centre. Similar relational forms are recognisable in how Argila's community broadly celebrates the sociocultural membership and contributions of the Eastern European population by facilitating their Orthodox liturgies in the town's chapel. In Darnau-Roslin, the integration officer facilitates a number of “encounter measures” such as breakfast meetings and or community tables bringing together a diverse group of people. These activities often happen “under the radar” of the public eye, a safety measure due to the political and social climate. Thus, these activities leave the impression of local efforts being more like pockets of sociability rather than part of broader community-making.

Thus, an implicit order prevails through which the politics of belonging are enacted (Geier and Mecheril 2021) against which migrants' legitimacy is assessed, while structural barriers to language learning, stable employment, or housing security are neglected. In this sense, functional resilience is underpinned by assimilationist expectations: participation and representation in the “local community” are difficult before the “standards” are met. Institutionally, this produces a narrow corridor of receptivity through functional practices. In Argila, support is predominantly channelled through emergency administrative

services, such as the Red Cross, without integration-specific policies or planning, reinforcing an understanding of migrants as recipients of assistance rather than residents with claims to participation. Darnau-Roslin shows a parallel dynamic in which institutional encounters are concentrated in bureaucratic and welfare domains through the foreigner's office. In both cases, inclusion depends heavily on informal intermediaries and individual initiatives. While these actors' involvement offers glimpses of relational forms of resilience, their actions are deeply limited by a lack of resources. Therefore, support is uneven, difficult to sustain, and often experienced as personally demanding by those who provide it.

This approach also shapes opportunities in accessing the local labour market. In Argila, there is a general disregard for meat workers' dangerous journeys on foot to work. This disregard is racialised (framed as uncivilised behaviour) and ultimately read as an unwillingness to "integrate":

We are talking about another culture that does not realise the dangers they are subject to. I imagine they were used to walking around their native settlements carelessly, but here we have roads. (Argila, local political actor, personal communication, 2024)

In Darnau-Roslin, one measure of the local administration targeted Syrian mothers for jobs in the childcare sector, culturalising their country of origin and essentialising their character traits:

Nevertheless, the number of educators, trained educators, is still insufficient. And what we know about people with a migrant background, especially women, is that they can look after large numbers of children and that there is a certain passion for wanting to look after other children in their community, and that there was certainly also a fascination with childcare, because this is not something you would expect to find in Syria [...]. (Darnau-Roslin, local stakeholder, personal communication, 2021)

The social consequences of this institutional logic become visible in the organisation of encounters. Decline-related erosion of amenities reduces low-threshold opportunities for contact and normalisation in both towns. In Argila, interaction concentrates in a small number of shared spaces like garden plots, the gym, and schools. Yet access to these spaces is stratified. Moreover, the potential of these communal spaces diminishes when migrant youth enter factory work early, reinforcing segmented trajectories. In Darnau-Roslin, contact is similarly channelled through workplaces, schools, and sports clubs. Even where such associations offer bridging potential, interaction remains contingent and can develop in parallel rather than mixed ways. As everyday encounters become rarer, difference becomes more visible and more easily filtered through politicised discourse. In Darnau-Roslin, even though our observations showed that the park is used by all kinds of people, this has the effect that it is framed by some residents as a "migrant space", referred to as dangerous and uninviting.

4.2.1 Migrants as conditional community-makers

For migrants in Argila and Darnau-Roslin, predominant "functional" resilience is experienced as conditional inclusion: their pathways into community life are limited, and they are often sidelined from long-term and expansive community-making processes. Migrants are marginally included in community-

making rather than incorporated as active members of the local community. This not only leaves belonging uncertain but also places the responsibility for integration on migrants themselves, forcing them to negotiate it individually, with heightened feelings of social isolation.

