Labour migrants and rural change: The ‘mobility transformation’ of Hitra/Frøya, Norway, 2005–2015

ABSTRACT

After the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements, large numbers of Eastern European labour migrants settled in rural destinations in Western Europe where they predominantly found low-skilled low-wage manual labour jobs in rural industries. These labour migrants differ from other types of rural migrants (e.g., domestic in- and out-migrants, lifestyle and amenity migrants, international refugees and asylum seekers) and represent distinct challenges and opportunities for the host rural communities—for example in terms of novel forms of social inequalities and cultural diversities. This paper discusses the dynamics of transnational labour mobilities and their consequences for rural Europe by investigating the case of the Hitra/Frøya community, until recently a traditionalist rural community in Mid-Norway. As a result of large-scale labour migration, over the last decade the region has developed into a genuine high-mobility, transnational rural community and is now characterised by its heterogeneous social fabric. From the local elites’ perspective, which seems to have hegemonic status in the region, the transformation is a successful, triple-win situation: The community at large develops a more sustainable economy and sees population growth and reduced social problems, the locals enjoy the boosted economy and its many benefits, and the in-migrants escape economic austerity in their homelands and are successfully integrated into their host communities. However, stories told by labour migrants provide important nuances to the narrative of success and suggest processes of social fragmentation, polarisation, and contestation. The paper demonstrates how contemporary forms of rural mobilities may confront the traditional structures of rural societies, generate novel social divides and multi-local identities and everyday practices. Methodologically, the paper employs a mixed-methods approach and analyses a variety of materials: statistical materials, public documents, interviews with key informants in the local rural community, and in-depth individual interviews and focus group sessions with migrants.

Keywords: Labour migration; Norway; mobilities; multi-local identities; rural

1. RURAL MOBILITIES – THE CASE OF LABOUR MIGRATION INTO WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRYSIDES

For decades, the persistent urbanisation of populations has shaped societies around the globe (UN-DESA, 2014). However, the urbanisation process is not uniform; rather, it varies greatly, both across regions and between time periods (Argent 2016). A recent—and for the rural studies discipline quite interesting—populational shift in Western European countries is that many rural regions after years of populational decline currently are experiencing population growth (Hedberg and do Carmo, 2012). A key aspect of this rural "demographic refill" (Hedberg and Haandrikman, 2014: 129) are the larger flows of international migrants, which are often "seen as a solution to the problems of depopulation and the loss of the economically active population in rural areas" (Camarero et al., 2012: 159). Throughout Europe, large-scale east-to-west labour migration streams that followed EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 have been particularly influential for rural regions’ populational recovery. Contrary to historical patterns in Europe, in which the northern urban regions represented the dominant destinations, a large number of labour migrants from the Eastern and Central countries now settle in the Western European countryside (Bock et al., 2016; Dufty-Jones, 2014; McAreavey, 2012; Scott and Brindley, 2012) where they predominantly find work in labour-intensive rural primary industries.

The influx of labour migrants reflects and further accelerates the ongoing process of rural transformation. A prime example is the reconfiguration of the rural economic base and the relationships between capital, labour and technology, as demonstrated, for instance, in the case of horticultural production in the Mediterranean. In just two decades it has changed from largely small-scale traditional family farming into large-scale industrialized and intensive food production strongly integrated into global food complexes and reliant on inexpensive and flexible migrant labour (Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Corrado et al., 2017). Furthermore, the rural labour migration phenomenon adds new dynamics of sociocultural change to rural societies, which often have been conceived of as more traditional and less dynamic than urban regions (Berg and Lysgård, 2004). For example, labour migrants exhibit a multitude of ways of life that reflect their diverse social and cultural backgrounds. As migrants, they stand out as ‘foreigners’ and ‘outsiders’ in receiving rural communities. Moreover, they are predominantly employed in low-skilled manual labour jobs and thus are often found in disadvantaged positions in the European rural labour market, which often corresponds to disadvantaged positions in the rural socioeconomic structure. They are by their very presence defying the hegemonic image of the rural as composed of essentially egalitarian and "idyllic" societies (Bell, 2006; Short, 2006) in which an "aversion to notions of class reflects rural ideology which traditionally presents the countryside as an essentially classless society" (Cloke and Thrift, 1990: 165). Thus, migrants further challenge traditional notions of the sedentarist ways of rural life by their migratory and mobility patterns, including lasting patterns of regular physical and virtual involvement with social networks in their nations of origin and their participation in other transnational spaces (Vertovec, 2009; Faist et al*.*, 2013). In total, the labour migration phenomenon enhances the development of more heterogeneous Western European countrysides.

The rural studies tradition has long observed, described, and theorised the emergence of a ‘new’ countryside: the ‘post-agricultural’, ‘post-productivist’, ‘post-Fordist’, or even ‘post-rural’ rurality. However, the contemporary East-to-West European rural labour migration phenomenon seemingly represents several novel aspects of this changing rural environment. Most importantly, the enhanced mobility of today’s late modernity allows for physical and virtual social practices that span local spaces in new ways. The Eastern European migrant worker may travel back and forth between East and West, maintaining his/her social networks here and there, hybridizing cultures and lifestyles, and developing spatially flexible strategies to negotiate structural powers. The genuine multi-local, cross-cultural, and transnational character of East-to-West European labour migration challenges the rural studies tradition and its scholarly account of the contemporary Western European countryside and raises a number of related questions, such as: How do enhanced structures of mobilities relate to rural transformations, as causes and as effects? Furthermore, how are macro-level changes translated to the micro-level of social life: How are processes and outcomes of contemporary rural mobilities experienced and evaluated by rural actors? How do they negotiate transformation processes? What characterises power relations between groups in “highly mobile” rural communities?

In the present paper, I focus on one key aspect of these questions, that of majority/minority differences in discourses on social change in contemporary rural community. Specifically, I analyse how processes of rural transformations are experienced, interpreted and negotiated in different ways by rural actors. Two discursive narratives are identified, the dominant local elite discourse and the labour migrant discourse. I further discuss how these are both reflective of and formative for novel social divisions in contemporary rural communities. The analysis relies on material from one study case, that of the Hitra/Frøya region, a rural coastal region in Mid-Norway. Over the last 15 years, the region has undergone profound societal transformations following the large scale in-migration of Eastern European workers to the region’s booming fish farming industry. As a result, daily life has changed both for the locals, now living in thriving post-traditional rural communities, and for the migrants who have left their homes in search of a better future in rural Western Europe. Thus, the case study invites fruitful discussion of the paper’s research questions:

*How is the enhanced rural labour migration experienced, evaluated, and negotiated by different rural actors (local elites/labour migrants), and in what ways are these discursive narratives reflective of and formative for social divisions in contemporary Western European rural communities?*

The paper’s main argument is that the contemporary rural labour migration phenomenon instigates novel processes of rural change. The Hitra/Frøya region serves as a crystalizing example of these processes and fruitfully demonstrates how stark divergences exist between the dominant discourses produced and upheld by local elites and the less coherent, visible and articulated accounts produced by Eastern European migrant workers. I claim that acknowledging the dynamics of these divergent discourses are important for understanding the new social divisions that are currently emerging in many Western European rural communities.

