
article

Can community involvement policies mitigate NIMBYism and local opposition to asylum seeker centres?

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Local governments have to take authoritative decisions about the placement of controversial but necessary facilities such as Asylum Seeker Centres (ASCs). Opposition from local residents against such facilities is often considered to be an expression of NIMBYism. This article explores whether a policy of community involvement addressing the underlying reasons for local opposition can mitigate such opposition towards an ASC. It uses a mixed methods approach combining survey data and semi-structured interviews among neighbourhood residents about an ASC in Utrecht. Local opposition is associated with experiences of economic competition and cultural threat. The policy strategy did not moderate these effects. Those who became involved were a selective group of locals who were largely already accepting of the centre and its inhabitants and involvement was often incidental. However, contact between asylum seekers and neighbours developing within and beyond the ASC mediated the effect of cultural threat – confirming Allport's contact hypothesis.

Key words local opposition • asylum seeker centre • facility siting • NIMBYism • mixed methods • community involvement • Utrecht • contact hypothesis

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Introduction

The refugee crisis of 2015–2016 prompted many governments throughout Europe to institute new asylum seeker centres (ASCs). Decisions to open facilities such as ASCs often inspire opposition among parts of the population (Karsten, 2012). Although there was broadly popular support for these facilities in many European localities,

plans to constitute new ASCs have been met with protest (Hubbard, 2005a; 2005b; Bock, 2018; Whyte et al, 2019). Cities in the Netherlands were a typical case (Karsten and Van der Velden, 2018). A survey during the refugee crisis indicated that 21% of the Dutch population would object to an ASC in their municipality under any circumstance, 29% would accept the presence of an ASC under certain conditions and 42% would accept the presence an ASC in their municipality irrespective of circumstances (see also: Lubbers et al, 2006; Kanne et al, 2015). These numbers indicate polarised attitudes towards ASCs which are typical to Western and Northern European countries: a majority of the population is accepting towards asylum seekers, while there is a notable minority that opposes the reception of asylum seekers, especially in their direct vicinity (Rea et al, 2019; Van Hoote gem et al, 2020).

Dealing with such opposition, even if a minority view, has become an important governance challenge. Governments need to deal with citizens' concerns for reasons of legitimacy and especially as opposition can gain significant media coverage and political attention through which local governments must navigate their way (Zorlu, 2017; Mescoli et al, cited in Rea et al, 2019). Policymakers and scholars often consider opposition to ASCs to be an expression of NIMBYism (where NIMBY is an acronym for 'Not In My BackYard'): people would object to the facility in their vicinity, but they would not object to it if opened elsewhere (Hubbard, 2005a; Maney and Abraham, 2008; Ferwerda et al, 2017). Based on this assumption, governments usually choose a policy strategy of isolating the facility and preventing possible negative impacts of the facility on its locality. In the case of ASCs, local governments in the Netherlands, for example, have revised their original plans by housing either smaller numbers of asylum seekers together, only specific groups of asylum seekers (for example families with children), or keeping a centre open for a shorter period of time.

The validity of NIMBYism as an explanation for local opposition towards ASCs is, however, strongly disputed (Wolsink, 2006; Zorlu, 2017). This suggests that local governments need to develop alternative policy strategies that engage with residents' underlying concerns. This article studies the effectiveness of such an alternative policy strategy on neighbourhood responses to opening an ASC in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.¹ The local government of Utrecht, the Netherlands, invested in measures to turn the supposed burden of an ASC into an asset for the neighbourhood by making courses and activities offered at the ASC available to locals with similar needs. The shared courses and activities were also intended to stimulate contact between asylum seekers and neighbourhood residents to diminish prejudice. This programme theory was inspired by social scientific theories such as Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. This article studies whether a policy strategy focused on addressing underlying concerns is successful in diminishing local opposition. It poses the following research question: *To what extent is a policy strategy aimed at addressing underlying concerns of local opposition effective in mitigating negative attitudes towards an ASC?*

This study builds upon fieldwork in the neighbourhood surrounding the ASC in 2017 and 2018, undertaken as part of an independent evaluation of the initiative. It presents a mixed method approach combining statistical analysis of survey data (N=511) with in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews (N=31). This approach has benefits in gaining a broad understanding of attitudes towards the centre, as well as gaining a deeper insight into lived experiences of local residents. First, we study what reasons explain opposition towards the ASC. Then, we study whether the policy

strategy aimed at involving locals in the ASC indeed led to more positive attitudes towards the centre. Lastly, we specifically consider the role of contact between locals and asylum seekers in mitigating negative attitudes towards the ASC. Findings of this case study provide evidence on the effectiveness of a strategy of community involvement rather than isolation of the ASC. This has relevance beyond the policy area of asylum reception when opposition towards other types of public service facilities such as homeless shelters, drug rehabilitation centres or mental health care facilities requires government response.