This positioning extends beyond early settlement stages, as everyday sociality in both towns is shaped by scarce and superficial interactions with long-term residents and heightened visibility. In Argila, migrants reported that community spaces are limited and unevenly accessible. In Darnau-Roslin, migrants recounted experiences in which their presence was often scrutinised, and sometimes problematised. However, this dynamic varies here: international students at the university, for instance, experience more relational forms of inclusion through structured integration pathways than refugee families in social housing. Nonetheless, students reported that their social circles are centred around the university context and contact with residents outside the university felt hard to establish and maintain. More generally, most interviewees described instances of discrimination and racism. The dependence on intermediaries renders support relations fragile and open to abuse, sometimes with far-reaching consequences:

I also got to know another friend, a German woman, [...] But unfortunately the woman is not what I want [her to be]. She's always disappointing me and annoying [...] I mean always arguing and so on, and I thought, no, I don't want [to be] with this woman ..., not really happy anymore. Now for example, I need help at the Jobcenter and things like that. I gave this woman power of attorney and we wanted to [get] an apartment for me. I found an apartment and I brought her along so she could help me. I can't speak well, she can. We were there. We had to sign the contract and so on. But we were there, she says everything against me. [...] I trusted this woman. I thought she would help me, but it was all the other way around. Since then I have understood: Oh, this is completely different. (Darnau-Roslin, migrant, personal communication, 2022)

In this predominant functional mode, migrants' experience is characterised by subordination. Despite contributing to the local economy, the pathways that would enable them to actively participate in the wider local community remain fragile, conditional, and continuously challenged. Yet, despite and because of this conditional inclusion, migrants develop practices to cope with restrictive pathways and self-organise to address unmet needs. They actively assemble micro-spaces of support that compensate for missing formal structures. In Argila, this takes the form of neighbourly assistance and improvised solidarities. That is the case of a local Moroccan-origin fruit seller, who, beyond his contribution to the local economic activity, informally builds and sustains everyday social infrastructure of solidarity and reciprocity:

When we need food, and we have no money to pay for it, the fruit seller [from Moroccan origin] sells us the vegetables on credit, and we pay back at the end of the month. [...] I like what he does, because that means he trusts the customers. (Argila, migrant, personal communication, 2024)

In Darnau-Roslin, migrants similarly emphasise the decisive role of personal ties, churches, and community actors who voluntarily translate letters, help navigate appointments, and access housing and

work. These forms of support help to overcome the gaps left by lacking institutionalised structures and, while highly effective, remain contingent, scarce, and heavily dependent on informal help. These practices gesture towards relational forms of community-making, but unfold in the shadow of community-making processes of the receiving society and can be read as practices emerging from the very structural gaps that functional resilience fails to address.

4.3 Relational resilience: Scéal, Ippenrode

In Scéal and Ippenrode, resilience predominantly appears as an inclusive community-making process in which the challenges of infrastructural decline are buffered by social networks. Receptivity becomes more than an administrative function. It is shaped by community efforts organised around bridging actors, such as civil society organisations, municipal support, schools, clubs, and everyday shared projects that personalise support. While societal efforts are marginally present in the functional mode, Scéal and Ippenrode show more expansive practices which make encounters more common. Nonetheless, these cases also contain traits of functional resilience, underscoring the coexistence and overlap between the two modes.

The differing characteristic of Scéal and Ippenrode lies in how migration is framed locally and by whom through the politics of belonging. In both cases, migration is considered part of the community's identity and value. In Scéal, migration is constitutive of local identity and often celebrated, as expressed by the local priest:

So, in Scéal, we were celebrating our unique heritage, and also our diversity. And I think it's a marvellous tribute to the local population, the rural area. That so many people of different nationalities have come here, and yet there's never been any major tension. I pay tribute to our schools. (Scéal, local stakeholder, personal communication, 2025)

Long-established migrant groups are widely recognised as having helped build the town's economic trajectory, including anchoring the local meat-processing sector in international markets. The Chamber of Commerce founding members actively involved some of these long-term migrant residents, renowned for their influence in the local economy. In Ippenrode, migrants' contributions to sustaining the town are valued personally and through everyday interactions. Migrants are considered familiar members of the community. Institutionally, a local migrant council was established in 2025. Community work is mainly conducted by a self-organised civil society that actively creates low-threshold spaces where encounters can become routinised. Faith-based, co-migrant, or language-focused community groups facilitate pathways into the community. Schools and sports clubs in both towns provide additional meeting spaces, especially for youth, and help shape demographic change and cultural differences as everyday familiarity. In public spaces, posters manifest diversity as a common local theme.