2. LABOUR MIGRATION IN RURAL STUDIES LITERATURE

The ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Urry, 2007, 2000; Sheller and Urry, 2006) relates many of today’s processes of social change to late modernity’s enhanced forms of movement of persons, objects, and symbols. By nature, humans are mobile; as Rushdie once noted[[1]](#footnote-1), we have *feet* not *roots*, and being on the move represents the rule and not the exception. However, many social theorists have claimed that recent decades have seen even more profound patterns of mobility across all levels of society (O’Reilly, 2012), which many trace to the compression of time and space (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989). We live in the ‘Age of Migration’ (Castles et al., 2014) and in ‘Worlds of Motion’ (Massey et al., 1998). More people are able to and do move between places. To illustrative this claim, some 232 million people presently live outside the country where they were born; the majority of these (ca. 150 million) being migrant workers (ILO, 2017). Furthermore, people in different places are able to interact by means of new information and communication technologies, thus taking part in social interactions that occur elsewhere, anywhere. In the virtual world, physical space, at least in theory, implodes. Among the many results are the construction of multi-spaced identities and communities as theorised in the transnationalism literature (Vertovec, 2009; Faist et al., 2013).

Interestingly, rural societies are often thought of as more sedentarist than urban regions (Bell and Osti, 2010). However, studies of different forms of migrations and mobilities have always been at the very core of the rural studies literature (Rye, 2014). While the traditional theme has been rural-to-urban migration within the framework of the nation state, in the last few decades, as Milbourne (2007, 384) claims, “it is clear [that] the dominant focus is on *uni-directional flows* of people *to* rural areas” [emphasis original]. Examples of this type of literature include studies of various forms of urban-to-rural migration and movements such as the back-to-the-land movements (Halfacree, 2006, 2007), rural gentrification (Phillips, 1993, 2005), and counter-urbanisation (Mitchell, 2004). Others have studied more specific groups of migrants (e.g., the large literature on second home owners (see Hall and Muller for an overview), Fuguitt (1991) on commuters and Hubbard (2005) on refugees and asylum-seekers).

There are fewer papers that address the phenomenon of international labour migration to rural destinations, in particular in the European rural studies tradition. Over the last decade, only a handful papers on international labour migration have appeared in the two flagship journals of the research field in Europe, the *Sociologia Ruralis* (Bayona‐i‐Carrasco and Gil‐Alonso 2013; Kasimis et al. 2010; Labrianidis and Sykas 2009; McAreavey 2012; Oliva 2010) and *Journal of Rural Studies* (Findlay and McCollum, 2013; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010; Scott, 2015, Flynn and Kay, 2017). Presumably, this reflects the relatively recent occurrence of large scale labour migration to European countrysides, both within and from outside the European Union. However, recently there seems to be enhanced interest for research on international migration to Europe’s rural regions, particularly in the Mediterranean region (e.g., Sippel and Gertel, 2014; Corrado et al., 2017) but also in the North-Western part of the European continent (e.g. Jentsch and Simard, 2009), reflecting Woods’ (2012: 2) call for research on the “intensification and reconfiguration of global mobility patterns”.

*2.1. Emerging themes: Precarious work, social exclusion and transnationality*

For the present paper’s discussion, I find three themes emerging from this literature of particular interest. First, several papers have shown that international labour migrants are largely recruited to low-skilled manual labour positions in Western Europe’s food industries, primarily but not exclusively in the agricultural industries. Here they find jobs in the secondary segment of the rural dual labour markets (Doeringer and Piore 1971, Piore 1979). Key characteristics of these jobs are low wages and poor working conditions, including health hazards, job insecurity and flexible/unpredictable working hours with few chances for advancement to better jobs (Hoggart and Mendoza, 1999; Rye, 2007; Kasimis, 2008; Rogaly, 2008). The concept of “precarious work” is often employed to describe the entirety of such work conditions (e.g., Eriksson and Tollefsen, 2013; Gerbeau and Avallone, 2016; Perrotta, 2015; Potter and Hamilton, 2014). Migrants of specific nationalities often dominate in different niches of the local labour market, and they are often in direct competition in their attempts to advance in the “hiring queues” (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Scott, 2013). This is often associated with a downward spiral of worsening conditions.

The migrant workers’ marginalized position in the labour market is similar to their wider social marginality. The literature has documented cases where labour migrants experience extremely poor living conditions, particularly in Southern Europe. Here some migrants are living in slum-like “ghettos” (Perrotta, 2017, 59) and “quasi slavery relationships occur” (Bock et al. 2016, 81). Avallone (2014, p. 137) designates the migrant workers in Europe’s agriculture as a “new international proletariat”. However, migrant’s living conditions vary greatly and many express great satisfaction with their migrant lives (e.g. Flynn and Kay, 2017)

A related topic in the literature is the question of migrant workers’ social integration in receiving rural communities (Jentch, 2007; Jentch and Simard, 2009; McAreavey, 2012). The focus has been on the limited migrant integration. In some accounts, migrant workers are almost totally excluded from the local rural community, as for instance in Perrotta’s (2017) description of the migrant ghetto in Southern Italy. Other articles refer to the “invisibility” of migrants in the local community. Work regimes (e.g., long working hours and few/no days off) demand migrants’ constant presence in the work-place (the farm), and they rarely appear in the local community (Hellio, 2017, 207). However, patterns of social exclusion are heterogeneous across the European continent. Bock et al., 2018, conclude that “there is no generalised pattern of migrant inclusion or exclusion across national contexts” (p. 81). In particular, rural municipalities experiencing population decline welcome the migrants as they represent a “demographic refill” (Hedberg and Haandrikman, 2014: 129)

A third topic in the emerging European literature is migrant workers’ transnational practices. Apparently, back-and-forth movements are integral to short-term and/or seasonal workers who work abroad but maintain their residence in a home country. They are physically present and socially involved in (at least) two communities and must find ways to organise their multi-local living (Hedberg and de Carmo, 2012, Halfacree, 2012). Alternatively, labour migrants can become excluded from *both* spheres: detached from the everyday life in the home community nor integrated into the receiving community (Andrzejewska and Rye, 2012). As reflected in “new mobilities” literature, however, the presence of novel information and communication technologies (ICTs), both physical and virtual, have allowed for the development of denser social interaction across space, and the migrant worker literature describes how migrants negotiate their multilocal lives.

