

**Interdisciplinary Migration Research  
With a Focus on New Technologies  
and Multiple Crises:**

**Relating Birds of Passage to  
Social Policies**

Edited by Felicitas Hillmann



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Interdisciplinary Migration Research  
With a Focus on New Technologies and Multiple Crises:  
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# EDITORIAL

Interdisciplinary Migration Research  
With a Focus on New Technologies and Multiple Crises:  
Relating Birds of Passage to Social Policies

Felicitas Hillmann,  
Paradigm Shift\_New Outlooks, TU Berlin

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This volume brings together emerging research on migration with a focus on multiple crises, new technologies, and social policies. Most of the chapters are written by PhD students or postdocs who took part in the 25th International Metropolis Conference Berlin 2022 (IMCB22). Both the conference and its associated scientific networking unit were made possible through funding from the German Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS). From the outset, it was clear that the process of planning a large, international conference is reminiscent of a hot air balloon. The conference serves as a point of orientation for the given field, attracting a great deal of attention from its position “up above” an environment teeming with knowledge production. Nonetheless, before the balloon can rise at all, it must be weighted with sandbags of knowledge from practice, politics, and research. Excess weight must be cast off, and the flight path must be determined. The conference balloon stays aloft for several days, as spectators watch in awe from below, wondering whether they should participate next time. Once the conference is over, efforts and time must be invested to collect the results of the conference and plan for smaller successive events on identified topics.

To organize the IMCB22 in times of COVID-19 and steer the conference process in coordination with the Metropolis International network, the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs established the IMCB22 task force. There was a call for proposals to establish a networking unit to enhance the pre- and post-conference

process on the academic side. As a result, the Networking Unit Paradigm Shift (NUPS) was installed at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning at the Technische Universität Berlin, and I, Felicitas Hillmann, was selected as its chair. NUPS helped to anchor the balloon—so to speak—through the establishment of working groups, webinars, encounters between interested parties, and publications. Working hand in hand with the task force, the networking unit functioned as a catalyst: It brought in dedicated scholars, helped select the keynote speakers, and ensured the participation of experts in the field of migration and integration with a specific focus on labor market and social policies. IMCB22 itself was organized around four topics: 1) the impact of multiple crises on migration and mobility, 2) technological development and the future of work, 3) the impact of climate change on migration, and 4) conditions for fair migration. A major task for NUPS was to nest the conference activities within a wider community of knowledge and to link the established working groups to existing networks.

With the intention of integrating young scholars into the conference, the networking unit organized a PhD forum one day before the conference started. The PhD forum offered 18 dedicated young international scholars the opportunity to present their current dissertation work and participate in the conference itself. Funding was made available for PhD scholars from Australia, Canada, China, Belgium, France, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Taiwan, and Turkey.

Two renowned professors, Dr. Jan Rath (University of Amsterdam) and Dr. Ute Klammer (University of Duisburg-Essen), were invited to join me in commenting on the presentations of the doctoral students. Also, an experienced and excellent scholar of practice, Mr. Nihat Sörgeç, contributed on each of the presentations. Once the PhD forum proved to be a successful tool for bringing the young academics together, the networking unit began to integrate them into the NUPS webinar series. We realized that we had tapped into a body of mostly undiscovered research. With some exceptions, migration studies still lack a focus on international social policies, even though it is clear that global dynamics such as climate change or the introduction of global digital systems will significantly alter the migration field and the world of work in the coming years. The networking unit therefore explored the possibility of developing an edited volume to present emerging research with a focus on the relationship between labor, migration, and social policies. As Brettschneider and Klammer (2021) argue, there is a general need to focus on preventive social policies and new solutions for addressing the challenges that accompany multiple crises (see also Nullmeier et al. 2022; Brücker 2022). The transnational social question has not lost its urgency since globalization took off (Faist 2021; Piper 2017).

The majority of the contributions presented here stem from the initial collaboration with young scholars; however, two chapters are contributions from academics

who became involved in the larger NUPS network (Chapters 1 and 3). All chapters in this book were peer reviewed; two author workshops in spring 2023 were part of this quality management process. There were clear criteria for the chapters collected in this edited volume, including that the research presented was previously unpublished. Contributions that did not refer to the existing body of academic literature were rejected. The 11 contributions selected utilize an interdisciplinary approach to address longstanding issues in migration research that are now reemerging.

The book is organized as follows: The first five papers focus on the complex relationship between new technologies and migration. Up to now, this field of knowledge is still relatively unorganized; empirical work is underway while innovations such as ChatGPT and other AI products already dictate the pace and rhythm of all regulatory attempts, be it of nation states or supranational bodies such as the EU (Hillmann 2022). Sanz de Miguel, Bazzani, and Aransanz (2022) rightly point to the “extreme re-commodification of work” through platform work. They direct our attention to the shifting boundaries within legal systems, which are mostly based on a binary division of the status of employees and selfemployed. New technologies affect the national definitions of labor itself; they put individual and collective labor rights to the test; and they question working time, wages, the right to freedom of association, the right to strike, and social security rights (e.g., parental leave, sick leave, retirement benefits, and unemployment benefits).

In this moment, there seems to be a cleavage within research itself. Often, policy related studies on technological change concentrate on describing the new technologies and sometimes also praise their potential for the future of work (Hampel & Krause 2023). Meanwhile, much of the more analytical and academic literature points to the pitfalls of introduced changes and makes nearly Pavlovian references, for example to the role of riders delivering food in the case of exploitative platform economies. It also speaks of precarity and the deterioration of working conditions through more external control and less selfdetermination in the work process. Much of the literature points to processes of deskilling and the devaluation of work (e.g., Floros & Jørgensen 2022; Manicelli 2020). However, the reality is far more ambivalent, especially when it comes to the use of social media as part of the world of work. Recent literature reveals that precarious working conditions are not necessarily perceived as such by the workers themselves (van Doorn 2023; Lam & Triandafyllidou 2022). For example, there are those who work on student visas and envisage an eventual upgrade of their working status once they complete their studies. There are also the countless agricultural workers who accept untenable working conditions during harvesting times to be able to put food on the table. They mostly see the opportunity to better their own lives rather than the risks that trade unions claim for the collective of workers. Only very recently have sound overviews of migration-related dynamics been published (McAuliffe 2021).

The chapters presented in this book step away from simple classifications; they seek to offer insights into the emerging world of work that go beyond traditional approaches. Some chapters exclusively use either qualitative or quantitative methods, while others turn to a mix of methodologies. As the collection of papers is already the result of a selection of applications to the PhD forum from all over the world, the approaches and theories used differ substantially as do the regions considered. In a way, the edited volume reflects the diversity of methodologies found in academia worldwide. I was reluctant to judge one method over another and explicitly allowed for academic freedom alongside a strict peer review process.

What can the reader expect? Starting with the ambiguity of perceiving one's positioning within the world of (paid) work, Chapter 1 by **Beverly Y. Thompson** examines digital nomadism, a subculture of remote workers who travel internationally. The author claims that we are rather confronted with a small and growing subculture that first began to gain traction in the mid 2010s. She sets the record straight by observing, first, that the adherents of digital nomadism are overwhelmingly millennials from wealthy nations. She then notes that these digital nomads face a broader socio-economic context of growing precarity in their career potential. Thompson sheds light on the economic precarity of a particular group of digital nomad women who were initially attracted to the subculture by social media content. She explains how that same social media content has itself become a marketing tool designed by precarious workers seeking financialization of online content to afford travel. The author concludes, "While nomads were quick to reject the state ideologically, they could not completely disregard the role of the state because it provides their passports, visa-free entries into other countries, and potential social benefits."

The role of digital tools, not only that of social media, is of increasing relevance for the organization of all sorts of migration. Various types of digital tools are used to organize the handling of migrants and refugees, such as matching systems and indicators to classify who is eligible for what. In Chapter 2, **Sifka Etlar Frederiksen** discusses the development of a novel tool that operationalizes indicators of violence protection measurements and sources of violence in refugee accommodations in Germany. Frederiksen describes how the so-called European refugee crisis in 2015 highlighted the shortcomings of the asylum system across Europe, including in Germany. Although fundamental human rights should be reflected in certain requirements for accommodations, the implementation of related standards proved to be difficult. Subsequently, minimum standards for refugee accommodations were formulated in Germany, but the implementation of the standards has varied significantly across different locations and in terms of its timing. The author portrays the introduction of a digital tool that was created in a co-creational process and which aims to overcome the flaws of the system by operationalizing the minimum standards. It visualized the realizations of these while also working as a reminder of the standards. Frederiksen adopts a Bourdieusian perspective to analyze the varying

dynamics and interactions of actors in the (political) field of refugee accommodations. Academia, civil society, and public administration joined forces to construct the tool, and, with the significant insights Frederiksen made as part of the team, the digital violence protection tool was developed. The chapter analyzes how the creation of knowledge using the monitor can be integrated into the governance of refugee accommodations, or rather the asylum system, and, conversely, how governance affects the making of knowledge and the construction of the digital tool.

Chapter 3, written by **Tobias Stapf, Taissiya Sutormina, and Annika Wangard**, is also concerned with the role that social networks play in how migrants and refugees organize their lives. By focusing on Ukrainian refugees' use of social media platforms like Facebook and Telegram to integrate into the German labor market, the authors provide important insights regarding the need to structure the matching process between employees and employers. The authors claim that social networks, which are initiated and managed by members of the migrant and refugee communities themselves, serve as crucial sources of information and mutual support for living and working in Germany. The size and character of the networks vary across communities. The immense growth of these networks highlights the inadequate reach of the information and support offered by public and civil society institutions. After more than one year of war in Ukraine and the arrival of over one million Ukrainian refugees in Germany, the labor market situation is marked by a slowly increasing employment rate that reflects, to a significant extent, an increase in those working either in marginally paid employment or low-paid helper jobs. As the survey took place not even a year after the refugees' arrival in Germany, such positions likely represent somewhat of a starting point for many of them. The authors' analysis of social media data reveals that job search-related topics are among the most popular discussions in social media forums used by Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Their analysis underscores that social media forums for migrants and refugees can be pivotal for the labor market integration process.

What often goes unnoticed is that the digital age also opens new, profitable pathways for groups that formerly operated their trade in an analog way. In Chapter 4, **Mingyue Yang, Lingyan Niu, and Junhang Yang** explore how new technologies are transforming the trade of jadeite across the China–Myanmar border. The authors claim that with the construction of China's digital infrastructure and platforms, technology has generated a new transaction model and livelihood that of selling jadeite through live streaming e-commerce, which enhances the mobility of participants in the jadeite trade and results in major changes to the relationships among those participants. The authors make use of an anthropological and ethnographic research method to produce insights into this form of commerce. By studying live streaming e-commerce participants in Ruili, a jadeite trade center near China's southwestern border with Myanmar, the authors show how the availability of digital infrastructure



and new media technologies can help people obtain or maintain the same living conditions without relying on resources available only at certain times or in certain places. “New livelihoods become possible,” as they put it. At the same time, however, these developments seem to increase friction and conflict between groups and create new competition for resources among them.

Chapter 5 also focuses on China, but from a very different angle: It investigates the role of social media for African students studying there. The authors, **Lin Chen, Ching Lin Pang, and Sylvie Gadeyne**, highlight how China has become one of the top destinations for African students pursuing higher education abroad. The focus of their work is the everyday life of these students and the varied obstacles they face, which can “make their study period in China a challenging endeavor.” The obstacles include immigration regulations; the educational programs themselves; access to healthcare, banking, and financial services; and the labor market. The authors unveil the history, development, and current limitations of mobility for African students studying in China under the framework of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. Chen, Pang, and Gadeyne use the theoretical lenses of coping strategies, social network analysis, and transnational digital habitus to tackle these issues analytically. By adopting both conventional and online ethnography, the authors demonstrate the various ways African students in China overcome adversity and boundaries. Based on data from in-depth interviews and online and offline ethnographies, the authors highlight the coping strategies of African students confronted with systematic and non-systematic restrictions in the age of digital social connections, including the development and use of a multilevel social network. The authors recommend that policymakers “provide accessible information platforms based on the multilevel social network for future students.”

The next section in the book presents work focused on social and urban policies. This section is the most regionally biased, as it only presents examples from either Canada or Germany. Both countries are hosting a relatively high number of migrants, and both are currently modernizing their migration laws and the related bureaucratic practices to become more attractive migration destinations. Both countries also have aging populations and are characterized by internal regional differences when it comes to the local governance of migration. Therefore, it is not by chance that Canada and Germany are the focus of emerging research. In Chapter 6, **Alex MacLellan** explores how immigrants in Canada are accessing the welfare state in that country. He examines behavior according to sex, knowledge of an official language, years since immigration, and class of admission (economic, family, or refugee). He also considers claim behavior for total government transfers, employment insurance, government pensions, old age security, and child benefits. His chapter contributes to the literature on immigrant social welfare by comparing welfare state claim patterns with economic incentives. He sheds light on several important aspects of the welfare state system: time is needed to gain proficiency in one of Canada’s

official languages, residency requirements determine eligibility and the level of support, and beneficiaries must learn how to access the complex welfare state system in order to partake. Unlike the authors of the chapters in the previous section, MacLellan relies on multivariate analysis, using public census data to identify behavioral patterns as they relate to incentives. The author concludes that there are many examples of available benefits that are not used to the full extent and that immigrant service providers play a crucial role in this respect.

In Chapter 7, **Tasneem Khan and Martin Cooke** tackle issues of public health in multicultural societies, concentrating on the realities of the Canadian immigration system. Needless to say, integration and resettlement are key aspects of the immigration process that involve a change to immigrants' physical and social contexts. Khan and Cooke apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, analyzing these contexts as nested systems. Accordingly, the microlevel context includes the household's social microsystem and psychosocial aspects of the household setting, while the intermediate context is the exolevel, which includes aspects of the neighborhood and community. Lastly, the macrolevel context refers to broader social, cultural, and economic aspects of the society. Although the associations between individual characteristics and mental health have been studied, there has been little consideration of the potential role of contextual factors in the mental health of immigrants in Canada. As was done in MacLellan's chapter, Khan and Cooke use quantitative methods to evaluate the mental health of immigrants. They utilize the Canadian Community Health Survey for the years 2015 and 2016, merging its data with area data from the Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation. The authors first examine and compare the proportion of immigrants and non-immigrant Canadians exposed to contextual factors in the household, neighborhood, and community contexts that are potentially unfavorable to mental health. Then, using binary multivariable logistic regression models, they estimate the association of those contexts with the odds of immigrants reporting poor self-rated mental health and having been diagnosed with a mood disorder. They start from the assumption that potentially unfavorable socio-economic aspects of household contexts include low household income adequacy, a household education level less than secondary school, having young children at home, living in a crowded household (i.e., five or more people), and perhaps surprising for the European audience living in a rented dwelling. In a nutshell, they are interested in understanding why immigrants are typically healthier than the native population when they arrive but then face a deterioration of their situation while living in Canada. There seems to be no clear association between higher neighborhood deprivation and the presence of mental diseases.

Chapter 8, written by **Sophie Sommerfeld**, directs our attention to the case of Germany. "Arriving for years," as it is coined in the title of her piece, is one of the major challenges when it comes to social policies for refugees in the eastern Berlin district of Marzahn. In 2015, the district, which until that point had very little immigration, became the first arrival point for refugees in Berlin.

Through three interview phases conducted in 2017 and 2020 with institutional actors working on this case as well as with refugees living in the neighborhood since 2014, Sommerfeld addresses the research gap concerning the evaluation of integration related work in an urban institutional context. In her study, she highlights the perceptions and experiences of social workers and actors within the framework of funding programs or state-funded institutions as well as the perceptions of refugees regarding the support they receive from those institutions. Her chapter is rich with insights into the short and long term tasks of institutional social work regarding integrative urban development. It contributes to the rethinking of integration and the related social work, policies, and programs as a holistic collective process. Building on the philosophical work of Martha Nussbaum, Sommerfeld analyzes the capabilities of refugees to access the German support system on the local level. Here, again, the organization of bureaucratic structures is at the heart of a functional welcome culture and it cannot be analyzed using only the available statistical data. For many years, Germany's migration system had a difficult time incorporating non-standard forms of employment into its welfare system. Self-employment was not considered a form of employment for migrants, and migrant economies were only a marginal topic in academia and even less prominent in social politics. Sommerfeld's chapter confronts us with the limits of viewing labor market integration as a straightforward process: Much of the goodwill on the side of both the refugees and the institutional social workers is blocked by high expectations and slow procedures and the refugees are left arriving for years, as the title perfectly summarizes.

Despite challenges, migrants who become active with their business and ideas are part of the urban machinery that integrates migrants effectively into the world of work. Chapter 9 focuses on trends in the urban fabric of Berlin. **MinJi Kim** takes up a tradition of migration research in the 1990s as she concentrates on one ethnic group of migrants. Her research interest lies in the way Berlin's migrant spaces are negotiated through self-employment. She takes us on an ethnographical visit to Vietnamese and Thai spaces in Berlin: the Dong Xuan Center in Lichtenberg (eastern Berlin) and the Thai Park in Wilmersdorf (western Berlin), each a marketplace and space of encounter for the two communities. The author claims that the two migrant groups have contributed to a migrant-led regeneration of urban space in this international city. She relies on earlier work on urban marginality (Hillmann 2012) and research on mixed embeddedness (Klostermann & Rath 2012) to frame her study analytically. By comparing these examples of migrant spaces, Kim's chapter examines factors such as the migrants' background, their process of becoming self-employed, and the formation of marketplaces. Additionally, it investigates contentious issue related to land use, including legality concerns, and it explores participatory planning processes implemented to resolve conflicts. Based on her work, there seems to be little relation between these migrant worlds and the social welfare system, and one might question why this is the case.

Section 3 of this volume includes two chapters that explore the impact of multiple crises on migration dynamics. In Chapter 10, **Helmia Adita Fitra** sheds light on the sudden health crisis and concurrent economic recession that were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, with a regional focus on Lampung Province (Sumatra). The pandemic had compelled urban dwellers in Indonesia to choose the safest option: returning to their hometowns. During the pandemic, there was an increase in return migration, which has had significant consequences, particularly for the areas of return. Her chapter illustrates the potential for reintegrating returning migrants during the pandemic and its implications on development, taking Lampung Province as the study area. Using a mixed-methods analysis, she includes a Likert scale to measure the local response and an open-ended question to capture unexposed local responses toward returnees. The results of her study illustrate that returning migrants have a moderate chance of being reintegrated into Lampung society, based on an overall accepting attitude from the local population. The findings indicate that adequate infrastructure and an inclusive attitude towards returning migrants are required not only during a pandemic but also under any similar circumstances that might arise. Her chapter reflects the need to think of migration as an integrative part of urban social policies and to implement a “comprehensive health monitoring system for returning migrants, coupled with entrepreneur training.”

The last chapter in the book, Chapter 11, authored by **Domenico Bovienzo, Letizia Monteleone, Sepehr Marzi, Jeremy Pal, and Jaroslav Mysiak**, also shares a policy oriented perspective. The authors explore how climate change, humanitarian access restrictions, and the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded the effects of the current drought in Ethiopia to drive rapidly increasing levels of food insecurity and internal displacement. The authors apply a (novel) storyline approach to investigate changes in drought risk for Ethiopia, combining vulnerability, hazard, and adaptive capacity information for current and future projected climatic and socio-economic conditions using a subnational composite indicator. The drought vulnerability assessment is carried out using the INFORM Severity index developed by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission to support decision making during humanitarian crises and disasters. The analysis shows that future droughts are likely to increase the number of people in need of food assistance, according to both current population numbers and future population projections, and that millions will be displaced as a result. If humanitarian aid and assistance are maintained at recent levels, the authors’ findings show that the amount of required funding will increase substantially. The framework the authors present in this study can be used as a policymaking tool to provide information on how to better prioritize future “Loss and Damage” funds and investments in adaptation and mitigation, thereby reducing population vulnerability and exposure. The link of crisis and resettlement to social policies is also clear in this chapter.

Each of the 11 chapters in this book reflect how the understanding of the connections between migration and national welfare policies remains incomplete and must be further explored. The birds of passage referred to in the title of this volume evoke the ambivalent constellation of individual solutions pursued by individual migrants seeking to make a living and the somewhat contrasting collective arrangements aimed at securing established welfare systems, which have, in turn, their own complex arrangements. As the authors move beyond conventional wisdom, there is hope that the discussion of such challenges will soon take on more speed and depth, moving away from the mostly sedentary policies at present. For migrants, being on the move often mean fleeing from risk and resorting to the kindness, responsibility, and assistance of other human beings. Or it can enable people to actively relate to migration systems that foresee rights, benefits, and opportunities for them while simultaneously encouraging them to abide by the rules of the social welfare states (Piper 2017; Lange et al. 2022). With an aging population in many countries worldwide and a shrinking work force in industrialized countries, the long-term organization of migration-related social infrastructures and international cooperation will be key to societal development.

This edited volume is the outcome of joint forces and efforts, so there are a number of people I wish to thank, including the IMCB22 task force at the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs; Yelda Grönlund, who helped organize the PhD forum at TU Berlin; and Prof. Dr. Jan Rath, Prof. Dr. Ute Klammer and Mr. Nihat Sorgeç, who shared their insights regarding the original contributions of the PhD students. My thanks further go to the FIS-NUPS team at TU Berlin—Sophie Sommerfeld, Helen Nyama Boahen, Saleh Ahmed Qazi, and Francesca Brecha as well as to the anonymous reviewers from the NUPS network who helped the younger scholars develop their chapters further. We acknowledge support by the Open Access Publication Fund of Technische Universität Berlin. Avery Edelman did an excellent job with the language editing, and Amna Shazad skillfully arranged the document, Anne Ziegler took care of the revisions and Ahmad Al-Ani helped out with the biographies of our authors. I owe many thanks to all of them for their passion and precision. Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to BMAS for the funding that made the Networking Unit Paradigm Shift possible.

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# **SECTION 1**

## **Digitalization and Mobile Worlds of Work**

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# CHAPTER 1

Digital Nomads, Social Media,  
and the Individualistic Solution of Long-Term Travel  
to Address General Downward Mobility

Beverly Yuen Thompson

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## Abstract

Digital nomadism is a small and growing subculture of remote workers who travel internationally that first began to gain traction in the mid-2010s. Adherents of digital nomadism are overwhelmingly millennials from wealthy nations; however, they still face a larger socio-economic context of growing precarity in their career potential. This chapter examines the economic precarity of a particular group of digital nomad women who were initially attracted to this subculture because of social media content, itself a marketing tool designed by precarious workers seeking financialization of online content to afford travel. I pursued a qualitative approach by attending international digital nomad conferences and retreats, during which 33 women were identified and interviewed. The literature on digital nomadism continues to focus on the lifestyle of traveling and working globally while navigating residency and employment laws. Little attention is given to the protection of locals, many of whom work in the service economy that caters to digital nomads. Local residents may experience some displacement or gentrifying effects of digital nomadism.

## Introduction

Digital nomadism has been romanticized for providing “freedom” to both workers who can work remotely and use their untethered employment to travel internationally and their employers, who are not obliged to provide digital nomads with full-time salaries, overhead, and benefits. This small and growing subculture began to gain traction in the mid-2010s within the news media realm. Adherents of digital nomadism are overwhelmingly millennials from wealthy nations who represent the most educated generation but nonetheless face a larger economic context of growing precarity. As precarity reaches new heights in the middle classes, younger workers often enter the workforce with feelings of uncertainty; many face obstacles such as student debt, stagnant wages, low-level employment opportunities, and inflation that impacts the costs of housing, medical care, education, childcare, and even food costs. Thus, young people who find relatively few options in their home countries are attracted to a lifestyle portrayed in social media as an escape from those obstacles, founded on an ideology that claims anyone can make money with minimal effort and travel the world in the meantime. I used qualitative methods by attending international digital nomad conferences and retreats, where 38 participants were identified and interviewed. Most participants were women, and focusing on gender provides further insight into the gendered nature of such precarity as well as the coping strategies utilized to fund a nomadic lifestyle for several years at a time. While nomads tend to face economically precarious conditions in their home countries, many can afford a more lavish lifestyle when traveling within developing nations that are heavily oriented towards tourism. Thus, their relative privilege based on their global ranking has a gentrifying impact on the host locations. This amplifies the tourism marketing industry, which also now targets the digital nomad lifestyle with offerings such as long-term co-living and co-working lodging, internet cafes, and networking events. It also impacts nations that pivot towards attracting digital nomads with longer-term travel visas as well as company visas and tax incentives. The literature on digital nomadism has focused on the lifestyle and experiences, but it has not addressed the social policy implications of how digital nomads travel and work globally while navigating residency and employment laws within national borders. Furthermore, even less attention has been paid to and fewer solutions are provided for the protection of locals, many of whom work in the service economy that caters to digital nomads. These locals are ultimately displaced by the gentrifying effects of digital nomadism.

## Digital Nomadism: A Futuristic Fantasy Whose Time Has Come

In 1997, Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners published *Digital Nomad*, their futuristic essay about the internet’s potential to revolutionize the lives of computer-based workers. The essay focused on the potential for portable computers and the internet to liberate those working in technology by untethering them from the office and their employment location. The office worker would

then be free to work from a beach (or other desired travel destinations) while logging onto the computer for a few hours of work interspersed with a significant amount of leisure. This lifestyle would, however, be limited to middle class, technology based workers. Service workers would continue to be rooted to a specific location.

It was not until the mid-2010s that the term “digital nomad” was first adopted by a new generation who were raised on the internet and are, as a whole, highly educated—but who are in many cases employed in entry-level opportunities that do not fulfill their employment goals. Newspapers and technology magazines that were covering the trendy concept of digital nomadism praised the potential for “freedom,” often presenting the positive perspectives of CEOs and employers on the subject (Sundararajan 2016). However, these projections were not empirically proven (Gorliński-Kucik & Tadeusz 2021). Hong (2021) outlines the historical development of tele-work, which began in the 1980s and 1990s and then expanded rapidly as technology was embedded into every aspect of daily life. Hong argues that such lifestyle developments were oriented towards “white, middle/upper-classed, male executives on the means to adapt to a precarious economic existence” by engineering “a buffer for privileged populations” (Hong 2021: 1). The popular concept of digital nomadism, as represented in social media, portrays the nomad lifestyle as accessible to all; however, a more critical, evidence-based perspective challenges these portrayals. Much academic research has focused on defining the digital nomad concept (Hannonen 2020). Šimová (2022) provides an overview of the existing literature and establishes 17 topics affecting the lives of digital nomads; she also identifies additional areas in need of study, such as the economic realities, taxation factors, and uses of social media by nomads. Other literature focuses on the classification of digital nomads and the process of entering the digital nomad lifestyle (Stumpf, Califf, & Landcaster 2022). Iakovleva et al. (2017) focus on the risks of digital nomadism: changing digital business models, impact on social behaviors, lack of culture in digital spaces, security, and isolation.

Finally, some literature examines various communities using ethnographic methods and empirical evidence. Cook (2020) focuses on the self-discipline required to run one’s own business while living in a space of leisure, as reflected by the experiences of new nomads who underestimate the work involved in the lifestyle. Other ethnographic studies examine the lifestyle in particular locations, such as the popular tourist destinations of Barcelona (Matos & Ardevol 2021) or Chiang Mai, Thailand (Loryn 2022), as well as the adoption of the lifestyle into non-Western spaces, such as Oman, and the particularities of such newly formed microcosms (Al-Hadi & Al-Aufi 2019).

Overall, the body of research on digital nomadism has shifted from one of enthusiastic ideology to one based on ethnographic evidence and critical perspectives on the inherent pro-entrepreneurial, pro-business, and anarcho-capitalist strands of digital nomadism.



## **Social Media: Lifestyle Marketing, Self-Branding, and Selling the Fantasy**

The digital nomad lifestyle trades the accumulation of material items and property for an alternative form of consumption. Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) draw from their interpretive investigation of the digital nomad community to highlight how the logic of consumption shifts from one of objects to one of experiences and images of those experiences to “signal status, build image, pursue happiness, and attain a sense of self-worth” (481). Just as the tourist collects souvenirs for colleagues back in the office, the digital nomad collects filtered images, which are posted on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, typically showing scenes of luxury, leisure, and joy. Bonneau et. al. (2023) adds that this romanticizing is further fueled when a nomad aspires to monetize their online identity performance via social media. Thus, rather than collecting items, one posts images of travel experiences that can be translated into viewers, followers, likes, and, ultimately, affiliated links and advertisements. This “identity work” as Arifa et al. (2022) refer to it that digital nomads enact in their expressed motivations includes concepts about new approaches to work, such as rebelling against occupational expectations by engaging with different ways of approaching working and leisure experiences. Ultimately, many digital nomads are also digital workers who create website content for themselves and others, and they hold aspirations of monetizing their digital content (Willment 2020). For this reason, their presentation of self (Goffman 1952) is highly performative; they construct both “front stage” and “back stage” elements to create a heightened sense of authenticity. While the glamorous images of a tropical region are highlighted, glimpses of the overwork, precarity, and loneliness are also harvested for content.

## **The State, Gentrification or Double Displacement, and Marketing to Nomads**

The digital nomad ethos is pro-capitalism, pro-entrepreneurship, and anti-state. Digital nomads call themselves (micro-)entrepreneurs, and some attempt to avoid state regulations, such as taxes. They do this by maintaining mobility, and, in some cases, by withholding their full status, including their income and workplace location, from the state. However, beyond the rhetoric of being a “global citizen,” which is based on their extensive travels, digital nomads soon discover that they cannot escape the state. They realize that it is the state itself that provides them with a passport which restricts or allows travel and imposes other regulations, such as income tax (Cook 2022; Akalp 2021). Indeed, it is often one’s nationality, possession of a strong passport, education, and access to capital that provides them with the ability to pursue the digital nomad lifestyle. Digital nomads are also impacted as many of them learned during the COVID-19 pandemic border lockdowns by restrictions on movement across national borders (Ehn, Jorge, & Marques-Pita 2022; Holleran 2022). Ultimately, the concept of a “global citizen” is inherently a privileged perspective and it is a contradictory one, as it directly relates to those with powerful passports, economic resources, and stability. McElroy (2019) argues that nomads are

implementing “Silicon Valley imperialism” by relying on Silicon Valley-level tech salaries; centering workdays around the California time zone; creating “double displacement” or gentrification in host countries; and describing themselves as “Gypsies” (considered a racial slur), while disregarding the historical context, racism, displacement, and exclusion faced by the Romani people. McElroy (2019) compares this usage to historical racial fantasies of colonial periods as described by colonial seafarers of the time. While digital nomads refer to a “Gypsy” or nomadic lifestyle, they erase the inequalities, oppression, and displacement that those forced migrants have faced. Indeed, McElroy et al. (2020) examine how digital nomads are traveling to Romania itself, resulting in the “double dispossession” of the Romani people through the fantasy that co-opts their imagery and the actual displacement that results from long-term tourism in Romania.