In Scéal, these meeting spaces make use of municipal facilities: language cafés hosted by volunteers in the community hall and local pubs, craft and arts activities at the Family Resource Centre, or a community garden that rehabilitated an underused public plot. Civic actors also self-organise responsive

spaces around contemporary issues relevant to the migrant population, such as Vigils for Palestine. In Ippenrode, the repertoire is also shaped by a dense landscape of associations. Municipal leadership and a strong network of volunteers normalise contact across groups, leading to strong interpersonal ties. Most migrant interviewees referred to residents by name, telling shared stories based on deep social relations rather than contacts necessitated by administrative needs. These personal references are rare in our interviews for Argila and Darnau-Roslin and are tied to individual intermediaries. Importantly, though, this personalisation is not evenly distributed, and asymmetries are also visible. Participation in some of the spaces, for example the language café in Ippenrode, has remained concentrated among migrants, with limited uptake from residents. This instance of limited community recognition of the space manifests as a form of functional resilience.

Altogether, the local politics of belonging is negotiated through broader civic participation, expanding recognition beyond labour-market participation. However, relational resilience is also subject to contestation, demonstrating that the politics of belonging remains a structuring force. As local stakeholders actively produce relations, it ultimately remains contingent on local capacities and underlying selectivity in the broader politics of belonging. Civil society actors in both towns reported feeling forgotten by higher levels of governance and overburdened by needs they cannot adequately address alone. Community experiences of decline interact with engaged and exhausted community action, producing ambivalent stances toward migration among the broader community. In Scéal, a form of functional resilience can be identified as the town's self-presentation as a "model" of diversity coexists with a growing narrative around a "limit" to migration and the perception that migrants are straining the limited housing market and local services. Pathways to society tend to be mediated through small-scale groups organised around shared characteristics, which may simultaneously act as a resource and a container, easing settlement while limiting cross-group mixing and sometimes exposing migrants to stigmatisation. In fact, the receiving community has facilitated the creation of community initiatives for Ukrainian refugees, with solidarity practices particularly targeting this group. For instance, the local newspaper regularly features stories of Ukrainian families while remaining largely silent about the particular vulnerabilities experienced by other migrant groups. This selective recognition also stood out in our group discussions. In Ippenrode, tensions focus on a mass accommodation facility managed by the district but located in the area. The limited attention given to refugees beyond their accommodation, together with the denied access of local initiatives and groups to the facility, reflects functional forms of resilience. Especially in 2022, tensions rose when asylum seekers awaiting decisions were relocated to make room for Ukrainian arrivals in March of 2022. Local groups advocated for humanitarian standards, arguing that it must be possible to care for all people seeking refuge. The relationship between civil society groups is also occasionally contentious, as one local administrator noted:

Yes, well, it's true that it has happened before [...] that certain people stood up when members of the other MSO entered the room. They then left the room. (Ippenrode, local stakeholder, personal communication, 2025)

Tensions between community groups are also salient in Scéal, particularly in relation to the temporary participation of transient migrants – especially asylum seekers required to engage with the community during their asylum processes. In interviews and group discussions, group leaders expressed contrasting evaluations of migrants’ perceived conditional participation and contributions. These tensions show that Scéal’s and Ippenrode’s proactive approaches do not emerge from an abundance of resources. They share similar conditions of decline with Argila and Darnau-Roslin; what distinguishes them is that meaningful action emerges from a culture of responsibility-sharing for receptivity.