Explaining local opposition towards ASCs

Policymakers and public administration scholars often consider local opposition towards facilities as an example of NIMBYism. According to this theory, citizens would recognise the broader societal need for a facility (of which examples might include wind turbines, environmental waste repositories, prisons and homeless shelters), but fear its local siting would bring hazardous or stigmatizing effects to their vicinity, including reduction in property values, fears about safety and effects on quality of life (Hermansson, 2007; Zippay, 2007).

More recently, scholars and policymakers have also suggested NIMBYism as an explanation for opposition towards ASCs and immigrant services: while citizens support humanitarian issues in principle, they are less accepting when ASCs are sited within their own locality (Hubbard, 2005a; Maney and Abraham, 2008; Ferwerda et al, 2017).

Local opposition towards facilities undoubtedly wreaks major problems for policymakers and developers. However, the explanation of NIMBYism as an explanation is contested and not clearly defined. Critics argue that NIMBYism tends to discredit local residents as being selfish and denies legitimate concerns that they may hold for society in general including for their own neighbourhood (Wolsink, 2006; Devine-Wright, 2009). Citizens objecting to the establishment of a facility in their own neighbourhood may hold objections to similar developments elsewhere. Moreover, the general explanation of NIMBYism fails to take into account the distribution of risk. Public facilities are disproportionately sited in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, especially as siting decisions are based on lowest cost (Rabe, 1994; Hermansson, 2007). In order to explain and address opposition towards ASCs, it is therefore important to look beyond the explanation of NIMBYism.

Academic literature generally distinguishes two hypotheses explaining opposition towards ASCs: economic (or 'ethnic') competition and cultural threat (Lubbers et al, 2006; Zorlu, 2017). The hypothesis of economic competition asserts that opposition toward ASCs is expected when neighbourhood residents' economic interests are threatened by the arrival of newcomers in their residential space, who have a claim to and compete for the same public services and resources (Jackson and Esses, 2000; Lubbers et al, 2006; Zorlu, 2017). Residents, for example, fear a decline in access to, and potential deterioration of public services, as well as loss of residential property value.

In the case of ASCs, experiences of economic competition coincide with a discourse that portrays asylum seekers as disguised economic migrants that seek to profit materially from European welfare states (Van Hootegeem et al, 2020). Citizens sometimes perceive that asylum seekers receive preferential treatment by the government, for example in finding housing, work and access to services

(Jackson and Esses, 2000). Our measure of economic competition focuses on experienced preferential treatment of asylum seekers by the Dutch government (see methods section for more detail on the measures). Our first hypothesis is that:

Neighborhood residents who experience more economic competition with immigrants are more likely to oppose the ASC. (H1)

The hypothesis of cultural threat asserts that opposition towards an ASC stems from the perceived threat that an ASC poses to the identity and customs of a local community. ASCs inhabit a yet unfamiliar out-group which is likely to hold different norms and beliefs. Cultural distance between the groups may be symbolised by differences in religion, language and physical appearance (Zorlu, 2017). Members of the local community consider the out-group as a threat to the cultural identity of the neighbourhood (Hubbard, 2005a; 2005b; Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010). Experiences of cultural threat also include a fear of crime, where asylum seekers are perceived to have a different morality. In the Netherlands, similar to other European countries, Islam is also considered by some as a cultural threat (Verkuysten and Zaremba, 2005; Grillo, 2005). Perceived threat of a culturally distant group of newcomers is measured as concerns about negative effects of the arrival of asylum seekers for the Netherlands. Our second hypothesis is that:

Neighborhood residents who experience more cultural threat from immigrants are more likely to oppose the ASC. (H2)

Interventions to counter opposition towards ASCs

Local governments and their partners have developed various types of policy strategies to address opposition towards ASCs, some of which are inspired by social scientific theories on inter-group prejudice and contact. Evidence on the effects of such interventions to enhance public support for ASCs is yet limited. One strategy involves extending public service provision to neighbourhoods ‘burdened’ with a new ASC. For example, the Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg (Germany) combines a hotel, café, restaurant and artistic space with an asylum centre (Zill et al, 2019). The assumption here is that this type of policy intervention will prevent economic competition between asylum seekers and locals, as provisions are available to all.

In the ASC under study, this strategy was used too: neighbourhood residents could join in a range of educational courses, events and coaching offered within the ASC’s programme of activities. These activities were aimed at improving economic participation, focusing on entrepreneurship, business English skills and professional networking. As the neighbourhood houses many residents with a low socio-economic status, this programme was expected to benefit locals with a need for similar support to (re-)enter the labour market. A deputy mayor explained that this policy strategy was supposed to ‘give a real answer to those complaints of being left aside’. In order to test this programme theory, we hypothesise that involvement in the ASC’s programme will moderate the effect of perceived economic competition on opposition towards the ASC:

The effect of economic competition on opposition towards the ASC is smaller among neighbourhood residents who were involved in courses and activities at the ASC. (H3)