Notably, most papers discuss migrant workers in agricultural ’industries, reflecting its extensive use of global labour. However, international migrant workers are now present in most sectors of the rural economy across Europe (Bock et al., 2016; Kasimis et al., 2010), including in the fish processing industry discussed in the present paper. Of particular interest are Rogstad’s (2001) and Aure’s (2008) studies of labour migration to Northern Norway’s coastal regions, which has a long history of recruiting internationally to fill low-skilled and manual labour job positions in the fish processing industry. Their findings reflect the findings in the studies referred to above with an additional emphasis on migrants’ social exclusion in receiving rural countries.

There are a number of papers that discuss migrant labour in other Western rural societies, particularly the U.S., which seems to have a far longer tradition of using migrant labour (see Ortiz, 2002, for a review). The *bracero* guest worker programmes from 1942 up through the 1960s introduced large-scale immigration to the agricultural industry, which have been reliant on such labour ever since, either through legal or illegal routes of immigration. However, the larger US immigration streams traditionally target urban gateway cities. Starting from the 1990s, somewhat earlier than in Europe, international migrants spread into small towns and cities all over the US (Massey, 2008; Hernandez-Leon and Zuniga, 2005). Today, most rural industries (meat-packing, tourism, services, others) have become recruiters of large scale international migrant labour forces. Here they are often found in the secondary labour market in poorly paid jobs that are difficult, dirty and sometimes dangerous (Leach and Bean, 2008). However, the case of the U.S.—and of Europe—covers a wide range of experiences, often marked by contradictions, in terms of migrant adaption to rural labour markets, social integration in local communities and the development of transnational, multilocal daily life practices. For instance, Rich and Miranda (2005, 189) find an “ambivalent mixture of paternalism and xenophobia”; labour migrants are welcomed as long as they keep invisible and away from local community activities. Donato et al. (2005), on the other hand, finds that undocumented migrants are better integrated than documented ones. These studies accentuate the important historical differences between the larger US and European societal contexts of labour migration, which strongly influence how the rural labour migration phenomenon unfolds, e.g., migration regimes, labour market arrangements, and welfare state arrangements (see Wells 1996; Keller, 2013). Thus, while the U.S. represents an illustrative example of the many varieties of migrant labour in the rural industries, comparing the U.S. to Europe is difficult for a number of reasons (Simard and Jentsch, 2009) and transference of findings demands wariness.

*2.2. Labour migration and community change discourses*

The review suggests that the international labour migration phenomenon is different from other forms of rural mobilities. Moreover, the literature also demonstrates the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, which results from a number of variables, for instance local, regional and national contexts, industrial characteristics and employment arrangements. The place of origin of the migrant also matters. The Eastern European labour migrants working in Western European countrysides’ food industries are different from other kinds of internal rural migrants; however, they are also distinct from other international migrants discussed in the traditional European rural studies literature on migration. First, the establishment of the common European labour market and its 2004 enlargement removed border controls and allowed many Eastern Europeans to be able to work anywhere in Western Europe. They are not subject to migration regulations and controls. The result is that large numbers have out-migrated and the very scale of post-2004 intra-European labour migration means that the Eastern Europeans in some local communities represent relatively large minorities, who thus possess greater leverage and are harder to ignore. Second, the Eastern European labour migrants represent less distinct/visible ethnicities (Eastern Europeans) than other international migrant groups from beyond Europe, such as refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. Third, the geographical proximity between sending/hosting locations invites practices that include both spaces and may (and often do) result in a more extensive formation of transnational spaces and the development of multilocal everyday lives.

In total, the present labour migration phenomenon holds novel characteristics of major importance for understanding the ongoing transformations of the sociocultural fabric of many Western European rural communities. The literature identifies three emerging topics as particularly important for understanding the character of the migrant labour phenomenon and how it influences rural transformations: one, migrants’ allocation to the secondary rural labour markets, two, their inclusion—or lack thereof—in the hosting rural communities, and three, the migrants’ development of transnational everyday life practices. However, the assessments of implications of these features of the labour migration phenomenon are divergent: How does the phenomenon change local rural communities and the everyday lives of their inhabitants, both for the locals and for the migrants? For good reasons, the phenomenon appears different from the perspective of the local receiving communities than for the arriving migrants. In this paper, I analyse how permanent residents (the “locals’) and labour migrants (the ‘newcomers’) perceive the local communities and their transformation: their views on the causes of change, evaluations of changes, and their strategies for the future. The analysis employs materials from a particular case, the Hitra/Frøya region in Mid-Norway. Over the last 15 years, the region has seen large-scale labour migration and, in effect, comprehensive restructuring of its economic and sociocultural fabric. As will be demonstrated, these changes have parallel impacts on the micro-level of the social reality, the everyday lives of the region’s heterogeneous population. However, the experiences and interpretations of changes are just as diverse as the members of the community

3. INVESTIGATING RURAL MOBLITIES—THE CASE OF HITRA/FRØYA

The Hitra/Frøyacase was chosen due to the region’s value in illustrating how the rural labour migration phenomenon is related to more general processes of social-rural change. Years of research engagement in the Hitra/Frøya case, working on different but related research questions focusing on the micro level (see below), the locality’s character as a rapidly changing rural community—with the labour migration phenomenon apparently at the very heart of these changes—invited a more thorough and holistic analysis at the community (meso) level. As such, the community worked as an analytical lens for observing key characteristics of rural transformation processes. Therefore, Hitra/Frøya represents an *extreme* and illustrative case, not a *representative* case (Yin, 2009). For example, Hitra/Frøya stands out from other Norwegian rural communities in terms of its high numbers of migrants and expansive economy. Furthermore, properties of the larger Norwegian society—for instance, the relatively modest impacts of the 2008 global financial crises and the relatively expansive and egalitarian social-democratic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1990)—have countered the proliferation of neoliberal austerity policies observed in many other rural localities (Short and Alston, 2016: 47–48). Thus, the Hitra/Frøya case is not directly transferable to other rural locations. Nevertheless, this case may serve to crystalize some of the social processes of rural transformation that contemporary rural mobilities instigate, e.g. the development of hegemonic representations and the often hidden and/or neglected responses to the same.

A brief description of the case study area and the materials employed in the analysis follows. The Hitra/Frøya region covers two rural municipalities located on the coast of Mid-Norway, Frøya and Hitra, and is one of the rural regions that has received a disproportionately large share of the total Eastern European labour migrant population since 2004.[[2]](#footnote-2) The municipalities have populations of approximately 4,600 persons each. Residences are distributed in a main centre, some smaller clusters of settlements, and a great number of separate housing units in each of the municipalities. Topographically, Frøya and Hitra are each composed of one large island and hundreds of smaller ones. Since 2000, these two main islands have been connected by an undersea tunnel road, which replaced a ferry service. The driving distance between the main centres is currently about 30 minutes. In effect, the municipalities form one functional region, e.g., in terms of labour and housing markets. The Hitra/Frøya region is distinctly “rural” according to the peripherality criterion (Jonard et al., 2009). The nearest larger urban settlement is Trondheim, Norway’s third largest city, which after the 1994 opening of a 5.6 km undersea tunnel road is still between a two-to-three hours’ drive away (Figure 1).