4.3.1 Migrants as recognised community-makers

For migrants, “relational” resilience is experienced as a personalised and socially embedded way of reception. In Scéal, migrants find more accessible ways into the community, facilitated by the established presence of earlier migrant groups and municipal initiatives. Migrant-led initiatives facilitate emplacement, including businesses supplying culturally specific goods – which are widely used by the entire population – and religious infrastructures offering social support. Together, these shape local institutions that research identifies as providing social continuity (Wessendorf 2019). A migrant interviewee recounted in a group discussion:

Wherever I am in this town, I always feel free. I can’t count how many times I wore my national attire. I never heard any criticism from anyone. There is a mosque in here. [Scéal is] the centre for all Muslims here from around the area. (Scéal, migrant resident, personal communication, 2025)

In Ippenrode, a variety of group-specific organisations – two Muslim communities, a reading circle, and a very engaged resident from Ukraine – accommodate the needs of migrants from various backgrounds.

Nonetheless, declining local systems limit the benefits migrants can obtain from community-making processes. In Scéal, while the local school system is widely regarded as a source of community bridging, many migrant families – particularly asylum seekers – reported feelings of disconnection as funding shortages and long waiting lists have forced many migrant children to attend school in other towns. This restricted participation in the community reflects functional forms of resilience. To maintain ties with the broader family structures in town, many asylum seekers have joined the voluntarily run toddler group – originally co-founded by migrant mothers. In Ippenrode, migrants share feelings of exclusion from the local housing market and struggles to find a home: primarily focused on homeowners, the market for rentals is limited, forcing migrants out of town or keeping them waiting. Amidst tense housing markets, migrants in both towns reported that they actively strive to stay but consider moving elsewhere.

Additionally, migrant community members describe how community-driven action can sometimes bind them to strict expectations regarding their involvement. The local population may frame their participation as conditional, pragmatic, and self-interested. However, migrants in both towns highlighted how participation in local initiatives collides with long factory shifts and family responsibilities, something we have also identified in Argila. This dynamic around expectations is particularly consequential for migrants’ participation in Scéal’s community groups, which favour Ukrainian refugees.

While this facilitates Ukrainians' membership, it also deepens feelings of exclusion among racialised workers and asylum seekers, who described these experiences in both group discussions and individual interviews as discouraging factors in staying socially involved. Despite this, asylum seekers emphasise the supportive micro-environments they build together with social workers at the IPAS accommodation centre. In Ippenrode, these tensions are part of the ongoing negotiation between support groups. The cases illustrate that relational resilience does not eliminate barriers to receptivity, but facilitates pathways to it, while still overlapping and interacting with functional resilience.

5. Decline as Fate for Constrained Community-Making?

The resilience dynamics found in the four towns show that, rather than contributing to a form of "normative welcome", local communities negotiate migration by engaging in diverse and often contested relational efforts shaped by collective memories of loss, long-term socioeconomic and demographic decline, and constrained local capacities. Decline renders existing community inequalities more salient and shapes local experiences of migration concerning structural scarcity in accessing housing, labour markets, and social mobility. In this context, migration becomes a polarised matter, problematised as a driver of territorial inequality while simultaneously advanced for its regenerative potential.

Against this backdrop, we distinguished between "functional" and "relational" resilience as heuristic modes through which towns negotiate community-making and different distributions of responsibility in receptivity under conditions of decline. While both modes involve administrations, civil society organisations and migrants themselves, responsibility is structured differently. Functional resilience organises community-making through formal administrative and institutional trajectories. The towns show no specific policies targeting migrant inclusion. Relational resilience extends beyond formal responsibilities by sharing responsibility for receptivity across a broader ecology of actors. It underscores social continuity, community-led practices for migrant receptivity, and the widespread recognition of migrants as community-makers. While migrants contribute to community-making across all contexts, recognition differs. In functionally resilient settings, they are recognised primarily for their labour market contributions and experience limited access to broader community-making, ultimately bearing individualised responsibilities for integration. Their incorporation largely depends on their capacity to adapt to pre-existing institutional arrangements and community norms. As shown in the migrant organisation of support initiatives in Argila and Darnau-Roslin, migrants contribute to community-making and transformation beyond their labour participation, expanding receptivity responses. However, they do so at the margins of mainstream processes and face limited recognition. Within relational resilient contexts, migrants experience more expansive recognition; they find more inclusive pathways and are embedded in broader networks of people, often being supported, encouraged to create new community protocols, or having their needs met within existing structures. Despite counting on more expansive approaches, their trajectories are often limited by uneven inclusion and selective recognition according to racialised expectations, as well as the over-reliance on civil society.