Policy strategies have also focused on stimulating contact and community building between refugees and locals. For example, the ‘Think project’ in South Wales, aimed to strengthen cross-community relations by changing the ways people think about ‘the other’ (Cantle and Thomas, 2014). In these types of projects, refugee integration is considered as a two-way process of adaptation at the neighbourhood level (Phillimore, 2012). This programme theory is inspired by social science research which provides strong evidence on the effectiveness of contact as a means to reduce hostility by countering negative preconceptions regarding the values, beliefs and lifestyle of the ‘other’ (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

The joint courses and activities at the ASC in this study created opportunities for encounter in and around the ASC to reduce fear of the other and to mitigate opposition towards the ASC. According to the deputy mayor, the mixed courses and activities were meant ‘to connect people from the neighbourhood and new people together in this new place’. We hypothesise that involvement in the ASC’s programme will moderate the effect of perceived cultural threat on opposition towards the ASC:

The effect of cultural threat on opposition towards the ASC is smaller among neighbourhood residents who were involved the courses and activities at the ASC. (H4)

Interethnic contact between neighbourhood residents and asylum seekers does not only emerge in the context of the ASC but can also be pre-existing or emerging in encounters elsewhere in the neighbourhood. Berg’s (2009) research into people’s core networks shows that native-born whites in the US whose core networks already include non-white others are likely to hold pro-immigrant attitudes, regardless of their interaction with immigrants. We therefore expect that contact more generally will mediate the effect of cultural threat:

The effect of cultural threat on opposition toward the ASC is partly explained by lower levels of contact with asylum seekers. (H5)

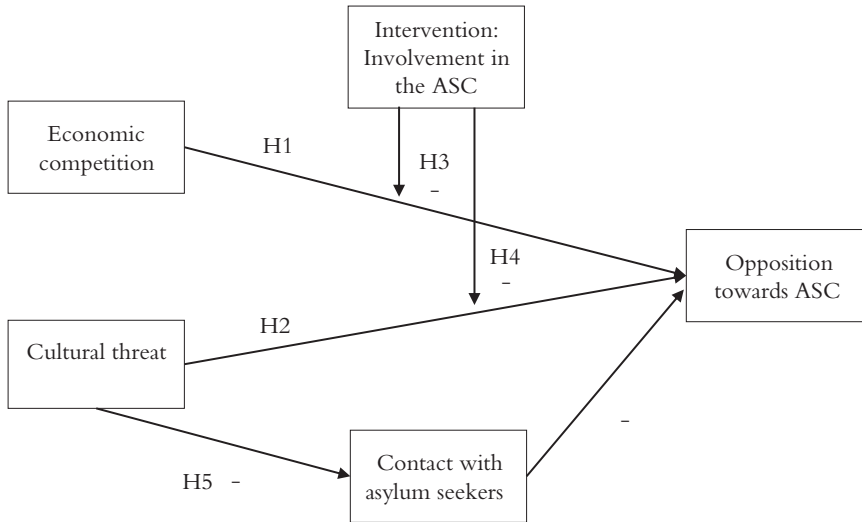
The model tested in this study is visualised in [Figure 1](#).

Data and methods

The case: U-RLP

We study opposition towards an ASC accommodating 400 inhabitants in Overvecht, a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Utrecht, one of the largest Dutch cities. The local government chose to locate an ASC in this neighbourhood because the facility, an unused office building, provided a viable and large enough site in the city to accommodate the high numbers of asylum seekers arriving in 2015 and 2016. This was typical of siting strategies seen in other European countries, where governments

Figure 1: Conceptual model.



made pragmatic decisions about the location of ASCs based on the ability to quickly convert facilities like sports halls, schools and factories (Seethaler-Wari, 2018).

In 2016, when the city of Utrecht announced that an ASC would open in Overvecht, negative sentiments dominated in the public debate and in the media. Several hundred people attended information meetings about the ASC that were organised by the local government. Protesters hung banners on the building where the ASC would be located, with slogans such as ‘the ASC should go’. Some drew swastikas on the window blinds. There were also counter-protests of citizens stating, ‘refugees welcome’, and violent conflict between the two groups arose during the evening of an information meeting. Protests against the ASC and counter-protests in favour of the ASC gained attention in local and national news media (AD/Utrechts Nieuwsblad 12-1-2016; NOS, 2016; Volkskrant, 2016). Interviews with project partners and neighbours indicate that outside agitators fuelled violent protest against the centre, but that protestors came from within the neighbourhood too. A civil servant recalls:

‘The neighbourhood was very hostile and coming out in big numbers to protest this new thing they thought threatened the wellbeing of their neighbourhood, that was already disadvantaged and facing problems with multi-ethnicity, low social development, a lot of people out of a job. And they said for instance that their own children could not get housing, and these foreigners, these refugees were getting everything. They wanted to set the place on fire, they were really very concerned about it.’