*----- INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE -----*

Over the last decade, Hitra/Frøya has become globalized and mobilized across a number of dimensions. Of particular importance is the fact that its economy has become more strongly integrated into the global economy. For centuries, the region relied on its fisheries, which have always had strong international linkages. However, in recent years Hitra/Frøya has came to harbour a booming fish farming industry that has successfully competed in the global market. Several companies have large production facilities in the region (fish farms and fish processing factories), among them three leading actors in the global industries: *Marine Harvest Group, Lerøy Seafood Group*,and *SalMar*.

The booming fish farming industry has generated an unprecedented demand for low-skilled manual labour in the fish processing factories. These assembly line positions, which are characterized by monotonous, arduous and physically demanding tasks, were traditionally filled by local domestic workers, predominantly women. However, over the last decade, the domestic work force (which increasingly found better job alternatives elsewhere in the booming economy) has gradually been replaced by Eastern European labour migrants (which constitutes a low-cost, flexible labour force that outdistances the locals by far). The industry’s changing recruitment strategies was supported by the labour market deregulation following the EU/EEA enlargements in 2004 and 2007 that allowed all EU citizens to work in Norway.

In effect, today about 1,730 residents of foreign origin are settled in Hitra and Frøya, representing 19 percent of the total population. Lithuanians (492) and Poles (360) are the largest groups. In total, two-thirds of the migrant population has migrated from the Eastern EU accession states. The remaining third is distributed between other Eastern European countries and roughly 25 other nationalities. In comparison, in 2005 there were only 281 migrants settled in the community (3.4 percent of the total population). As a result, the municipalities, which experienced steady population decline beginning in 1950, have in the last decade increased their population by 13 percent, to the present-day level of 9,200 inhabitants. This increase is despite a birth/death deficit and substantial net out-migration among Norwegian citizens in Hitra/Frøya.

Today, most aspects of everyday life in Hitra/Frøya are characterised by social and cultural diversity. Most apparently, there is a rich blend of languages spoken. At one of the elementary schools, none of first graders who started school in fall 2015 had Norwegian as their sole mother tongue (Adresseavisen, 2015). There is also a greater variety of cultural practices, indicative of the migrants’ transnational networks and practices. For example, Hitra/Frøya*,* which traditionally have been exclusively Protestant, now hosts a large Catholic minority. The local newspaper regularly prints news reports in different Eastern European languages. Recently, a Polish-Norwegian Association was formed in Frøya to facilitate cross-cultural networks in the region.

*3.1. Methods and materials*

The materials analysed in this paper originate from the author and his colleagues’ research, including many engagements in the Hitra/Frøya community over a decade. The first encounter with the region was in the late 2000s, when the author studied rural transformation processes related to the booming second-home industry in the communities (see Van Auken and Rye, 2011). That study triggered interest in the community as a case study area, as it appeared to be strongly imbued with the new mobilities described by Urry (2000, 2007) among other reasons. This later led to various research engagements by the author and his colleagues in the region. The result is a varied body of materials inspired by a mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2008).

First, in 2012 interviews were conducted with nine key informants in the region: local politicians, chief municipality officers, and representatives of the fish farming industry. Together these provided a detailed account of the labour migration phenomenon in the community, both factually and in terms of local public policies, private business strategies and civic society responses to the changing population.

Second, in 2012, 13 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with Eastern European labour migrants working in the fish farming industry in low-skilled manual labour positions. The informants, 7 men and 4 women, were between 23 and 51 years old and had stayed in Hitra/Frøya 4.9 years on average (see Sæther, 2016) The following year, these interviews were supplemented with qualitative materials from 19 immigrating teenagers (16 to 19 years old) who lived in Hitra/Frøya. All were born in an Eastern European country but had moved with their labour-seeking parents. The interviews were conducted as individual in-depth interviews (n=9) and in focus groups (n=12); two informants were thus interviewed twice (see Rye, 2016). This material gives a rich account of how the migrants experience, evaluate and respond to their everyday lives in Hitra/Frøya.

A third source of information collected by the author in various formal (research meetings and seminars, including local participants) and informal encounters with other key actors in the locality, including representatives from the local newspaper and other key actors who possess in-depth knowledge of the local community. The research has also benefitted greatly from one of the research team members’ intimate knowledge as a former inhabitant and part-time employee in one of the fish processing facilities in the region. For background information, the paper relies on various secondary statistics about Hitra/Frøya, primarily from Statistics Norway.

4. COMPETING NARRATIVES OF RURAL CHANGE

During research encounters with residents of Hitra and Frøya, both locals and migrants have enthusiastically shared their everyday experiences in the region’s communities and reflected on how these relate to social contexts at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Their accounts differ, at times quite remarkably, both in terms of how they evaluate their own everyday lives and in their assessments of the workings of the structural forces of social change. In the following section I present two remarkably different accounts of the past, the present, and the future of Hitra/Frøya. The first stands out as the official, hegemonic narrative as told by the local elite. It centres on the community’s success in economic restructuring and adaptation to global forces over the last few years, its strong social and cultural integration of the population, and its promising future. The other narrative is told by the migrants and provides nuances, and at times contestations, of the official story of success. This account is not as easy to detect, less distinct and uniform, and at times internally contradictory.

*4.1. Successful rural restructuring*

Speaking with the local elites, defined as residents born and bred in Norway (many of whom trace their family history in Hitra/Frøya back hundreds of years) and now in leading positions in public, private and civic life, the story about the region’s successful development immediately surfaces. The main symbol of this success is the demographic shift from depopulation to repopulation. As noted above, the last decade’s labour migration from Eastern Europe has produced a net population increase that has compensated for the continued net out-migration of locals and an excess of deaths over births. The populational growth is taken as a strong indicator of the region’s vitality and sustainability, and the islanders take pride in living in a society that outsiders find attractive.

The success is unanimously credited to the extraordinary boom in the fish farming industry, and for good reason. Since 2005 fish farming has experienced a major expansion in the region, as it has elsewhere along the Norwegian coast, and three large fish farming companies currently have operations in the region. The *SalMar* has its administrative headquarters, several fish farms, and a large processing facility at *Frøya* (SalMar, 2017).In 2012 the company had an annual turnover of 467 million Euro and employed 920 people. Most of its activities are in Norway; however it also has strong ownership interests in the UK’s second largest fish farming company, *Scottish Sea Farms*. The company is traded on the stock exchange but is financially controlled by a local Frøya family. *Lerøy Midnor*, part of the larger and internationally-oriented *Lerøy Seafood Group* (headquartered in Bergen, Norway), operates several fish farms and two production facilities at *Hitra. Marine Harvest* *Group,* the world’s largest producer of salmon, has several fish farms and one production facility at Hitra. Its headquarters are also in Bergen. Its activities span several countries in Europe and North and South America.