However, workers in highly developed countries are now feeling the economic pressure and facing relatively high rates of inequality. This bifurcation is also inherent in the digital nomad community, which consists of a few high-income earners and a vast number of low-income earners. McElroy’s (2019) Silicon Valley imperialists can, at the expense of the local community, take their high salaries and visit foreign nations for companies such as Airbnb and others tailoring their products to these nomadic high earners. Remote and flexible work has further opened the door to this process to those who may not consider themselves digital nomads but who can commute from their high-income employing home country to a “more affordable” country that caters to these new residents. As Kaysen (2023) reports, high income-earning Americans those in the top 10% of income earners are moving in greater numbers to southern European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, and Italy, to purchase real estate, thereby increasing prices and making rent unaffordable for many citizens of those countries. High-income tech workers also face cyclical periods of hiring and mass layoffs. In the first part of 2023, the Meta corporation laid off two waves of 10,000 workers each, or 13% of its workforce, with other tech companies following a similar trajectory (Isaac 2023; Genovese 2023; Hufford 2023; Liedtke 2023). While these groups are not necessarily digital nomads, they nonetheless demonstrate a related context of global displacement occurring as housing costs escalate worldwide.

Despite the negative impacts on local populations in popular tourist destinations, governments often cater to the tourism economy generally, and to the burgeoning digital nomad market in particular, with incentives such as digital nomad visas for extended stays (Gennaro 2022), visas for nomadic businesses, and co-working and co-living spaces.

Despite the participants’ desire to avoid being labeled as “tourists,” digital nomads tend to stay on the beaten tourist path, seeking out locations that cater towards English-speaking visitors. Although they travel to “exotic” and distant

destinations, nomads tend to seek Western-style accommodations and connections with people of similar backgrounds. They rarely develop friendships with locals (outside of service economy interactions) and are interested in friendships with other digital nomads. Thus, they often rendezvous with their other nomadic friends in tourist hot spots and may spend time together in co-working and co-living spaces. Young workers in expensive cities are beginning to explore co-living opportunities to share expenses and experience a social and communal living situation, especially in places such as New York and San Francisco (Bergan, Gorman-Murray, & Power 2021). Much academic literature on digital nomad lifestyles has focused on co-working spaces and how these can be leveraged to attract long-term visitors (Chevtava & Denizci-Guillet 2021; Wörndl, Koo, & Stienmetz 2021; Bassiyouny & Wilkesmann 2023). Some of this literature explores digital nomad hot spots and how local businesses attempt to attract nomads to places such as Ubud (MacRae 2016), Thailand (Orel 2021), and Gran Canaria, Spain (Hannonen 2023).

## **Methodology**

To meet digital nomads, I attended several in-person lifestyle conventions that were held in various southern European tourist hot spots, such as Lisbon and Spain. These conferences brought the digital nomad community together, and participants took the opportunity to reconnect with nomadic friends, network for business opportunities, or simply socialize. While one conference targeted a general nomadic audience and was comprised mostly of Western, White men and women, two other events targeted women. This study oversampled women to focus on that demographic, but it also included a smaller sample of men, including partners of the women participants. One of the events was a ten-day retreat during which I became familiar with all the attendees and was able to interview majority of them. At an associated event, I volunteered as a photographer; I therefore met most of the participants and followed up with each after the event to conduct a formal interview. The interviews were each one to two hours long and focused on the participant's life story as it pertained to their background, travel experience, demographic information, and working experience.

Overall, I interviewed 38 participants; five identified as male and the rest as female. All participants held a Western passport, and several held dual passports, including some passports whose visa-free access to nations worldwide was more limited. All participants spoke English. None of the native English speakers had learned a second language, whereas the multilingual participants had learned English as a second language. A majority of the participants were millennials in their 30s; a quarter were in their 20s; and four were in their 40s. Most of the participants were White (n=25), three were mixed race, two were Asian (Chinese and Indian), five were Black or African, two were Hispanic White, and one was Arab American. A majority of the participants identified as heterosexual; five identified as lesbian, queer, or gay; and three identified as bisexual or fluid.

Twenty-three of the participants had a bachelor's degree; six had a master's degree; one had a law degree; two had PhDs; and one had attended high school only (and, incidentally, was one of the highest earners). Half of the participants had student debt. The Europeans and Australians had repayment plans with the government based on income (or lack thereof), whereas the Americans either paid full rates (regardless of employment status) or were able to put their loans in deferral, thus continuing to accrue interest. Six of the participants were married, and two of those six were planning to divorce. Thirty-two of the participants were unmarried, but ten of those were in long-term relationships. One participant had a grown child; the rest of the participants had no children. Four strongly desired children in the future; 15 were unsure about having children; and 14 were certain they did not desire children. One participant had an alcohol-related criminal driving charge that had since been expunged; therefore, none of the nomads had a criminal record that would be a barrier for travel (many countries ask visitors about their criminal backgrounds). Two participants identified as followers of an organized religion. Four affirmed being a homeowner (past or present). The majority had middle-class parents who were educated and employed, but most were in careers that reflected gender norms.

Overall, besides the oversampling of women, the participant demographics reflect trends in the digital nomad community, which is key to understanding the subculture, who joins it, and who it excludes. The participants were from "strong passport" countries, did not have criminal records, were highly educated, and did not have children (nor property). While the participants may currently lack high-paying jobs, their privileges offer them a number of advantages, including easy access to visas and credit cards; the ability to purchase plane tickets and pay for accommodations; and the freedom of mobility associated with a child-free lifestyle. Those without such privileges would likely have difficulty joining the digital nomad community as frequent international travelers.

### **Interviewees Discover Nomadism via Social Media**

For younger generations, such as the millennials and Generation Z digital natives, as they are known cell phone cameras and surveillance of online behavior are seamlessly integrated into their social expectations. Members of these generations rely on social media to post continuously about their lifestyle. What is significant for these younger generations is the notable influence media has on their lifestyle choices. The participants shared stories in which an Instagram post or television show had the power to influence their future trajectory. American participant Chelse, from the southern United States, was initially inspired by a television show to pursue her dream of digital nomadism. Chelse states:

*"I was not always remote, and, actually, the position was not supposed to be remote at all. But, on my 25th birthday, I had this epiphany. I had been watching*

*this TV show called Chasing Life about this girl with cancer. She was 25 at the time in the TV show. And, one day, I was like, "Is this it, am I going to go to work every single day until I die?" Then, I started researching options. I found this thing called digital nomadism. I had never heard of it before. Then, the next week, I sat down with my boss and said, "This is what's going to happen. I'm totally cool if you want to fire me. You're not going to find anyone as good as me." I mean, I said it nicer than that. But it was definitely an ultimatum. Thank goodness that they accepted my wild behavior."*

Chelse was working with a small advertisement agency, and the position continued for another year of remote work before she started her own small advertising company focused on selling Facebook advertisements and other social media content. All but one of the participants were college graduates who anticipated full-time employment after graduation. Acquiring a full-time job and affording rent in a major city proved difficult for the young adults. They were seeking ways to achieve what they had come to expect without full-time employment. They began searching online. Marie Starck was one of the more professionally established nomads; her strong work history in software development facilitated her entry into a well-paid, in-demand field in which remote work was a possibility. Marie states:

*"I had always wanted to travel. My goal was to be a consultant. I wanted to merge tech and traveling at the same time. Basically, my goal was to have a couple of years of experience as a software developer and then become a tech consultant for IBM or another big company. The idea would be that every two years they would send me to other places, and that's how I would travel. But then, I was like, "There has to be a better way." That's when I stumbled onto this whole digital nomad thing. Once I found the first article, I did all my research."*

Many of the digital nomads discovered the nomadic lifestyle in a similar way: They researched the lifestyle online via websites and encountered other digital nomads promoting their branded web content. I asked the participants about the websites, individuals, books, and podcasts that motivated them to begin traveling. Many were inspired by Tim Ferriss's book *The 4-Hour Work Week* as well as specific websites about digital nomadism and content that they followed. MC told me about the blogs that she followed:

*"While we were in the Peace Corps, I started researching travel for us after we got out. That is how I came across both travel hacking and the digital nomad world. It was like, "We should at least try that." I know at some point I read The 4-hour Work Week early on, so maybe that kind of sparked. But I don't feel a strong connection to his philosophy. I would say probably Chris Guillebeau's (2010) blog "The Art of Nonconformity," where he writes about unconventional work, online work, and travel. His website probably connected me to more people that were blogging about digital nomadism."*

Kee Kee, an African American participant, was traveling with her husband at the beginning of their journey as nomads. Previously, they had lived on a houseboat because her husband was hired to work on the boat and was able to reside there as an incentive, not unlike the house-sitting gigs that other nomads sought. Kee Kee was also inspired by an online search in which she encountered websites selling the travel and entrepreneurial lifestyle:

*“It just kept coming up because I was looking for other people who lived this life I wanted to live. I was just calling it “living on vacation,” but then I came across Wanderlust Entrepreneurs. I came across Click Millionaires and then started hearing the term “digital nomad” or “nomad,” and I thought, “That’s me.” I just embodied it. I really embodied it. The wanderlust, I thought, is a feeling inside of me, but it is not who I am or what I do. My sister called me a gypsy. I thought, “I’m not a gypsy. I want to work.” So, I noticed that most of the work that I do—pretty much all of the work that I do, even in the States—I have never had a client that was in the same city as me where I could meet one-on-one. They’ve always been in another state. Even when I was in Colorado. So, when I came across the term “digital nomad,” it just stuck.”*

Kee Kee had retired from a full career working in a stable corporate job, and she was the only nomad with a child; however, her child was an adult at this time. Marta, a nomad from Poland, planned ahead with her boyfriend, and they bought their tickets in advance to Chiang Mai, Thailand ground zero for the digital nomad community. Although influencers such as Guillebeau (2010) promote “non-conformity” as a business strategy, nomads adhere to many subcultural norms, especially that of beginning the nomad journey in Chiang Mai. Marta describes her experience as follows:

*“We bought tickets a year in advance to Chiang Mai. We chose this place because I don’t know if you know the website nomadlist.com? Chiang Mai was the first on the list as the most popular digital nomad destination in the world. So, we decided to go to a place where we will meet nomads and see how it works, if we meet other people doing that. So, we went to Chiang Mai. We prepared for a year in advance, bought tickets, and went. It was interesting that everybody was supporting us. Everybody was super happy for us, including family and friends, until we actually told them we bought tickets.”*

The nomads found the lifestyle via an internet search. They bought the e-books, subscribed to podcasts, and picked the location where they were likely to meet other aspiring nomads like themselves. Once in Chiang Mai, nomads go to the co-working spaces and quickly make friends with others who teach them the ways of remote work. Many of the participants report trying to learn about drop shipping, which is promoted as an easy way to make money. Those in the drop shipping business establish a website that sells trinkets. The website is connected to a trinket maker (in China or another manufacturing country), and orders

placed on the website are shipped by the manufacturer or distributor. The business therefore provides, theoretically, a passive income. However, one quickly learns that significant effort is required to build an audience; indeed, this step proves nearly impossible, and nomads quickly move on to another “side hustle,” as Guillebeau (2010) calls it. Selling the fantasy of the lifestyle itself even when one has just begun their journey becomes a side hustle, and a few successful “audience-builders,” such as Guillebeau himself, are at the top of this pyramid.

### **Travel Bloggers and Content Creators**

Few nomads were employed full-time with one company. One of the two highest earners in the group I interviewed was an international lawyer who worked between Hong Kong and Florida; however, her salary fluctuated from zero to six figures. The other high earner landed a gig as a ghost writer after being discovered from his blog. He was the only participant who claimed to earn a six-figure salary consistently, and he was the only one whose education was limited to high school. Kavi explains his success:

*“I was location dependent. Then, in 2014, my partner at the time and I decided to find ways to get out into the world and see different cultures. I wanted to see different types of working styles, so that I could write about it. It just so happened that I was keeping a blog. I have been writing a blog since I was in the 10th grade. I started writing about those things on the blog. There was a pure chance encounter where one of the editors at Forbes Magazine had tweeted something. I tweeted back something with a bit of humor and wit, and I guess that compelled him to check out my blog. He sent me an e-mail and said, “I like what you’re writing. Do you want to come write for us?” That was purely a chance encounter. In a fuzzier sense, I always believed that phrase, “Luck is the intersection of opportunity and preparation.” My girlfriend and I decided we were going to quit our jobs. We had saved up enough money to travel for about a year and a half, and I was just going to write and see what the world was like in terms of work. So, he said, “Write about it with us.” So, I said, “Okay. Cool. I’ll do that.” We went to Southeast Asia, which is now the most common journey for all these remote workers. I wrote consistently about that intersection of technology and workplace transformation. It opened up things like speaking, working on books, and meeting a lot of those unique people that I wanted to meet. Eventually, I came to Australia. We were planning to be in Australia for a year anyway and then eventually settle in Western Australia.”*

Aspiring digital nomads without professional skills and graduate degrees are often at a loss when pursuing remote work. Participant Taylor Lane describes her leap into digital nomadism:

*"I decided that I wanted to continue with some kind of career and be a productive member of the world. Get my own apartment and everything like that. I started looking for options. I found some Instagram pages of people who worked remotely. I fell down a rabbit hole scrolling on Instagram for centuries. I realized that there were remote jobs out there. That's how I stumbled upon that. I applied up the wazoo and got something within two weeks."*

She was able to monetize her ability to search for remote work and sell this skill to others on her website, Remote Like Me. Once aspiring digital nomads moved beyond the social media posts, they began to follow certain bloggers who appeared successful. Most of these bloggers produce similar content; it often depicts a young, traditionally attractive, White person sitting on a beach with their laptop.

Sally, like other nomads, found Tim Ferris's books online, and then she found other bloggers to follow:

*"I had started following some travel bloggers. Then, it progressed into finding online entrepreneurs, like Tim Ferris. Some of the early travel blogging, Nomadic Matt, Christine Gilbert from Almost Fearless... These are people who I saw traveling solo, with significant others, or even with their children, and still working. So, I wanted to work and figure out how can I do this."*

Overall, the nomads reported being disappointed with employment opportunities in their home countries, and they longed for something more. They spent their time consuming social media, looking for opportunities that might be more fulfilling. They consumed travel-related content, and some began selling the same type of content themselves to fund a lifestyle that they could not support by other means. Generally, the nomads were working precariously in their home countries and left unsatisfied. They consumed social media that promoted the digital nomad lifestyle, and some were able to join the lifestyle with a few months of planning and minimal savings or remote work opportunities.

## **Employment, Precarity, and Benefits**

As mentioned previously, the nomads I interviewed were inspired to join the lifestyle because they spent a significant amount of time consuming social media, where much nomadic content is located. Most were not yet remotely employed and therefore attempted to determine which remote work opportunities they could pursue in order to adopt the digital nomad lifestyle. The British and Australian nomads had more opportunities than the Americans, as they were often able to work and access healthcare reciprocally, and many of these participants had dual passports. Alexandra is an Australian citizen, and her British boyfriend owns a flat that he rents out while traveling to produce some of his income. When they are in the UK, they live in the flat. Alexandra describes her entry into the lifestyle:



*“A friend of mine worked for a company that did academic editing. I started doing that in Thailand. I still had a freelance client that I did some writing for. Those are the main two things that I did at the start. John started by actually working for the people who ran Making It Anywhere. And they had a bunch of businesses, and they wanted someone to do their newsletter and other content. They hired John to do that, and he did that for quite a while. Yeah. So, we spent some time in Sydney. He came and met my family and friends. And then we went to Thailand, Budapest, and Turkey. That was the first year. We spent three months in each place, in Airbnbs. We were trying to get our heads around the whole thing. In 2015, we moved to Sydney for the whole year. I had a project that I wanted to start out with a friend, a nonprofit thing. John was still doing stuff remote. Last year, we did a bit more traveling. We spent the whole summer in the UK. And then went back to Turkey. And we also decided that I would get a partner visa. Now we settled in the UK. We moved back into his flat. We have been location-independent more than digital nomad for the last year or so.”*

As a couple, Alexandra and her boyfriend could pool their income and resources and live comfortably in the digital nomad lifestyle. They took advantage of spending time in their home countries, where they had access to resources and social networks, as well as his flat in London, and they spent additional time traveling in eastern Europe. Alexis, who was described in the previous section, was one of the highest earners, but her income fluctuated. Her job as an international lawyer was precarious; one client was unstable, and another was commission based. Alexis further describes her income situation:

*“The first soul-killing job was my first law firm. When I was a first year, we were making anywhere from mid-\$150,000s to \$200,000 plus. When I was at the law firm in Asia with the expat package, it was about \$300,000, and this is right before the recession. When I was a legal recruiter, I was 100% strict commission, so I ate what I killed. First year, I made no money. I was at \$0 in 2009, but so were many other people. 2010, I think I made around \$75,000. 2011, I made \$200,000. 2012, I made about \$100,000. It was up and down. Then, in 2013, when I came back to New York and worked for the other recruiting agency, I didn’t make crap. I closed \$30,000 worth of deals. My maid back in Hong Kong was making more than I was in New York. Now, I’m just under \$100,000. I am about to get a new job with my old boss. He is starting his own company. He is asking me to join him, and he said, “I don’t care where you work. You are 100% digitally remote.””*

However, Alexis was not representative of the group as a whole; she was one of the few participants with the potential to earn a high income based on having a law degree and an advanced skill set. Anna was more representative as a multilingual college graduate with a bachelor’s degree but an irregular, entry-level employment history that only led to further entry-level employment opportunities:

*“My income fluctuated wildly. I honestly don’t even know what I earn year to year... Last year was definitely very little. Because I was recovering from my accident and couldn’t work. There was a year where if I wrote an article or made like \$200 in a month, that was great. I know that I kept myself, while I was in New York, on a budget of about \$30,000 to about \$35,000 a year that I was allowed to spend. Because I calculated that after my taxes and my deductibles from being a freelancer. I am also on a very aggressive student loan payment plan. After my taxes and after my student loan payments were paid, I could spend the rest, about \$30,000 a year, without stressing out. And sometimes there would be a little bit leftover to save.”*

Anna is also an American; she had an accident and accrued medical bills, which, in addition to her student loan debt, created a large economic burden for her to address. She was unable to save money and lived on a small spendable income, especially considering she was living in the most expensive city in the United States. In contrast to that significant precarity, Alexandra, as an Australian, was able to access free healthcare in both the UK and Australia, as well as federally required retirement benefits, demonstrating the significance of one’s home government regulations. She described her situation as follows:

*“As an Australian in the UK, they have a reciprocal free healthcare agreement. With the NHS, you can just turn up, and they’ll treat you and then send you home. And they won’t necessarily ask you for any money. When I got my visa, I had to pay £600 for an NHS fee. When I’m at home, I get free healthcare as well. When we travel, we don’t typically get health travel insurance unless we’re going to the States. But I think we should probably start doing that. In terms of retirement, I do. I have some money in a retirement fund in Australia, that I put... I guess I put a small amount of money in that each month. When I was at one company for five months, I was on the payroll, and they paid tax and retirement. In Australia, there’s a compulsory 9.5%. It’s something I pay quite a lot of attention to actually, paying my superannuation fund. And I have a couple of hundred pounds in a fund here—that came from when I was working for that last mobile job.”*

Finally, the digital nomads I interviewed had purchased travel insurance. For Americans such as Anna, the travel insurance was their primary healthcare, whereas for Australian and British passport holders, the travel insurance served as a backup. Thus, a medical emergency could be a catastrophe for nomads, and they would likely use the local healthcare system in their host country. For Americans, accessing paid healthcare in a developing country would likely be much more affordable. Australian and British nomads, on the other hand, had free healthcare in home countries to which they could return. Thus, the significance of the state was visible not only through the power of a passport’s global visa-free reach, but also in healthcare, student debt payments, and retirement funding. As the nomads were often employed precariously, these benefits served as a literal lifeline.

## Discussion

The participants in this study all encountered the lifestyle of digital nomadism on social media. They expressed disappointment with their economic opportunities in their home countries and had high aspirations for their careers and lifestyles. The digital nomad lifestyle piqued their interest because it was represented by people who looked like them. Erving Goffman (1952) wrote about “front stage” and “back stage” performances in everyday life, describing how people manage appearances and behaviors for a perceived audience of coworkers, acquaintances, and strangers in the workplace and on the street. “Back stage” aspects include those which we hide: behaviors in the privacy of our homes, faces without makeup, unpopular opinions, personal insecurities, and emotional breakdowns. Goffman can be useful in understanding digital nomadism as this is a lifestyle focused on the performance of enjoying leisure travel. Willment (2020) focuses on the performance of travel bloggers in the digital nomad workplace. She notes that images of enjoyable adventures in beautiful locations are central to such performances. The participants appeared eager to consume such images. As Chelse and Taylor Lane noted, the imagery had the power to change their life trajectory; they wanted to have what they saw in images posted online by strangers. Chelse stated: “Is this it? Am I going to go to work every single day until I die? Then, I started researching options. I found this thing called digital nomadism.” Taylor Lane described a similar encounter with the lifestyle on social media that had a significant impact on her. She stated:

*“I found some Instagram pages of people who worked remotely. I fell down a rabbit hole scrolling on Instagram for centuries. I realized that there were remote jobs out there. That’s how I stumbled upon that. I applied up the wazoo and got something within two weeks.”*

Sally also confirmed that she had followed travel bloggers online and that the blogs inspired her to pursue the lifestyle with little further information.

Indeed, Arifa et. al (2022) write that digital nomadism is not only a personal lifestyle; it also incorporates projecting a particular “identity work” and performance that legitimizes one’s choice and impacts their audience, which, in turn, affects the financial marketing that many nomads rely on to fund their travels (Bonneau et al. 2023). Ultimately, as Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) note, the digital nomad lifestyle is still one of consumption but it replaces material items with experiences and images that one can post publicly to reinforce the subcultural ideology.

Digital nomads often minimize the role of the state in their lifestyle, referring to themselves as “global citizens” and rejecting the idea that their home country has provided them with specific powers and privileges, especially in

contrast to the locals in the host country. This became especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many nomads had to decide if they were able to travel at all during the period of border closures which location was more suitable for lockdown: the host or home country. This choice was a clear indicator of the power of the state and citizenship. Those whose home countries provided assistance chose to return. For others, such as Americans, many of whom could not afford to live in the United States, or to return there, it was better to stay abroad. Alexandra and Anna both demonstrate the significant impact of healthcare on one's life. Alexandra is an Australian with a UK-based boyfriend, and she was able to access healthcare in either Australia or the UK. Anna had had an accident that left her with significant medical debt and the inability to work at full capacity, and she therefore struggled to meet her financial needs. Anna also had private, expensive student loans to repay, and the loans were not based on income, as they are in Australia and the UK, where the income-based loan system eases the burden on those who make little to no income.

Finally, McElroy (2019) critiqued the digital nomad lifestyle for continuing to implement a so-called "Silicon Valley imperialism" that relies on global inequalities and benefits nomads with strong passports and weak incomes. McElroy (2019) also described nomads' use of the term "Gypsies" in a manner that disregards the historical and cultural context of the Romani people. Kee Kee used the term in her interview when she described it as a word her sister had called her, reflecting its currency and use out of context, as well as a lack of understanding of the differences between forced migration and leisure travel pursued by choice. Despite adherents of digital nomads referring to themselves as "global citizens," they often lacked a sufficient understanding of the context in the impoverished countries to which they traveled in order to access a material lifestyle that, in turn, directly impacts and creates displacement of local economies.

## Conclusion

Makimoto and Manners' Digital Nomad provided the organizing concept for this digital nomad subculture that would emerge decades after its publication in 1997. The lifestyle is promoted in popular media as a "freeing" way of being that is open to anyone. However, adherents of digital nomadism are overwhelmingly millennials from wealthy nations who, despite representing the most educated generation, face a wider economic context of growing precarity. Although nomads prefer not to identify as "tourists," they tend to congregate in popular travel destinations, thereby amplifying the tourism marketing industry. The industry now also targets digital nomads with offers such as long-term co-living and co-working lodging, internet cafes, and networking events. Because the nomads are mobile, they trade their opportunity to collect objects, houses, and material items for the consumption of travel experiences that they can photograph and market

on their social media pages (Atanasova & Eckhardt 2021). The most financially successful digital nomad participants were those with full time employment in computer programming or software design and professional skills and degrees who can work remotely. However, high-income earners were the exception; aspiring digital nomads without professional skills and graduate degrees were often unsuccessful when pursuing remote work. Participant Taylor Lane used the difficulty others had finding remote work to her advantage by creating a micro-business that sold job listings and advice on remote work to aspiring nomads. While nomads were quick to reject the state ideologically, they could not completely disregard the role of the state because it provides their passports, visa-free entries into other countries, and potential social benefits. However, less research has examined the gentrifying effects of digital nomadism on local communities.

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# CHAPTER 2

## Exploring Dynamics in the Co-Production of Monitoring Technologies for Refugee Accommodations in Germany

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### Abstract

This paper explores the development of the Violence Protection Monitor, a digital tool created to support violence protection in German refugee accommodations. This social innovation was established following the refugee influx to Germany in 2015. The analysis is based on data gathered from workshops conducted between 2019 and 2022, and it examines the development, adaptation, and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor. Employing Bourdieusian and co-production frameworks, this paper investigates the dynamics and interactions among actors in the political field of refugee accommodations. While the emergence of the monitoring tool has created spaces for challenging power dynamics and addressing key issues, hierarchical structures have also been reproduced to some extent. While different bottom-up and top-down approaches have been employed, the implementation of the monitoring tool would not have been possible without collaborations on all levels in the governance of refugee accommodations.

## **Introduction:**

### **German Refugee Accommodation Centers and Violence Protection**

With the global surge of refugees since 2015, the field of refugee reception has experienced “campization” an increase in the practice of accommodating asylum seekers in institutional, camp-like centers (Kreichauf, 2018). In Germany, the responsibility for the initial refugee accommodation centers lies with the 16 federal states, rather than the central government, resulting in various approaches to the governance of centers and various conditions within them. After the initial reception, refugees are distributed to local municipalities, which oversee longer-term accommodations (Doomernik & Glorius, 2016, 233). Like with centers in municipalities, the reception accommodation centers are often operated by NGOs. Thus, the refugee reception system needs contributions by various actors across levels and requires cooperation between state, third sector organizations, and other stakeholders (Garkisch et al., 2017, 1839). Nonetheless, the political decision to institutionalize the housing of asylum seekers has significant overall implications for their well-being, particularly regarding their heightened vulnerability to violence within institutional centers. Factors such as diverse populations living in close proximity, limited privacy, the stressful asylum process, and inadequate resources contribute to an environment in which conflicts can easily escalate. This poses risks to the safety of residents, employees, volunteers, and service providers in the accommodations (Al Ajlan, 2022; Böhme & Schmitt, 2022; Nilsson & Badran, 2021; Scherr, 2022). In response to the challenges faced by federal states and municipalities regarding the reception of asylum seekers, a federal initiative for the protection of refugees was created with the aim of establishing uniform standards for accommodations: “The Minimum Standards for the Protection of Refugees in Refugee Accommodations.” These standards serve as guidelines for managers, social workers, and other personnel involved in accommodating and ensuring the safety of refugees throughout Germany. Drawing from various legal frameworks, including asylum, child protection, social security, violence protection, and UN conventions, these standards encompass a broad definition of violence and violence protection. They refer to physical, sexual, and psychological forms of violence, as well as diverse violence relations such as violence against children, domestic violence, and human trafficking. The guidelines for protection cover various aspects, including staff training, infrastructure measures, opportunities for participation, grievance procedures, internal organizational structures, handling of violence, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the execution of the standards (ibid.).

However, the minimum standards are not legally binding, and although in many cases personnel intend to implement them, a lack of resources and an inconsistent information flow in the field of refugee accommodation have posed a challenge to that implementation. For instance, although the standards recommend monitoring and evaluating implementation within the accommodations, no direct criteria to measure violence protection are provided. Additionally, the absence of

standardized processes and scarce resources have made this a particularly difficult task (Kleist & Frederiksen, 2022, 262). This paper examines the development and implementation of a novel digital monitoring tool for measuring violence protection in accommodations, namely the Violence Protection Monitor. The tool is intended to provide management and employees of reception facilities and shared accommodations for refugees<sup>1</sup> an indication of their progress in the implementation of violence protection measures (ibid.). By doing so, it offers a solution to the challenge of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the minimum standards.

Scholars in the field of asylum system governance have explored various dimensions. Some have focused on governance within the broader context of EU migration management (Hess & Karakayali, 2007), while others have examined management and governance within Germany in particular (Bogumil et al., 2016), including through the appraisal of digital advancements on refugee registration and shelter provision in the country (Verenkotte, 2019). Several studies highlight promising practices in accommodating refugees, such as the Leverkusen Model, which promotes collaborative efforts among government entities, NGOs, and the Refugee Council (Auslender, 2022); benefits of private accommodations (Dudek et al., 2022); and alternative approaches to decentralization (Hauge et al., 2016). However, despite the existence of these diverse “best practices,” potential challenges remain, and a significant number of refugees continue to reside in state- and municipality-operated facilities.

In Europe, mass accommodations, despite their differences in sizes, conditions, and legal frameworks, serve as political instruments to regulate immigration flow (Kreichauf, 2018). These facilities act as focal points for “cimmigration,” or the criminalization of migration and border crossing (Aas, 2011). While accommodations may have contrasting official purposes (such as detention centers for punitive measures or centers for vulnerable populations seeking protection), they all contribute to crimmigration and political control. German reception and accommodation centers explicitly connect the asylum process with eventual deportation (Münch, 2021), and despite their official purpose of protecting asylum seekers, the accommodations are sites of inherent violence (Scherr, 2022). Mass accommodations are consistently viewed by scholars as an inferior option for ensuring the well-being of asylum seekers (Baier & Siegert, 2018). Scholars have emphasized the importance of implementing institutional measures for violence protection (Christ et al., 2017), and although a heightened professionalization and development of the asylum system has been acknowledged, they have also criticized the insufficient local implementation of such violence protection measures (Zimmermann et al., 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> As defined in Sections 47 and 53 of the Asylum Act, hereinafter referred to as “refugee accommodation.”

## The Development of a Novel Digital Monitoring Tool

The Violence Protection Monitor was collaboratively developed through a multi-stage process involving practitioners from accommodations, experts from academia, and rights-based NGOs. It was further enhanced through qualitative interviews conducted by the research team with residents and employees in accommodations. This paper aims to explore the establishment of the monitoring tool within the context of asylum governance, including the emergence process. The participatory development and implementation process of the monitor was designed to achieve two objectives: 1) raise awareness among various stakeholders, including federal state ministries, management and employees, service providers, volunteers, and residents in accommodations and 2) capture their diverse experiences, skills, and interpretations as valuable knowledge. Therefore, it was crucial to include multiple voices and perspectives throughout the development and implementation of the monitoring tool, treating all stakeholders as experts and fostering a strong connection between scholarship and practical application (Anastasiadis & Wrentschur, 2019, 14). This paper focuses on actors working in the field of refugee reception and accommodation centers in Germany who were also involved in the development and implementation of the monitoring tool. This includes actors within the federal initiative on violence protection, actors from NGOs, a scientific advisory board, state ministry officers, and practitioners in refugee accommodations. It addresses the following questions: How have different actors engaged with the development and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor, and how has this process influenced the governance of refugee accommodation centers in the seven federal states involved?