Reducing hostility towards the ASC became one of the project goals. This was done first through a concession to reduce the number of asylum seekers housed in the facility from 600 to 400. In addition, the municipality chose an active strategy to address concerns of locals. They devoted space in the ASC for social and educational activities and opened up this offer for residents from the neighbourhood. The project was named

the 'Utrecht Refugee Launch-Pad (U-RLP)' and is also known by its colloquial name 'Plan Einstein' after the street where the ASC was located (Einsteinreed). The ASC was fully functional at capacity between August 2017 and November 2018.

Data collection

We carried out door-to-door surveys and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with locals living within a 1 km radius around the ASC. Data collection started in October 2017 and ended after closure of the centre in November 2018.

Quantitative data: neighbourhood survey

We conducted the survey through computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). A team of trained research assistants went door to door at a random sample taken from 6,552 registered addresses in the area around the ASC. They visited each selected address at least twice on different occasions, in case there was no response at the first call. Most addresses were visited three times. After gaining informed consent to participate, researchers read the questions from their smartphones and directly entered the responses in specialised survey software. Respondents who were not at home at multiple occasions were invited to complete the survey online. This made up 17.6% of the total sample. We conducted two survey rounds with different respondents during the period when the ASC was open: a first round in the autumn of 2017 and a second round in the autumn of 2018.

N=511 neighbourhood residents completed the survey amounting to a response rate of 22%. Non-response had different reasons. A number of addresses proved ineligible because they were uninhabited (garage boxes, shops, schools and so on) or not accessible (special needs living). N=16 persons could not participate because they did not speak Dutch or any of the minority languages in which our interviewers were proficient. N=719 persons actively refused to participate after the interviewer explained the research. Reasons for refusal were (1) not knowing anything about the ASC; (2) not having time to participate and (3) expecting that participation in the survey would not make a difference ('the asylum centre is already there', 'the municipality does not listen anyway'). People at the remaining addresses were not at home at multiple visits and did not complete the survey online.

By comparing our sample to register data from the city of Utrecht on the total number of 8,935 adults living in this area, we checked representativeness in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. Females, older people and Dutch people were slightly overrepresented.² This is probably because these people were more likely to be home and able to participate in the survey. We decided not to weight for these factors as they do not correlate with our dependent variable.

Qualitative data: semi-structured face-to-face interviews

In the period of March 2018 to August 2019, we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with neighbourhood residents: N=16 female and N=15 male, N=17 Dutch and N=14 of other ethnic backgrounds. Five of these respondents were refugees themselves. N=19 respondents were recruited as a follow-up of the neighbourhood survey. They reflected different attitudes toward the ASC. The remaining N=12 were recruited through convenience sampling at the premises of the ASC. This latter group

was biased in displaying more positive attitudes towards the centre, but they were able to provide better insight into experiences with the project. Interviews were conducted at the respondent's home or at another place that the respondent would suggest. They each took around one hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed ad verbatim. All respondents were pseudonymised to ensure their anonymity.

Analysis

Survey data of N=511 respondents were analysed in SPSS statistics using OLS regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Although the items of our dependent variable were initially measured on an ordinal scale, the commuted overall score looks at the average score across items and is no longer ordinal. In this case, a linear model is preferred (Field, 2017). We ensured that our model adheres to the assumptions underlying OLS regression analysis (independent errors, homoscedasticity, normally distributed errors and no problematic multicollinearity). Furthermore, we checked the residuals for evidence of bias through casewise diagnostics. We found no cases with an undue influence on the model that should be excluded from the analysis. Due to item-non response our model includes a smaller number of cases, however, we found no indications for problematic bias in missing values. We thematically coded the interview transcripts using NVivo software. The main code families reflect the variables and hypotheses included in the conceptual model (see again Figure 1).

Measures

Key variables included in the analysis are 'opposition towards the ASC' (dependent variable), 'economic competition', 'cultural threat' (independent variables), 'involvement in the ASC' (moderator) and 'contact with asylum seekers' (mediator).

Opposition towards the ASC is measured with five items based on Zorlu (2017: 19) that we reformulated slightly to fit the situation of the ASC in Overvecht. The items are listed in Table 1. A principal component analysis revealed one factor with an eigenvalue over Kaiser's criterion of 1. This component explains 58.48% of variance. Table 1 presents the factor loadings. Based on these items, we created a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.82$). As shown in Table 2, opposition towards the ASC is slightly below the mean score (2.42, SD 0.74) on a scale of 1–5 with 5 indicating the highest level of opposition towards the ASC.

Cultural threat was measured with a standard question from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) (Den Ridder et al, 2016):

There are different views about the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. On one hand, some people are worried about the negative effects of the arrival of asylum seekers for the Netherlands (view A). On the other hand, some people are concerned about a rejecting stance towards asylum seekers in the Netherlands (view B). Which people do you feel you associate with?

A: people who are concerned about the negative effects of the arrival of asylum seekers on the Netherlands
 B: people who are concerned about a rejecting stance towards asylum seekers in the Netherlands
 (5-point Likert scale, 5=Associate strongly with A – 1=Associate strongly with B)

Table 1: Summary of principal component analysis on opposition towards the ASC in the neighbourhood (N=412).