In line with the global fish farming industry’s success over the last several years, activities in Hitra/Frøya’s fish farming industry expanded during the last decade. Illustratively, in 2011 the *Salmar* company opened its new state-of-the-art high-tech fish processing facility at Frøya at a cost of 46 million Euro, and the companies have recruited large number of workers, predominantly from Eastern Europe.

The growth in the fish farming industry has also led to an expanding economy in the Hitra/Frøya region at large. First, a number of smaller companies that provide products and services to the fish farming industry have been set up and currently employ a sizeable workforce (e.g. production and maintenance of fish farm facilities, packaging products for the fish farming industry, and transport services (sea/land)). Second, there are spill-over effects to other parts of the economy in both the private and public sectors. The number of people in the total Hitra/Frøya area who are employed has increased by more a third between 2005 and 2014, from 3,759 to 5,010 persons. In the same period unemployment has remained low; the 2015 unemployment rates in the municipalities were 2.7 (Hitra) and 2.4 (Frøya) percent, lower than the national average and down from 3.6 (Hitra) and 3.7 (Frøya) in 2005. As noted above, the 2008 financial crisis never really hit the oil-rich and affluent Norway, which implemented strong counter-cyclical measures. The impact of the crisis was likewise modest in Hitra/Frøya, if anything it merely slowed the economic boom.

Not only are there jobs for everyone, but the expanding fish farming industry also generated more attractivejobs for the locals. As companies expand production, they also recruit more workers to the better-paid white-collar positions. These jobs demand fluency in the Norwegian language and favour applicants with local and industrial knowledge and networks. The locals thus rarely compete with the migrant workforce in this niche of the regional labour market. The result is the development of two segments of the labour market that are distinct in their functions but inherently dependent on each other.

The need for inexpensive migrant labour was acknowledged by one of the informants, who held a lead position in one of the fish farming companies. He took for granted that the local labour force never would accept manual labour positions in the fish processing factories.

*The EU enlargement was very welcome. To put it straight: without the labour migrants, we would have never developed the business activities there are here today. There just are not people [i.e., locals] to hire here. [Business manager I]*

Tiller et al*.* (2015), interviewing local stakeholders in the community, similarly noted that local leaders explicitly stated that access to a migrant work force, whose lower wage demands are considered a requirement for the regional industry’s ability to compete in the global fish market, is pivotal for creating attractive work opportunities for local youth. The next generations of locals may therefore plan for careers in the community and, contrary to previous generations, will not have to out-migrate to obtain occupational careers. The growing population also generates attractive jobs in other sectors of the local economy, e.g., in the public and private service sectors.

The positive effects of the good times are traceable in most living condition indicators in the community. For example, between 2010 and 2014, the number of people whose registered personal wealth was greater than 1 million NOK (110,000 Euro) increased by more than 50 percent in *Frøya*, from 229 to 357 (Dagens Næringsliv, 2015). Tellingly, in 2014. the 21-year-old heir to the *SalMar* company was listed as Norway’s richest male under 30 with a registered fortune of 3.4 billion NOK (Dagens Næringsliv, 2014).

The locals also report a number of other benefits of the migration. Local, regional, and state authorities have invested large amounts of money to expand and enhance the societal infrastructure. The main road connecting Hitra/Frøyato the national road system has received upgrades in recent years, substantially reducing travel time to the nearest major city, the regional airport and harbour, as well as the national road and railway networks. While the fish farming industry’s need for transportation has been the main rationale for these investments, these improvements are also valued by the general population, who gain access to a larger region for work and leisure purposes. Another highly valued implication is the improvement in public services. Most importantly, many local schools that were threatened with closure due to declining numbers of pupils now find their classrooms filled with migrant children.

There are few concerns about the influx of large migrant populations. In interviews, informants tend to emphasise the positive effects of migration on the economic and demographic indicators referenced above. They also highlight the warm welcome that the locals gave the ‘poor’ Eastern Europeans, especially in the first phase of migration following the EU enlargement in 2004.

*And they knew nothing, they didn’t know a word in Norwegian... And they had no money, nothing. I gave them each a loan of 1,000 kroners to buy some food. And the women working here, they went home after working hours, dug into their freezers and came back next day with bread and jam and fishcakes they had found, to feed them up. [Business manager II]*

Informants further relayed many efforts they made to integrate the migrants into their workplaces and the local community. Contrary to refugees and asylum seekers coming to the country, the Norwegian government does not offer labour migrants language courses. However, some of the fish farming companies have, on their own initiative and cost, arranged for Norwegian classes for their employees. These companies also take on other corporate social responsibilities. For example, at least one company offers subsidized house loans to their workers. One informant explained the logic, which at the same time was presented as a general code of ethics, as such: ‘A happy worker is a better worker’.

The perspective is shared, at least in discourse, by representatives of a local staffing company that provides labour to the local industry. In an interview, a representative of the company emphasised the importance of social responsibility, which would benefit both the industry and the local community. Migrant workers who are integrated in the local community thrive, and thus function better as labourers. Interestingly, the interviewee was convinced that rural communities are better at facilitating such integration than urban ones.

*It makes our work better that locals are more inclusive outside the urban centres. It is easier to integrate twenty [migrants] at Hitra than two in Trondheim, no need to lead them by hand and show them everything. [Staffing company representative]*

There seems to be a strongly established official narrative that the Hitra/Frøya region is a successful version of rural change and that everyone benefits. In 2012, the local newspaper *Hitra-Frøya* reported that the Telemark Research Institute named the region the country’s second most attractive region to live (Hitra-Frøya, 2012). In 2013, the regional newspaper *Adresseavisen*, with a daily readership of 250,000 in the larger region where Hitra/Frøya is located, crowned their achievements in a lead editorial that applauded the efforts in one of the municipalities:

*Frøya represents an example to follow for other local communities that are dependent on labour migration [ . . . ] In total, the challenges, trends, and measures at Frøya demonstrate that politicians, employers, and neighbours have understood that migrants are a blessing and a requirement. The result is that companies and the municipality are heading in the same direction. Frøya welcomes the migrants.*

The materials primarily contain the accounts of locals speaking from their privileged positions in the Hitra/Frøya region, the local elites. As such the success story reflects a hegemonic representation, constructed and maintained by those with political, economic, or other interests in a positive portrayal of recent changes. The material does not include accounts of ‘ordinary’ local residents. However, the impression from our numerous encounters in the locality is clearly that the success story also is shared by the wider local population.

