

Immigrant integration through a LEADER project in Punkalaidun



Can LEADER help the refugees adapt to North and North adapt to refugees?

"We lived in a tent in a refugee camp in Thailand. Now we have work, own house and sense of community." – a family from Myanmar

"When we came we didn't know what is a bed."

Since 2011, the most rural municipality of Joutsen Reitti LAG in South-West of Finland, Punkalaidun, has been investing in the integration and welfare of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers through a series of LEADER projects. Why and how?



Why?

1. Solidarity towards people who are in need of leaving their homes and risking their lives in order to find a new start
2. A refugee center located in Punkalaidun – over years thousands of asylum seekers have gone through it
3. Readiness of the local community (public sector, companies and NGOs) to work together and help the new-comers
4. Need of seasonal labor in local agricultural businesses and SMEs
5. Decreasing and ageing population of the municipality
6. Political willingness to welcome refugees and asylum seekers in the municipality
7. Suitable buildings and public services (schools, health services etc) available to new-comers

How?

1. The municipality was planning an integration project assisted and supported by the LAG
2. The first 'immigration coordinator' Maarit was hired in the municipality in 2011
3. Maarit's work is basically problem solving and bridge building between the new-comers and Punkalaidun residents
4. Practical rural issues like picking up blueberries, playing football, agricultural work and dancing tango best bring people together
5. Toughest thing has been building up the mutual trust and respect to each other
6. Now after four years of implementation the project has been awarded and appeared on national TV and other media several times – the best feedback however are the happy new-comer families living in Punkalaidun

General conclusion

Now that the EU experiences one of the strongest immigrant and refugee influxes in its history, LEADER could help with integrating the new-comers in the rural communities of the EU.



The next steps of the integration project?

Several refugee centers are now being opened in Finnish rural municipalities (and other EU rural territories too)

- The next project phase could be inter-territorial or transnational for the exchange of good practices
- If you are interested to join, please send us an e-mail!

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