Item	Mean	S.D.	Factor loading
How do you feel about the asylum centre in Overvecht? (Very positive–very negative)	3.42	.75	.74
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: It was a good choice to establish the asylum centre in <i>Overvecht</i> (Strongly agree–strongly disagree)	3.23	1.09	.80
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I would like to see the asylum centre at the Einsteindreef move to another neighbourhood or city (Strongly disagree–strongly agree)	3.80	1.05	.81
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The presence of the asylum centre at the Einsteindreef brings advantages to the neighbourhood (Strongly agree–strongly disagree)	3.01	1.00	.80
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I dislike meeting asylum seekers during my daily activities such as shopping and work (Strongly disagree–strongly agree)	4.34	.88	.68
Eigenvalue			2.92
% of variance			58.48
α			.82

Economic competition was measured with a standard question from the European Social Survey:

‘Compared to people who were born in the Netherlands how do you think the government treats asylum seekers who have come to live here recently from other countries? (5–point Likert scale, 5=Much better – 1=Much worse)’

Involvement in the ASC is measured with the dummy variable: ‘Have you ever visited the asylum centre at Einsteindreef? (yes/no)’ Neighbourhood residents could visit the centre for social activities such as an open day, sports, cooking and arts or to participate in the courses.

Contact with asylum seekers is measured with the item: ‘How much contact, if any, do you have with asylum seekers who have recently come to the Netherlands? (5–point Likert scale 1=Never – 5=Almost every day)’

Also, a number of **sociodemographic control variables** were added (gender, age, level of education, ethnicity) to control for differences in attitudes towards the ASC based on these characteristics. We also added the variable survey round (1 or 2) to check for possible changes in attitude over time.

Results and discussion

The regression models testing the various hypotheses are presented in [Table 3](#). We used a standardised variable based on the scale measuring ‘opposition towards the ASC’ as dependent variable. The first model presents the sociodemographic control

Table 2: Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean/ Median	S.D.
Opposition toward ASC	501	1	5	2.42	.74
Cultural threat	495	1	5	2.31	1.25
Economic competition	430	1	5	3.04	1.12
Involvement in the ASC	No: N=382 (88.8%) Yes: N=48 (11.2%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Contact with asylum seekers	503	1	5	1.97	1.28
Gender	Male: N=238 (47.2%) Female: N=266 (52.8%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Age	488	18	98	48.6	20.1
Level of education	500	1	7	4: Upper secondary education (havo, vwo, mbo 2, 3, 4)	n/a
Ethnicity	Dutch: N=313 (61.3%) Non-Dutch: N=198 (38.7%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Survey round	1: N=234 (45.8%) 2: N=277 (54.2%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

variables to observe whether opposition towards the ASC differs among demographic groups. The second model tests to what extent experiences of cultural threat and economic competition associate with opposition towards the ASC. The third model tests whether participation in U-RLP moderates the effects of cultural threat and economic competition. Model 4 measures whether contact with asylum seekers mediates the effect of cultural threat on attitudes towards the ASC.

Opposition towards the ASC was expressed by a minority of respondents. Most respondents expressed neutral or slightly positive attitudes towards the ASC. Of all demographic variables (Model 1), only level of education has a significant effect on opposition towards the ASC. The higher educated someone is, the more accepting of the ASC in their neighbourhood. It is important to note that participation in round 1 or 2 of the survey makes no significant difference in opposition – indicating no change in attitudes over time.

Table 3 reports improvement of the model at each stage by reporting the adjusted R^2 , F and F change. Models 1, 2 and 4 generate significant F change, Model 3 does not. This indicates that the demographic variables, economic competition and cultural threat, and contact with asylum seekers improve our explanation of opposition towards the ASC. Involvement in U-RLP does not make a significant difference. The overall fit of Model 4 is good with an F statistic of 17.57*** and with an adjusted R^2 of 0.35. This means that 35% of variance in opposition towards the ASC is accounted for by this model.

Determinants of opposition towards the ASC

Model 2 shows that both hypotheses on determinants of opposition towards the ASC are confirmed. Respondents who experience higher levels of economic competition

Table 3: OLS regression results (Dependent variable: Opposition towards the ASC, N=345).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)	B (s.e.)
Constant	.59 (.34)	-.78* (.32)	-.89** (.32)	-.63 (.33)
Demographic variables				
Gender Female (Male is reference)	.14 (.11)	.12 (.09)	.11 (.09)	.10 (.09)
Age	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Level of education	-.16*** (.04)	-.09* (.03)	-.08* (.03)	-.08* (.03)
Ethnicity Non-Dutch (Dutch is reference)	-.07 (.11)	-.01 (.10)	.02 (.10)	.07 (.10)
Survey round 2 (1 is reference)	-.02 (.11)	.02 (.09)	.04 (.09)	.07 (.09)
Independent variables				
Economic competition		.13** (.05)	.14** (.05)	.13** (.05)
Cultural threat		.37*** (.04)	.37*** (.04)	.36*** (.04)
Moderator				
Involvement in U-RLP			.35 (.47)	.38 (.47)
Involvement*Economic competition			-.19 (.16)	-.13 (.16)
Involvement *Cultural threat			-.06 (.13)	-.07 (.04)
Mediator				
Contact with asylum seekers				-.12** (.04)
Adjusted R²	.06	.32	.33	.35
F	5.34***	24.39***	17.73***	17.57***
F change	5.34***	66.81***	1.79	10.80**