*4.2. Displaced but thriving*

When interviewing labour migrants, another storyline about Hitra/Frøya and its booming population appears. The migrants’ stories are far more diverse and nuanced, more ambiguous, and in total generate a far more complicated assessment of the community’s development over the last decade, the present situation, as well as likely and possible futures.

The migrants do acknowledge the hegemonic discourse of Hitra/Frøya as a history about a successful local community, primarily due to the expansive fish farming industry. Positive impacts of the boom are observed by migrants, yet they do not have the same feeling of excitement about the region’s rise to prosperity and that the long-term trend of population decline has turned to repopulation. However, if nothing else, Hitra/Frøya’sboomingfish farming industry has provided what they were looking for when they decided to emigrate from the east: economic betterment. Wage levels are far higher in Hitra/Frøya than in their homelands, particularly during the first years after 2004:

*In a month, I had earned a much as my mom and dad, who are teachers in [homeland]. I had five times as much than the two of them combined.” – Crystain, 30 yrs.*

The income gap narrowed in later years but is still considerable. Additionally, the Eastern European countries are still plagued by large-scale unemployment, which would make return difficult. The financial security working in Norway provides is highly appreciated by the migrants. The migrants also praise other aspects of Norwegian work life. They find work at the fish processing facility physically demanding and monotonous yet acceptable. Many contrast their present work with previous experiences in their homeland, e.g., Jakub reflecting on his first days at his work place:

*I was surprised, because, you know, you have two hours of work, you have break, two hours of work, you have break. And it was, oh super! In [homeland] I work 16 hours and I had one break. Only to eat something very fast, and again work.*

The migrants also voice appreciation for other aspects of the thriving community. Some value the Norwegian nature, its beauty and sense of peacefulness. Others enjoy what they find to be a less stressful atmosphere in Norwegian society, which they seem to indicate applies to the whole country and crossing the urban/rural division. When they use ways of speaking that echoes traditional descriptions of ‘the rural idyll,’ it is *Norway* as a whole they describe. Further, many of the interviewees emphasise the quality of public services. For 37-year-old Iulian, his reasons for migrating to Hitra/Frøya include:

*At first it was the financial situation, however then there was another reason: my son [ . . . ] He has [a serious chronic illness], but in Norway there are better health specialists, for [the serious chronic illness]and all that. Also, the social services are better than in [homeland].*

However, the migrants’ stories contain discordance as well. First, the migrants’ everyday life in Hitra/Frøya may represent a preferable option relative to alternative in their homelands. Nevertheless, the migrants deplore the societal structures that make emigration and employment in foreign low-skilled and manual work preferable to working in their country of origin. While they are not forced migrants *per se*, they are nevertheless victims of micro-level economic conditions that are beyond their control. All but one informant explicitly stated that their decision to migrate to Norway was mainly (though perhaps not only) economically motivated. Audra, a 50-year-old woman, likened her choice to that of a war refugee:

*Interviewer: Why did you decide to come to Norway?*

*Audra: I had economic problems. Because when it started, the crisis, in [homeland], it was very difficult. With jobs, with salary. With normal life. So, I never . . . think I would go from [homeland] for anything but a war. But life was . . . [difficult] because of the economy.*

The husband of another informant, Ewa, worked as a manager in [homeland] but “he didn’t get much money” and therefore decided to try his luck as a manual fish processing worker in Hitra/Frøya, there earning far more money to provide for his family who remained at home. After a few years, however, she realised that the divided household threatened the very existence of her family, and she took her children with her as the husband

*“didn’t want to come back [to homeland]. There was too much stress, too low money, and he didn’t want to live in [homeland] anymore”.*

As such, Hitra/Frøya represents the better of two evils. They are displaced, “voluntary” migrants, the decision to migrate was theirs; nevertheless, they feel forced into migration by lack of economic opportunity in their homelands.

Second, life in Hitra/Frøya may be favourable to alternatives in the migrants’ homelands; however, as their stays are prolonged, the frame of reference changes, and their evaluations may likewise change as well. This relates to what Nieswand (2006) refers to as the *status paradox of migration*. Wages are at first seen by the migrant as generous, as they are multiples of those in the homeland. Later, if the migrant settles down in the host country and thus changes his/her frame of reference, the very same wages levels will be considered ‘just normal’ (Piore, 1979). In other words, the time horizon of the migration project and whether or not the migrant plans to return to the homeland is in the literature generally described as an important determinant of their assessment of their situations.

However, such discords were not (yet?) openly voiced in the interviews with the informants. They still employed the homeland as reference and came out great. As Leonas exclaimed:

*Yeah, it’s a good salary. In [homeland] you know, in the parliament, people get less money. I get more money than them.*

However, while most initially planned for short term stays, they had gradually extended their time horizons. Some were now planning to stay indefinitely. Importantly, the fish processing industry offers full time, non-seasonal and, after some time on temporary contracts, often also permanent employment. As a result, many’s initial search of economic betterment was gradually supplemented with a more general appraisal of everyday life in Hitra/Frøya. Maria, 36 years old and about to get married, stated that

*I want to stay in Norway. In the beginning, I thought that I wanted to come here for only one or two years, and that I would save some money and go back to [homeland]. But I like it here. I like the stability.*

However, their appraisal of their everyday lives in the Hitra/Frøya community were with clear reservations. Most importantly, some of the informants report feelings of social exclusion in the local community, though experiences vary. Audra praised the Norwegians as very helpful, yet even after five years of living in the community, she does not describe any of them as her friends. The Norwegians, she stated, are difficult to socialise with: ‘Maybe they are very . . . how to say . . . good friendly people but not so quick on relationships, you know!’ Others reported what they experienced as outright racist attitudes towards the migrants. Among these was Maria who generally found rural Norwegians difficult to socialize with.

*When you have friends in [homeland] for example, you are visiting each other often or you are going somewhere together, and here it’s not so often. I mean I have few Norwegian... maybe not friends [ . . . ] They have been visiting me in my house for lunch and cake and coffee, but I have never been invited to their house, for example. Maybe that is not the tradition here, that people are visiting each other in their houses, maybe they are socializing in a restaurant somewhere, I don’t know. Maybe I have a wrong impression because we are here in a very small island. This is a very small society, so it might be different than Trondheim or Oslo or somewhere else.*

Others are more positive and report about friendly Norwegians who are open to socializing if the migrants themselves are willing and interested in establishing relations. Overall, however, a feeling of an “us”/“them” divide seems to characterise informants’ relationship to the community.