This paper encompasses multiple academic domains namely the governance of refugee accommodations, digital migration studies, and transformational social innovation. The development, adaptation, and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor can be seen as action research. Digital migration studies address both “bottom-up,” digitally mediated processes involving transnational and local networking, connectivity, and activism, as well as “top-down,” digitally mediated processes related to migrant management, such as border control, surveillance, and information dissemination (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018, 263). In this paper, the analysis of the Violence Protection Monitor recognizes the monitor’s versatile, dual-adaptation processes, which encompass both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Nevertheless, when considering the context of digital migration studies, the monitor can be specifically positioned as a top-down digital migration management tool. Simultaneously, the monitor can be seen as a transformational social innovation grounded in intricate and fluid institutional structures, the collaborative co-production of knowledge and action, and individual and collective agency, as well as (dis)empowerment (Pel et al., 2020, 11). Accordingly, this article seeks to bridge an empirical and conceptual gap within the field of refugee accommodation governance and contribute to the

expanding literature by investigating how this bottom-up and top-down social innovation affects violence protection governance in refugee accommodations.

To assess how various actors have been involved in the Violence Protection Monitor and its impact on the governance of refugee accommodation centers, I triangulated data obtained through workshops, meetings, and events. These were conducted during the development, adaptation, and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor from 2019 through 2022. As part of the research team working on the monitor, I was granted unique access to study the organization of the field of asylum and protection from both insider and outsider perspectives. To analyze how different actors have constructed and transformed political structures related to the governance of refugee accommodations, the paper combines a Bourdieusian approach with the concept of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004), which is also related to the field of transformational social innovation.

In the following section, I will describe the object of study, the Violence Protection Monitor, in greater detail. Then, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework and provide further analysis. Finally, I will address how the creation of knowledge using the monitor can be integrated into the governance of refugee accommodations as well as how that governance can affect the production of knowledge and the construction of the monitor itself.

### **The Object of Study: The Violence Protection Monitor**

The Violence Protection Monitor, developed at the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), is a digital application created based on the minimum standards established for Germany after the influx of refugees in 2015 and 2016. These minimum standards, developed as part of a German federal initiative involving UNICEF and other NGOs, were specifically designed to ensure the protection of asylum seekers in accommodations (BMFSFJ & UNICEF, 2021). The standards encompass various aspects of violence protection, including monitoring and evaluation practices.

The Violence Protection Monitor was conceived as tool to assist accommodation staff in assessing their adherence to the minimum standards and creating safe living spaces that meet the complex guidelines. It was developed as a digital resource that can be used for the monitoring of violence protection measures. By using the monitor, accommodation staff can document their actions, critically reflect on them, and make necessary changes.

The monitor is grounded in the concept of participatory monitoring and evaluation (Jacobs et al., 2010), and it draws on the expertise of different employee groups with thematic knowledge. Additionally, a module was integrated to allow for resident surveys. This participatory approach aims

to empower individuals who are otherwise only marginally involved in the process, such as those targeted by violence protection initiatives. By involving these individuals, monitoring activities not only address the goal of empowerment but also serve as a means to that goal (Jacobs et al., 2010, 40).

Throughout the development of the Violence Protection Monitor, it was crucial that scientific, ethical, data, and violence protection requirements were considered. Furthermore, the practicality and feasibility of the monitor under the specific conditions of refugee accommodations—including institutional, staffing, legal, political, and financial conditions—were taken into account. The monitor is designed for self-evaluation purposes, with internal data usage aimed at safeguarding against potential misuse, political misinterpretation, or manipulation (Kleist & Frederiksen, 2022). Moreover, due to the non-legally binding nature of the minimum standards and limited financial resources within the field, it was not possible to establish the standards nor the monitor as enforceable measures, and they therefore lack any associated sanctions for non-compliance.

The inherent motivation of accommodation management and other accommodation staff, as well as employees at state ministries, for violence protection serves as a central driver for the Violence Protection Monitor, which aims to strengthen employees' effective involvement in that protection through internal monitoring. By creating a platform for critical reflection and continuous improvement, the monitor contributes to the dynamic nature of violence protection and provides an empirical basis for further development and enhancement of related practices (Abbott et al., 2005).<sup>2</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework: The Field of Asylum and Protection and Its Co-Production**

Employing a Bourdieusian perspective, this paper analyzes the asylum and protection field, focusing on the actors involved and their dynamics amid field changes. The actors include the federal violence protection initiative, NGOs, researchers, state ministry officers, and practitioners in refugee accommodations. This approach emphasizes agency and offers insights into the dominance of certain governance rationalities and their influence on the actions of various stakeholders.

By delving into the political structure and examining interactions within it, this perspective sheds light on how power struggles and efforts for control shape and potentially challenge or transform the structure (Zimmermann & Favell, 2011, 500).

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2. For a more extensive background of the different monitoring concepts, see Jacobs et al. (2010), and for an elaboration of the methodological background and reasoning for the Violence Protection Monitor, see Kleist & Frederiksen (2022).

A field is a formation of relative positions in which actors including individuals, groups, and organizations reflect and act. Within the field, socio-spatial conflicts and competitions lead to internal struggles, which can alter the power dynamics. Capital and habitus are constituent elements (Hilger & Mangez, 2015, 10 ff.; Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu, 2005; Zimmermann & Favell, 2011, 497). The nature of a field is not fixed but subject to ongoing challenges and renegotiations from other actors within the field (Hilger & Mangez, 2015, 17). Although actors within a field are contested, it is also a hierarchical space in which actors struggle to acquire different resources. Certain actors are dominant due to their cumulation of capital while others are dominated because of their lack thereof (Zimmermann & Favell, 2011).

In this analysis, the focus is on transformation within the governance of the asylum system, particularly through the implementation of a technological tool aimed at effecting change. When certain actors establish a discourse that presents change as something necessary and requires sacrifices from all, change can, within this framework, reinforce the existing hierarchy. While change may be perceived as a means of external control to maintain the hierarchy, it can also be understood as an omnipresent force whose emphasis is on internal self-evaluation rather than external control (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015, 13 ff.).

The (political) field analysis can display the links between “technologies of government,” political actors, and the molding of those technologies by the actors (Zimmermann & Favell, 2011, 501). While the field analysis hints at this interplay, it is at the core of the concept of co-production, which comes from the field of science and technology studies (S&TS). S&TS focuses on knowledge societies and the production of knowledge, emphasizing dynamic interactions between society, technology, and collaborations among actors with diverse perspectives and assessments of the world. The collaborative process of co-production leads to the creation of new knowledge and technologies, with a particular focus on the structures, practices, artifacts, and traces of change within knowledge and its generation (Jasanoff, 2004a, 2 ff.).

According to this perspective, concepts and material objects undergo processing in the realms of both science and technology to address specific issues. Science and technology, acting as political actors, can bring about societal, political, or cultural changes through new scientific discoveries. Similarly, problems in society, politics, or culture often require transformations in existing knowledge formations for effective resolution (Jasanoff, 2004b, 14, 21). Co-production acknowledges the inseparability of knowledge and the way individuals choose to exist in the world. Scientific knowledge is not a detached reflection of reality; it is intertwined with social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments, and institutions (ibid., 2 ff.).



Institutions play an essential role in co-production and its explanation of the world because they consistently store knowledge and authority and offer fast solutions in times of chaos, while institutionalized knowledge is concurrently reproduced in new settings (ibid., 39 ff.). The concept of co-production proves beneficial by relieving the analysis from the pursuit of one “dominant and all-powerful truth” and instead offering new modes of investigating contexts, “where politics, knowledge, and inventions are continually in flux” (ibid., 43).

### **Workshops as a Research Methodology**

This analysis is based on data derived from events, meetings, and trainings. These include project events in 2019 and 2020 as well as meetings with officers from the federal state ministries and practitioners from the seven different participating federal states conducted throughout 2021 and 2022. Additionally, trainings on the conceptualization and usage of the monitoring tool were conducted in 2022. These events, meetings, and trainings are analyzed as workshops, wherein participants engage in learning, problem-solving, and innovation related to specific issues. The aim of this methodology is to generate well-founded data on forward-oriented processes, with the expectation of producing new insights, suggestions, or redesigns of products, processes, or innovations (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, 71 ff.).

Despite limited theoretical literature on workshops as a research methodology, they are recognized for their valuable contribution to the generation of knowledge in dynamic projects characterized by real-time processes (Darsø, 2001, 203; Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, 73). This approach allows the researcher to participate as an insider in discussions while maintaining an outsider’s perspective during knowledge analysis (Spradley, 1979; Ahmed & Asraf, 2018). The data used for this study includes event reports, field notes, and contextualizing notes from workshops, meetings, and trainings with actors at different levels (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017, 381, 383).

The workshops provided an opportunity for diverse stakeholders from different organizations and levels to collaborate, enabling the researcher to triangulate data from multiple sources (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017; Ahmed & Asraf, 2018; Schwarz-Shea, 2006). The workshop settings allowed the project team to build trust over an extended period, observe continuously, and gather comprehensive data capturing participants’ perspectives at various levels. This approach revealed previously unrecognized or undervalued aspects, such as conflictual negotiations between actors, that might not have been illuminated by other research methods (Maxwell, 2002; Denzin, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ahmed & Asraf, 2018; Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, 77; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017, 381).

While this method challenges researcher-researched dichotomy and emphasizes the creation of spaces for engagement and struggle (Galis, 2022, 187), ethical considerations must be made. Although formal written consent was not obtained

from participants during data collection (Thagaard, 2013), the roles of researchers and their institutional affiliation were clearly communicated in all meetings.

### **Analysis:**

#### **The Participatory Implementation Process of Violence Protection Monitor**

The development, adaptation, and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor were and are part of a larger field process, namely the development of the asylum system in Germany. The influx of forced migrants in 2015 created challenges for the German asylum reception system, which prompted the establishment of the federal initiative “Protection of Refugees in Refugee Accommodation” (PRRA)<sup>3</sup> in 2016. The PRRA, led by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), aimed to establish uniform standards for accommodations (Bundesinitiative Schutz von geflüchteten Menschen in Flüchtlingsunterkünften, 2020). The establishment of the PRRA and the minimum standards prompted a focus on issues present in both the field of asylum and the accommodations themselves as well as the need for monitoring.

In this analysis, I will focus on 1) the involvement of actors in the organization of the Violence Protection Monitor; 2) their participation and the process of determining which actors could participate; and 3) the reciprocal relationship between the creation of knowledge, including the minimum standards and the Violence Protection Monitor, and the governance of refugee accommodations.

#### **Actors in the Organizational Field of the Monitor’s Conceptualization**

The field of asylum in Germany involves various interconnected actors operating at different levels. At the national level, the PRRA federal initiative plays a significant role in the flow of violence protection information. However, because the responsibility for accommodating asylum seekers lies with the federal states, state ministries and municipalities are key decision-makers. In response to the significant influx of people seeking protection since 2015, municipalities and states have, to a large extent, outsourced the governance of refugee accommodations to welfare organizations that, in turn, hired service providers to address various needs, such as security within the accommodations.

During the development of the Violence Protection Monitor, a monitoring working group was formed to provide input on its conceptualization. The group was led by the DeZIM-Institute and consisted of 26 participants from ten NGOs, three different state ministries, two administrative districts, the national level, and three universities. Additionally, insights from diverse organizational levels were

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3 For clarity I will refer to the federal initiative “Protection of Refugees in Refugee Accommodations” as PRRA hereafter.

incorporated. The conceptualization and development involved an open event on violence protection in accommodations, which included 120 participants, and a closed workshop held in December 2019. These events highlighted difficulties related to violence protection and revealed conflicting perspectives. Key challenges identified included practitioners viewing the minimum standards as unrealistic ideals and potential misuse of data collected through the monitoring tool (Field notes, 10.12.2019).

At the organizational level, the research team observed a conflict regarding the responsibility for violence protection in accommodation as outlined in the minimum standards. Some perceived the task of violence protection as the responsibility of accommodation providers, while others emphasized the important role of other actors, such as security companies, canteen staff, and medical services, who were not actively involved. An initial reception authority recognized his and his colleagues' efforts in protecting against violence in shared accommodations, but he emphasized that they faced challenges in finding cooperation partners among the numerous service providers who were committed to violence prevention (Event report, 09.12.2019).

### **The Power to Adapt and Implement**

After the events on violence protection and challenges in refugee accommodations in December 2019, the research team focused on developing the digital tool and the questionnaires within.

In December 2020, the Violence Protection Monitor concept and sample questions were presented at an event attended by participants from various organizational levels across Germany. This event marked the beginning of the monitor's distribution, after it was perceived positively by the attendees as an approach reflecting social innovations as relational and dependent on the reception and co-production (Pel et al., 2020, 3). The monitoring tool underwent continuous development and adaptation to align with the specific practices of seven federal states. These processes took place in dynamic and evolving contexts of development (Pel et al., 2020, 2). The analysis and discussion will now focus on the interplay between these actors and their relationship with the Violence Protection Monitor.

Actors from two federal states expressed immediate interest at the event in 2020 and subsequently advocated for the implementation of the monitoring tool in their respective states. In State A, a representative from the ministerial level showed interest, while in State B, a practitioner from an accommodation facility made the following comment:

*“Looks very promising! Integrating this into practice on the ground will be challenging. I’m happy to take it on. This tool can make a tremendously important contribution to bundle all existing data... and get an overall view! Thanks for the development!” (Field notes, 10.12.2020)*

In an initial meeting with State A, participants from two ministerial units, including the unit head, were present. These individuals possessed financial resources and decision-making authority to invest in the necessary technical requirements and allocate resources for adaptation of the monitor to meet the state’s needs. However, no accommodation staff were present in this meeting.

The initial meeting with State B involved three individuals at the ministerial level and three violence protection coordinators, a role that did not exist in State A. During the meeting, the violence protection coordinators expressed significant interest and acknowledged the need for confirmation from their team of practitioners in the accommodations. The introduction of violence protection coordinators seemed to empower practitioners in the field. The coordinator positions received training through the federal initiative PRRA, contributing to the practitioners’ cultural capital and potentially granting them more authority. The institutionalization of violence protection coordinators in State B may explain why practitioners were more involved in one state but not the other. This approach appeared to foster a more bottom-up dynamic compared to traditional power structures.

The adaptation and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor involved multiple phases. A first meeting between the research team tasked with the development of the monitoring tool and the respective federal state was conducted, followed by meetings regarding the adaptation of the tool. The different federal states have adopted varied approaches to the participatory adaptation and

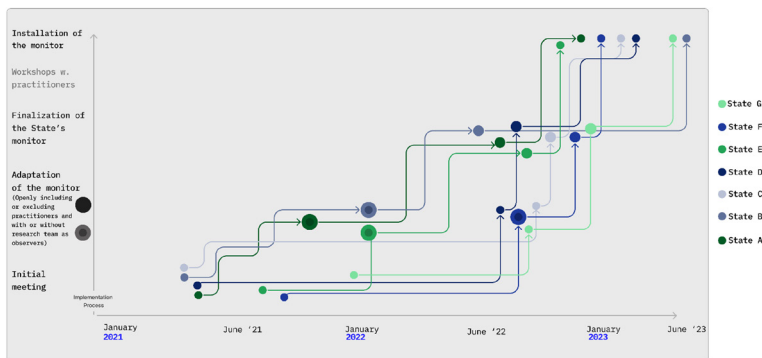


Fig: 2.1 – Infographic indicating the varying process of adaptation and implementation in the different states.

implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor. However, in all states there has been involvement of all levels at some point in the adaptation and implementation process.

In State B, where violence protection coordinators played a role, the process was initiated in a bottom-up and top-down manner, involving practitioners in the content adaptation from the outset. This approach was also observed in other states with violence protection coordinators (e.g., State E), potentially paving the way for increased practitioner participation and recognition as experts (Wynne and Lynch, 2015, 206). These processes align with those of other proposals for social innovation. This emphasizes the experimental and adaptable nature of social innovations driven by individual motivations to participate and the transformative societal impact of innovations (Pel et al., 2020, 7).

In State F, a different participatory process was articulated, with the state authority initiating the process and deciding on a two-step adaptation. The first step involved adjustments made by state-level actors, followed by discussions with accommodation managers to address objections or propose new questions. During this process, the concept and understanding of participation were articulated by a high-ranking, state-level actor:

*“This government places a high value on participation. Participation is, however, sometimes understood as co-determination, but is not always so. It should rather be understood as having a say.” (Field notes, State F)*

In States C, D, and G, the participatory process was conducted internally, without direct meetings on adaptation between the research project team and practitioners. As a result, practitioners in these states were unable to express direct criticism to the researchers regarding the monitoring tool or the state’s organizational field of accommodations, including resource allocation and the practitioner’s work challenges. Through this approach, the research team received fewer insights on how the monitoring tool was perceived, but a participatory adaptation has been seen in all states. Actors at the federal state level and practitioners in the accommodations had to collaborate to implement the Violence Protection Monitor since they are dependent on each other for financial, organizational, and technical aspects of the monitor, as well as for its actual use.

I will now explore external factors that impacted the organizational field of refugee accommodations and, consequently, the implementation of the monitoring tool.

### **External Factors Influencing Adaptation and Implementation of the Monitoring Tool**

The Violence Protection Monitor was offered, at no cost, to federal states in Germany for tool conceptualization or content adaptation. However,

the states needed to allocate resources for their employees to participate in questionnaire adaptation according to their specific needs. Additionally, since the monitor would be a decentralized tool hosted and managed by the state authorities themselves, the states were responsible for providing a server and fulfilling the technical requirements of the Violence Protection Monitor to address data governance concerns (Kleist & Frederiksen 2022, 278 ff.).

During the initial meetings in three states (States D, E, and F), the adaptation and implementation of the tool were postponed due to budget freezes. State E, in particular, expressed strong political support for the monitor, but faced funding challenges due to statewide budget freezes. Content adaptation processes were also hindered in several states due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of forced migrants following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Additionally, employees involved in the adaptation and implementation process within state authorities in several states (States A, B, C, and G) were unresponsive for up to six months. In some states, the responsibility for the adaptation and implementation of the monitor continuously shifted between different employees. These factors potentially increased bureaucratic pressure on employees in accommodations and at the ministry level.

A major factor influencing perceptions of the feasibility of the monitoring tool was data protection. To convince the state authorities and practitioners to commit to the tool, the research team decided to adopt a decentralized approach, with data stored locally in each state and with each accommodation having access to only their own data. On the one hand, this decision was convincing for both the states and practitioners in the accommodations, as it emphasized ownership of data entered into the tool. From a monitoring perspective, this approach also helps to prevent data falsification, as the focus is on assessing the individual realization of minimum standards rather than making comparisons between accommodations.

On the other hand, the implementation of the decentralized approach has been highly challenging due to the slow pace of digitalization in Germany. The digital transformation of the government sector lags significantly behind advancements in the private sector and citizens' personal lives (Initiative D21 e. V. & TU München, 2021). Meeting the technical requirements for installing the Violence Protection Monitor has been a hurdle for many states, resulting in the need to hire external service providers. This has further complicated the implementation process and extended its duration. The timeline for adapting and installing the tool has varied greatly among the states. The quickest process took one year, thanks to the server hosting provided by the company developing the monitoring tool and it nonetheless experienced a four-month pause due to budget freezes. The longest process spanned over two years, due, in part, to bureaucratic processes related to procurement law.

Despite successful installations, certain states have decided not to immediately utilize the monitor due to lack of clarity around responsibility and potential backlash from increased pressure on accommodations wanting to protect the practitioners. However, there are also potential downsides to this approach. The unavailability of the monitor, either due to delayed installation or underutilization, can have a negative impact on the process and erode trust in the monitoring tool. Moreover, the renegotiation of relationships during the monitor's adaptation and training can fulfill psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which can positively influence motivation and agency (Pel et al., 2020, 4). However, unexplained delays may undermine this process and lead to a perception of wasted time.

### **A Brave New World: Technological Tools, Standardization, and Resistance**

This section will further examine the concept of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004) to explore the integration of the minimum standards and monitoring method into the governance of refugee accommodations. It will also analyze the reciprocal influence of governance, actor dynamics, and power structures on the creation, adaptation, and implementation of the monitor.

The PRRA initiative aimed to unite actors and establish uniform standards for refugee accommodations to ensure refugee protection. However, as is often the case, there is a gap between the development and implementation of the standards. The minimum standards were created in 2016 and expanded over time. They were jointly published by prominent actors in the field, but they are not legally binding. The effectiveness of standards depends on their implementation (Timmermanns & Epstein, 2010, 79), and the implementation of the minimum standards in this case was hindered by challenges such as limited resources and staffing shortages, reducing their nationwide impact. In a December 2020 workshop, practitioners expressed interest in the monitor but highlighted challenges related to limited time and resources in practice.

One practitioner stated the following:

*“Monitoring makes sense and is important, but it is definitely not possible in practice given the workload. Additional extra positions would have to be created for this. Especially in the work with refugees, however, many funds are cut and considered irrelevant.” (Field notes, 10.12.2020)*

In this case, the development of an accommodation-specific protection concept had not occurred, making the implementation and utilization of a monitoring tool seem even more unrealistic. Motivated by feedback from practice, the monitoring tool was developed to be modular, allowing different employees to answer different thematic surveys. This allocation of resources among actors facilitated the incorporation of diverse knowledge expertise into the monitor. In the implementation process across the seven participating federal states,

actors at the practice level can be divided into three groups. One group consists of highly willing actors who recognized the significance of the monitoring tool for self-examination, targeted improvement, effectiveness measurement, and monitoring the implementation of minimum standards (Field notes, 10.12.2020).

The second group comprises actors who acknowledged the importance of monitoring but perceive it as impractical due to existing workloads. For example, one actor stated, “What I hear is beautiful—a brave new world. The realities I know are so different” (Field notes, 10.12.2020). Actors in the second group stressed the need for additional positions to be established if monitoring were implemented. This concern was particularly emphasized because funding was being reduced or deemed irrelevant at that time. In the first two groups, actors also expressed apprehension about being measured on indicators beyond their control, such as the inability to provide single-room housing, due to structural conditions or lack of cooperation from other organizations like the youth welfare office. The third group exhibited a general resistance to the minimum standards and their application. This resistance can be attributed to “uncertainty” and the “compatibility and switching costs” associated with new implementations (Timmermanns & Epstein, 2010, 79).

### **The (Re)production of Power Structures**

The monitoring tool underwent refinement and expansion based on feedback meetings with each federal state. Workshops were conducted in each state to train practitioners and state ministry actors responsible for implementing the monitor. The focus of these workshops varied across states; some focused primarily on the practical use of the tool, while others served as a platform for practitioners to critically address issues in the asylum and protection field with representatives from the bureaucratic level. State E emerged as a notable case, expressing strong criticism and concerns about resource limitations and the monitoring tool. While this was expressed as a hurdle, the state was also unique in voicing thoughts on funding allocation to support the use of the monitoring tool, after choosing to make the use mandatory.

In contrast, other states viewed the use of the tool as voluntary, considering it a tool for self-evaluation. In all states, there was a focus on the fear of being negatively measured on problems outside the accommodation’s scope of action and not only on the realization of vulnerabilities in the accommodations. Though the workshops in general provided a space for practitioners to openly communicate with state ministry actors, with the project team present as spectators, certain actors held more influence and power due to their positions.

Additionally, a conflict that arose concerning violence protection and monitoring in practice is the shortage of skilled workers, such as social workers. As a result, daily operations in accommodations are carried out by other service providers, such as security and janitorial staff. The decision to hire service providers



is often driven by budget considerations, prioritizing costs over experience or commitment to violence protection concepts (Field notes, 10.12.2020).

While the minimum standards and the monitoring tool aim to improve conditions for residents and employees, they can also be viewed through a Bourdieusian lens as a mechanism for reinforcing power and hierarchy. Through the use of a discourse of change, dominant actors assert control and maintain the existing order, undermining the field's autonomy (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015, 13 ff.). The concept of co-production, on the other hand, recognizes the presence of entrenched power structures but also allows for the potential disruption of established orders. By incorporating both constitutive and interactional perspectives, it views “hegemonic” forces as (co-) products of contingent interactions and practices (Jasanoff, 2004b, 36).

In the framework of co-production, scientific ideas, such as the minimum standards, and associated technological artifacts, like the Violence Protection Monitor, evolve alongside the institutions that give them real-world influence and significance. From this viewpoint, the development of the minimum standards and the monitoring tool can be understood as a response to new knowledge about poor conditions in accommodations, leading to the emergence of new institutions like the PRRA initiative. These institutions provide a social and normative framework that recognizes and enables political action based on novel understandings of the contexts (Jasanoff, 2004b, 40).

In PRRA, discussions about the necessity of minimum standards and monitoring coexist with criticism of limited resources in the field. This has led to the allocation of funding for the development of a monitoring tool. Following Jasanoff's co-production theory and other (transformational) social innovation theories, the PRRA played a crucial role in enabling the co-production of the Violence Protection Monitor by providing the necessary structure and flexibility to adapt to practical needs (Jasanoff, 2004b, 40; Pel et al., 2020, 9). Unlike many other social innovations, the Violence Protection Monitor did not need to seek institutional shelter—it was already granted through the PRRA. According to the concept of co-production, the monitor represents a form of knowledge that emerges from dynamic interactions between technology and society. Technical experts, the research team, actors at the federal state level, and employees in accommodations have collaborated to create new knowledge and technology through the process of adaptation and implementation. This process has involved the adaptation and operationalization of the minimum standards to better align with reality and foster trust of the technology among the various actors. However, in line with transformational social innovation, the fear of only creating limited change while reproducing existing institutional contexts also exists (Pel et al., 2020, 5).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine the construction and transformation of political structures in the field of refugee reception through the Violence Protection Monitor, with a focus on the governance of refugee accommodations and the interplay between different actors. Drawing on a Bourdieusian framework and the concept of co-production, the study analyzed how the emergence of the monitor has impacted actors in the asylum reception governance and, conversely, how governance has influenced the generation of new knowledge throughout the tool's development, adaptation, and implementation.

The project surrounding the Violence Protection Monitor exhibits an inherent paradox in line with transformational social innovation. While aiming to transform institutions, the monitor is simultaneously being shaped by them (Pel et al., 2020, 6). Despite the potential reproduction of power structures through the adaptation and implementation of the monitoring tool, the process can nonetheless yield practical outcomes in the asylum and protection system and its governance.

The monitoring tool, along with the actors and processes involved, serves to generate real-world impact within the asylum and protection system, while also shedding light on fundamental issues within the field. By systematically collecting information from employees and residents in the accommodations, the monitoring tool can highlight critiques from the practice and thereby empower the relevant actors. However, the application of the tool is contingent upon the resources provided to the field, which are often determined by dominant economic actors. In line with transformative social innovations, the process surrounding the monitoring tool has involved contesting, modifying, and replacing the institutions of governance (Pel et al., 2020, 5). Through the participatory relational framework, spaces were created in which conflict and solidarity between actors could arise and become salient.

The participatory co-production of the monitor has both reproduced and transformed power dynamics in the field. The development, adaptation, and implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor, which involved the PRRA, state ministries, accommodation management, practitioners, and the research team, have allowed for power contestation, collaboration and sharing across organizational levels and actors in the field. However, a valid criticism is that the monitoring tool has not immediately resulted in additional resources for practitioners, potentially leaving them at a disadvantage compared to actors at higher levels.

The use of the Violence Protection Monitor can, at least short-term, place an additional burden on practitioners in accommodations, who are already dealing with a high influx of refugees and limited resources. Despite the aim of improving protection in the asylum field, it is the practitioners who

bear some of the burden of these challenges. State ministry employees have temporarily allocated resources, but it is expected that practitioners will consistently spend resources on data collection, analysis, and developing violence protection measures. Although violence protection is part of their responsibilities, and the monitoring tool should assist them, the conflicts highlight frustration regarding resources and duties among the field's actors. Moreover, building on a point made by a practitioner in the development phase, funding for the field of asylum is being reduced. Although initial funding allowed for the development of the Violence Protection Monitor, without further investment, knowledge of the practical use of the monitor will not necessarily enhance the effectivity of the social innovation—at it will be at the cost of all parties involved.

The emergence of the PRRA initiative and the implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor in the field of asylum and protection have, to some extent, disrupted established power structures and introduced new dynamics. The PRRA's creation of different trainings for practitioners has granted them more influence, as their training provides cultural capital and recognition as experts. The different workshops in relation to the Violence Protection Monitor have provided a space for open communication and highlighted conflicts between practitioners and actors at the state ministry level, with the project team observing. While some actors at lower levels were very vocal in expressing criticism of the monitoring tool and the lack of resources, others vocalized strong support and willingness to relocate resources to use the monitoring tool. Through these discussions, hierarchies and existing power dynamics were apparent, with federal ministry officers and, to some extent, accommodation managers holding more influence compared to other actors. However, collaboration and co-dependence between the parties for a successful result has also been evident. Moreover, after the implementation in the seven federal states, practitioners including in two of the states where it was implemented and in one state that has not implemented the tool have expressed their interest. In the two states that have the Violence Protection Monitor, the interested practitioners can use the monitor, while this option does not exist in the third state at this time, since the monitoring tool is decentralized and adapted to each state.

Although the term “glocal bureaucrats” (Hillmann, 2021) refers to mayors rather than regional governments, it seems that many of the actors serving in the state ministries in this study similarly perceived themselves as intermediaries who address both immediate local needs in the accommodations and the broader global migration dynamics (Hillmann, 2021, 16). During the adaptation and implementation of the monitor, actors at the state ministry level and in the accommodations have dealt with challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the high influx of refugees from Ukraine. As the accommodation practitioners had to continue operating the refugee accommodations during times of crises, the state ministries continued working on the implementation of the Violence Protection Monitor while addressing the same challenges, in addition to budget freezes, limited

project time, and technological issues. During the adaptation and implementation process, they adopted a supportive approach towards the accommodation practitioners, stressing voluntary use and practitioners' support for the monitoring tool instead of imposing strict top-down management. The Violence Protection Monitor could only be implemented through the collaboration and willingness of all parties involved. While the state ministries have provided the financial and technical means, the practitioners have provided their insights and willingness to employ the monitoring tool.

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# CHAPTER 3

## The Role of Social Media Networks in the Labor Market Integration of Migrants and Refugees: The Example of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany

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### Abstract

Over the last few decades, social media platforms have become hubs for large, self-organized networks utilized by the majority of migrants and refugees in Germany. These networks serve as crucial sources of information and mutual support regarding living and working in the country. The immense growth of these networks, which are initiated and managed by members of the migrant and refugee communities themselves, highlights the limited reach of the analog and digital information and support offers provided by public and civil society institutions. In this article, we analyze how the example of the recent refugee migration from Ukraine to Germany—characterized by extensive use of chat groups, especially on the Telegram platform—further exemplifies this trend.