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

express more opposition towards the ASC (H1). The interviews give further insight, highlighting that there is perceived competition over different resources, such as access to social housing. Margot, a Dutch-Indonesian woman of 66 explained:

‘I’ve heard refugees are prioritised in the allocation of social housing. My son and his girlfriend have been on the waiting list for a bigger place for a long time. I don’t agree if refugees are prioritised. I was born here so I can say: our own people who have trouble finding suitable housing should get priority.’

Other examples include worries about increased demand for ‘already lacking parking space’ in the neighbourhood (Stijn, a Dutch man in his 30s).

Some respondents felt that asylum seekers were receiving preferential treatment by the government and that the ASC’s placement infringed on ‘their’ space. Edward, a Dutch man of 43 experienced that:

‘Once the ASC opened, the maximum speed limit on the road alongside it was lowered to 50. I was fined there a few times for exceeding the speed limit. It may sound a bit petty, but it does bother me... That road has been there for many years, and the speed limit was never an issue until the ASC came. My impression is that the asylum seekers are again more important than people who have lived here for years. It’s only a small example, but...’

Roos, a Dutch, 67 year-old woman expressed concern with reducing provisions for the youth in Overvecht, with the ASC opening perceived as a symbol of the local government’s low regard for the neighbourhood:

‘I thought opening an ASC in Overvecht was really the worst idea in the world. [...] In the past years, all kinds of public services were taken away from Overvecht: youth work, community centres, all kinds of provisions for the youth. [...] The neighbourhood is being left behind. I always say, Overvecht is the stepchild of Utrecht. And then they decide to put an ASC here. We were really angry about that decision.’

Model 2 shows that the effect of perceived cultural threat on opposition towards the ASC (H2) is even stronger. In the interviews, some respondents explained that they were ‘fearful’ of the centre, citing reports of crime in the media. Edward, for example, explained his negative opinion about the centre opening: ‘Yeah, against [...] Mainly because of the risk of criminality [...] That those guys would hang about, cause damage, or intimidate people in the street, that sort of thing.’ Here, it is important to note that the centre was announced shortly after the Cologne attacks. Roos, a Dutch, 67-year-old woman explicitly refers to this event:

‘I had heard about Germany, the rapes, violence, stabbing and frustration... A lot of people in there [ASCs] are traumatised, have psychiatric problems and sometimes turn to violence. Well, we really don’t need anything like that. Enough people are shot and killed in Overvecht already. [...] If they would put many single men in one place, who are frustrated, that is asking for trouble.’

These interview quotes highlight how asylum seekers are considered to be an out-group. It is also their placement in *this* neighbourhood, a neighbourhood where residents as Farel, 44 year-old respondent of Dutch-Indonesian descent, felt as ‘being out in the cold’ is particularly problematic because of existing deprivation. This demonstrates Grillo’s (2005) observation: that a distinctive local ‘realist’ perspective is present in opposition to asylum seekers, whereby racist and/or xenophobic points of view are disguised as ‘common sense’.

Many respondents combine perceptions of economic competition and ethnic threat. The fiercest critic was Trijntje, an ethnically Dutch women in her 70s, who had a resigned attitude to the centre since she conflated its opening with an existing general feeling of cultural threat from immigration within the neighbourhood around her, mostly former labour-migrants originating from Turkey and Morocco. She emphasised the different clothing which to her, emphasizes cultural differences:

‘There are seven houses here, I am the only Dutch person. [...] And the rest is all headscarf, long robes. They should do that in Morocco, [but] in the Netherlands you should adjust. Very strange things are happening here! [...] Moroccans, Turks, that is where it started. [...] It is terrible!’

Economic competition was present in her complaints indirectly. She had a neutral recognition that asylum seekers needed housing, but they should not be placed here, ‘in the worst neighbourhood of the whole of the Netherlands’.

Moderating effect of the policy strategy

Given the size of the neighbourhood population, the actual proportion of locals who participated in U-RLP was overall low. A majority of N=382 (88.8%) had not visited the ASC at the time of taking the survey, but involvement in the centre grew after changes in the project’s recruitment strategy from N=11 (4.7%) of the neighbourhood residents in the first survey round towards N=37 (13.4%) in the second survey round. We did not find a significant difference in opposition towards the ASC between locals who did and did not get involved in U-RLP. This variable also does not moderate the effects of economic competition and cultural threat on opposition towards the ASC. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are rejected. The lack of a significant effect is likely partly due to the small numbers of U-RLP participants in our sample which reflect the low numbers of participants in the overall population. However, although not significant, involvement in the project seems to be associated with more opposition towards the ASC. How can this be explained?