Many of the informants instead established and upheld extensive transnational practices. Glorius and Friedrich (2006) suggest a threefold model of transnationalism: individuals’ physical circular mobility, their bi-cultural practices, and their formation of hybrid identities. All these elements are present in the everyday lives of the informants, however in different expressions and intensities. For instance, most regularly travel back and forth between Hitra/Frøy and their homelands, and on a daily or weekly routine further keep in touch with families and friends by digital communication channels. Linguistic practices, particularly at work but also off-work, are often a complex blend of Norwegian, English and their mother tongue, often also with input from the other Slavic languages spoken by work colleagues. Many try to upkeep homeland traditions, e.g., national diets and religious feasts. There are also signs of emerging hybrid identities, most apparent for those with a longer migrant history and with children born and raised in the locality.

Nevertheless, the material indicates that the rural context of immigrant life represents some specific barriers to the development of transnational space. First, the immigrant population in Hitra/Frøya is large in terms of its share of the total population (19 %) yet small in absolute figures (1730). Seemingly, this is too small to establish diasporic institutions that one would find in most urban environments. For instance, there is no Catholic church in Hitra/Frøya and, as noted above, the first Polish-Norwegian Association was just recently formed. The dispersed settlement pattern in the community, which requires motorized transport (private or public) for meeting with others further restricts social intercourse with fellow countrymen. There are few further signs of emerging enclave economies, e.g., immigrant stores. Second, the peripheral location of Hitra/Frøya adds to the expenses for physical travels back home, both in terms of time and money. In some cases, the journey from Hitra/Frøya to the Trondheim airport is as lengthy and costly as the leg from the airport to their Eastern European homes

*5.3: First- and second-generation migrants*

Piore (1979) points to the difference between “first” and “second” generations immigrants in their approaches to and adaption strategies in hosting societies. As in the present materials, the first-generation migrants, recently arrived, are primarily economically motivated in their actions. Their social and cultural integration into the host society is weaker, which the migrant finds acceptable, perhaps even preferable, as her/his identity and strategies for the future are still directed towards the home community. However, as time passes by and the migrant piece, often unnoticeably to herself/himself, adapts to and integrate into the social environment his/her everyday life now belongs to. The migrant transforms from “homo economicus” to “homo socius”. Among other implications, this replaces the migrant’s dual frame of reference with the receiving country’s standards for what is considered acceptable wage and working conditions.

These processes are even more distinct among migrant teenagers—the workers’ offspring. Many of them had lived in Hitra/Frøya for most of their lives and, in effect, now constitute a second generation (or more precisely, the one-and-half generation) of the Eastern Europeans in the locality. Their nuanced perspectives on the Hitra/Frøya community are interesting, as they more clearly demonstrate the two-sidedness of the status as labour migrants in the region. On the one hand, they acknowledge the benefits of the booming economy and higher wages that caused their parents to break with the East. On the other hand, for many of the teenage migrants, moving to Hitra/Frøya was not something they wanted. Birgitta told about her tears when her parents informed her about the decision to migrate. Her peers Monika and Marine elaborated:

*Monika: It’s quite different, because we have no children. They [the parents] came here to have a better life for their children and themselves, to have money to buy something for their kids. They have no money, nothing were they come from.*

*Marina: They really are happier here, because they can see we are better off here, economically. Though maybe not mentally.*

The teenagers were generally satisfied with their everyday lives in Hitra/Frøya. They were attending the local upper secondary schools, taking part in leisure activities, and socialising with peers. While the informants showed variation in their involvement with the locals, their networks, and their sentiments of social inclusion in the community; their experiences of active exclusion or outright discrimination were rare. However, they clearly saw themselves—and thought they were seen by the locals—as foreigners. They did not have the same claim to Hitra/Frøya’s richness. Marina reported about a school session where representatives from the fish farming industry were present:

*What was said, was: “You should kiss our feet, all of us [Hitra/Frøya-people] because we are so nice and kind that we provide jobs to your parents.”*

As a result, many of the teenagers have turned their back on Hitra/Frøya. Many were insistent on their plans for escaping Hitra/Frøya as soon as they had completed school and had chosen subjects that would facilitate further studies in urban regions. They are also negative about their parents’ careers and do not plan to follow their trajectories. They understand that their parents had to move to Hitra/Frøya and work as low-skilled manual labourers in the fish farming industry; however they—in parallel to the local youth—would not consider similar careers.

The interviews with the migrants indicate social marginalisation and detachment and counter the local dominant discourse of successful integration. However, these tensions nonetheless seem modest in comparison to many other versions of the labour migration phenomenon in Western European Countrysides. As elaborated in the literature review, studies from several other European nations suggest examples—though not a uniform picture—of precarious working practices and social exclusion (Bock et al., 2016). Labour migrants in Hitra/Frøya also seems to fare better than elsewhere in Norway. For instance, Aure (2011) details the ways in which Russian labour migrants in coastal northern Norway must negotiate accusations of prostitution, crime, and unhygienic practices, and Andrzejewska and Rye (2012) describe how farm migrant workers in Norwegian rural communities are ‘invisible’ to the locals. The migrants in Hitra/Frøya also seem less socially marginalised and detached than many of their counterparts in urban Norway (Friberg, 2013).

5. NEW RURAL INEQUALITIES AND IDENTITIES

The contrasting narratives of the Hitra/Frøya case demonstrates the social tensions that may emerge in the wake of contemporary rural mobilities, such as the large-scale labour migration from Eastern Europe to the Western European countrysides. Whereas the locals see a “triple win”-situation, the labour migrants are more nuanced, and more reserved, in their enthusiasm, and many report social exclusion and limited belonging to the local community. As such, the labour migration phenomenon adds novel aspects of social differences and inequalities into rural communities. To some extent, these tensions reflect previous and familiar lines of conflict in rural communities, e.g., between locals and newcomers. However, the enhanced international labour migration transforms the very logic of rural societies and the local communities.

First, the analysis demonstrates how the very presence of a large population of labour migrants from Eastern Europe has the potential to rapidly change the local economy and demography of rural communities. The Hitra/Frøya community has changed from communities in decline to ones experiencing growth, success, and optimism. This perspective is jointly held by both locals and labour migrants. However, underlying the “good times” is the boom in the global fish industry at Hitra/Frøya, where the labour migrants play an important role as labour force in a distinct secondary segment of the rural labour market in Hitra/Frøya. This aspect of the Eastern European labour migration phenomenon suggests the emergence of novel dimensions of the rural social structure of inequalities. As demonstrated, the labour migrants are located in the typical low-skilled and manual labour segment of the rural labour markets. Here they are offered poorer wages and working conditions than was previously commonplace in the countryside. Their marginal position in the labour market is reinforced by their lack of access to alternative forms of social capital that could compensate for lower economic resources. For example, they have less well-established social networks in the local community and fewer family members and lifelong friends in the community. Existing bonds are often with other migrants, who are similarly marginalised actors. Rather, in rural communities like Hitra/Frøya, the contours of a lasting marginalised migrant shadow society may emerge.