Just over a year after the start of the war in Ukraine and the first arrivals of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees to Germany, the labor market situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany is marked by a high unemployment rate but also an increasing employment rate. However, the increase in the number of employed

Ukrainians appears to reflect, to a significant extent, an increase in Ukrainians working either in marginally paid employment or low-paid helper jobs. We seek to examine the role social media platforms play in this development.

Our social media data analysis reveals that job search-related topics are among the most popular discussions in social media forums used by Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Since the start of 2023, we have seen an increasing number of questions focused on German employment law and working conditions in different types of jobs. The large number of published employment opportunities in these digital networks range from precarious, low-paid positions to higher-skilled and lucrative jobs. Of particular concern is the large number of job offers that pay below the statutory minimum wage.

Our analysis of social media forums for migrants and refugees underscores the vital role of these networks in the labor market process for Ukrainian refugees. On the one hand, social media platforms positively facilitate this process by providing Ukrainian refugees with easy access to large amounts of information about employment law and job offers as well as peer-to-peer support. On the other hand, it is on social media that vulnerable refugees are exposed to precarious and sometimes illicit employment opportunities, which increases their risk of becoming exploited and facing even more precarity. To address this issue, we recommend stakeholders in the public, civil society, and the private sector develop multi-faceted strategies to a) combat the publication of illicit content via content moderation by the platforms and the group administrators; b) improve platform users' awareness of the risks via information campaigns; and c) increase the proactive outreach engagement of institutions offering legitimate employment offers with migrants and refugees directly on social media, which is where most of them look for this type of information.

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## Introduction

Why and for what purposes do migrants and refugees in Germany use social media? Since around 2013, numerous studies have shown that, on average, newly arrived migrants and refugees in Germany utilize social media platforms more intensively than the German population does (Emmer, Richter, & Kunst, 2016). They also appear to prefer social media platforms as information sources over the multitude of analog information and counseling services offered to migrants and refugees (Brücker, Rother, & Schrupp, 2016).

Social media platforms serve multiple functions for migrants and refugees in Germany. Beyond enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends, these digital spaces offer a conduit for timely information on a host of issues related to life and work in Germany from bureaucratic and legal matters to practical aspects

like job hunting (Pfeffer-Hoffmann, 2015). The search for employment stands out as a key long-term priority for many who have migrated or sought refuge in Germany.

As a result of these diverse functions, social media platforms have emerged as crucial “spaces” where migrants and refugees exchange ideas, discuss, and negotiate their integration into and participation in German society. Discussions cover a wide range of topics relevant in this context, such as finding jobs, housing, education, and healthcare.

While the usage and significance of digital information sources for migrants and refugees have been extensively documented, research on the specific real-world implications of social media usage for these groups remains limited. Considering the pivotal role that labor market integration plays in enabling societal participation for migrants and refugees in Germany, it is crucial to try to answer the following questions: To what extent do migrants and refugees looking for jobs find employment through social media platforms? What types of jobs do they find on social media platforms, and to what extent do the jobs align with the job seekers’ qualifications and expectations?

With this article, we seek to contribute to the critical discourses surrounding the role of social media for migrants and refugees. We hope that the offered insights into the experiences of migrants and refugees on social media, especially experiences related to searching for jobs, will enable the development of effective strategies to address these developments.

The article begins by reviewing the current state of knowledge on this topic using academic literature, current labor market data, and recent analyses of both survey and social media data, focusing on social media usage among Ukrainian refugees as a current case study. The article synthesizes the findings from the analyses to provide recommendations for actors and organizations tasked with supporting migrants and refugees in their job search in Germany.

## **Literature Review:**

### **Digital and Social Media Use Among Refugees and Migrants in Germany**

Based on Manuel Castells’ seminal work on the shaping of societies by global digital information networks and their underlying capitalist dynamics, the growing importance of communities of interest as societal structures has long been a focus of sociological research (Castells, 1996). Around 2012, empirical studies began to investigate the phenomenon of digital media usage among refugees (Charmarkeh, 2012; Wilding & Gifford, 2013). In one qualitative example, Witteborn (2012) found that the majority of refugees in Germany preferred using computers or laptops over smartphones. Three years later, in 2015, digital media usage patterns of refugees had shifted, and the intense media attention on

refugee migration to Europe—partly fueled by iconic images of Syrian refugees utilizing smartphones to navigate their way to Europe (Emmer, Richter, & Kunst, 2016)—led to a growing focus on the importance of social media for refugees.

Following the increase in the number of refugees arriving in Germany in 2015 and 2016, a series of qualitative and quantitative studies investigated the digital media usage of refugees in Germany (e.g., Oprisor & Hammerschmid, 2016; Brücker, Gundacker, Hauptmann, & Jaschke, 2021; Gillespie et al., 2016; Mason & Buchmann, 2016). It became clear that, on average, refugees in Germany are well equipped with mobile digital devices and use social media intensively. With regard to the question of what migrants and refugees use digital media for, many studies confirmed their central importance as communication platforms and sources of information before, during, and after the migration process (Emmer, Richter, & Kunst, 2016). While Syrian refugees who arrived between 2015 and 2016 were primarily using the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, more recent surveys (Info - Markt- und Meinungsforschung, 2022; Ünsal, v. Oswald, & Lushankina, 2022) among Ukrainian refugees showed that the group mostly uses the messenger application Telegram and, to a lesser degree, the Facebook platform as information sources. These observations highlight the importance of understanding the evolving digital preferences and habits of different migrant and refugee groups, which are crucial prerequisites for those organizations seeking to provide effective communication and timely information in order to support their successful integration into new societies.

Consistent with the findings highlighting the importance of digital and social media platforms as information sources for migrants and refugees, the cited studies showed that, compared to digital information sources, analog information and advice services predominantly operated by public and civil society institutions in Germany were generally less well known and perceived as less effective at meeting the information needs of survey participants (Info - Markt- und Meinungsforschung, 2022, p. 30; Brücker, Rother, & Schrupp, 2016).

Numerous studies have explored the digital media usage of refugees<sup>1</sup> but significantly fewer analyses have been conducted on the digital media use of migrants from EU and non-EU countries, who have come to Germany for reasons other than fleeing war, violence, or conflict, such as skilled and unskilled workers, students and trainees, and family members of residents. This represents a substantial gap in knowledge, as most of the immigration to Germany originates from EU and non-EU countries that are not countries of origin for refugees (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2023a). To address this gap, in 2016, a research team at Minor – Projektkontor für Bildung und Forschung conducted exploratory surveys of digital media usage among EU immigrants

1 Our use of the term “refugee” is based on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ definition: “people, who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.” See: [www.unhcr.org/what-refugee](http://www.unhcr.org/what-refugee)

from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and France (Pfeffer-Hoffmann et al., 2016). In a later survey, the team also included non-EU migrants (Stapf, 2019, p. 51). These surveys document similarly high usage and positive assessments of social media networks by migrants from EU and non-EU countries during their arrival and orientation in Germany and a comparatively lower usage of analog support services such as Jobcenter offices<sup>2</sup> and migration counseling centers.

### **The Use of Social Media Data Analysis in the Context of Migration Studies**

The widespread use of social media by migrants and refugees presents a unique opportunity to leverage data derived from social media platforms for migration studies. Provided in anonymized form, this type of data can provide almost real-time estimates for transnational migration movements, demographic profiles of social media users within migrant and refugee communities, and insights into the information needs expressed within these online communities.

The various digital and social media platforms allow for different types of analyses, based on how they are used and the type of data access they provide. For the Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram, different studies (Zagheni, Weber, & Gummadi, 2017; Becker, Spitaleri, & Ziegler, 2022) demonstrated how, via the platforms' application programming interface (API), data about the number of users who are active in a certain location and using certain languages can be derived to monitor and predict fluctuations in the migrant population within a specific country. Another data source used in the analysis for this chapter is data from the Telegram messenger application, which can be accessed via the Telegram API (Skowronek, 2023).

An application programmed especially for this purpose<sup>3</sup> facilitates the recording of Telegram group membership numbers and the content analysis of the posts published in these groups. Given the special importance of social media networks noted previously, this analysis provides important insights into the job search experience of Ukrainian refugees.

The use of social media data analysis offers an innovative and valuable tool in migration studies, providing insights that can enhance the effectiveness of efforts to support the integration of migrants and refugees. The following example of the labor market situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany and their job search

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2 The German Jobcenters are joint institutions of the Federal Employment Agency and municipal agencies in Germany. They are responsible for job placement, qualification, and security of basic livelihood (social benefits).

3 The Telegram research application was developed as a prototype within the Digital Streetwork project "Fem.OS – Proactive counselling in social media for female migrants from third countries" funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration. It was applied as a tool within the project on migration and digitalization "NexSM Social Media for Migration and Society" funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung. It ensures GDPR compliance by disregarding personal data and only using relevant data for analysis. Potentially personal data has been modified to ensure that it cannot be used as such by applying the one-way hashing method, which transforms a dataset using a function, thereby allowing data links to be maintained while ensuring anonymity.

experience on social media will showcase how this approach can be applied in practice.

### **Experiences of Migrants and Refugees on Social Media**

In any examination of the significance of social media platforms for refugees and migrants, it is essential to consider the associated risks to which these users are exposed, such as state and private surveillance, hate speech, misinformation, and fraud (Mancini et al., 2019). While several studies have explored the incidence of fraudulent and illicit job offers on social media (Habiba, 2021), no empirical data is currently available to quantify the extent of such fraud within migrant or refugee social media networks.

Public institutions worldwide are working on legislation and law enforcement practices to improve the removal of illicit content by platform operators (Kunze, 2020). Nonetheless, several hurdles persist. For instance, some platforms have curtailed the funding allocated for content moderation (DeGeurin, 2022), and algorithms developed to detect harmful content have demonstrated less efficacy in languages other than English, leaving migrants and refugees who utilize non English languages disproportionately affected by problematic content (Ben-David & Fernández, 2016).

It would be misguided to assume that migrants and refugees are oblivious to the risks inherent in these platforms (Beseiso-Kamel & Schilf, 2016; Kutscher & Kreß, 2016). However, despite widespread awareness of the potential hazards, migrants and refugees persistently rely on these digital resources because of a (sometimes perceived) lack of accessible alternatives; a skepticism towards information provided by “official” institutions; and their indispensable need for information, orientation, and social connectivity throughout their migration and asylum-seeking journey. With our analysis, we aim to deepen the understanding of this nuanced phenomenon.

### **The Impact of Social Media Usage on Migrants’ Job Search**

Despite the well-documented high usage of social media platforms and their significance as information sources for migrants and refugees in Germany, there is a knowledge gap concerning the tangible impact of this observed phenomenon on the integration and participation experiences of these groups, particularly with regard to specific outcomes in the labor market.

In her text “New Technologies, Migration and the Future of Work,” Hillmann (2022) outlines a theoretical framework for the labor market integration processes of refugees and migrants in the context of contemporary network societies. Hillmann references the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2006), who describe the transition from lifelong working conditions to a flexible capitalism marked by pro-

ject-based or contract work and an exploitative, entrepreneurial spirit overriding social policies. In this context, mobility can be seen as a new form of social capital, requiring individuals to perpetually adapt and move in response to the fluidity of societies (Baumann, 2006). In addition, Hillmann bases her framework on Honneth's (2023) research on the changing work environment in advanced economies under the influence of deindustrialization and digitalization. Honneth delineates five features of the process: increasing isolation of individuals, nested hierarchical structures, rising analytical skills, commodification of social and domestic work, and growing precariousness of working conditions. Digitally apt migrants and refugees can benefit from this environment because of a demand for their skills and easier access to job opportunities. However, access to these opportunities is by no means equitable, and vulnerable groups like refugees can find themselves disproportionately exposed to the downsides of flexible labor markets (i.e., by being locked into precarious working conditions with no social security or healthcare and, in the worst cases, being exploited and unpaid). In addition, a public perception of migrants and refugees as agents of the digital transformation processes affecting society and labor markets could jeopardize the societal solidarity crucial to support for vulnerable migrants and refugees (Blix, 2017). This theoretical framework highlights the importance of considering both the opportunities and the risks that migrants and refugees face in the digitized labor markets of flexible network capitalism.

As one of the few empirical studies on the topic, Stein Montero's analysis of the digital media usage of migrants in Canada confirmed that migrants use social media to find information about employment, language learning, and training opportunities (2022). According to Montero's research, social media can serve as an important tool for newcomers to connect with social networks and understand the labor market in their country of arrival, but social media platforms offer no relative employment advantages for migrants. The study concludes that to improve labor market outcomes for newcomers, policymakers should consider promoting more equitable access to the internet and social media.

### **The Example of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany**

To provide a current example of the impact of social media networks on the labor market integration of migrants and refugees, we analyze the situation and social media usage patterns of Ukrainian refugees in Germany. The availability of large social media data sets from the online networks of Ukrainian refugees allows for the detailed analysis required for our research. Although the demographic profile of Ukrainian refugees, the legal basis of their residence title, and access to the German labor market (see the section on the employment situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany) differ from those of refugees from other countries of origin (Desiderio & Hooper, 2023, p. 5), many barriers to labor market integration such



as an initial lack of German language skills, educational qualifications, or formally recognized job qualifications—are similar to those faced by many other refugees as well as migrants from other countries (Brücker, Rother, & Schrupp, 2016, p. 63; Brücker et al., 2022, p. 57; Geis-Thöne, 2019). Despite the differences among refugee groups, insights gleaned from the social media usage patterns and labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees can improve the understanding of and help address challenges shared by other refugee and migrant populations in Germany.

## Research Methodology

Within the scope of our investigation concerning the labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, we adopted a mixed-methods research design. This approach involved the utilization of descriptive official labor market statistics obtained from the Federal Employment Agency to examine employment rates and occupational distribution. Additionally, we conducted quantitative data analysis on the Telegram and Facebook online networks, which allowed us to identify the most prominent topics discussed on Telegram among Ukrainian refugees in Germany. To monitor the development of the Ukrainian community on social media, we identified 196 Facebook groups and 268 Telegram group chats through their group titles and the language used. The groups are operated by and for Ukrainian refugees in Germany. We obtained and aggregated publicly available data on group membership and user statistics from Telegram and Facebook to provide an overview of the community size, platform usage, and growth rates.

To obtain insights into the most discussed topics among Ukrainian refugees, we conducted a content analysis of posts published in the identified Telegram groups. This analysis was based on a dataset extracted via the public Telegram API from 268 Telegram groups on a weekly basis between November 2022 and May 2023 using a Telegram application specifically programmed for this purpose (Skowronek, 2023). The application ensures compliance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation by excluding personal data from the analysis. We focused on the frequency of keywords and word pairs to identify and cluster the most popular discussion topics. During the period analyzed, the application captured more than 100,000 individual messages per week, as well as mentions, reactions, and responses in the group chats, and it measured the frequency of major key words or collocated word pairs associated with the key words. We then compiled the results to identify and count the most popular key words related to the topics of “job search” and “job offers.” This approach helped us assess the job interests and information needs of the group members. Any potentially personal information in the analyzed data was automatically anonymized via the one-way hashing method, which transforms a dataset using a function, thereby allowing data links to be maintained while ensuring anonymity.

## Official Data on the Employment Situation of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany

Regarding the employment situation of Ukrainians<sup>4</sup> in Germany, data from the German Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023b – see Figure 3.1), shows that the employment rate<sup>5</sup> for Ukrainian nationals in Germany stood at 52.4% in February 2022, at the start of the war in Ukraine. That rate was closely aligned with the general employment rate of foreigners in Germany, which was 54.3%. The unemployment rate<sup>6</sup> for Ukrainians in Germany, at 12.8%, matched the general unemployment rate of foreign nationals.

Following the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the arrival of large numbers of people fleeing to Germany, the employment rate declined to 15.7% in April 2022.

This decrease can be attributed to the large and sudden increase in the size of the working age population, which is used to calculate the rate. As Figure 1 shows, the unemployment rate increased sharply from June 2022. It was at that point that Ukrainian refugees who registered in Germany under Section 24 of the Residence Act (Aufenthaltsgesetz) gained the right to work in Germany and were able to register with the German Employment Agencies as “job-seeking” and unemployed (Ünsal & v. Oswald, 2022, p. 22).

This change led to the sudden increase in the unemployment rate. The unemployment rate for Ukrainians later peaked at 60.9% in August 2022 and declined by 6.8 points to 54.1% in February 2023. During the same period, the unemployment rate of foreigners in general remained nearly constant at around 14.9%.<sup>7</sup>

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4 The statistics of the Federal Employment Agency provide data only according to nationality, not residence title. Therefore, the labor market data applies to all Ukrainian nationals in Germany, including refugees and non-refugees. At the start of February 2022, the population of Ukrainian nationals living in Germany stood at approximately 155,310, consisting mostly of migrant workers and persons who had moved to Germany for family reasons (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2023a). In December 2022, the population stood at about 1,164,200 (ibid.), indicating that refugees made up approximately 87% of the total population at the time. Therefore, in the following text, the term “Ukrainian refugees” refers in some cases to the population of Ukrainian nationals in Germany.

5 The employment rate is the share of employed persons of working age in the resident population of the same age. It is a key indicator for assessing the employment status of a region. The numerator—the number of employed persons aged between 15 and the legal age limit in the place of residence—includes both full-time and part-time employees. It excludes civil servants, the self-employed, and people working in their households. The denominator is the resident population aged between 15 and the legal working age limit. Every person who mainly resides in Germany is counted. Thus, the employment rate also includes all foreigners registered in Germany (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023a, p. 19, own translation).

6 The unemployment rate indicates the relative underutilization of the labor supply by relating the (registered) unemployed to the labor force (employed and unemployed) (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023a, p. 8, own translation).

7 We recognize that demographic factors like gender and age distribution play a significant role in explaining the labor market situation of Ukrainians in Germany. This topic was outside the scope of this research, but it merits detailed analysis and further research.

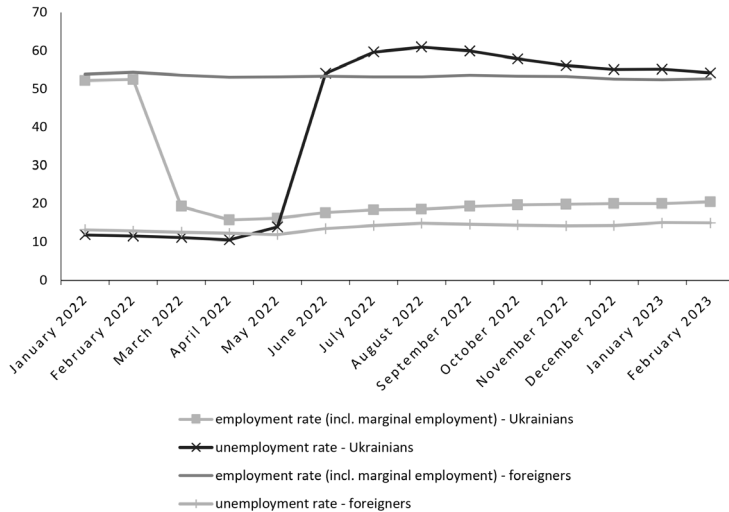


Fig. 3.1 – Employment and unemployment rates for Ukrainians and foreign nationals in general in Germany between January 2022 and February 2023; source: Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023b, Minor | protected by copyright.

One reason for the increase in the employment rate and the decrease in the unemployment rate among Ukrainians after August 2022 lies in the high number of Ukrainians acquiring “helper” or “assistant” jobs<sup>8</sup> (Figure 3.2) and marginally paid employment<sup>9</sup> during that time.

As seen in Figure 3.2, data from the Federal Employment Agency regarding the type of work that employed Ukrainians in Germany are doing, differentiated by required skill level and qualification, shows that before February 2022, the biggest group of Ukrainians in Germany were employed as skilled workers (42%),

<sup>8</sup> The Classification of Occupations 2010 shows the “requirement level” at the level of the occupational categories. The requirement level describes the complexity of an occupational activity. It is always typical for a specific occupation and is also independent of a person’s formal qualifications. Although the formal qualifications required to perform the occupation are used for classification, informal education, and/or work experience are also important in the assignment.

The requirement level is divided into the following four levels of proficiency:

Requirement level 1 “helper”: helper and semi-skilled activities. Requirement level 2 “skilled worker”: Technically oriented activities. Requirement level 3 “specialist”: Complex specialist activities. Requirement level 4 “expert”: Highly complex activities (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023d)

<sup>9</sup> The Germany Federal Employment Agency explains on their website: “A person who is in ‘marginally paid employment,’ ‘short-term employment,’ or a ‘mini job’ is referred to as a ‘marginally employed person.’ [...] We speak of marginally paid employment [...] if the remuneration from this employment does not exceed the marginal earnings limit on a regular monthly basis. If a main job subject to social security contributions is combined with a ‘mini job,’ the latter remains exempt from social security contributions. Marginally paid employees are exempt from insurance [...]. Short-term employment exists [...] if the employment is carried out for a period of time which, in the course of a calendar year, is limited to no more than 3 months or a total of 70 working days in accordance with its nature or is contractually limited in advance. [...] Provided that these time limits are not exceeded, the monthly remuneration may exceed the marginal earnings limit. [...] The marginal earnings limit for marginally employed persons is regularly adjusted by the legislator. Since 01.10.2022, the earnings limit has been €520.00 per month.” (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023a, own translation)

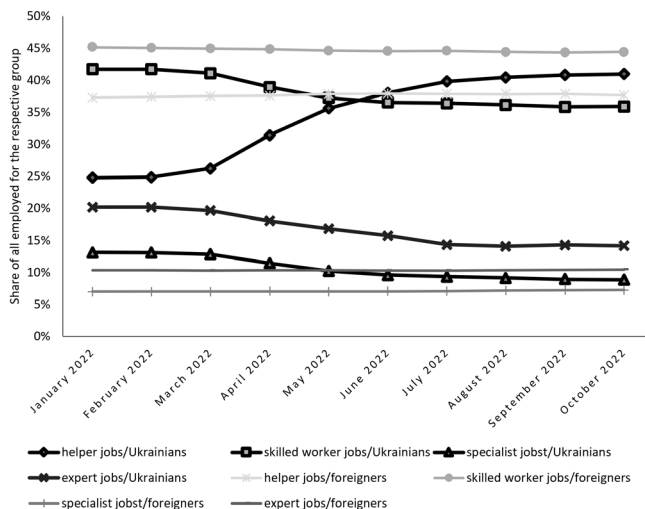


Fig. 3.2 – Changes in the shares of helper, skilled worker, specialist, and expert jobs among employed Ukrainians and foreigners in Germany between January 2022 and October 2022; source: Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023b, Minor | protected by copyright.

which was just below the share of foreign nationals in Germany working in skilled jobs in general (45%). Since March 2022, the share of Ukrainians employed in helper or assistant jobs, which require little or no formal qualifications and are generally lower paid, has been increasing. In June 2022, the share of Ukrainians working in helper jobs overtook the share of foreign nationals in Germany working in helper jobs and increased to 41% in October 2022, the latest month for which the data is available. The equivalent rate for foreign nationals in Germany remained almost constant at 37–38% during this period. During the same period, the share of Ukrainians working in skilled, specialist, or expert jobs, which require more qualifications and training, declined. The fact that a disproportionate share of migrants in Germany work in menial, physically demanding, low-paid jobs, especially in the first years after their arrival, is confirmed in the literature (Gundert, Kosyakova, & Fendel, 2020, p. 10). Despite their comparatively easier and faster access to the German labor market, Ukrainian refugees appear to face similar challenges in finding high quality, qualification-appropriate employment.

In addition to this change in the labor market structure for Ukrainians in Germany, the data from the Federal Employment Agency also shows an increase in the share of employed Ukrainians working in marginally paid employment.<sup>10</sup>

10 This share refers to the percentage of all Ukrainians who are registered as employed with the Federal Employment Agency and who are working in marginally paid employment rather than “regular” employment, which is liable to social insurance contributions (see Footnote 9).

Before February 2022, the share of Ukrainians working in marginally paid employment in Germany stood at 5.9%, just above the rate of 5.3% for foreign nationals in general, which represented about 11% of the employed workforce in both cases (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023c). By April 2022, the share of Ukrainians working in marginally paid employment had decreased along with the employment rate—but it decreased less than the overall rate. At that time, approximately 13% of employed Ukrainians were working in marginally paid employment. Along with the increase in general employment, the share of marginally paid employment increased to 19% of the overall employment rate by February 2023 almost double the rate for foreign nationals.

Based on the data from the Federal Employment Agency, the labor market participation for Ukrainian refugees in Germany shows a positive trend since August 2022, marked by a declining unemployment rate and an ascending employment rate. This situation is particularly encouraging considering that most Ukrainian refugees have been in Germany for just over a year and arrived with limited German language proficiency (Brücker et al., 2022). The legal framework provided by the expedited issuance of residence titles, including the right to work, to Ukrainians under Section 24 of the Residence Act has played a substantial role in this positive trajectory. However, the data also shows that a considerable part of the growth in the employment rate among Ukrainians is due to the growth in low-skilled helper/assistant jobs and marginally paid employment. This shows that, despite their expedited legal access to the German labor market, Ukrainians face considerable labor market barriers, such as a lack of German language skills and the need for formal recognition of their educational and professional qualifications (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2023b).

The official labor market statistics do not capture numbers of Ukrainian refugees working in undeclared or illicit employment in Germany.<sup>11</sup> According to the law against illicit or undeclared work (Schwarzarbeitsbekämpfungsgesetz), engaging in this type of employment carries significant risks for employers, who could face persecution, significant fines, and even prison sentences (Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2004), as well as for the employees, who, depending on the type of employment, could face legal consequences for tax avoidance or working without the required licenses (Generalzolldirektion, 2023). In the absence of representative data or studies, reports in the media (Lehner & Bodyagina, 2022) and testimonials from professional counsellors working with Ukrainian refugees on individual cases have been the only evidence of this phenomenon, and it

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11 “Undeclared work is performed by anyone who, on the basis of a service or work performance as an employer, entrepreneur, or self-employed person subject to compulsory insurance, fails to fulfill his or her obligations under social security law to register, contribute, or keep records; as a taxpayer does not fulfill his or her tax obligations; as a recipient of social benefits, fails to comply with his or her obligation to notify the social benefits agency (...). Illegal employment is committed by anyone who employs foreigners without authorization as an employer or allows foreigners to work without authorization as a hirer; as a foreigner, engages in gainful employment without permission; as owner or third party, allows persons to work in contravention of section 6a(2) of the Act on Securing Workers’ Rights in the Meat Industry (GSA Fleisch); (...) as an employer (...) employs employees under exploitative working conditions” (Generalzolldirektion, 2023, own translation).

therefore remains difficult to assess its extent. Nonetheless, it is clear that Ukrainian refugees engaged in undeclared or illicit work face significant risks, including potential exploitation as employees and repercussions for their legal status in Germany.

In the following sections, we will discuss the insights gained from our data analysis about the role of social media networks in the development of the labor market situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

## **Our Research on Social Media Networks of Ukrainian Refugees in Germany**

Since the start of 2022, several exploratory surveys asked Ukrainian refugees in Germany about their digital media usage. In a sample survey on behalf of the German interior ministry in March 2022, 52% of respondents named Telegram and 45% named Facebook as information sources they used to orient themselves in Germany (Info - Markt- und Meinungsforschung, 2022, p. 30). In the survey by Minor's European Labour Lab Project of Ukrainian refugees in Berlin and Brandenburg, Telegram groups were rated as the most helpful information sources regarding bureaucratic processes (Ünsal, v. Oswald, & Lushankina, 2022, p. 24), followed by websites of German public institutions. Facebook groups were rated as less helpful in this survey. The results suggest that the messenger service Telegram has become the most used and highly rated digital information source among Ukrainians for finding information about living and working in Germany and connecting with peers. Facebook and other digital information sources are considered secondary.

To track the development of the Ukrainian community on Telegram, we have been monitoring a wide range of Telegram groups created and used by Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Our data analysis shows that the number of groups has grown exponentially from 0 in January 2022 to 268 by May 2023, accompanied by very high growth rates in group membership numbers of around 238%, with the groups counting an average of 2,290 members in May 2023 (Telegram, 2023). In the analyzed groups, we counted just over 600,000 total members and 226,345 unique members in mid-May 2023, which indicates that, on average, each person is a member of 2.7 groups. This sample represents about 21% of the currently registered Ukrainian refugee population in Germany (Mediendienst Integration, 2023).

Through our monitoring, we observed a rise in the number of Ukrainian-speaking Facebook and Instagram users in Germany, from 54,300 in February 2022 to 346,500 in April 2023—an increase of 638% (Meta, 2023). This correlates with the increase in the number of registered Ukrainians aged 13 years or older residing in Germany from 118,020 on December 31, 2021 to 717,150 on December 31, 2022—an increase of about 600% (Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2023a). Data from Meta indicates that while 46% of Ukrainians in

Germany used the Meta platforms in 2021, that number increased to 48% in 2022. These findings show that, despite the survey results suggesting a less prominent role for the Facebook platform as an information source for Ukrainian refugees, just under half of Ukrainians in Germany use the platform.

Via our network analysis in 2022, we identified just under 200 Facebook groups operated by and for Ukrainian refugees in Germany. About half of these groups were established before 2022 and, along with an increase in the number of groups after February 2022, the average group membership<sup>12</sup> declined—from 23,000 in January 2022 to 12,000 in March 2023. Nonetheless, the average Facebook group remained larger than the average Telegram group. These data analyses clearly indicate that both Telegram and Facebook groups are used by a significant share of Ukrainian refugees in Germany. Thematically, the Ukrainian Telegram and Facebook groups in Germany cover a wide array of topics in their discussions, as seen in group titles such as “Помощь украинцам в Маннхайме/Help for Ukrainians in Mannheim” and “Работа - Карлсруэ Украина – Blue-Yellow Bridge/Work - Karlsruhe Ukraine” as well as in the descriptions or user guidelines of the groups. Via the Telegram API, we were also able to count the number of messages posted in the groups between November 2022 and May 2023. An average of between 12,000 and 20,000 messages were posted across these groups every day, demonstrating the high intensity of communication taking place in the forums.

In addition to the aforementioned survey findings, data drawn directly from Facebook and Telegram groups confirms the intense usage of migrant- and refugee-led social media networks by Ukrainian refugees in Germany. The extensive use of these digital platforms by Ukrainian refugees can be attributed to their accessibility and utility as arenas for peer-to-peer support and self-help initiatives. These platforms not only facilitate individuals’ orientation and participation within their respective (online) communities but can also provide significant assistance regarding their integration within German society.