First, the data suggest that the courses and activities mainly attracted neighbourhood residents who were already accepting of the ASC. This is a different target group than the one originally envisioned by the project of those who actively opposed the centre – which we pointed out during the mid-term evaluation. According to class registrations, participants included not only residents from the direct vicinity, but also people from other parts of the city of Utrecht. Among the participants were many former refugees and other people with a migrant background, and people from Dutch origin with culturally diverse social networks (see Berg, 2009). Two examples are Sofie, a Dutch woman in her 40s, who first heard of the centre before it even opened. Her instincts were ‘to see if we can get in touch with the people there’. Raafi, a young Syrian refugee who was housed in the neighbourhood, also became actively involved through volunteering there. They already maintained positive attitudes towards the centre and these attitudes did not further improve as a result of experiences with the ASC and its inhabitants (see Mescoli et al, cited in Rea, 2019).

Qualitative evidence shows, however, that some neighbours who initially opposed the centre became involved and shifted their opinion. For example, Malik, a Dutch-Indonesian man in his 40s who attended an open day explained:

‘[My view] completely changed, from the first moment. Just because those refugees are very nice [...] It felt very safe and secure to walk in.’

For this respondent, contact with refugees led to a more positive attitude towards the ASC. Also, some neighbours, like Liselot, reported personally benefiting from the course programme:

‘I knew then already that I was going to lose my job at the end of this year, I started the entrepreneurship and also the English course because my English is not very good. I think it has given me a better chance to find another job and because I had to work on a [business] idea in the course.’

This was, however, a minority within the already small group of neighbourhood participants.

Second, the association of involvement in the project with increased opposition to the ASC might also be explained by the incidental nature of ‘involvement’ in the centre, partly due to its early closure. Involvement measured a range of activities, from visiting the centre once to attending courses on a weekly basis. The survey shows that a lot of participation was incidental, borne out of curiosity, rather than long term and habitual. Interviewees include those like Johanna, who had dropped by once, Marit, who had been to an open day, and Ton who had been to a barbecue at the beginning of the project but has not been back since. In types of participation, there was limited opportunity for gaining personal benefit from the programme and for inter-group contact to develop.

For some of these people who were more indirectly involved, the courses and activities confirmed their idea of competition, since extra resources to the neighbourhood had only become available once the ASC opened. This was also quite a common narrative among those who had never been to the ASC. Johanna, a Dutch-Surinamese woman of 41, who had been to the ASC once, expressed this type of opinion:

‘I think it was for the political image. Like: look what we did for the neighbourhood, it all went very well and the neighbourhood residents were allowed to participate. It all sounds very nice, but in practice that is not the case. I don’t believe [U-RLP] offered a lot of added value for the neighbourhood.’

Temporary investments only during the two-year period when the ASC was present, exacerbated a sentiment of ‘being forgotten’. Looking back at the project after the ASC closed, Roos expressed some annoyance that the extra government resources had gone:

‘It was like: Well, it has been nice. When the asylum seekers were there, we heard you, but now you should do it all on your own again. We are gone.’

These findings resonate with research showing a detrimental effect of government compensation on citizens’ intrinsic willingness to accept a NIMBY-type of facility. When a community is generally willing to accept a facility, being offered monetary compensation can lead citizens to change their minds (Frey and Oberholzer-Gee, 1997; Ostrom, 2000). Our findings suggests that intrinsic support for public facilities might be crowded out by other forms of government compensation as well – especially when compensation is temporary. However, we also encountered counter-stories indicating appreciation of what U-RLP was trying to achieve. Some respondents who did not participate in U-RLP themselves, nevertheless appreciated that resources were used for the neighbourhood too. Marit, a Dutch woman of 66, speaks of ‘killing two birds

with one stone': helping refugees to integrate and helping out the neighbourhood. And Stijn states:

'I think that if you are hosting refugees as a country, this is the way to do it. The combination of an ASC with some extra care for the neighbourhood. Because right from the start it didn't feel right to have an ASC there, but in the meantime so much extra attention has gone to the neighbourhood, the mayor comes by, the aldermen are regularly found at the ASC. So there is a lot of extra attention for the neighbourhood. And I like that very much.'

Mediating effect of contact

The survey shows that contact between locals and asylum seekers emerged on the premises of the ASC and in daily encounters elsewhere in the neighbourhood. Respondents who were in contact with asylum seekers more often, expressed less opposition towards the ASC. This is an indirect effect which partly mediates the effect of cultural threat. In Model 4, the effect size of cultural threat slightly decreases, but is not eliminated by adding the contact variable. We used bootstrap methods to estimate the significance of the indirect effect via the mediator (using Hayes' process macro for SPSS). This demonstrates that there is a significant effect of cultural threat on attitudes towards the ASC through contact with asylum seekers ($B = -0.02$, 95% BCa CI [0.04, 0.01]).