Nonetheless, these modes are not fixed characteristics of particular towns. Both are present across the cases, although one tends to predominate in each. In Argila and Darnau-Roslin, predominant functional resilience coexists with relational forms of community-making, including the selective facilitation and tolerance of the sociocultural needs of the Eastern European and student communities, respectively. Conversely, Scéal and Ippenrode's predominant resilience interacts with functional forms: in Scéal, an inclusive environment rolls back as certain migrants are framed as straining local services, reminding us of an administrative gaze.

Finally, beyond this nuanced distinction between modes, migrants' experiences converge across all resilience types: their realities are characterised by strong precarity. Across cases, decline translates into deprived communities, whose receptivity capacities are limited and overburdened, heightening migrants' sense of impermanence (O'Reilly 2018). This was evident in Argila's stigmatisation and disregard of migrant labour conditions, Darnau-Roslin's policies targeting and culturalising Syrian mothers, Scéal's growing narrative of a "limit" to migration, and Ippenrode's community groups' tensions over refugees' deservingness of support. Across all cases, resilience must be read against decline instead of a perceived "migration crisis". Moreover, the politics of belonging reproduce racialised and socioeconomic hierarchies through which migrants are valued around pragmatic understandings of regeneration, presenting them as silver bullets against the structural effects of decline (Egea and Kreichauf 2025).

6. Conclusion

The article has expanded the study of resilience beyond structures of governance, or crisis frames, to centre local community efforts in migrant receptivity amidst contexts of decline. By examining community-level adaptive strategies and practices, the study has expanded the analytical focus beyond state structures to include the everyday dimensions of migrants' inclusion. More specifically, the article refines the relationship between resilience and receptivity (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Meerow et al. 2016; Glorius 2025), revealing it as a process, while acknowledging its fragility and political ambivalence (Rapaport et al. 2018; Meerow and Newell 2019).

We thus see three contributions to understanding resilience in connection to receptivity. First, receptivity emerges as a concrete domain of resilience in settings of decline. Second, we demonstrate that the absence of structural support, stable funding, and multi-level accountability does not affect local resilience uniformly. It shapes how responsibility for receptivity is distributed, producing distinct opportunities and limits for migrants' participation and belonging. Relatedly, and third, the capacity of receptivity to function as an inclusive community-making process is structurally conditioned by the same scarcity that drives decline, meaning that even the most proactive local responses operate under significant constraint.

Finally, through a relational comparison of towns of diverse scales – from small rural villages to medium-sized regional centres – in relation to their geographical and historical contexts, we have challenged simplistic notions of decline as a homogeneous phenomenon and shown how broader global

restructuring processes take locally specific forms. Overall, the article has shown that receptivity in declining towns is not simply a matter of welcoming capacity or integration policy, but a contested community-making process shaped by scarcity, responsibility and unequal recognition. This challenges crisis-driven discourses and underscores the need for whole-of-community approaches to studying processes of receptivity, regeneration, and decline (Schiller et al. 2026).

Declarations

Author Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript. IE conducted the data collection of the Spanish and Irish cases, and DZ of the German cases. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the privacy of the research participants.

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Footnotes

1. For a separate analysis of the German cases, specifically examining resource functions and resilience assessment, see Author 2 (forthcoming).
2. Given the small scale of the towns of study and the consequent easier identification of actors, the names of the towns have been pseudonymised to protect the anonymity and safety of our respondents.