### **Our Social Media Data Analysis on Ukrainian Refugees’ Job Search Experience in Germany**

Gauging the number of Ukrainian-speaking social media users in Germany who are searching for jobs on social media platforms can be challenging. As a proxy indicator for the number of job-searching social media users, we tracked the membership of job search-related Telegram and Facebook groups for Ukrainians in Germany. Between March 2022 and March 2023, the number of tracked groups focusing on employment-related topics increased from 2 to 25. Although this number is significantly lower than the number of mixed-topic groups, the average membership size of the employment-related groups (24,000) is significantly

12 We were not able to calculate the number of unique members because the Meta API does not allow for the counting of individual users across groups.

higher than that of mixed-topic groups (7,800). These observations suggest that a substantial proportion of Ukrainian-speaking social media users in Germany use Telegram and Facebook for job searching, a finding that highlights the relevance of social media platforms for job-seeking activities among this demographic. To obtain a representative overview of the most discussed topics in Ukrainian social media groups, we conducted a content analysis of posts published in Telegram groups. The results indicate the frequency with which the topics were mentioned within the groups, which, in turn, reflects the interest in the topic among the group members.

To identify the trending topics in the discursive elements in both the Russian and Ukrainian languages, we clustered the most frequently used words into eight topical terms:

- Jobcenter/social benefits
- Official documents
- Work
- Childcare
- Housing
- Finance
- Car registration and transportation
- Language

Figure 3.3 shows that, particularly at the beginning of the analyzed period, there was a surge in discussions regarding the Jobcenter and the associated social benefits that refugees from Ukraine are entitled to in Germany. Similarly, topics such as childcare, housing, and inquiries concerning official documents like

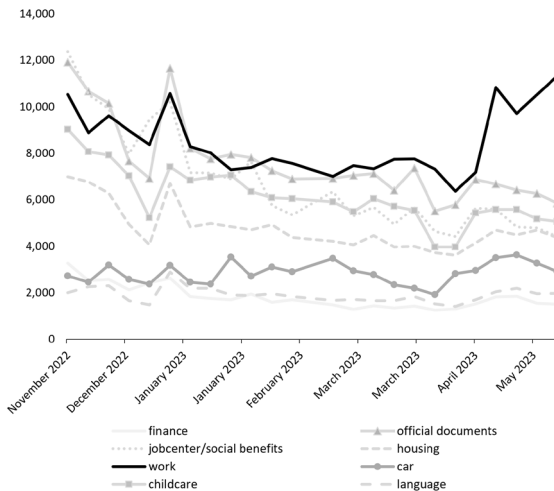


Fig. 3.3 – Overview of the most popular topics based on word frequency in 266 Ukrainian migrant and refugee group chats on Telegram from November 2022 to May 2023, Minor | protected by copyright.



passports or administrative letters were frequently discussed at the beginning of the observation period but then showed a flattening trend in 2023. On the other hand, the number of posts on the topics of car registration, language learning courses, and finance were at a consistently lower level throughout the period.

During the same period, the frequency of postings on employment-related topics, including posts about wages and job vacancies, exhibited a steady increase, reaching a peak of 11,319 mentions per week in mid-May 2023. Since January 2023, employment-related questions have been the most discussed topic in Ukrainian online communities on Telegram, supporting the observation from the documented advice data that the focus of information needs among Ukrainian refugees shifted from job search to employment law.

Considering the described labor market situation of Ukrainians in Germany, we chose to assess the role played by Telegram groups in the job matching process for Ukrainian refugees. For this purpose, we analyzed the frequency of collocated word pairs associated with job offers or posts sharing information about wage offers by counting the frequency of the code “Euro per hour” or “€/h” during the week from May 1 through May 8, 2023 (Figure 3.4). During this period, we identified 1,501 posts referencing wages below the average wage in Germany<sup>13</sup> out of a total of 10,519 general work-related mentions. Among the posts with wage references, half of the posts referred to wages below the current statutory minimum wage of €12 per hour in Germany. The minimum wage applies to all employees except for persons not considered as workers according to the Minimum Wage Act: trainees and volunteers, youth under 18 years of age who have not completed vocational training, and long-term unemployed persons during the first 6 months of their reentry into the labor market (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2023). The statutory minimum wage also applies to marginally paid employment, which is the type of work held by almost 20% of employed Ukrainians, as discussed previously. Employees who qualify for the general minimum statutory wage according to the law but who are paid less than €12 per hour for their work could either sue their employer or report the employer to customs officials for illicit employment (IQ - Netzwerk durch Qualifizierung, 2023). When work offers on social media represent illicit or undeclared employment, refugees are exposed to significant risks of exploitation by employers as well as legal sanctions from the authorities, as explained earlier.

Figure 3.5 shows examples of job posts disseminated in Ukrainian Telegram group chats that offer hourly salaries below or at the legal minimum wage in Germany. Many such posts are published by recruiting agencies that offer their placement services to employees for free. The job offers also often include housing

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13 As of April 2022, the average gross hourly earnings of an employee in Germany amounted to approximately €22 per hour. Source: Earnings Survey April 2022. Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office): <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Labor/Earnings/Earnings-Earnings-Differences/Tables/quarterly-earnings.html?nn=23016> (available on 30.05.2023)

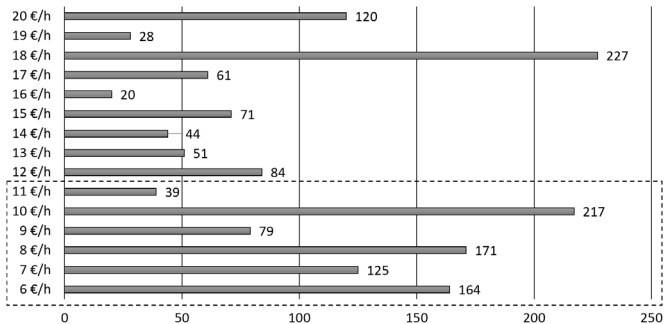


Fig. 3.4 – The number of job offers disseminated on Telegram, categorized according to the gross stated wage (€/hour), with wages below the minimum wage highlighted, Minor | protected by copyright.

opportunities, which is used to justify the low wages; rental costs are deducted from the salary. The positions offered generally do not require German language skills and are primarily in the transportation and logistics sector. Many positions are also offered in housekeeping, manufacturing, and gastronomy. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the number of posts referring to salary payments in relation to work offers as “net,” “cash,” or “cash on hand” (1,345) significantly outnumbered those referring to salary payments as “gross” or “official” (312). This prevalence of “cash on hand” references further suggests that many of the work offers could represent illicit opportunities.

As Figure 3.4 shows, we also found evidence of many apparently legal and non-precarious employment opportunities via Telegram groups, demonstrated by the large number of vacancies offering a wage of €18 per hour, which is below the average wage in Germany (Statista, 2023) but well above the €12 per hour legal minimum wage. This demonstrates the positive potential of social media forums as job-matching platforms for Ukrainian refugees. The question that remains unanswered is how the legitimate job matching happening on social media platforms can be strengthened while effective action is taken against illicit employment offers that are made on these platforms and can put migrants and refugees at risk of exploitation and legal peril.

These findings demonstrate the prominence of employment-related discussions with focus on job searching and matching within the online Ukrainian communities in Germany, which highlights the important role social media groups can have on the labor market participation of refugees and migrants. In the analyzed Telegram groups, we found a wide variety of job offers being published in terms of the type of work and the wages being offered. Of particular concern are the large number of precarious employment opportunities being offered in these groups at hourly wages below the legal minimum wage in Germany. We also found evidence that a sizeable share of the offered work opportunities may be illicit, which could create significant risks of exploitation, especially for vulnerable groups like refugees.

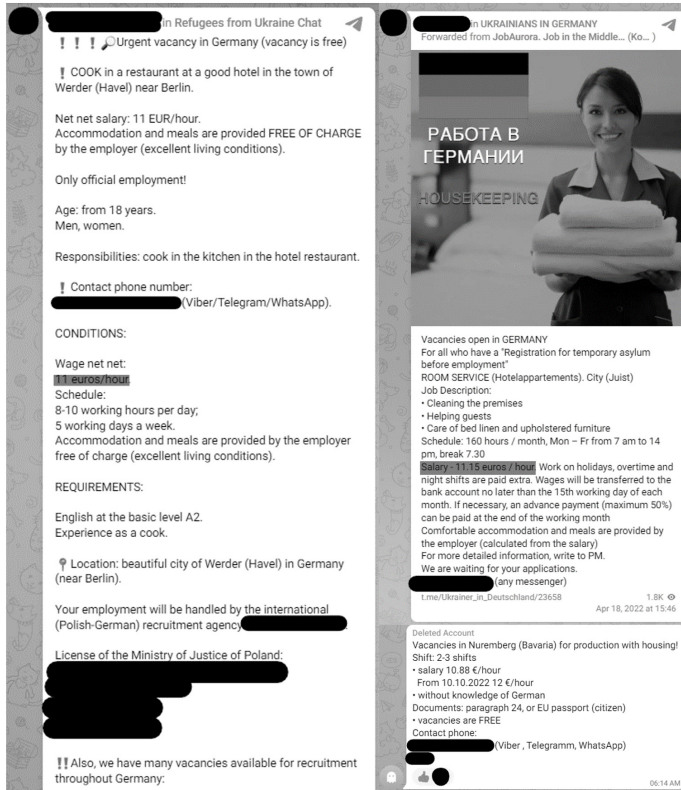


Fig. 3.5 – Screenshots of posted job offers below or at the minimum wage in Telegram online group chats “УКРАЇНЦІ В НІМЕЧЧИНІ” (“UKRAINIANS IN GERMANY”) and “Українці в Німеччині DEUA” (“Ukrainians in Germany”), with automatic English translation from Ukrainian; source: Telegram | protected by copyright.

## Summary and Conclusion

Over the past decade, numerous qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that social media platforms are pivotal in the migration, arrival, and orientation processes for migrants and refugees in Germany. Our article focuses on the example of Ukrainian refugees in Germany who use Telegram and Facebook groups as sources of information and advice, especially in their search for employment. The extensive use of social media platforms by migrants and refugees offers unique opportunities to analyze migration flows and the networks of migrants and refugees on those platforms as well as to better understand the information and support needs of their users, which, in turn, can form the basis for better support strategies and policies. For this article, we analyzed real-world data on the labor market situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany and compared it with our data analysis from

Telegram and Facebook groups used by members of the same population to assess the impact of the social media platforms on their labor market integration processes.

Although the official employment statistics show that a large percentage of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, who began to arrive at the start of 2022, remain unemployed, their employment rate has markedly increased since August 2022, and their unemployment rate has decreased. This positive trend is partially based on the fact that nearly 20% of employed Ukrainians work in marginally paid employment and that the majority of regularly employed Ukrainians now work in helper or assistant jobs, surpassing the share of people working in skilled, specialist, or expert positions. Despite Ukrainian refugees' expedited access to the German labor market, empirical studies show that their experience in the German labor market corresponds with the experience of most newly arrived migrants in Germany due to common barriers, such as a lack of German language skills and a lack professional and educational qualifications.

Our data analysis from Telegram and Facebook groups used by Ukrainian refugees ascertains the influence of those platforms on the labor market integration of Ukrainians in Germany. Our topic analysis of over 2 million posts from Telegram groups revealed a surge in employment-related posts since the beginning of 2023. Our analysis demonstrates that about 50% of the wage figures offered on social media groups were below the legal minimum wage of €12 per hour, and many job offers proposed cash-in-hand payment.

Our data analysis shows that for migrants and refugees with high levels of digital media usage, social media platforms can significantly impact their labor market participation. In terms of positive impacts, these digital forums provide easily accessible information in a user's native language and peer-to-peer support about job offers and labor market conditions in Germany, thereby facilitating their labor market participation and contributing to the rising employment rate. In terms of negative impacts, the reported low usage rate of (digital) official information sources and support offers among Ukrainian refugees limits their access to reliable information about employee rights and pathways to qualification-appropriate employment, which is typically less accessible on social media groups. This factor likely contributes to the increase in low-skilled and low-paid employment among Ukrainian refugees.

Our findings on the prevalence of low-paid and potentially illicit employment offers on social media groups show that social media forums can form high-risk environments where migrants and refugees are exposed to precarious employment offers that can lead to exploitation, underpayment, and legal repercussions. Individual reports of Ukrainian refugees finding themselves in illicit and exploitative employment (Lehner & Bodyagina, 2022) have highlighted the dangers such practices pose to their integration process in Germany, but a lack

of representative data makes it difficult to estimate the extent of this phenomenon. Our analysis shows that social media data can provide a quantitative indicator of how many illicit jobs are being offered to job-seeking Ukrainian refugees.

These observations exemplify the opportunities and risks present for migrants and refugees in the flexible labor markets under network capitalism in advanced economies as described by Hillmann (2022), Boltianski and Chiapello (2006), and Honneth (2023), among others.

While our analysis focused on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, many of the findings are transferrable to other groups of migrants and refugees who exhibit similarly high social media usage rates. Given the shared barriers to labor market integration in Germany faced by many migrants and refugees from different countries of origin and the observed above-average social media usage rates across these groups (Stapf, 2019), we expect social media groups to play a similarly important role in the job search for other migrants and refugees.

One possible strategy to address the negative impacts of social media on the labor market integration of migrants and refugees would be for the Telegram messenger and other social media platforms to formulate and/or implement effective content moderation strategies to identify and block posts with illegal employment offers. Furthermore, support and training regarding German employment law could be provided to the administrators of social media groups to inform them of the risks illicit employment poses to group members. In addition, social media information campaigns can inform migrants and refugees of their rights as employees in Germany, warn them about the risks of engaging in illicit employment, and increase their chances for finding legal employment.

Another promising approach would be for institutions working to facilitate the entry of migrants and refugees into the job market to proactively collaborate with migrant- and refugee-led social media networks to share information and support offers in those networks. Such collaboration could broaden access to information about high-skilled jobs, advice offers, and training and qualification opportunities (or the possibility of getting foreign qualifications recognized in Germany). By understanding and harnessing the communicative power and reach of social media networks self-organized by migrants and refugees, it is possible to create a more effective approach to facilitate their integration into the German labor market.

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# CHAPTER 4

Ice and Fire:  
The Social Impact of China's  
Digital Infrastructure on the Jadeite Trade

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## Abstract

The construction of infrastructure is regarded as an important means to stimulate economic growth, but it can also have a significant impact on the relationship between social structures and actors. The same is true for digital infrastructure. The jadeite trade across the China–Myanmar border is a traditional industry of the Chinese people. With the construction of China's digital infrastructure and platforms, technology has generated a new transaction model of live streaming e-commerce, which, in turn, has reconstructed the interactive relationship between participants in the jadeite trade. To examine the impact of digital infrastructure construction on the organization of jadeite trade activities, this study conducted an in-depth ethnographic observation of jadeite live streaming participants in Ruili, a jadeite trade center located on China's southwest border. The study found that with the help of digital platform technology, participants can obtain or maintain the same or higher income without relying on resources available at only certain times and in certain places, and new livelihoods become possible. However, the influence of digital platforms also increases friction and conflict between groups and creates new competition for resources.

## Introduction

The jadeite trade is a traditional industry operated by the peoples of China and Myanmar that has lasted for hundreds of years. Because jadeite resources and mines are located in Kachin State in northern Myanmar, and the main jadeite consumer market is in China, the most direct trade route is between northern Myanmar and southwest China. This region has one of the highest concentrations of cultural diversity in the world. In addition to the Han Chinese, the ethnic groups involved in the jadeite trade also include Burmese Chinese, Kachin, Shan, Burmese, and Muslims<sup>1</sup> among others. Traditionally, China has been home to the jadeite culture. The Chinese buy ores from Burmese ethnic groups such as the Kachins, Shans, or Burmese, or they participate in the excavation of jadeite ores. They then grade and evaluate the jadeite, process it, and sell it to on the Chinese market. At the China–Myanmar border market, Chinese jadeite merchants can be seen setting up wholesale stalls, while most of the Myanmar Muslim jadeite merchants are wandering and selling. Although merchants offering the same product type and level try to conceal base price and selling price of their products, they often borrow goods from each other to sell, thus forming a relationship of cooperation rather than competition among ethnic groups.

With the construction of China's digital infrastructure covering border areas, online and offline platforms have also become part of the jadeite trade. As has been the case in the various Taobao villages<sup>2</sup> in Zhejiang Province in China, the use of time and space at the border areas has been reshaped by digital platforms. On the one hand, technology has shaped the concept of time and the daily business arrangements of online merchants, and those arrangement have simultaneously been shaped by the time system formed under existing social and natural conditions (Qian Linliang, 2019). On the other hand, the new livelihood model presents the characteristics of spontaneity, diversity, and technology. The transformation of the livelihood model promotes the change of local social space, and the change of social space is constantly adjusted to adapt to the transformation of the livelihood model (Zhou Daming & Xiang Lu, 2018). However, border areas are often ethnically diverse, trade activities are cross-cultural, and digital technology complicates social relations. This is precisely the case with jadeite trade activities. With the advent of e-commerce on websites and through WeChat,<sup>3</sup> digital technology has produced the live streaming trade model, and the trading rules and ethnic relations of the entire jadeite industry have undergone significant changes as a result.

1 This Muslim group includes the Rohingya, other Muslim ethnic groups in Myanmar, and Muslims in China.

2 The first e-commerce platform to develop in China was Taobao, whose headquarters are located in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Because many local villages have benefited financially from access to the Taobao platform and the development of e-commerce livelihood models, they are referred to as "Taobao villages."

3 WeChat is an instant messaging app that can be used for almost all needs in daily life in China. As of December 2022, WeChat had more than 1.3 billion active users worldwide, and it was the social software with the most active users in mainland China.

This study focuses on the way digital infrastructure construction has changed the traditional cross-border trade industry including cross-regional, cross-country, and cross-cultural trade exchanges—and its impact on the economic and trade methods and interactions of different groups of people. The study found that due to the rise of digital infrastructure and live streaming technology, people can earn or maintain the same or higher income without relying on resources that are used once or appear in only one location. The new livelihood model has given many groups who were previously unable to enter the jadeite value chain a chance to participate. However, this also increases friction and conflict between groups, generating new relationships of cooperation and competition.

## Theoretical Literature Review and Methodology

Infrastructure, a combination of the Latin terms “infra” and “structure,” originally meant “a device that constitutes any operating system.” The pioneer of development economics, Rosenstein Rodin (1943), first mentioned concept of “infrastructure” in his book *The Problems of Industrialization in Eastern and Southeastern European Countries*. Today, the term “infrastructure” is widely used in economic, political, and social research, but there is no standard definition in academia. The most widely accepted is the definition from an economic perspective proposed by Jochimsen. He considered infrastructure to be “the sum of material, institutional and personal facilities and data which are available to the economic agents and which contribute to realizing the equalization of the remuneration of comparable inputs in the case of a suitable allocation of resources, that is complete integration and maximum level of economic activities” (Jochimsen, 1966). Jochimsen further describes infrastructure as including the following: “1. the sum of all profitable assets, equipment and working capital in the economy serving energy supply, transportation services and telecommunications; we must add 2. structures, etc. to protect the widest range of natural resources and transportation routes in the broadest sense and 3. Buildings and facilities for public administration, education, research, healthcare and social welfare” (1966). Torrisi and Gianpiero (2009) also define infrastructure in an economic sense, classifying it from different perspectives based on existing research: economic and social, core and non-core, basic (main) and supplementary, material and immaterial, networked and nuclear, and so on.

With the development of digital technology, the concept of digital infrastructure came into being, but its scope of coverage is debated. Jun mo Kim (2006) argues that digital infrastructure is digital equipment manufacturing. Ding Zhifan (2020) posits that digital infrastructure includes not only modern information infrastructure, such as broadband and wireless networks, but also the digital transformation of traditional physical infrastructure. In one Chinese government report (Xinhua Net, 2020), digital infrastructure mainly refers to new infrastructure such as 5G, artificial intelligence, the Industrial Internet, and the Internet of Things. This paper defines digital infrastructure as emerging technologies based on digital technology and their supporting designs, including the following:

1) physical digital infrastructure represented by traditional communication and cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and blockchain technology; 2) system construction for the purpose of ensuring the sustainable development of digital-related industries, such as platform rules, government network supervision and governance, financial supervision, and other institutional arrangements; and 3) the possibility of entering digital platforms, including the use of social media, commodity digitization skills, financial digitization skills, and other personal capabilities to use digital technology. Digital infrastructure is a necessary condition for the development of a digital economy (Grimes, 2003). It can promote economic growth, and it plays an important role in national economic transformation (Madden & Savage, 2000; Rapheal, 2001; Datta & Agarwal, 2004).

However, the issues that should be prioritized when assessing the results of economic growth include what kind of impact the construction of digital technology facilities will have on social structures and relationships, whether to promote that construction, and, if so, to what extent or under what restrictive conditions. At present, China is a pioneer in the construction of digital infrastructure worldwide. In the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative, scholars have discussed issues such as the connotation scope, development planning, statistical measurements, and the significance of digital infrastructure construction from the perspective of macroeconomics (Zhu Yunqiang et al., 2015; Fang Fang, 2019; Geng Xuefeng, 2019; Shi Jiaying, 2020). He Rixing and Gong Huili (2021) examined the difference in digital infrastructure construction from the perspective of the digital divide, which affects the survival and development rights of vulnerable countries and vulnerable groups.

In order to better answer the research questions, we chose Ruili, the jadeite trade center located on the China–Myanmar border in southwest China, as a fieldwork site, and conducted a six-year research project on jadeite trade activities using ethnographic methods. We investigated Ruili's digital infrastructure and wholesale jadeite market, conducted in-depth interviews with trade participants of various ethnicities, and observed jadeite trade activities to obtain empirical data.

### **The Change Process of China's Digital Infrastructure Construction on Jadeite Trade**

Interviewee YMR runs a large jadeite e-commerce platform company whose transaction volume exceeded RMB 10 billion in 2020.<sup>4</sup> The company manages the jadeite transaction process of multiple online live streaming platforms, and it provides offline live streaming venues, quality inspections, logistics and other transaction supporting services for live streaming e-commerce companies selling jadeite.

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4 Interview time: January 2021; Interviewee: YMR; Location: Mobile Communication Building, Kunming, Yunnan Province.

The company is not a trading company in terms of its operating nature, but instead a technology company that has developed along with China's digital infrastructure construction.

In the communiqué of the Central Economic Work Conference of the Communist Party of China in December 2018, “new infrastructure” appeared in official documents for the first time. The “White Paper on China's Digital Economy Development (2019)” divides the digital economy infrastructure required by the digital economy into traditional categories and new categories. The document uses information infrastructure as an indicator of traditional digital infrastructure while data centers, 5G, and IPV6 development are considered part of the new digital infrastructure. This was the first time that the Chinese government proposed the concept of “digital infrastructure” in a work report. However, this concept had been implemented and practiced long before it was noted in an official context. This paper divides the development process of China's digital infrastructure construction and e-commerce into the following four stages.

First, from the Reform and Opening-up<sup>5</sup> to the early 21st century is the embryonic stage. The development of this stage was mainly driven by the eastward transmission of western information technology, and it was dominated by government influence. On October 4, 1982, the State Council of China established a computer and large-scale integrated circuit leading group to determine the basis for the selection of various types of computers in China (People's Daily Online, 2014). In March 1986, the National High-tech Research and Development Program (or the “863 Program”) was officially launched. Since then, some Chinese universities and scientific research institutions began to study internet networking technology and communicate with parts of Europe and the United States via e-mail (Xinhua Net, 2014). On April 20, 1994, the 64K international special line for China to access the Internet was opened, providing China with a comprehensive internet connection. The first year of the Internet in China is therefore considered to be 1994. However, at that time, China had only just launched the GSM mobile phone service, and the telephone penetration rate was only 3.2 per 100 people. In October 1995, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 14th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China identified “speeding up the process of informatization of the national economy” as a strategic task, which promoted the arrival of the tide of internet entrepreneurship. In July 1997, the “Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Informatization and Outline of 2010 Long-term Objectives,” regarded as a milestone in the construction and development of China's informatization work, was promulgated (Liu Yujia, 2022). In 1998, the separation of government and enterprises in telecommunications promoted the

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5 Reform and opening up is a theory proposed and founded by Deng Xiaoping, who served as supreme leader of China in 1978. It transformed China from a closed planned economy to an open market economy, and it has become a national policy that China has adhered to since.



overall marketization of telecommunications operations. At that point, China Telecom, China Netcom, China Mobile, and other similar companies were established. Comprehensive portal sites, such as Netease (1997), Sina (1998), Sohu (1998), and Tencent (1998), were established one after another. Alibaba Group (1999), JD (1998), Dangdang (1999), and other e-commerce sites also entered the initial stage (Wang Xiuzhe, 2021). During this period, the business model of China's digital economy was relatively simple, mainly including online news, email services, search engines, social platforms, and value-added services. Since internet applications and personal computers were not popularized in society, the scale of internet consumers nationwide was relatively small. Overall, it was determined from the beginning that China's digital infrastructure construction would be led by the government, which shaped the subsequent development direction and unique landscape.

The second stage, from 2003 to 2015, is the initial development period. At this stage, China's social media and large-scale e-commerce platforms developed, and trading habits in cities began to shift from offline to online. In 2003, through the use of blogs and microblogging, the long-standing one-way reception of information among the Chinese people was disrupted, and there was a growing demand for individuality and initiative. Taobao, the Chinese version of Amazon, grew in this period. The so-called Great Firewall of China, which has gradually been developed since the 1990s, blocked Amazon and other international internet companies from accessing the Chinese market and eliminated Taobao's competitors. The lack of competition, coupled with the advantage of a better understanding of local consumer preferences, has brought Taobao significant success. In 2006, China's online retail sales exceeded 100 billion yuan, and in 2012, it was as high as 1.26 trillion yuan. In 2005, the State Council of China issued the "Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of E-Commerce" policy initiative, which indicated that the digital economy dominated by e-commerce had become an important part of China's national development strategy. Under the active promotion of the government, internet companies have successively launched their own application platforms to attract traffic and consumers. For example, consumers can recommend, share, and comment on products in the communities of the shopping guide websites Meilishuo and Mogujie, and they can forward the graphic content they publish or have an interest in to Weibo, QQ, Douban, and other social platforms with larger traffic (Yu Hua, 2021). Due to the content output by many professionals, the content producers in the shopping guide community are also known as the predecessors of online celebrities who promote certain products (IiMedia, 2020). As a physical part of digital infrastructure, mobile devices that can access the Internet, such as smartphones and tablets, are also popular in China. By the end of 2013, the overall scale of Chinese netizens was 618 million, and the internet penetration rate was 45.8%. With the development of digital technologies, such as cloud computing and big data, internet companies have developed many kinds of e-commerce software and built interconnected and overlapping platforms. The categories of goods traded online cover almost all

daily needs. These developments, coupled with the establishment of online payment services and offline logistics services, have largely eliminated the need for people to visit physical stores where they can choose and buy goods. An increasing number of people prefer to select products online through mobile devices, pay online, and wait for the delivery to experience the feeling of opening a package as if it were a gift.

The third stage, from 2016 to 2020, is the stage of rapid development. During this stage, the online transaction method developed from live streaming services provided by e-commerce platforms to live streaming on short video platforms. Chinese people refer to 2016 as the first year of live streaming e-commerce. Mogujie launched the live streaming function in March of that year to support the incubation and brokerage business of its live streaming artists. Taobao and JD.com also successively launched live broadcast services. Live streaming is an e-commerce model in which the broadcaster acts as an intermediary, using the platform to sell products to fans and acquire a commission in the process. It provides consumers with a real-time, visual product-viewing experience, and a sense of participation because they can directly communicate with the live streamer. Live streaming limits the physical distance between consumers and objects to the highest extent. Fans can even chat with their favorite internet celebrity while any uncertainty regarding the purchase is addressed. According to the 2019 Taobao Live Streaming Ecological Development Trend Report, the Taobao Live platform carried more than 100 billion yuan worth of goods in 2018, with a year-on-year growth rate of nearly 400%, and the number of products that could be purchased exceeded 600,000 (China E-Commerce Online, 2019).

From April to December 2018, short video platforms KuaiShou and TikTok launched e-commerce functions, marking the entry of short video platforms into the live streaming industry. The short video platform is based on the production of short video content, and it has inherent advantages in terms of customer “stickiness,” daily activity on the platform, and internet celebrity resources. According to data from iiMedia Consulting, the online transaction volume of Kuaishou live e-commerce increased from 30 billion yuan in 2018 to 150 billion yuan in 2019, a five-fold increase (iiMedia, 2020). The participants of live streaming e-commerce come from both cities and rural areas.

The fourth stage, from 2020 to the present, is the era of live streaming for all. The pandemic broke out in China at the end of 2019. Then, from 2020 through 2022, the Chinese government was restricting the flow of people and goods externally while isolating internally and implementing city lockdowns. The offline real economy was heavily impacted. People were confined to isolation places, such as homes, offices, hospitals, and communities, for several weeks or months, and sometimes multiple times. This not only damaged the real economy, but also severely restricted logistics, an essential part of e-commerce, which blocked online transactions to a significant extent. Based on the necessities of daily life

and individuals' desire for free movement, online consumption compensated for the lack of offline consumption among those living in isolation. In 2020, the mayor of Guangzhou, Wen Guohui, announced the start of the year of live streaming in Guangzhou, hoping to make Guangzhou the country's live streaming capital. At the same time, the People's Daily, which represents the policy vane of the central government, continuously reported that government officials bought goods. This indicated that, in the field of live streaming e-commerce, the role of the government was no longer only to promote the construction of digital infrastructure public services and continuously establish market management regulations but also to directly lead development of the live streaming e-commerce model. In April 2020, CCTV News Channel, the highest-level official media of the Chinese government, planned a live broadcast for public welfare called "Thank you for making orders for Hubei," which launched the duo of famous CCTV host Zhu Guangquan and live broadcaster "First Brother" Li Jiaqi to promote Hubei's special products. This live stream attracted 10.91 million unique viewers, 122 million views, and 160 million likes in the live broadcast room. The two-hour live stream resulted in the sale of 40.14 million yuan worth of Hubei products (China Youth Net, 2020).