As such, the labour migrants may hold the potential to represent a new rural labour class, perhaps even a rural ‘precariate’ (Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2009) that is socially detached from mainstream rural society. While the literature suggests the mature development of such parallel societies, as is already documented in some places in present-day rural US (Keller, 2013), it would represent a more novel feature of the Norwegian and Western European rurality.

Second, the everyday transnational lives of the labour migrants in the Hitra/Frøya community demonstrate how it has changed into a genuine multilocal community. Both in the nuts and bolts of the economy (as illustrated by the global fish farming industry) and in the population (as illustrated by the migrant workers), Hitra/Frøya represents a truly global mixture of elements. This changes Hitra/Frøya, which has come to represent what Hedberg and do Carmo call ‘translocal ruralism’ (Hedberg and do Carmo, 2012). More importantly, the rural individuals develop ‘heterolocal identities’ (Halfacree, 2012). In this regard, there is a division between locals and labour migrants. The former are aware of their community’s dependence on the extra-local; however, the latter’s daily lives and identities take on a heterolocal character: they are ‘here’ but maintain homeland practices and attachments.

Third, labour mobility further increases the heterogeneous character of the rural population, long noted in rural studies but taking on novel qualities, as the labour migrants represent multicultural and transnational ways of life. Reflecting their numerical strength and at least partial integration and participation in their local communities—for instance as workers, residents, and pupils—their presence becomes an integral part of their community’s sociocultural fabric. Thus, it is difficult to reproduce the myths of the rural idyll without qualifications. For example, everyone in Hitra/Frøya is aware that the nostalgic saying ‘everyone knows everyone’ no longer applies. They do not even speak the same language, neither literally nor metaphorically.

The migrants might possibly negotiate their marginalisation in the Western European countryside by drawing on extra-local resources. The labour migrants are characterised by their genuinely transnational ways of life, where they maintain contact and continuously engage with their homelands. Many of them hold parallel identities and double and contrasting class positions; they are part of the rural labour class in Hitra/Frøya, but reflecting their previous class positions before emigration, they are still conceived of as members of the homeland middle class.

6. DIVIDED IDENTIES, DIVIDED SOCIETIES

The narratives of the local elites and the Eastern Europeans in the fish processing industry in Hitra/Frøya demonstrate the stark differences of the majority/minority perspectives on the labour migration phenomenon. The local elite focus on economic prosperity and demographic growth. The migrants acknowledge the economic betterment, both for themselves and for the hosting society. However, their perspective is primarily that of the globalised migrant working class: they are doing great *relative* to what they would expect in their economically deprived Eastern European homelands. Their narratives further differ with regard to social integration. The local elite see few problems. The labour migrants are more balanced. Rather, they rely on the upkeep of relations to their homeland and the development of transnational practices.

Thus, in some regards they hold a secondary status in the Hitra/Frøya community. They are ‘visitors’, ‘guests’, members of the local rural working class, relatively poorly integrated in the community, and often orient their everyday lives and identities towards their home communities. In many regards, there is a clear social divide between “us” and “them”—the “locals”, the ethnic Norwegians, and the “newcomers”, the international labour migrants.

Nevertheless, the Eastern European labour migrants in Hitra/Frøya manage to contest and negotiate their social marginalisation. They are members of the rural labour class but are not without leverage in the local economy. Migrant labour is required for the continued growth of the local economy. As waged workers, they control economic capital and represent a group of consumers in the local economy that cannot be ignored, e.g., in the housing market. As citizens, they also represent a category that needs to be accounted for, e.g., in the provision of welfare services (i.e., kindergarten, health services, etc.). Furthermore, the presence of strong labour unions in the fish processing industry supports the migrants’ position vis-à-vis their employers and, if they actively organised, they could also represent a significant block in local politics. However, there are few signs of such involvement so far. The local elites’ narratives acknowledge these aspects of the labour migration phenomenon, and they seem sincere in their wishes to integrate the migrants in the local community. The Eastern European migrants in Hitra/Frøya are not at the mercy of the locals and are quite able to negotiate their standing in the community. As they do, they set their imprints upon the local community.

*6.2. Further research*

In this paper, I have discussed the novelty of the East-to-West European labour migration phenomenon in reference to the case of the Hitra/Frøya region in Norway. Obviously, the particularities of this case influence the scope of transferability of the findings and reflections. For example, the booming regional economy accentuates positive outcomes and shelters negative ones. Assumingly, should Hitra/Frøya return to times of economic depression, other nuances would arise. Additionally, other contextual aspects are important for understanding the logic of the rural labour migration phenomenon. Research in other locations, both in Norway and elsewhere, may provide other, or even contrasting, nuances to the descriptions of the phenomenon. For example, the use of full-time and permanent employment in the fish processing industry creates relatively stable job opportunities. In contrast, the circularity and impermanency of agricultural migrant work seems to generate less-integrated workers who have a smaller impact on their rural host communities, both in Norway (Andrzejewka and Rye, 2012) and abroad, e.g., in the Mediterranean agricultural industry (Gertel and Sippel 2014; Corrado et al., 2017). The specifics of Norwegian labour market regulations and welfare state arrangements further shape the labour migration phenomenon. Other national contexts are likely to generate other nuances of the phenomenon (Bock et al., 2016).

However, for the case of comparisons, it is interesting to note that even in the Hitra/Frøya case, which in many regards represents a “perfect” case of labour migration, there are pronounced discords in the narratives of the migrants. Migrants have decent wages and good general living conditions, they are permanently employed, and they experience no outright racism. However, they represent a population apart. What would it take to achieve fuller integration of international labour migrants when even the “extreme” case of Hitra/Frøya fails?

The labour migration phenomenon in the Hitra/Frøya case is relatively large in scale, so much so that it helps to accentuate the novelties of the migrant labour phenomenon. Parallel social processes will likely take place in rural communities that do not yet host sizeable labour migrant populations, yet it is expected that this will occur with variations across local and national contexts. Further research may provide more detailed accounts of the variations in the phenomenon and discuss which societal properties are most important in determining the impacts of labour migration into Western Europe’s countrysides. Other studies may also include narratives other than those presented here, both in terms of localities and actor categories. For example, it would be interesting to hear from the general rural population and not only from the community’s elite, as in the present paper. It is also likely that the stories of the migrants will change over time; with time, they will change from ‘recent’ to ‘established’ newcomers, which will likely alter their frame of reference further and thus their expectations of their rural communities.

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1. The ultimate source of the feet/root metaphor is unclear; however, Prieur (2004), referencing Røgilds (1995), ascribes it to Rushdie. See also Eriksen (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In effect, the enlargements applied to the European Economic Agreement (EEA) in which the EU member states plus three Western European non-EU member states (including Norway) participate in the common European labour market. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)