In the interviews, neighbours expressed the feeling that contact with asylum seekers gave them a greater understanding of the other. Frans, an unemployed Dutch man in his 50s remarked that contact was a real eye-opener for him. Despite his fears of increased crime associated with the centre, fuelled by the media, there were friendly relations 'even with the refugees'. Sanne, a Dutch-Surinamese woman of 38, felt that spending time with asylum seekers at the ASC provided a 'chance to talk to those people and understand, and how do you say, walk in their shoes'. Through creating a better understanding of asylum seekers and refugees, contact led to more acceptance of the ASC in the neighbourhood.

Conclusions

When siting new facilities, governments often face opposition and protest. This has been the case with ASCs, especially amid a climate of anti-immigrant sentiment. Finding appropriate responses to local opposition, even when a minority view, is an important governance challenge. Governments often consider opposition to be an example of NIMBYism and choose to isolate the facility from the neighbourhood. This study analyses the effects of an alternative policy strategy addressing the underlying motives of local protesters by connecting the facility with the neighbourhood and offering resources to them too.

First, we studied what motives inspired local opposition towards this ASC. We found support for the economic competition and cultural threat hypotheses. Neighbourhood residents who fear that their economic interests are threatened by the arrival of newcomers, express more opposition towards the ASC. A distinctive feature found in many narratives is that the ASC is placed in a neighbourhood already perceived as 'left behind' in government policy. Whereas NIMBYism is usually associated with

objections by the middle and higher class, here it was triggered by under-investment in the neighbourhood. We found an even stronger effect of cultural threat: those who fear negative effects of the arrival of 'others' holding different norms and beliefs, express more opposition towards the ASC. Cultural aspects including difference in appearance, language, customs and associations with criminality are emphasised in the narratives of those opposing the centre.

The policy strategy addressing economic competition and cultural threat by offering resources to the neighbourhood and stimulating contact was not yet successful in recruiting large numbers of locals including those who were initially opposed. The small and selective group which chose to participate did not become less opposed to the ASC. Their already positive attitudes could not be further improved. Also, participation was often incidental which limited opportunities for gaining personal benefit from the programme and for inter-group contact to develop. To some more incidentally or not involved, the extra attention and resources for the neighbourhood only strengthened a feeling of competition and preferential treatment, as the extra resources were only available as long as the ASC was present. Pre-existing and newly developed contact with asylum seekers partly mediated the effect of cultural threat on opposition towards the ASC. Locals who are in contact with asylum seekers say that they gained a better understanding of asylum seekers' needs.

This study did not use an experimental design including a randomized group of participants which would enable us to draw more definitive conclusions on the effectiveness of the policy strategy. However, the situated mixed methods approach proved valuable in providing quantitative evidence as well as in-depth insight into a contentious issue. In this disadvantaged neighborhood with generally low responses to online surveys, the CAPI method of surveying led to acceptable response levels. While non-response remained high, reasons given were more pragmatic rather than motivated by specific attitudes toward the ASC. Overall, a diversity of opinions was expressed across the survey and interviews, allowing a nuanced understanding of attitudes towards the ASC and the effectiveness of a policy strategy addressing underlying concerns.

Potentially, these findings have broader theoretical and practical relevance in explaining and addressing opposition to other types of public facilities – such as homeless shelters or mental health care facilities. Expanding a facility's offer to the neighbourhood will likely attract a small and already accepting segment of the neighbourhood which is unlikely to further improve their views (see Mescoli et al, cited in Rea, 2019). When expansion of resources is experienced as a temporary compensation, it might crowd out intrinsic willingness to accept the facility (see Frey and Obenholzer-Gee, 1997; Ostrom, 2000). Projects like these should therefore focus their efforts on expanding participation beyond a group of those already accepting and creating opportunities to participate which are more than incidental.

Notes

¹ The neighbourhood of Overvecht houses about 35,000 inhabitants of whom 40.5% have a non-western migration background (in Utrecht this is 13%, and in the Netherlands 4%). According to municipal data (<https://utrecht.incijfers.nl/>), Overvecht's inhabitants report more problems than people living in other parts of the city and in the Netherlands in total. Education levels are generally lower and 18% of Overvecht's inhabitants has an income below the poverty line, while in the Netherlands this is 7%. In Overvecht,

46% of the inhabitants suffers a chronic disease, in contrast to 37% in Utrecht. A lack of safety in the neighbourhood is regularly experienced by 46% of Overvecht's residents while this is 30% in Utrecht.

² Female respondents: 52.8% in sample versus 49.7% in population; Dutch respondents: 61.3% in sample versus 43.0% in population; elderly respondents (66 or older): 26.0% in sample versus 18.5% in population.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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