Jadeite is one of the material commodities traded online, and its trading methods have also been continuously shaped by the development of e-commerce in China. Jadeite is categorized with non-necessities and luxury goods, so the overall pace of its development in e-commerce has been slower than that of other commodities. Jadeite's e-commerce process can be roughly divided into three stages (Yang Mingyue, 2022). The first is the era of website e-commerce. As was the case with other commodities, shops selling jadeite gradually appeared on Taobao after the establishment of the platform in 2003, and there were also independent websites specializing in selling jadeite. In online trading stores, standardized industrial products could use a series of attribute terms, parameter data, and attractive advertising images to demonstrate the superiority of their value. When consumers received the goods, they could also use this series of indicators to verify whether the products match their online descriptions. However, the natural properties of jadeite are quite varied, and there is no standardized rule to frame and distinguish its quality. Because the carefully processed pictures presented on the websites tended to misrepresent the products, consumers often did not buy online. Another type of website in this period was the online sales branch developed by large-scale physical jadeite enterprises, which still relied on the existing set of offline trade models of physical companies. The websites were often only a "front" for physical companies to access new technologies, demonstrate corporate strength, or facilitate the display of goods to customers. Real online transactions were few and far between. This situation continued until 2014, when WeChat's online payment service was linked to the bank accounts of many users. According to traditional Chinese customs, red envelopes are given to express love and blessings during Chinese New Year. Considering this tradition, WeChat's online payment service launched

the “red envelope” function during the Spring Festival of 2014. The user scale accumulated by Alipay, the main online payment tool, over the previous 10 years was achieved by WeChat within a few days of the Spring Festival holiday. The combination of new and existing users has made selling goods on the WeChat platform the most effective new e-commerce model, and Jade WeChat business has also flourished. One of our interviewees described their successful use of WeChat to sell jadeite:

*“Every morning, I go to Jiegao Jade City to pick up the goods, and after I got them, I take photos and videos under the sun on the side of the road in Jade City to post to Moments. It must be taken under natural light, otherwise the customer will definitely return the product if the color is different after buying it. After each item is photographed, the size, price, and (theme) description should be marked... I also have three WeChat groups with nearly 500 members. The photos and videos taken every day are also posted in it, and some activities are also held, such as vouchers, flash sales, and promotions, and the group can reply immediately. During promotions, customers will look at each other and rush to buy. The business is very good.”<sup>6</sup>*

The third stage is the live streaming e-commerce stage. Unlike WeChat business, live streaming e-commerce has broken through the restrictions of the social rules of WeChat acquaintance; live streamers can display goods to any customer without adding them as a friend in advance. Live broadcast platforms like TikTok also have algorithm push support; they obtain data on user preferences according to users' stay time when browsing and push similar content from different broadcasters to users accordingly. The live streaming platform actively encourages newcomers to create new, superior video content. It also assesses the user's selective acceptance of information and pushes familiar and favorite information to them, thereby encouraging more people to participate as long as they can shoot, edit, and create popular videos. Jadeite can be displayed comprehensively, intuitively, and in real time through the live broadcast media, which largely solves the problem of the limitations of photographs and questions regarding the authenticity of the product. Therefore, at this stage, the development of jadeite live streaming e-commerce has quickly transformed from the micro-business model. Interviewee YMR's company has gradually developed from a technology company that provides consumers with online jadeite trading services to a platform company that provides complex services such as offline live streaming venues, live streaming room operations, online transaction supervision, jadeite quality inspection, and logistics. They also assist the local government in managing the Myanmar people who come to the border city of Ruili to work in the jadeite industry.

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6 Interview time: July 2018; Interviewee: XM; Location: Jiegao Yucheng, Ruili City, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

To summarize, China's digital infrastructure construction has been led by the government's efforts to implement reform, open-up, and build a socialist market economic system. Government policy has promoted the development of internet companies and spawned the emergence of various e-commerce platforms. According to the characteristics of China's social development and government management methods, platforms and applications are constantly being innovated to provide services to consumers and guide their online transaction methods. The online jadeite trade is an example of this process, but due to its cross-border and multi-ethnic participation characteristics, the results of digital technology in this field are more complicated than they are in many other fields.

### **New Livelihoods: Digital Technology Facilitates the Restructuring of the Flow of People, Materials, and Money in the Jadeite Trade**

The construction of digital infrastructure has brought much convenience in terms of time and space constraints, which has significantly affected the flow of commodities in the jadeite trade, the actions and relationships between buyers and sellers, and the flow of transaction funds. First, the flow of materials has been reconstructed, and people do not have to rely on resources available only at certain times and in certain places. In traditional jadeite trade activities, markets, merchants, consumers, and commercial venues are relatively stable, and the space for the actors participating in economic activities is limited. Therefore, the market is often located in a small area in the major cities along the trade route, and the same is true for border jadeite markets like Ruili. Because of the convergence of jadeite commodities, people gather to form a market, where they trade face to face. The shops have display and storage areas, and the market is often equipped with corresponding quality inspection agencies. E-commerce brings the optimization and reorganization of different production factors with people at the core, and it is a process of creating new links in the value chain.

In addition to online transactions, services such as quality appraisal, warehousing, logistics, and after-sales of jadeite products can all be incorporated into the digital infrastructure. This eliminates many offline material flows that must cross physical spaces, thereby allowing for the preservation and re-allocation of resources and eliminating the restrictions of traditional commercial resources. In addition, live streaming technology allows mobile phones, cameras, video cameras, and other devices to become sources for videos.

As a result, people, equipment, and scenes transcend time and space constraints. The live streamers not only have automatic calculation logic system provided by the platform to help attract same type of fans on same platform, but they can also open accounts on different platforms and operate multiple cameras to broadcast same screen on different platforms, thereby covering a larger number of consumer groups. Following is one interviewee's description of how multiple accounts are used:

*"I have accounts on Douyin, Kuaishou, Taobao, and Pinduoduo. The Douyin account has the most followers, but the Taobao account sells the best... Our company's goods will be sorted after they are brought in, and then they will be rotated in each broadcaster's live streaming room. Each broadcaster has several accounts, and it doesn't matter which account they sell from. Those that cannot be sold will be returned to the company's purchase team, who will return them to the owner, and some will be bought by the company, and will be broadcast again in a few days."*<sup>7</sup>

A piece of jadeite belonging to one consignor may be circulated between different live broadcast rooms until it is sold. The sold goods are not directly taken away by customers; instead, professional logistics companies transport and deliver the products. Merchants seeking to sell jadeite use live streaming as an intermediary to access a larger pool of consumers, and consumers looking to buy jadeite do not need to travel to distant distribution centers at China's southwestern border, nor do they need to visit local retail stores where items are more expensive. This removes the reliance on resources available only at certain times and in certain places, as is the case in traditional commercial activities, and it saves time and economic costs for both buyers and sellers.

Second, digital technology separates participants from transactions, and the relationship between the two remains indirect, creating new livelihood opportunities. New livelihood opportunities mainly refers to the opportunity for groups who were unable to enter the cross-border value chain of jadeite trade to participate and thereby earn a living. Digital technology removes the participants' bodies from the physical space and produces new forms of communication and practice in the digital space.

On the one hand, digital technology has changed the channels through which people connect with society, and it has created new social relationships in a field where the virtual world blends with reality. On the other hand, people are the carriers of knowledge and technology. In the process of digitalization, people embodied in technology also become digitalized, thus generating new practices and livelihoods. Everyone can participate in live e-commerce, which is not only a product of media decentralization; it also creates many new livelihoods that are different from traditional business methods due to its low threshold and diverse participants. Interviewee AS is a Rohingya from Myanmar who was not previously engaged in the jadeite industry before. He came to Ruili six years ago to work on the assembly line of an electric bicycle factory. He described his experience as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Interview time: December 2022; Interviewee: CLX; Location: Duobaozhicheng live streaming base, Ruili City, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

*“My friend told me that jadeite live streaming rooms need faces like mine, a bearded Burmese face, which is very different from Chinese people. They want the on-screen footage of Burmese trading with the broadcaster, so that fans will believe that jadeite is cheap. I just need to be responsible for delivering the goods to the broadcaster and pretending to be a bargainer. My friend will give me some commission after the sale. I work in a factory during the day and go to the live streaming room at night to earn some more money. The income is much higher than when I was in Myanmar.”<sup>8</sup>*

In addition, live streaming e-commerce has also expanded the employment ecology, supporting a range of professionals—such as makeup artists, trainers, anchor assistants, and event planners—who provide services for platform broadcasters. Intermediary companies that provide services such as translation, venue, logistics and security have also appeared. The intermediaries are familiar with Myanmar’s policies, regulations, and cultural habits, and they can ensure the safe transportation of jadeite goods to China. The emergence of live streaming e-commerce also interrupted the traditional schedule of jade trading. Since Chinese consumers are busy with work during the day, they typically have time to shop online at night. Accordingly, the working hours of the live-streaming transaction operators tend to start at noon and end at 2:00 AM or 3:00 AM. The major jadeite trading markets, which used to only operate during the day, have gradually started to operate at night. Live streaming e-commerce based on digital technology eliminates the dependence on physical space, as the flow of materials and human activities are aggregated in the digital space. Business activities are no longer limited to a specific location. Human actions can be expanded in the spatial dimension, and resources in multiple regions can also be linked, thus providing greater freedom to the flow of resources.

Third, digital technology has restructured trade settlement methods and capital flow routes, and there have been major changes in terms of the time and function of cross-border settlement and currency exchange. The price of jadeite is not transparent, and merchants generally prefer not to share their sales prices with other merchants. Therefore, in the traditional jadeite trade, the buyer and the seller negotiate the price through a language of gestures hidden in the sleeve or by inputting the number into a calculator, and the cash transaction is made immediately after the price is negotiated. This situation had not changed significantly until the popularization of credit cards and credit card machines.

Merchants without credit card machines are rarely willing to let their customers swipe their cards in the machines of nearby merchants. However, since the widespread application of electronic payment systems such as Alipay and

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<sup>8</sup> Interview time: February 2022; Interviewee: AS; Location: Duobaozhicheng live streaming base, Ruili City, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

WeChat Pay, merchants no longer need to worry about this problem as long as they have an account and can provide customers with a QR code for payment.

The goods traded in live streaming rooms can also be paid for by electronic currency; however, the transaction price is transparent in the context of live streaming. After consumers pay electronically, the money is transferred to the account of the service platform, where it is initially recorded. It is then recorded again in the system of the China Internet Federation. Since the “7-day no reason return and exchange” trading rule introduced by Taobao to protect consumers’ rights and interests has been adopted by major platforms, these electronic currencies generally remain in the platform account for up to 7 days before entering the merchant’s electronic account. If the merchant needs to convert the amount into cash, they can see the change of the deposit number in the associated bank account after paying a small percentage as a handling fee to the platform, and then they can withdraw cash at the bank. This must be done within 10 days.

The settlement method of jadeite cross-border trade has also undergone notable changes. In the past, sellers in the Burmese jade market only accepted banknotes for transactions. The value of the kyat currency has consistently been very low (RMB to Myanmar Kyat was about 1:200~300 at the time of writing), so Chinese jadeite merchants often needed to carry cash in large woven bags to buy jadeite in Myanmar. However, in the era of electronic money, almost no credit card or bank card is used for settlement in the cross-border jadeite trade. One reason is that Myanmar’s banking industry is underdeveloped. Regardless of whether the business is a store, restaurant, or hotel, credit cards cannot be swiped, and the relevant financial infrastructure is not common in the jadeite market. A second reason is that the arrangement of the RMB cross-border settlement system is limited by the operating time (Qu Qingdong, 2016). This is because RMB cross-border settlement needs to be connected with China’s large-value payment system before it can process business normally, but the system design and operating rules of the large-value payment system are considered based on the needs of domestic payment and settlement (Qiang Li & Wang Yingying, 2015). The third reason is that the cargo owners prefer that prices remain unknown and that the transactions are not recorded. Therefore, cash payment remained the primary method. As Chinese live broadcast e-commerce companies selling jadeite continue to enter Myanmar, however, WeChat payment and Alipay payment have changed the settlement method and the flow of capital in the jadeite market. The woven bags used in the past have been replaced by mobile phones, and online payments have replaced cash payments. After quoting from the cargo owner in Myanmar, live streamers quickly convert the RMB amount in the calculator and quote it to the fans, settle with the fans in RMB, and then settle with the Myanmar cargo owner in kyat. The goods cannot be returned or exchanged after the transaction, so the service platform immediately deposits the settlement funds into the live streamer’s platform account. He D. (2021) argues that from the perspective of the back-end process, digital technology can undoubtedly increase the



efficiency of existing financial intermediaries, making the flow of funds for cross-border payments more traceable and transparent. However, the process has evaded the regulations of foreign exchange settlement and financial supervision of the two governments.

At present, the settlement method in Myanmar is complicated, and the primary accepted settlement method is not RMB. Prior to February 2019, the official settlement currencies approved by Myanmar included the euro, the US dollar, and the Singapore dollar. On January 30, 2019, the Central Bank of Myanmar issued Directive No. 4 of 2019, announcing the approval of the inclusion of the RMB in the scope of currencies allowed for international settlement and direct exchange. The Myanmar government made the RMB the official international settlement currency. This was the first time that the RMB was recognized by the Central Bank of Myanmar, and it has become Myanmar's official international settlement currency for non-border trade settlement. This move by the Myanmar government may have an impact on the cross-border settlement method of the jadeite industry in the future.

### **Friction and Conflict: The Shadow of Digital Technology in the Jadeite Trade**

Live streaming e-commerce and its related emerging formats have provided a new livelihood for many people, but they have also reshaped the relationship between participants in traditional trade. The new livelihoods have carved up the market share of the former jadeite merchants, threatening the survival and livelihood of the predecessors. Therefore, the situation of jadeite's live streaming e-commerce ecology is complex, and various tensions have developed.

The first group of tensions is related to the fierce competition for resources between traditional shop merchants and live streamers. Shop merchants and cargo owners are largely excluded from the emerging transaction mode, leaving them disadvantaged in a value chain where they used to profit. The essential feature of shop merchants is that they conduct sales at the place of business. Their sales method is relatively simple: They have a storefront where goods are displayed, and they wait for customers to come to the door. Such a trading model has lasted for hundreds of years. The traditional business philosophy of shopkeepers is conservative, and it is generally difficult to make significant changes to sales methods and volume. For shop merchants, the sales radius of commodities is limited, and the scope of circulation is relatively narrow, so the commercial relationship formed by merchants is limited to buying and selling. Basically, there is no relationship between the seller and the buyer after the transaction has been completed, and there will be no relationship until the next time the buyer comes to the shop. Jadeite merchants must often spend significant amounts to store goods, and the overall sales volume is relatively low. However, the profit margin of a single customer is relatively high. Merchants will therefore maintain some regular customer relationships to ensure long-term

business. When those involved in the jadeite trade on WeChat started to prosper, merchants rarely lent them goods for filming and publishing. Then, once live streaming e-commerce began to spread, the merchants had to lend them goods to broadcast.

Compared with store merchants, live streaming e-commerce merchants have a competitive advantage in the large number of customers. Their fans may be scattered across China; as long as they have purchasing power, they are not limited by space. Another advantage is that the live streaming room can be sufficiently intuitive, real, and highly interactive to minimize the distrust that comes from the inability of customers to touch the goods. Compared with pictures and short videos, the live commentary and emotions of the broadcaster, alongside the immediate feedback from the audience, make the product appear more real. Because the broadcaster in the live streaming room provides a real-time, interactive channel, consumers perceive personal services, their demands can be addressed quickly, and the broadcaster hears immediate consumer feedback. The scene marketing model of live streaming with goods not only eliminates the anxiety and distrust caused by the absence of in-person contact, but it also simulates the return of a “physical presence.” A third advantage is that live streaming e-commerce companies do not need to stock up on goods; most of the goods they display do not belong to them. On the one hand, this model greatly reduces the investment costs of entering the industry; on the other hand, most of the risk of storing goods is shouldered by the shop merchants. The fourth advantage is that live streamers act as intermediaries, encouraging different cargo owners to provide different sources of goods. This form of transparent sales and open price comparison not only allows consumers to take the initiative regarding which items to purchase, but it also compresses the profits of cargo owners. Considering the fact that consumers can compare prices of similar goods in multiple live streaming rooms, the profit margin of the goods owner is reduced further, while the commission ratio of the broadcaster remains stable, and the conflict between the two parties intensifies. As a result, live streaming e-commerce merchants have even begun to earn higher profits than shop merchants, and the live streamers maintain firm control of the sales channels. Not only has the strong position of traditional dealers deteriorated, but they must also take the initiative to go to the physical live streaming room to request a display. Many of them have gone bankrupt in the process and withdrawn from the competition entirely.

The second group of tensions is related to the resource competition between Burmese and Chinese, which is mainly reflected in the market, consumers, and commercial space. Jadeite is a kind of jade. Over time, the cultural symbolism of jade has formed in China, and the consumption demand in modern society has therefore been relatively strong. However, Myanmar does not have as significant of a jade culture as China, and Myanmar plays more of a role as the raw material provider in the China–Myanmar jadeite trade. Not only is the domestic demand

for jadeite in Myanmar very low, but the level of raw material processing is also low, and the symbolism associated with jadeite deep processing is difficult to reproduce. Although Myanmar has long sought to obtain higher added value from jadeite resources, the country's long-term, unstable political situation and slow industrial development has meant that it can only transfer the deep processing of jadeite to China (He Ming & Yang Mingyue, 2022). When the jadeite trade is presented in the form of e-commerce live streaming, the losses suffered by Burmese shippers are no less than those of Chinese shippers. Furthermore, the language used during the live streaming is Chinese, and all the rules of the live trading platform and even the rules for the use of mobile devices are designed to meet the behavioral preferences of Chinese users. These hurdles magnify the difficulties, excluding almost all Myanmar cargo owners from the new trading model. In 2018, Myanmar jadeite merchants launched a protest. More than 7,000 jadeite merchants jointly signed a letter to the Law Drafting Committee of the Federal Parliament, strongly urging relevant departments in Myanmar to prohibit the use of live streaming to sell jadeite in the jade trading market. In this regard, Wu Joang, a member of the preparatory committee for the Mandalay Jadeite Exhibition in Myanmar (the largest jadeite exhibition in the country), said at a press conference, "Businesspeople are prohibited from conducting live transactions at the exhibition. If any businessperson violates the regulations, he/she will be blacklisted and will not be allowed to participate in similar exhibitions." Tensions grew. For about three years after the protests, live streaming e-commerce companies were excluded from the Mandalay jadeite market in Myanmar. However, a small number reappeared starting at the end of 2022.

There are also new Burmese groups participating in live streaming e-commerce for jadeite. They actively cooperate with Chinese broadcasters and fulfill the role of cargo owners in the live streaming room. However, the status of the two parties is very unequal. Burmese people often provide the goods and must bargain in the live streaming scene, while Chinese broadcasters are intermediaries who negotiate on behalf of consumers to convey that they are helping buyers acquire more benefits. In addition, the presence of Burmese sellers, whose appearance typically differs from that of Chinese people, increases consumers' trust that they are receiving "goods from the original source." Additionally, in the process of directly bargaining with the Burmese, the curiosity of Chinese consumers in the deep inland region is also satisfied, and the demand for a certain level of enjoyment also increases the pressure for Burmese participation in the live streaming scene. Factors that can attract consumers' attention in a live stream include scenes directly from Myanmar and the presence of Myanmar people.

Because the content of the live streaming can be designed and created in advance, the broadcasters and the Burmese can also arrange a real cross-border jadeite transaction scene to show to viewers, thereby enhancing the sellers' credibility. For example, the script of one live streaming room involved a "smuggling" plot. The broadcaster claimed that he was risking his life to buy millions of yuan worth

of rough jadeite on the China–Myanmar border for fans. This kind of scene engages the viewers, as if they are also taking risks on the spot, which is very appealing. However, it was verified afterwards that there was no need to risk one's life to buy these jadeite raw materials. And the product may have actually been jadeite from Guatemala, which is of inferior quality and costs only about one-tenth of the price of Burmese jadeite. Another example is a live streaming scene in which the broadcaster is negotiating with the Burmese who dig the rough jadeite at the Hpakant Jadeite Mines in northern Myanmar. However, the scene actually depicts a performance arranged on a hillside near Ruili, China, and it reflects how live broadcast technology can be used in various ways, including to help consumers see and understand products remotely or to deceive them.

In this type of cooperative relationship, the Burmese benefit in some ways. However, the status of the two parties is unequal, and the scenes constructed are often deceptive, which has a negative effect on the long-term development of the entire live streaming e-commerce economy for jadeite. Therefore, although Burmese and Chinese have cooperated in live streaming e-commerce, the Burmese are restricted by factors such as digital infrastructure, new technologies, trading rules, and language. They are therefore at an overall disadvantage in resource competition.

## Conclusion

The construction of digital infrastructure has been, in general, jointly executed by the government, enterprises, social organizations and individuals, while China's digital infrastructure construction is clearly led by the state. The Chinese government starts by planning strategic goals. Then, relevant government departments formulate, manage, and supervise policies. Enterprises implement policies at all levels of government and gradually build certain rules for economic activities, thus continuously building physical infrastructure and a series of institutional arrangements. Once individuals can purchase mobile devices, use social media, and make online payments, the way social interaction occurs both online and offline is transformed. The innovation of the platform economic model<sup>9</sup> has enabled the digital economy to enter a broader development space and created new business formats and job opportunities, such as live streaming e-commerce. Due to relatively easy access to technology and convenient transaction methods, people, materials, and money can flow in a wider range of space and time, and the trading field of live streaming e-commerce covers almost all commodity categories. Participants have also loosened industry restrictions controlled by enterprises in the past, as well as the restrictions of longstanding regulations, and industry access has been decentralized.

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9 The platform economy is a new economic system based on digital technology, composed of data-driven, platform supported, and network-coordinated economic activity units. It is a general term for various economic relationships based on the Internet.

It is clear that the construction of digital infrastructure promotes the development of the digital economy, thereby promoting economic growth.

However, as is the case in the China–Myanmar jadeite trade, the impact of digital infrastructure construction on traditional industries and society is not only positive. The digitized jadeite trade has crossed the national borders of the two countries as trade in the past did, accompanied by the flow and reproduction of economies, knowledge, and values. The business model in the industry, the interaction method and social relationship of the participants, and the industry structure is reconstructed. On the one hand, enterprises and businesspeople who cannot immediately adapt to new technologies and changes are gradually excluded from the competition, and the tensions between longstanding and new actors have intensified. On the other hand, new economic models and economic actions often go beyond the scope of the traditional regulatory system and need to be regulated by new institutional rules and laws. Therefore, the construction of digital infrastructure not only brings about the expansion of livelihood opportunities, but it also creates new tensions.

The disadvantages of the Burmese compared to the Chinese in the China–Myanmar jadeite trade must be considered. Actors in Myanmar can participate in live streaming e-commerce and can benefit from the China–Myanmar jadeite trade value chain. However, due to the clear disparities between China and Myanmar in terms of the materials, systems, and skills required for digital infrastructure, the Burmese people are more passive in digital jadeite trade activities. The Burmese jadeite merchants' resistance to live streaming e-commerce is a call for justice in the digital space under digital globalization. Therefore, the construction of global digital infrastructure should give more preference, support, and protection to disadvantaged groups participating in digital globalization through the construction of material facilities, the formulation of relevant rules, and the improvement of the ability to use digital media, thereby ensuring their right to a livelihood and to develop in the reconstructed economic structure and order. Only in this way can more people enjoy the dividends of the global value chain as digital technology continues to develop, and a sustainable digital globalization ecosystem can be collaboratively shaped.

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# CHAPTER 5

## Coping Strategies for Navigating Boundaries: Resilience and Connectivity of African Students' Multilevel Social Networks in China

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### Abstract

This chapter presents our study investigating coping strategies employed by African students during their studies in China, drawing upon existing academic literature on migration social networks (traditional, digital, and multilevel), and transnational digital habitus, which together forms a platform giving African students the agency to develop pathways towards dynamic problem resolution. This study employs in-depth interviews regarding African students' decision making processes and study experiences in China, and utilizes ethnographic methodologies to investigate the experiences of African students in China within both physical and digital spaces. The results show how African students in China employ coping strategies to navigate challenges at different stages of their studies, including during the preparation and arrival phase, the study phase, and the graduation career phase. When facing restrictions and obstacles, African students in China construct coping strategies by leveraging overlapping layers of dynamic social networks and transnational digital habitus that are used to reach out for information, resources, and support both online and offline. The multilevel social network architecture is based on the foundation of both digital platforms and physical, geo-spatial locations. Thus, the high digital and physical density of the African student community with spatial diversification provides the core of different levels of social network development. Such forms of multilevel social networks offer more space for resilience with diversification and flexibility for African students in different locations of China to resolve the obstacles they encounter.

## Introduction

China has become one of the top destinations for African students pursuing higher education internationally. However, in everyday life, these students face many obstacles that can make their study period in China a challenging endeavor. These obstacles concern immigration regulations; educational programs; access to health care, banking, and financial services; and the labor market. This paper unveils the history, development, and current limitations of mobility for African students pursuing higher education in China under the framework of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in both systematic and nonsystematic ways in the education, labor market, healthcare, and social media sectors. This paper provides insights into the life of African students in China through the theoretical lenses of social network analysis and transnational digital habitus. It adopts both conventional and online ethnography to demonstrate the various ways African students overcome adversity and boundaries. Based on data from in-depth interviews and online and offline ethnographies, this paper investigates the coping strategies used by African students confronted with these systematic and nonsystematic restrictions in the age of digital social connections, as well as how physical meetings and online platforms are set up to discuss shared problems.

## Literature Review

Previous studies on African migrants in China have mainly addressed African traders or undocumented African migrants, particularly in the major trading cities of Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, and Beijing (Bodomo, 2010, 2012, 2020; Bodomo & Ma, 2010, 2012; Castillo, 2014, 2016, 2020a, 2020b; Castillo & Amoh, 2020; Hall et al., 2014; Haugen, 2012; Lan, 2016; Li et al., 2008, 2009; Lin et al., 2015; Mathews, 2019). They provide a broad overview of mobility, network accumulation, sociocultural integration in local urban communities, and the well-being of African traders and undocumented migrants in Chinese society.

Other researchers have examined the African student community in China in terms of their well-being and cultural adaptation (Haugen, 2013; Mulvey and Mason, 2022; Nyamwana, 2004). Nyamwana's (2004) research on cross-cultural adaptation showed that African students had experienced culture shock in China and that all were homesick to a certain degree. Haugen's (2013) work on China's recruitment of African university students showed that African students who engaged in trade during their stay had contributed to the export of Chinese products to Africa. However, some African students cited the unsatisfactory quality of the education as a reason why China's initiative had failed to fulfill its aim of strengthening the country's cultural influence and international relations through the recruitment of international students. Mulvey and Mason (2022), adopting the Bourdieu theory in their study, argue that the pre-mobility habitus influences the decision-making processes of African students both during and after their studies in China. It also influences

their adaptation to social field transformation from their countries of origin to China.

Concerning research on the coping strategies of international students, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) identified various challenges faced by international students in Australia, including “adjustment difficulties, social isolation, language barriers, academic challenges, unmet expectations, employment concerns, culture shock and psychological distress.” Their research highlighted the benefits of information and communication technologies, social networks, and the experiences shared by previous students in facilitating the adjustment process.

Similarly, Hussain and Shen (2019) conducted a study on international students in China and found that academic challenges, sociocultural challenges, and language barriers are the primary obstacles to their adaptation. The study revealed three main categories of support received by international students in Chinese universities: university support, peer support, and psychological/motivational support. The researchers emphasize the importance of “readiness” as a significant factor influencing coping strategies and academic adaptation among international students.

In summary, the existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of south-to-south mobility from Africa to China, especially among the contemporary African trader community. There is, however, a dearth of empirical studies that examine the well-being and cultural adaptation of the growing African student population in China. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the restrictions and challenges they experience and the problem-solving strategies they employ to overcome them. This article aims to address that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the coping strategies utilized by African students in China within their multilevel social networks, taking into account both systematic and nonsystematic facilitation and restriction. The study will adopt a novel lens that goes beyond digital spaces, providing a deeper understanding of the experiences and resilience of these students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The present study investigates coping strategies employed by African students during their studies in China, drawing upon existing academic literature on migration social networks (traditional, digital, and multilevel), and transnational digital habitus, which together forms a platform giving African students the agency to develop pathways towards dynamic problem resolution.

### ***Migration Social Networks and Social Media***

Researchers have examined the role of social media in facilitating social ties among mobile individuals (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Komito, 2011; Dekker &

Engbersen, 2012). Komito (2011) and Dekker and Engbersen (2012) reported that social media platforms enable mobile individuals to maintain ties with their past social connections, thus sustaining community ties across long distances. Haythornthwaite (2002) found that new media provide a platform for previously unconnected people, such as compatriots and alumni, to communicate and strengthen their network ties, which can potentially assist in the processes of mobility and integration. Dekker and Engbersen (2012) also highlighted how digital social network platforms serve as interaction-acquiring systems, offering valuable “insider knowledge” through shared experiences. Moreover, the social network can be constructed in the form of a multilevel structure involving different levels of agency, including individuals and organizations, that are mutually interdependent (Brailly, 2016). Interactions and knowledge transfers between people are influenced by both temporary and pre-existing contextual factors, depending on a multilevel social network that comprises interpersonal relationships, organizational affiliations, and interorganizational relationships (Berends et al., 2011). Combined, these functions can help reduce the costs associated with mobility and alleviate the emotional cost of separation.

In addition to facilitating social connections, social network building among African students in China also contributes to the social reproduction of group consciousness and a sense of belonging. The emergence and circulation of a new form of “Pan-African belonging” are facilitated through digital spaces, both within and beyond China’s so-called “Great Firewall.” These digital social networks are culturally, politically, and economically constituted frontier spaces that play a crucial role in strengthening group consciousness and fostering a sense of belonging (Ponzanesi, 2019). Consequently, African students can engage in intercultural social interactions both within and across the transnational digital spaces, transcending the digital border enforced by the Great Firewall.

### ***Transnational Digital Habitus***

Bourdieu defined habitus as “a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action” (2002: 27–28). Habitus, as “a way of being, a habitual state... and in particular, a disposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination,” is generally understood as internalized and acquired through one’s cultural, social, historical, and ideological experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 18). In the digital era, characterized by both physical and virtual mobilities, the concept of transnational digital habitus arises (Nedelcu, 2012). This notion is shaped by deterritorialized lifestyles and modes of communication. By utilizing the technological possibilities of communication, especially in the context of higher education, African students in China adjust their ways of thinking and practices to incorporate their transnational mobility and cosmopolitan orientations. Craig Calhoun (2017) states that cosmopolitanism involves varied and incomplete patterns of interconnections. African students actively leverage digital tools to expand their interconnections

at both global and local levels. This exploration of possibilities enables them to pursue upward mobility and engage in empowering problem-solving practices within the cosmopolitan context.

## **Methodology**

This study employs in-depth interviews regarding African students' decision making processes and study experiences in China conducted in English, French, or Chinese, according to interviewee's preference and ethnographic methodologies to investigate the experiences of African students in China within both physical and digital spaces. The in-depth interviews focus on understanding the structures and dynamics of communication within online and offline social networks. Specifically, the interviews and ethnography explore the usage of social networking sites inside China's internet firewall (Micro Blog, WeChat, etc.), sites outside China's internet firewall (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), and sites not blocked by the firewall, such as Skype and the professional website LinkedIn. These interviews examine the interactions of African students with local friends and family back home.

The ethnographic methodologies used for this research combine traditional ethnography with netnography. Netnography, as defined by Kozinets, involves conducting ethnographic research on the Internet. This includes cultural entrees, data collection, and analysis, ensuring reliable interpretation, ethical research, and opportunities for feedback from members of a culture (Kozinets, 2009). In the present study, the ethnographic research method is conducted both online and offline, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of African students' lifestyles; language usage; cultural intergroup interactions with local students, teachers, and government administrators; and intragroup interactions among African students themselves. The present study also observes and analyzes communications, community formation, and mutual support among both official and unofficial African migrant associations as well as African students representing different countries of origin. Through these methodologies, the research aims to explore the social structure and group culture of African students in China by examining their friendship compositions, group affiliations, participation in activities, contact frequency, languages used in communication, and social network constructions and social relation maintenances over time.

## **Data**

Data for this study was collected from African students studying at universities in three Chinese cities that are major destinations for international students: Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The sampling method consisted of respondent driven sampling (Heckathorn, 1997, 2002; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004), which involved the initial selection of interlocutors through connections with African student associations at each university, followed by subsequent waves of interlocutors identified from the social networks of the initial participants.

During the 2018–2019 academic year, a total of 130 in-depth interviews were conducted, including 70 in Beijing, 30 in Shanghai, and 30 in Guangzhou. Each interview had an average duration of 90 minutes. Social network data was collected via virtual follow-up interviews and digital ethnography during the 2019–2020 academic year. Overall, interviews were conducted with students from 52 countries of origin in Africa. It is worth noting that students from Libya and Eswatini were not included in the social network reached. The interviewees represented various degree levels, including 45 bachelor's degree students, 60 master's degree students, and 25 doctoral degree students. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all interviewees were assigned new names based on the principle of anonymity.

## Analysis

From a “Mei Banfa” Scenario to a “You Banfa” Solution. One of the Chinese terms most frequently mentioned by African students during our fieldwork was “mei banfa”, which translates to “no solution.” This term was one of the first Chinese terms that the students learned through daily encounters with Chinese university or governmental administrators. This study aims to unfold the path ways that African students developed and relied upon to search for “you banfa”, which means “resolution” or “solution,” and then by overcome the obstacles they faced.

Over the course of 30 years of cultural and economic communication and exchange between China and Africa, the linguistic and cultural gaps between the two regions have significantly narrowed. This has been facilitated by various initiatives, such as scholarships offered by the Chinese national government, provincial local governments, and African governments to encourage African students to study in China, starting with the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in 2000. In addition to the national policy support for African students' studies in China, both the central and local governments in China made efforts, in 2016 and 2018, to develop and revise policies related to the administration of work permits. These policies aim to support African students in China after graduation, facilitating their entry into the Chinese labor market. Yet, in practice, many challenges and limitations remain. Immigration regulations, social welfare policies, and systematic restrictions related to health insurance and the job market exist for African student migrants in different areas of China. The support provided by the national government, local governments, and universities for the education and integration of African students in China is unable to meet the needs of the growing number of African students. Support for bachelor's graduates regarding work permits and entrepreneurship has been offered in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong, as well as some coastal areas where students are often concentrated, but remains very limited in third-tier cities. In these areas, local departments, universities, and employers often lack sufficient awareness of the relevant procedures and support available for African

students in their career endeavors. In addition, levels of support within the health system, which includes health insurance and emergency medical procedures, vary depending on local policies and the university in question.

Moreover, African students in China exhibit a high level of technological proficiency, global awareness, and cosmopolitanism, despite facing various challenges. They aspire to attain a globally recognized status. They also possess more agency and are more empowered given recent geopolitical shifts regarding cooperation between African countries and China. Nonetheless, they must overcome many obstacles to achieve the status of global cosmopolitan students. This study explored how digital boundaries influence the integration and mobility of African students in China.

The analysis covers three major phases of African students' studies in China: the preparation and arrival phase, the study phase, and the postgraduation career phase. The preparation and arrival phase includes the students' arrival, adaptation to the digital divide, establishment of digital ties, and accessing banking and mobile payment services. The study phase includes language-related obstacles and students' adaptation to the health care system. Finally, the postgraduation career phase includes students' entry into the career market and entrepreneurship.

## **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies include both engagement and disengagement strategies (Varni, Miller, McCuin, & Solomon, 2012). Engagement coping strategies are defined as individuals' attempts to resolve a difficult or problematic situation they encounter and the steps taken to reduce or eliminate the negative impact of salient stressors or to protect themselves from risk factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Disengagement coping strategies, on the other hand, are defined as individuals' endeavors to escape or avoid an obstacle. For African student migrants in China, engagement coping strategies often manifest as confrontation, positive reappraisal, and seeking information and social support from their social networks. These social networks, either online or offline, include person-to-organization networks that provide access to official guidelines and representatives from governmental, administrative, embassy, and legal bodies, as well as person to person networks such as families, friends, schoolmates, compatriots, and social media connections.

When facing restrictions and obstacles, African students in China construct coping strategies by leveraging overlapping layers of dynamic social networks and transnational digital habitus that are used to access information, resources, and support both online (through platforms like WeChat, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) and offline. These networks can be categorized into small, medium, and large social networks. Small networks consist of family, friends, classmates, and teachers. Medium networks include universities' African student associations, international



student associations, religious groups (e.g., church communities), and groups of students from the same origin country (within the university or city, or across China). Large social networks encompass the embassy network, the African Union network in China, the Pan-African diaspora network, and extended compatriot networks including trading communities across different regions of China.

### ***Adaptation to Transnational Digital Spaces and Forming Digital Ties***

*“I asked my family and close friends to download and open WeChat accounts, so that I don’t need to worry to lose contact with them when the Firewall is upgraded again to block WhatsApp.”*

(Nena, Kenya)

*“The internet back home was very unstable and very slow. My parents were not able to reach WeChat or Facebook, so I used Imo to call them. With this app, I can top-up small amounts of money online, then I can call directly to their landline using my internet in China using VPN.”*

(Oman, South Sudan)

Due to the Chinese government’s implementation of the Great Firewall, which restricts access to social networking websites and search engines from within China, African students in the country need to install a virtual private network (VPN) on their devices. By using a VPN, they can access the digital space and connect with their families and friends in their home countries. These digital ties play a crucial role in bridging the gaps, enabling students to compress both the geographical and informational distances between themselves and their home countries.

### ***Accessing Banking and Mobile Payments as an African Student***

Adapting to the banking and mobile payment system in China is a challenge for some African students. Hasen, a water conservancy engineer from South Sudan who traveled to China in 2017 to pursue postgraduate studies in environmental engineering, shared an unexpected difficulty he encountered. After arriving in China as a recipient of a Chinese government scholarship, Hasan tried to open an account at a local bank to receive his monthly scholarship payments. However, he discovered that his South Sudan passport could not be used for this purpose. He then learned about the UN sanctions imposed on South Sudan in 2017, which affected the procedure of opening a bank account for South Sudanese students in China. Neither the Chinese university nor the scholarship committee had prepared to deal with this situation, and affected students like Hasan were left uninformed. Hasan’s predecessors who arrived from South Sudan before 2017 did not encounter such difficulties. No one involved knew how to address the issue of scholarships that could not be paid through a bank. Having only prepared living expenses for one month based on the experiences of other

students, Hasen faced a challenging situation: He could not receive scholarship payments for an extended period. However, with the assistance of the South Sudanese Association at his university, he received two months' worth of living expenses. Finally, after much communication with the International Students Office of his university and its scholarship committee, Hasen managed to open a bank account at the China Postal Savings Bank four months after his arrival. During the first months without a bank account, Hasen experienced many inconveniences, including the inability to open WeChat Pay and Alipay accounts. These mobile payment accounts are crucial to navigating daily life in a large Chinese city.

Coincidentally, Dio from Zambia also encountered a mobile payment issue. Dio invited one of the authors of this study to attend the birthday party of one of his Zambian classmates at a Pakistani restaurant near the university. After the meal, they planned to use their WeChat accounts to pay for the meal. However, Dio's WeChat wallet was locked and required an authentication ID for access. Despite multiple attempts to re-authenticate the WeChat ID, he was unable to unlock the wallet due to the restriction of WeChat IDs registered with foreign phone numbers at the time. Eventually, Dio's friend had to pay his part of the bill, and Dio promised to reimburse him. He smiled with a sense of helplessness and mentioned that this was not the first time that an issue like this had occurred. Dio had opened his WeChat account in Zambia before traveling to China, as advised by the International Student Administration Office of his university, to facilitate communication with the new student group. Because his phone number was linked to Zambia, Dio's WeChat account was frequently locked after his arrival to China, and it often took one or two days to fix the issue. Dio also shared that during his first month in China, he was unable to open a bank account and therefore could not use mobile payment services like WeChat Pay and Alipay to access services such as rental bicycles and online shopping.

### ***Language as Both a Medium for and Obstacle to Connection***

Although social media applications and physical interactions among African students provide flexibility and a platform for African students to connect, the language barrier remains a major obstacle in the study experiences and daily lives of African students in China. This is exemplified by Nicola's story:

*"I got my Chinese government scholarship for my PhD study in international relations in China at [a top foreign studies university in China]. After the warm welcome from the university's International Student Office helped me to settle in on my first day in the dormitory, one situation surprised me when I went to register in my department the next day. The administration secretary informed me that my research program would be based in the Chinese language as a requirement of my doctoral dissertation, because the English courses were only provided at the master's degree level. I was shocked to learn that I was the first English-based*

*doctoral student in my department. This information was not correctly conveyed to me through the application and admission processes, or from the funding body, university, or department... It took almost two months for me to coordinate with my supervisor, the department, and the doctoral school to agree on a new English curriculum and requirements designed specifically for me and future English-based doctoral students in the international relations major."*

(Nicola, South African)

In China, medical degree programs are primarily taught in Chinese and assisted in English at the major medical schools in the country. For instance, to enroll in a bachelor's degree program at Sun-Yet-Sun University Medical School in Guangzhou, medical science students are required to have completed at least one year of intensive Chinese language studies and achieved a minimum proficiency level of 5 on the Chinese Language Exam at a Chinese university. Andrew, a fourth-year medical student from Gabon, which is a Francophone country, has faced challenges because his program is mostly taught in Chinese. Although some professors provide English explanations, and English textbooks are used, Andrew finds it very difficult to follow along. During the initial stage of his studies, he had to seek assistance from online teaching platforms such as YouTube and edX, utilizing both French and English courses. He emphasized the importance of learning medical terms in French, English, and Chinese, because he will need to pass the practice certificate exam in his home country after graduating with a Chinese medical degree.

In addition to the language barriers, medical students face challenges during their residencies in Chinese hospitals. Leila, a medical student in Beijing, noted that "African students are the most difficult group to gain trust and communicate with local patients in our medical practice." Discrimination and a lack of trust from patients due to the language barriers are common obstacles encountered by African medical students in China. Even with a Chinese language certificate, African medical students often encounter difficulties when elderly patients speak local dialects rather than standard Mandarin. African medical students often depend on their Chinese classmates, both in-person and online, as well as translation applications to communicate with patients.

### ***Adapting to the Healthcare System***

When seeking medical treatment in China, African students in China also face difficulties, including with regard to communication and navigating the complex and inefficient health insurance reimbursement system. Emma, a bachelor's degree student from the Central African Republic, experienced these difficulties firsthand. With her native French and limited proficiency in Chinese and English, she struggled to effectively communicate her symptoms during her first visit to the doctor in China. Communication difficulties persisted at the registration and triage stages in the hospital, leading Emma to seek help from a Guinean classmate

with more advanced Chinese language skills who could assist with translation via their class WeChat group. Emma also noted the difficulty she faced while using the hospital's mobile phone application to register for a doctor's appointment online. Because the application was only available in Chinese, she instead woke up especially early to register in-person for a doctor's appointment.

In accordance with Chinese regulations, international students, whether self-financed or scholarship students, are required to purchase medical insurance. However, each university has different procedures for the handling of student medical insurance. Some African students noted that they often did not receive reimbursement for personal expenses due to complicated and cumbersome insurance reimbursement procedures. Emma shared the experience of a classmate from Ghana who experienced acute appendicitis on a Saturday and needed immediate surgery. Because the student held a government scholarship, he was required to obtain approval from the study abroad scholarship committee for reimbursement under the insurance policy. However, it was not possible to contact the scholarship committee on a Saturday. Instead, the student contacted teachers in the school's International Mobility and Exchange Center and sought assistance within their department and the Ghana Association's WeChat group to raise the funds for the surgery. On the following Monday, they contacted the scholarship committee, explained the situation, and successfully re-applied for insurance reimbursement.

Taya, a student from Kenya, also encountered a problem with medical insurance during his time in China. He recalled an incident that occurred while he was participating in an interscholastic football match at an urban stadium far from his university. He accidentally fell, and his left arm was dislocated and fractured. Initially, he planned to go to the nearest hospital for medical treatment, but he consulted his insurance company before proceeding. To his surprise, he learned that his insurance coverage was limited to three designated hospitals near his university. Consequently, he had to endure the painful fracture during a 40-minute taxi ride to one of the designated hospitals where he could be treated. Taya expressed much confusion about this experience. The inconvenience of communication and the complicated procedures for medical treatment and medical insurance have often puzzled African students living in China.

In sum, the difficulties in communication and the complex, cumbersome procedures for medical treatment and insurance reimbursement often pose significant challenges for African students residing in China. These inconveniences highlight the need for improved accessibility, clearer guidelines, and more flexible options within the medical insurance system to better cater to the diverse needs of international students.

### ***Exploration of the Labor Market***

After completing their studies at Chinese universities, African students generally choose from three developmental directions: returning to their home countries for employment and development of their careers, continuing their studies in a third country, or staying in China for entrepreneurship or employment. Until 2015, graduates who had studied in China were required to have a master's degree or higher, or at least two years of relevant work experience, to obtain a work permit. The Shanghai Free Trade Zone updated its policies in July 2015, followed by Beijing in January 2016, the Guangzhou Free Trade Zone in July 2016, and the Hainan Free Trade Zone in October 2018, allowing undergraduates studying in China to directly obtain entrepreneurial work permits. This change opened doors for undergraduate students to engage in employment directly after graduation. Notably, on November 15, 2017, the first African Student Employment Expo took place in Beijing. The event, titled "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Employment Prospects of African Youth," was jointly organized by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and American Universities. Furthermore, on December 5, 2019, the first China–Africa Talent Summit and Job Fair, which was tailored to African students studying in the province of Guangdong, was held in Guangzhou.

The experience of Maria, a Ugandan student, highlights the initial challenges faced by the first batch of bachelor's graduates who registered for direct employment in the Shanghai Free Trade Zone in 2018. Because the Shanghai Free Trade Zone had just started offering work permits for direct employment to undergraduates studying in China, there was a lack of guidance and understanding from the university's international exchange center, employment guidance center, and the human resources management department of the company she was applying to. Maria had to visit the relevant administrative departments of the city and the Shanghai Free Trade Zone to navigate the application process, which took more than a month to complete. In the end, she determined the proper steps and left instructions with the International Student Administration office and her alma mater's career center as a reference for future students.

It is worth noting that career fairs and job opportunities are concentrated in first- and second-tier cities and coastal areas in China. This concentration poses a challenge for African students studying in other provinces or in third- and lower-tier cities, because they may have limited access to resources and information regarding job opportunities. The lack of a centralized platform that integrates information for international students contributes to the difficulty they face in staying informed and connected. Consequently, the university career center and the interpersonal social network among African students become crucial for gathering information and exploring the labor market in China.

## The Multilevel Social Network as a Problem-Solving Mechanism

The aforementioned cases have shown how African students in China employ coping strategies to navigate challenges at different stages of their studies, including during the preparation and arrival phase, the study phase, and the graduation career phase. To further analyze their approaches for resolving these challenges, we introduce the multilevel social network. This framework is useful in understanding the dynamic pathways developed by African students as they utilize various levels of social networks to find solutions and overcome obstacles during their time in China.

Unlike most African students, students from countries with particularly large numbers of students in China can often rely on social networks of their compatriots for coping strategies. For instance, statistics from 2018 indicated that there were 50,600 students from South Korea, 20,996 students from the United States, and 10,695 students from France in China. In the same year, a total of 81,562 students from all 54 African countries were counted in China. The population of African students from each African country on any given campus is therefore relatively limited. Accordingly, African students have developed the multilevel social network as a problem-solving mechanism for navigating boundaries amid limited support and numerous obstacles.

The digital space has synchronized temporal and spatial proximity into virtual proximity through social networking platforms, such as WeChat groups and Facebook groups. Information sharing and trust-building among individuals are based on shared interpersonal traits, common affiliations with organization, and interorganizational connections.

Figure 5.1 illustrates multilayered architecture that explicates growing connectivity and interdependencies across different spatial scales, including social networks within universities, beyond universities, and across trader social networks. To navigate their experience in China, African students employ coping strategies that involve both physical and digital connections with relevant individuals. These pathways occur in the following networks: 1) the university social network, in which African students search for solutions through their class networks, the African student association, and the university's international student administration; 2) the broader social network beyond the university, in which African students reach out to African compatriot networks across different cities and provinces in China, utilizing the national embassy network as well as the African Union and African diaspora networks; and 3) the trader network, in which African students, especially those in Guangzhou, can reach out to the well-established and empowered community of African traders, as well as the (Pan-)African trader community in Guangzhou.

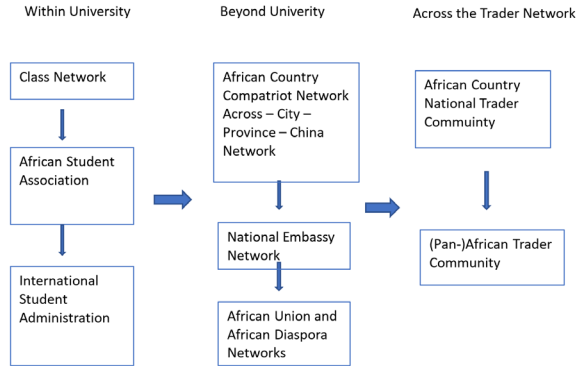


Fig. 5.1 – The multilevel social network for African students in China.

### Spatial Diversification of the Multilevel Social Network

Using this multilevel social network, African students in China develop their transnational digital habitus and establish coping strategies to address obstacles and restrictions. However, when considering the spatial dimension, there are variations in the multilevel social network across the three studied locations: Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. In Beijing, the capital city and political center of China, the multilevel social network within and beyond the university is concentrated and densely interconnected. This is primarily due to the proximity of university campuses in Haidian District and the strong connections between them. In the Shanghai area, known as one of China's most globalized metropolitan regions, the multilevel social network within and beyond the university is discrete and fragmented. This is attributed to scattered spatial locations of university campuses across the city, resulting in longer distances, relatively independent campuses, and weaker connections and interactions between them. On the other hand, in Guangzhou, a city that hosts the largest and most well-established African trading community, the multilevel social network mainly consists of clustered subnetworks. These clusters are found within university and compatriot networks in Guangzhou city, as well as within the local African trading community. The clusters within the local African trading community network are particularly powerful and trusted—sometimes more so than government and university administrations. This is especially the case when emergency situations occur among African students in Guangzhou who have family connections with African traders.

The multilevel social network architecture is based on the foundation of both digital platforms and physical, geo-spatial locations. Thus, the high digital and physical density of the African student community provides the core of different

levels of social network development. Such forms of multilevel social networks offer more space for resilience with diversification and flexibility for African students in different locations of China to resolve the obstacles they encounter.

## Conclusion and Discussion

African students in China possess technological proficiency but nonetheless face difficulties bridging the digital divide. They exhibit a global consciousness and cosmopolitan outlook. Despite being more empowered than previous generations of African students, given the new geopolitical reconfiguration, the current generation of African students must overcome many obstacles to gain the status of global, cosmopolitan students. African students in China establish convivial dispositions through their multiple spatial linkages and digital networks (Schiller & Salazar, 2013) between African communities in China and their international and local connections. The spaces African students create, both digitally and physically, prioritize interconnections, dialogue, collaboration, interdependence, and compassion (Nyamnjoh, 2017). These spaces serve as platforms and hubs for African students to facilitate personal connections and access social support and social resources, helping them cope with constraints and restrictions through the exchange of ideas and innovative solutions. African students reject preconceived categorizations, and, when faced with adversity and friction, find various ways to persevere. Along with in-person interactions, online platforms are set up to discuss shared problems. When confronted with systematic and nonsystematic restrictions, African students constructed a dynamic pathway through the multilevel social network and embedded their solutions in their transnational digital habitus in the age of digital social connections. Because African students cannot rely on large groups of compatriots in China, as is the case for certain groups of other international students, they have devised the multilevel social network, which offers a more flexible pathway to address restrictions in China. We recommend that policymakers provide easily accessible information platforms based on the multilevel social network for future students who may face similar obstacles. Over time, this multilevel social network has the potential to engender new identifications and subjectivities, such as a Pan-African identity and identification. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this article and needs further investigation.

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# **SECTION 2**

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# CHAPTER 6

## Low-Income Immigrants and Government Transfer Claims in Canada

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores how permanent residents in Canada relate to the welfare state, with a focus on low-income residents. It analyzes the relationship by sex, federal official language ability, years since gaining permanent resident status, and class of admission (economic, family, or refugee), and It considers the relationship with total government transfers, Employment Insurance, government pensions, Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and child benefits. It contributes to the literature on immigrant social welfare by providing a comprehensive assessment of how immigrants are participating in the welfare state while leveraging low-income incidence to explore who needs the benefits the most. These findings will be of particular interest to settlement services seeking to strengthen their approach to permanent residents' economic integration.



## 1. Introduction

Supporting low-income earners while maintaining an incentive for paid work is a constant pursuit for governments (Phelps, 1997: 3). Some argue that providing income transfers can create disincentives for paid work (OECD 2005: 126). Similarly, institutions such as welfare state can place constraints on the labor supply when they do not adequately encourage paid work (Pudney 1990: 274). In *Rewarding Work*, Edmund Phelps discussed this problem and how individual, their family, and the society in which they live can benefit from dignity of paid work (Phelps 1997: 12). Additionally, in the Canadian context, paid workers' incomes are an important revenue source for the Consolidated Revenue Fund, which funds many programs on which Canadians rely (Bird, 2019: 629). Dignity and revenue are both important reasons to encourage paid work. However, some people need more support than others, and paid work is not practical for everyone (Green et al. 2021: 402). This paper defines the welfare state as the economic benefits people can receive from a government after verifying their eligibility.

This paper focuses on permanent residents because of the importance of immigrants' economic integration. Permanent residents are interesting/important because they are a diverse population that has a greater need for income security than non-immigrants on average (Picot & Lu 2017: 12; Crossman et al. 2021: 8). They are a diverse population for several reasons. Permanent residents are immigrants who Canada selected to live in the country permanently. It does not include those in Canada temporarily—such as international students and people living in Canada under emergency authorization—as they were not selected for permanent residence. Permanent residents are selected under the economic class, family class, or refugee class (Government of Canada 2021d; Government of Canada 2021j). Economic-class immigrants are selected because there is a specific demand in the Canadian economy for their paid work (Government of Canada 2021d). Family-class immigrants are selected for reunification with family members living in Canada (Government of Canada 2021h). They include spouses and common-law partners, dependents, parents, and grandparents (ibid.). Finally, refugees are selected because they are escaping hardship in their home countries (ibid.). They include individuals assisted by private organizations and/or the Government of Canada or Province of Quebec (ibid.). Immigrants as a population also represent a range of source countries and linguistic profiles (Government of Canada 2021a). Paid work is most relevant for those coming to fill specific labor market gaps. However, refugees can have their economic needs met by a sponsor—either government, private sector, or a combination of the two—for their first 12 months in Canada, or fewer if they can start sustaining themselves earlier (Government of Canada 2021k). Once this sponsorship ends, they must start supporting themselves through paid work and/or the welfare state. Policymakers in Canada commonly term this issue “the month 13 problem.” In addition, Canada does not select refugees based on their ability to quickly integrate; therefore, it can be assumed that refugees will face differ-

ent challenges from other immigrants in finding paid work (Vineberg 2018: 5). Because immigrants, especially refugees, have lower labor market outcomes (Picot et al. 2019: 31), both immigrants and society more broadly may not be reaping the maximum rewards of their paid work. In such cases, this loss can be a barrier to immigrants' economic and social integration into Canada because they miss, for example, the social and professional networking uniquely associated with paid work. This study's findings will be of particular interest to settlement services. By describing the relationship between immigrants and the welfare state, this study will contribute to answering the following questions:

1. Do permanent residents use the welfare state more than those born in Canada? And, if so, which aspects of the welfare state do they use most?
2. Are there stronger associations with benefit participation for specific characteristics of permanent residents (e.g., class of admission, sex, knowledge of an official language, and years since admission)?

There are several realities about immigrant use of the welfare state system that focus this paper's analysis:

Learning to access Canada's welfare state takes time. Many immigrants have not had the same time to learn the system as Canadian-born persons of similar ages.

Some benefits, such as pensions, Employment Insurance, and Old Age Security, have residency requirements for eligibility and level of support. Many immigrants have not had the same residency in Canada as Canadian-born persons of similar ages, so their access to income support is compromised.

Using English or French is virtually a requirement to access the welfare state. Because some immigrants can be selected regardless of their language levels, it can be assumed that some do not have the same ability to use English or French to access the system as a Canadian-born person does.

In Section 2, a literature review discusses how the current debates about helping underprivileged people are not new. It also presents the idea that although encouraging paid work is important for policymaking, it is not always the goal for integration. In addition, Section 2 describes the unique barriers faced by immigrants and how these barriers relate to each other. Section 3 explains this study's methodology, which focuses on describing claim participation for various populations of immigrants, with comparison to Canadian-born persons. Section 4 discusses the findings on claim participation, organized by benefit area: total government transfers, Employment Insurance, government pensions, Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and child benefits. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. Background

### *a. Description of Welfare State*

Table 1 below details immigrant eligibility for the benefits discussed in this paper, adapted from Koning and Banting (Koning & Banting 2013). Eligibility/direct exclusion refers to the eligibility for benefits. It shows that permanent residents who have lived in Canada for under ten years would not meet the residency requirement for Old Age Security. Indirect exclusion refers to how being new to Canada compromises the level of benefits immigrants receive compared to Canadian-born persons of the same age. Finally, informal exclusion addresses uptake of benefits, which Koning and Banting found was lower for immigrants. For example, many benefits in Canada are managed through the income tax system. If a resident does not file taxes, they cannot claim these benefits. Therefore, because some people do not file taxes, they are excluded from certain benefits. Recent permanent residents in Canada file taxes at a lower rate than people born in Canada and therefore do not always take advantage of the benefits available to them. In 2015, recent permanent residents (those living in Canada for less than ten years) filed taxes at a rate of 82.57%, compared to 86.35% for people born in Canada (Robson & Schwartz 2020: 338).

	Direct Exclusion	Indirect Exclusion	Informal Exclusion
Retirement benefits	10 year requirement to claim	Canada Pension Plan likely to be lower	Low uptake of Canada Pension Plan
Child Benefits	None	None	None
Employment Insurance (EI)	None	EI likely to be lower	None

Fig. 6.1 – Immigrant eligibility for certain welfare state benefits. (own elaboration)

### *b. Theory*

Debates about income supplementation and dignity in Canada are longstanding. In *The Age of Increasing Inequality: The Astonishing Rise of Canada's 1%*, Lars Osberg discusses how, from 1951 to 2015, the share of total household incomes received by the bottom quintile of earners declined from 4.4% to 3.9% (Osberg 2018: 32). Considering that immigrants' earnings trail behind those of Canadian-born people, and this gap has not been improving (Crossman et al. 2021: 16; Government of Canada 2022g), the dignity Phelps discusses may be more relevant for immigrants than for other Canadians. Immigrants are at greater risk of losing this dignity because, in some cases, employment income may be lower than social assistance income. Having a decent income is also an important part of the

solution. Thus, the welfare state must encourage paid employment for those who are able and willing to work. In Canada, some benefits are designed to encourage paid work, such as the Canada Workers Benefit. Additionally, some benefits have shown some success at encouraging paid work, including with interesting labour market participation effects for women, although the overall record is mixed. Draghici et al. (2023) found that provinces with more generous social assistance regimes had the most success reducing dependence on social assistance (Draghici et al. 2023). Two papers also noted a reduction in child poverty associated with the Canada Child Benefit, with results differing somewhat according to the specific data source (Baker et al. 2021a; Baker et al. 2021b). However, another one found that universal child benefits can be associated with lower labor market participation for women, especially for those with lower education levels (Schirle 2015). Regarding pension benefits, a study found that those claiming the Guaranteed Income Supplement, available to people in Canada aged 65 and over who earn the lowest incomes, faced the strongest disincentives for paid work (Milligan & Schirle 2008: 299). Therefore, the labour market may be losing workers over age 65. Their work ran simulations to test disincentives to work that retirement benefits impose in Canada. Finally, the employment insurance program's effect on paid work incentives is sensitive to its duration, and it can vary by gender and level of education, among other characteristics (Liu & McCall 2019; Friesen 2002).

A problem with any benefit is that not eligible persons know what is available to them. Luttmer and Samwick (2015) found that a sample of Americans perceived the value of their social security benefits as lower than the law provides (Luttmer & Samwick 2015c). Their study used an experimental design that surveyed 3,000 people aged between 25 and 59, and asked them to describe their chances of getting benefits in certain ranges (*ibid.*: 278). It found that “respondents on average expect about two-thirds of the benefits they are supposed to get under current law (*ibid.*: 304).” It is unclear whether this study's results can be generalized to Canada's context. However, it can be assumed that there are people in Canada who do not know which welfare state benefits are available to them too. This may be especially an issue for permanent residents with language barriers or who have not yet learned how to benefit from Canada's welfare state (Koning & Banting 2013; Kaushik & Drolet 2018).

### *c. Previous Literature*

The literature found two barriers that many immigrants face in accessing the welfare state: lack of official language and lack of experience. Knowing English or French is virtually a requirement to accessing the system, therefore those who do not know those languages will be at a disadvantage. In addition, given the volume of information on welfare state benefits, it will always take time to learn how to access them. Immigrants experience unique barriers to accessing the welfare state in Canada, and these barriers overlap. Canada considers ability to speak English and/or French in selecting economic immigrants (Government of Canada 2021c).

Canada does not assess official language ability in selecting family reunification immigrants or refugees. Further, from 2001 to 2002, the Government of Canada made a series of changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act to favor the most at-risk refugees for selection (Vineberg 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that there are differences in official language capacity by class of admission. Immigrants speaking English and/or French include 92% of economic immigrants, 77.87% of family reunification immigrants, and 57% of refugees (Government of Canada 2021a). In addition, language ability is not only an issue of linguistic competency. Kaushik and Drolet (2018) found that concerns for immigrants include “lack of Canadian accent or rhythm of speech, knowledge of specific linguistic skills such as job, position, or industry-specific jargons, knowledge of Canadian expressions, idioms, and/or slangs, and cross-cultural communication” (Kaushik & Drolet 2018: 7). Although the authors were referring to issues impacting employment outcomes, these are all issues that could also impact access to the welfare state. In addressing the relationship language and accents have with labor market outcomes such as employment, Green and Worswick observed that “it is not clear whether this trend reflects causation or just correlation” (Green & Worswick 2017: 1279). They were referring to how immigrants who work in lower-skilled jobs and/or jobs that do not demand language use may not have an incentive to develop their language capacity. Therefore, language issues should not necessarily be viewed as a cause of lower earnings; lower earnings may have a negative causal effect on language skill. However, as welfare state access requires some knowledge of English and/or French, it is an interesting question whether a lack of linguistic attainment may be causing lower earnings with a specific effect occurring in welfare state access. Picot makes a similar point to Green and Worswick in the context of how the economic welfare of the most recent immigrants declined in the 1980s and 1990s (Picot 2005). They noted a change in the composition of source countries, a decline in returns to pre-immigration labor market experience, and a decline in the labor market outcomes of new entrants as crucial factors (*ibid.*: 22). They also note that, although the topic has not been extensively studied, there is no evidence of increasing government transfer rates during the 1980s and 1990s (*ibid.*).

There is evidence that social networks are positively associated with the economic integration of immigrants in Canada (Majerski 2021). Individuals who are new to a country typically need time to learn how to apply for benefits, and different types of immigrants learn in different ways. Wilkinson and Garcea (2017) discuss how refugees cite lack of information about rights and services and lack of service provider ability, among other reasons, as barriers to accessing settlement services (Wilkinson & Garcea 2017). Spending time in Canada can help address a few of these issues, as this paper will discuss in the next paragraph. The important takeaway for policymakers is that providing the benefit is not sufficient if those in need are not accessing it.

Years in Canada may help immigrants address other barriers. Koning and Banting (2013) discuss how “Immigrants who have been in the country for a long time tend to be better protected than their more recent counterparts.” Their paper examines to what extent immigrants claim the five primary benefits (Employment Insurance, health, Old Age benefits, child benefits, social assistance) according to certain demographics (sex, Canadian experience, and class of admission) of permanent and temporary residents. Its focus is understanding how immigrants’ eligibility has manifested in their claim rates. Because temporary and permanent residents have different integration expectations, analyzing them jointly may be problematic. Furthermore, as Kaushik and Drolet (2018) observed, there are relationships among the barriers immigrants face. However, there is evidence that Canadian experience may address several issues simultaneously (Koning and Banting 2013). It is not surprising that gaining experience in Canada may address other issues since learning the processes in a new country typically takes time.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***a. Data***

This study used the 2016 Census Public Use Microdata Individuals File to compute claim rates. The census is the most recent publicly available data set that allows for a break-down by category of admission for permanent residents: economic immigrants, immigrants sponsored by family, and refugees. This information is available through a link to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’s administrative files in its Public Use Microdata File, as well as several questions in the Census on immigration status. The sampling frame for this study has 915,177 observations. The variable used to set the sampling frame, Immigrant status, has 0.26% missing values, all of which are valid skips.

#### ***b. Measures***

This paper used the low-income cut-off (before taxes) to define the low-income rate, as benefit programs often use before-tax income to evaluate eligibility for welfare state benefits. It used the low-income rate for sub-populations alongside their claim participation rates. For Employment Insurance, it used the unemployment rate. Doing so shows who could benefit most from welfare state benefits.

This paper used sex because it can be a factor in household decision-making, such as how unpaid care work is handled. The 2016 Census collected data by the binary male/female definition of sex; therefore, this paper could not analyze benefit participation of sexually diverse people. It also considered conversational capacity in English and/or French. Finally, it analyzed the data by time in Canada: under one year, between one and five years, between five and ten years, and over ten years.

### *c. Analysis*

This study conducted two-sample two-tailed tests of proportions, always setting no difference in claim behavior as the null hypothesis. And comparing a group's participation to a relevant counterpart. It selected the 99% confidence level due to the size of the Census to ensure the differences in participation are true differences.

"Total government transfers" includes a wide range of benefits and credits distributed by Canadian governments. This amount provided a general sign of participation in the welfare state. Other literature studying benefit participation did not always use this variable.

"Employment Insurance" includes the benefits under the Employment Insurance program's first and second parts. The first part is Employment Insurance regular benefits, which issues temporary payments to eligible individuals, while the second part offers benefits for specific circumstances, such as for sickness (Government of Canada 2021f). Employment Insurance is relevant to individuals with labor market attachment because the program requires that an eligible individual be looking for paid work but not be currently employed (Government of Canada 2021e).

"Government pensions" includes the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension plan. The study only examined the behavior of individuals aged 60 and over because 60 is the earliest age at which Canadians become eligible for these benefits (Government of Canada 2021b). Because only people in paid work for registered employers are eligible to receive payments under these pensions plans, labor market attachment is a factor (*ibid.*). However, as this study relied on the Census, which is a cross-sectional dataset, it did not track previous labor market behavior. Therefore, this study did not capture the level of labor market attachment retired people aged 60 and over had during their careers. Thus, this study used the sub-populations' labor market participation in their core working age (25 to 54). "Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement" are both available for people aged 65 and over. The study therefore considered claim participation for persons in this age group.

"Child benefits" include payments under various federal, provincial, and territorial child benefit programs, such as the Canada Child Benefit. These are most relevant for understanding the welfare state behavior of parents. This study used the percentage of each population with children in their homes as a predictor of behavior.

This study did not track earlier labor market behavior nor the lifecycle effect of welfare state behavior. Any individual in Canada experiences various life events that impact their welfare state behavior, such as a layoff or an injury. These events contribute to an individual's overall well-being. The individuals represented in

this dataset may have experienced such events, but they are not reflected by a cross-sectional dataset. Comparing immigrants to non-immigrants also poses methodological challenges because these populations differ in many ways. However, as this paper intends to see how immigrants relate to the welfare state, it is necessary to compare them to non-immigrants as a starting point for analysis.

#### 4. Findings

	Total Transfers	Employment Insurance	Government Pensions	Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement	Child Benefits
	Diff. in means ( $p_{1,t} - p_2$ ) (Standard Error)	Diff. in means ( $p_{1,t} - p_2$ ) (Standard Error)	Diff. in means ( $p_{1,t} - p_2$ ) (Standard Error)	Diff. in means ( $p_{1,t} - p_2$ ) (Standard Error)	Diff. in means ( $p_{1,t} - p_2$ ) (Standard Error)
Immigrants, Canadian born	(0.681 – 0.537) = 0.144* (0.001)	(0.065 – 0.076) = -0.011 (0.000)	(0.679 – 0.831) = -0.152* (0.001)	(0.809 – 0.900) = -0.091* (0.000)	(0.15 – 0.100) = 0.050* (0.000)
Female immigrants, male immigrants	(0.741 – 0.614) = 0.127* (0.001)	(0.069 – 0.060) = 0.090* (0.001)	(0.667 – 0.693) = -0.026* (0.001)	(0.827 – 0.789) = 0.038* (0.001)	(0.276 – 0.008) 0.268* (0.000)
Female Canadian born, male Canadian-born	(0.592 – 0.484) = 0.108* (0.000)	(0.751 – 0.777) = -0.026* (0.000)	(0.833 – 0.826) = 0.007* (0.000)	(0.917 – 0.878) = 0.039* (0.000)	(0.186 – 0.010) = 0.176* (0.000)
Refugees, economic immigrants	(0.680 – 0.595) = 0.085* (0.001)	(0.080 – 0.070) = 0.010* (0.002)	(0.390 – 0.442) = -0.052* (0.000)	(0.609 – 0.636) = -0.027* (0.001)	(0.150 – 0.162) -0.012* (0.002)
Family class, refugees	(0.688 – 0.680) = 0.008* (0.001)	(0.083 – 0.090) = 0.003 (0.002)	-0.045* (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	0.080* (0.002)
Family class, economic immigrants	(0.688 – 0.595) = 0.094* (0.001)	(0.083 – 0.070) 0.013* (0.001)	(0.345 – 0.442) = -0.097 (0.002)	(0.606 – 0.636) = -0.030* (0.001)	(0.230 – 0.162) 0.068* (0.002)
Immigrants in Canada for under one year, immigrants in Canada for 1 to 5 years	(0.416 – 0.537) = -0.120* (0.005)	(0.023 – 0.065) -0.042* (0.000)	(0.063 – 0.053) = 0.010 (0.000)	0.107 – 0.075) = 0.031* (0.000)	(0.076 – 0.153) = -0.077* (0.000)
Immigrants in Canada for 1 to 5 years, immigrants in Canada for 6 to 10 years	(0.537 – 0.616) = -0.79* (0.000)	0.065 – 0.091) -0.026* (0.000)	(0.053 – 0.159) = -0.107* (0.000)	(0.075 – 0.142) = -0.067* (0.000)	(0.153 – 0.215) = -0.062* (0.000)
Immigrants in Canada for 6 to 10 years, immigrants in Canada for over 10 years	(0.616 – 0.725) = -0.109* (0.000)	(0.091 – 0.060) = 0.031* (0.000)	(0.159 – 0.744) -0.585* (0.000)	(0.142 – 0.897) -0.755* (0.000)	(0.215 – 0.136) 0.079* (0.000)
Immigrants who speak an official language, immigrants who do not	(0.671 – 0.822) = -0.151* (0.001)	(0.060 – 0.091) = 0.019* (0.000)	(0.744 – 0.159) = 0.274* (0.004)	(0.897 – 0.142) = 0.110* (0.000)	(0.136 – 0.215) = 0.076* (0.002)
* Significant at the 99% confidence level.					

Fig. 6.2 – Significance testing of differences in claim participation. (own elaboration)



### ***a. Total Government Transfers***

Overall, permanent residents participate in government transfers at a higher rate than those born in Canada. In 2015, 68.14% of permanent residents claimed government transfers. Of individuals born in Canada, 53.79% received government transfers. The two populations also show differences according to their sub-populations. Immigrant women participated at a rate of 74.10%, while immigrant men participated at a rate of 61.42%. Canadian-born women participated at a rate of 59.16%, while the rate was 48.35% for Canadian-born men. However, permanent residents have a higher low-income rate than individuals born in Canada, at 17.81% versus 10.68%. Canadian-born women also have a higher low-income rate than men, at 11.18% versus 10.19%. For permanent residents, women also have a higher low-income rate than men in the Immigrant population, at 18.33% versus 17.24%.

This study also found a positive association between years since immigration and participation. The claim participation peaks with immigrants in Canada for more than ten years at 72.45%. Those in Canada for under one year claim at a rate of 53.65%; those in Canada for one to five years claim at 53.65%; and for five to ten years claim at 61.56%. This pattern is inconsistent with the low-income rates. However, the inconsistency is not surprising because those in Canada for under one year have had the least amount of time to learn Canada's system. Those in Canada for more than ten years have a low-income rate of 13.95%, while the rate is 20.23% for immigrants in Canada for five to ten years, 32.82% for immigrants in Canada for one to five years, and 49.17% for immigrants in Canada for under one year. However, permanent residents with no capacity in English or French claim at a rate of 82.24%, while those with some capacity in English and/or French claim at 67.11%. Their low-income rates are 32.66% and 16.74%, respectively.

“Total government transfers” is broad as it includes every benefit and credit. They are serving different audiences with different ways to access them. However, particularly interesting patterns can be seen for time in Canada and language ability. A longer experience in Canadian expands eligibility options for the retirement benefits. In addition, with more time working for registered employers in Canada, the benefit levels for Employment Insurance and the Canada/Quebec Pension Plan increase, thus reducing these time-based indirect exclusions.

### ***b. Employment Insurance Benefits***

Overall, permanent residents claim Employment Insurance at a lower rate than those born in Canada. This subsection only considers persons in the labor market. Permanent residents participate at a 9.24% rate, while those born in Canada participate at a rate of 12.72%. Because Employment Insurance is based on how long someone has been working in paid work, its claim rates should be compared

to unemployment rates. Canadian born people had an unemployment rate of 6.8% in 2016, while the rate was 7.5% for permanent residents. It should be considered that not all permanent residents have accumulated enough time in Canada to qualify for Employment Insurance. However, given the unemployment difference, it appears some eligible permanent residents are not receiving Employment Insurance.

There are also differences in claim participation based on sub-populations. Immigrant women claim at a higher rate than immigrant men, while Canadian-born men claimed higher than Canadian-born women. Female immigrants claim at 6.95%, while males claim at 6.02%. Female immigrants also had a higher unemployment rate, at 7.8%, compared to 7.3% for males. Male individuals born in Canada claim at 7.77%, while female individuals born in Canada claim at 7.51%. Canadian-born males also had a higher unemployment rate than Canadian-born females, at 7.8% versus 5.7%.

The assessment of years since immigration reveals an inverse relationship between unemployment rate and Employment Insurance claims. Up to the ten-year mark, immigrants have both an increasing rate of participation and a declining unemployment rate. For those in Canada for over ten years, the unemployment rate was 6.5%, and they also had the lowest claim rate at 6.02%. Immigrants in Canada for under one year claim at a rate of 2.33%, while those in Canada for one to five years have a rate of 6.49%, and those who immigrated five to ten years ago claim at 9.12%. Individuals in Canada for under five years have an unemployment rate of 7.5%, and the rate for individuals in Canada for five to ten years is 8.8%. There is also a gap based on language ability. Immigrants who do not speak English or French claim at a much lower rate—4.76%—than those with capacity in one of the two languages, who claim at 6.62%. This behavior is at odds with how the same groups compare in their unemployment rates. Immigrants with no official language capacity have an unemployment rate of 11.80%, compared to 7.49% for those with official language capacity. This pattern would be partially explained by language ability being a barrier to finding and understanding the forms required to apply for jobs.

There are some patterns particular to Employment Insurance that deviate from the overall picture. The benefit participation rate for those in Canada for over ten years is partly explained by people aging out of the workforce or obtaining more stable employment, and the need for Employment Insurance is therefore reduced. However, the overall trend that a longer experience in Canada is associated with higher claim participation is confirmed. Thus, many individuals are removing their indirect exclusion over time. Regarding language, immigrants with no official language status appear to have particularly low participation in Employment Insurance. This difference is partly explained by the specific application required for the benefit, which is not under the tax system. Individuals without conversational capacity in English or French would likely have difficulty navigating the

eligibility for Employment Insurance than for benefits that are accessed when filing one's tax returns. Additionally, a loss of Employment Insurance puts the rewards of paid work at risk because Employment Insurance is meant to aid labor market attachment.

### *c. Government Pensions*

Caution must be exercised when interpreting claim behavior for pensions because, as discussed previously, permanent residents experience an indirect exclusion from government pensions because they are newer to Canada than Canadian-born persons of similar ages. In addition, because many permanent residents were eligible for government pensions in their countries of earlier residence, lower participation in government pensions does not necessarily mean they lack pensions. Therefore, the most important question regarding pensions is whether permanent residents are using what is available to them in Canada. All participation rates are analyzed for those aged 60 and over, which is the age at which someone becomes eligible to receive a government pension in Canada. Permanent residents participate in government pensions at a far lower rate than those born in Canada: 44.22% versus 83.14%. This difference reflects how immigrants face indirect and informal exclusions from participation in pensions, as Koning and Banting (2013) discussed. The labor market participation rate among the core working age is also lower, at 82.48% for permanent residents compared to 86.26% for the Canadian-born. It can therefore be hypothesized that labor market behavior explains part of this gap.

There is a gender-based gap among permanent residents, with women claiming pensions at 66.73% and men at 69.29%. However, a similar gap can be seen in core working age participation among women and men, with rates of 75.91% and 89.93%. As both are groups of immigrants, they have similar eligibility, and labor market attachment can better explain the gap in claim behavior. These groups' labor market attachment would need to be assessed through a longitudinal dataset for an accurate picture of whether this gap in claim behavior is consistent with what expectations based on their labor market attachment. Females and males born in Canada also exhibit a difference in claim behavior, at 83.33% versus 82.55%, respectively. However, men have a much higher labor market participation rate than women, at 89.08% compared to 83.47%.

A strong association between years in Canada and claim behavior for government pensions can be seen. This reflects the fact that many immigrants need to accumulate working years to become eligible for government pensions. Immigrants in Canada for one year or less claimed at a rate of 6.28%, while those in Canada one to five years claimed at 5.26%, and those in Canada five to ten years claimed at 15.95%. Claim behavior peaks for those in Canada for more than ten years, at 74.44%. benefit participation also increases with years in Canada.

Ability in English or French also reveals patterns in benefit participation, showing that language capacity influences how well permanent residents can participate. Permanent residents who know English and/or French claim pensions at a rate of 71.73%, while only 44.28% of those who do not know either language claim pensions. Those who know English and/or French have a higher participation rate than those who do not, at 83.44% versus 56.05%. However, it would be remiss to hypothesize that the participation gap explains the claim participation gap. The lifecycle affect plays a role because those who do not know English or French generally have broad challenges integrating in Canada.

The benefit participation for pensions also shows some unique patterns. Years in Canada reveals a large hump in participation among individuals who exceed ten years in Canada. Essentially, permanent residents are removing their indirect exclusions from pensions. Curiously, there is some concordance between the participation for pensions and that of Employment Insurance, with over ten years in Canada being the point where participation grows notably for pensions and declines for Employment Insurance. This reflects the fact that the ten-year mark is when permanent residents eligible for pensions start leaving the labor market for retirement. In addition, like Employment Insurance, pensions are accessed through an application outside of the tax system. Therefore, there may be a stronger learning effect whereby permanent residents need more time to learn how to access pensions. Official language status shows a trend like that of Employment Insurance—and it also differs from the overall picture: Permanent residents without conversational ability in English or French claim pensions at much lower rates. This pattern provides further evidence that a benefit's application scheme has a significant influence on the learning effect.

#### *d. Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement*

Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement are notable because they target different populations than government pensions do. Anyone aged 65 and over can receive Old Age Security, and those aged 65 and over who earn below certain income thresholds can receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement (Government of Canada 2021i). As with pensions, many permanent residents would qualify for similar benefits in their countries of previous residence; thus, lower participation in Old Age Security does not necessarily indicate that permanent residents are completely excluded from such benefits. Therefore, the most important question in this case is how well they leverage what is available to them in Canada. Nonetheless, permanent residents cannot claim the benefit if they are sponsored and have been in Canada for under ten years (*ibid.*). This paper therefore examines claim behavior for those aged 65 and over, comparing it to the percentage of each population aged 65 and over that earns below the low-income line (Government of Canada 2023). This comparison reveals whether populations who can benefit the most are claiming the benefits.

Permanent resident seniors claim at a rate of 80.87%, which is lower than the 89.91% rate for individuals born in Canada. However, there are more landed immigrants below the low-income line, at 15.20%, compared to 9.08% for individuals born in Canada. There are also differences according to sex. Female permanent residents are claiming these benefits at a higher rate than males, at 82.67% versus 78.84%. There is also a higher percentage of female permanent residents living below the low-income line than male permanent residents, at 17.14% versus 13.01%. A higher claim rate among women can therefore be expected. A similar pattern can be seen among individuals born in Canada. Females born in Canada claim at a rate of 91.71%, while males born in Canada claim at a rate of 87.84%. In a similar situation to that of permanent residents, 11.17% of women born in Canada live below the low-income line, while 6.68% of males born in Canada live below this threshold. Due to the differences in eligibility, it is difficult to assess, based on these results, whether Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement are reaching permanent residents.

The number of years an immigrant senior has been in Canada is positively related to claim behavior. This behavior is expected because permanent residents in Canada for under ten years cannot receive the benefits while they are sponsored (Government of Canada 2021g). Permanent residents in Canada for one year or less claim at a rate of 10.66%. Notably, those in Canada for one to five years have a lower rate, at 7.53%. Permanent residents in Canada for five to ten years claim at 14.23%. And, as expected, those in Canada for more than ten years have the highest claim rate, at 89.68%. However, the areas of need do not follow the same pattern. Permanent residents in Canada for one year or less have the highest percentage below the low-income line, at 29.10%. Permanent residents in Canada for five to ten years are next, at 25.87%, followed by those in Canada for one to five years, at 24.22%. Permanent residents in Canada for over ten years have the lowest rate, at 14.44%. As Koning and Banting (2013) discussed, immigrants face direct exclusion from Old Age Security participation because a prerequisite of participation is that a person must have lived in Canada for at least ten years beyond the age of 18 to be eligible (Government of Canada 2021i).

Language ability also reveals interesting results. Landed immigrant seniors who do not know English or French claim at a rate of 71.59%. Their claim rate is lower than the rate for those who know English and/or French, which is 82.61%. However, permanent residents who do not know English or French have a higher low-income rate, at 25.92%, versus 13.28% for permanent residents who know English and/or French. Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement claims have the potential to lift many members of both groups out of low-income status. The average pension claim for impoverished immigrants without English and/or French was CA\$3,581.89, and the average income of those living in low-income status who did not claim pensions was CA\$16,447.53. Additionally, the average pension claim of impoverished immigrants with English and/or French was CA\$1,541.79, and their average income was CA\$17,702.54. The

average family size for both groups of immigrants is about 2.7, which indicates that the average non-pension claimer would not be lifted out of low-income status by claiming the average pension amount, thus they are not helped as well as Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement claimants (Government of Canada 2023).

There is a notably sharp increase in Old Age Security participation for persons in Canada for over ten years. These results must be cautiously interpreted, however, because there are a few eligibility schemes for Old Age Security beyond the minimum residence. Persons can also gain eligibility through social security agreements between Canada and the country where they previously lived (Government of Canada 2021i). Thus, persons 65 and over who were residents in Canada for over ten years are starting to take advantage of the residency threshold, but those with less time in Canada may also be eligible. Therefore, eligibility alone does not explain this difference. Further, language status does not show these same gaps for Old Age Security. This finding is particularly puzzling given Old Age Security is outside of the tax system and requires a separate application, meaning it is more dependent on the applicant's language skills.

#### ***e. Child Benefits***

Permanent residents claim child benefits at a higher rate than people born in Canada. Overall, 14.79% of permanent residents and 9.96% of people born in Canada claim child benefits. This behavior is not surprising because immigrants have children in their homes at a far higher rate than Canadian-born residents do, at 44.04% and 12.72%. In addition, women claim child benefits at a far higher rate than men; this is the case among both permanent residents and people born in Canada. However, the female-male gap in these claims is higher among permanent residents than people born in Canada. Female permanent residents claim these benefits at a rate of 27.56%, while only 0.75% of male permanent residents claim them. Females born in Canada claim the benefits at a rate of 18.85%, while 0.96% of males born in Canada claim them. This pattern occurs despite males and females having similar rates of children in their homes. Male immigrants have children at home at a rate of 44.12%, compared to 45.79% for female immigrants. Meanwhile, 22.79% of males born in Canada and 27.13% of females born in Canada have children at home. This behavior reflects a clear and consistent pattern related to sex. In addition, as the participation rate in child benefits never approaches the percentage of permanent residents in families, some appear to be missing the benefits.

Differences can also be seen based on how long a landed immigrant has been in Canada. The claim rate increases with time in Canada until the ten-year mark. Permanent residents in Canada for under one year have a claim rate of 7.62%, while those in Canada for one to five years participate at 15.27%, and five to ten years are claiming child benefits at 21.49%. Those in Canada for over ten years claim

at a rate of 13.55%. It can be hypothesized that for permanent residents in Canada for under ten years, many need time to learn what is required to file taxes and what they can access. The Canada Child Benefit, for example, is accessed when filing taxes. This behavior is consistent with the trend of having children at home, which also curtails at the ten-year mark. Immigrants in Canada for under one year have children in their homes at a rate of 32.67%, compared to 39.06% for those in Canada for one to five years, 48.40% for those in Canada for more than five years but fewer than ten, and 44.46% for those who landed more than ten years ago.

Permanent residents also show gaps in claim rates according to language ability. Those without conversational capacity in English or French claim at 7.69%, while those with capacity in at least one of the languages claim at 15.29%. Because government services in Canada delivered by the federal government and the provinces are in English and/or French, it is not surprising that language ability plays a role in who claims child benefits. Permanent residents' and Canadian-born persons' behavior is consistent with who has more children at home. Only 1.08% of Canadian-born people with no English or French have children at home, compared to 25.05% of Canadian-born people with English and/or French. For immigrants, 39.82% of those with no English or French had children at home, compared to 44.30% of those with English and/or French.

Child benefits have the fewest exclusions for immigrants in the Koning and Banting (2013) model, but the aforementioned figures nonetheless show that many permanent residents are missing out on benefits. Regarding experience in Canada, there is a similar drop-off in participation for persons in the country for over ten years, as is seen for employment insurance. A possible explanation is that these people are reaching an age at which they are no longer caring for children. As for the other year-bands, learning how benefits work in Canada likely explains much of the increase in participation with longer time in Canada. The lower claim rate for permanent residents without ability in English or French is notable because child benefits are more easily accessed through the tax system. It shows that the access gap reflects factors other than ease of access.

## 5. Conclusion

Regarding the original research questions, this paper has shown that permanent residents claim more in benefits than those born in Canada do. However, permanent residents are not eligible for all the same benefits nor benefit levels as those born in Canada; several benefits are based on the time an individual has spent in Canada. The most important message is that because Canadians are expected to use the same system, the comparison can reveal who is not being reached. Additionally, paid work, while important, cannot meet everyone's needs.

The results show that permanent residents participate more in child benefits than Canadian-born people do. However, those born in Canada participate more in Employment Insurance, pensions, and Old Age Security. Child benefits are accessed

through the tax system, and thus arguably have a simpler application scheme, which may explain some of this difference. Applications for benefits that do not automatically leverage the tax system demand more of the applicant in terms of gathering information and understanding eligibility requirements. This difference may explain some of the comparative differences in benefit participation.

Furthermore, there are several notable associations with knowledge of an official language and years since admission. Neither of these are surprising considering the learning effect of being in a new country and having to adapt to its systems. Because Canada uses English and French as its two official federal languages, those who do not have conversational capacity in either language are at a disadvantage. In addition to the learning effect for the welfare state, there is likely also a language learning effect, given the time required to obtain or develop English and/or French abilities. Beyond any learning effects, time in Canada also provides immigrants with more time to develop social and professional networks that can help access resources.

Ultimately, the availability of benefits does not necessarily indicate that those eligible are using them. This study revealed many examples of available benefits that are not used to the full extent and some of the reasons why. Based on these results, there are some clear actions policymakers could take to improve access for immigrants. Increasing the availability of services in non-official languages could significantly improve access for the many immigrants who do not speak English or French. Similarly, ensuring that resources that must be provided in English or French are written in plain language could be instrumental for those who do not have high levels in these languages. Finally, ensuring immigrants are connected to information about the benefit available to them is critical. Immigrant service provider organizations play an essential role in helping many immigrants adjust to their new lives in Canada. These organizations could play a more prominent role in the outreach. More broadly, if the Canada Revenue Agency were to file certain tax returns on individuals' behalf, an idea that has been discussed in the public economics literature in Canada (Genest-Grégoire et al. 2023), this initiative would connect people with benefits they otherwise would not receive. These actions would reflect a better recognition that integration into Canada includes being able to access benefits that most Canadians rely on at some point in their lives.

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# CHAPTER 7

## Household, Neighborhood, and Community Contexts and the Mental Health of Immigrants in Canada

Tasneem Khan, Martin Cooke

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### **Abstract**

#### Background

Integration and resettlement are key aspects of the immigration process that involve a change to immigrants' physical and social contexts. Following Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), these contexts can be viewed as nested systems. The most immediate context is the microlevel, which includes the household's social microsystem and psychosocial aspects of the household setting. The intermediate context is the exolevel, which includes aspects of the neighborhood and community. Lastly, the macrolevel context refers to broader social, cultural, and economic aspects of the society. Although the associations between individual characteristics and mental health have been studied, there has been little consideration of the potential role of contextual factors in the mental health of immigrants in Canada.

## Methods

Using the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) from 2015 and 2016, merged with area data from the Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation (CIMD), we first examined and compared the proportion of immigrants and non-immigrant Canadians exposed to contextual factors in the household, neighborhood, and community (HNC) contexts that are identified in the literature as potentially unfavorable to mental health. Second, using binary multivariable logistic regression models, we estimated the association between these contextual factors and the odds among immigrants of reporting poor or fair self-rated mental health (PF-SRMH) and having been diagnosed with a mood disorder (MD). We defined potentially unfavorable socio-economic aspects of household context as including low household income adequacy, a household education level less than secondary school, having young children at home, living in a crowded household (i.e., five or more people), and living in a rented dwelling. In the neighborhood and community context, we considered unfavorable contextual exposures to include living in a census dissemination area with higher levels of deprivation (i.e., higher residential instability, economic dependency, situational vulnerability, and ethnocultural composition). Lastly, in the community context, having a weaker sense of belonging to local community was considered an unfavorable exposure.

## Results

We found that immigrants generally had higher exposure to categories of household socio-economic factors that are potentially unfavorable to mental health. However, low income adequacy was the only unfavorable household characteristic associated with significantly higher odds of PF-SRMH and having a MD. Moreover, immigrants living in neighborhood contexts of higher deprivation generally had higher odds of PF-SRMH, although these results were statistically significant only for the highest quintiles of situational vulnerability and ethnocultural composition. We did not find any significant association between higher neighborhood deprivation and the presence of an MD. A weaker sense of belonging to local community was a strong predictor of poor mental health, however.

## Implications

Our findings suggest that some contextual factors are important for the mental health of immigrants, but these were mainly at the neighborhood or community levels, rather than the household level. Immigrant households with low income adequacy are a potentially important focus for mental health services. Improved social integration of immigrants, including fostering feelings of local community connectedness and reducing marginalization, are potentially important for promoting better mental health outcomes among immigrants.

## Introduction

Canada currently accepts roughly 400,000 immigrants annually, mainly through the economic and family immigration programs (IRCC, 2023), with the policy goal of supporting the economy as the country faces the challenge of an aging population (Statistics Canada, 2022a). By 2031, one in three persons working in the Canadian labor market is expected to be foreign-born (Martel, 2011). The growing size of the immigrant population makes their mental health a key area for research (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Among immigrants, the migration process is an important dimension of risk for mental health and illness (Bhugra, 2004; George et al., 2015). Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual can cope with the daily stressors of life and contribute to their community, whereas mental disorders are abnormalities in an individual's emotional and psychosocial interactions (WHO, 2020). International research suggests that migrants are at higher risk of developing some mental disorders than non-migrants are, at least in part due to migration-related stress (Bhugra, 2004; Breslau et al., 2009). Although previous research has found that, on average, immigrants in Canada have better mental health than Canadian-born individuals, this effect is reduced with longer stay in Canada (Ali et al., 2004; Ng & Zhang, 2020). Moreover, the mental health advantage is less evident for immigrants with certain demographic characteristics, including younger people, women, and racialized people (Ali, 2004; Islam et al., 2014; Islam, 2015; Patterson et al., 2013).

Although research has examined associations between individual characteristics and the mental health of immigrants, there is limited research in Canada on the social and economic contexts in which immigrants reside and their contribution to the reinforcement or reduction of inequities in immigrant mental health (Beiser et al., 2002; Emerson, 2021; O'Campo et al., 2015; Mahmood et al., 2011; Matheson et al., 2012). We address this gap in the research by examining potentially unfavorable aspects of household, neighborhood, and community (HNC) contexts and their association with aspects of mental health among immigrants. This assessment can improve the understanding of housing- and neighborhood-level needs of immigrants and contribute to social and mental health equity in Canada, in line with the priorities of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Mental Health Strategy for Canada to improve mental health and support for the diverse Canadian population (MHCC, 2012).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides us with a framework to consider immediate household and more distal neighborhood and community settings and their relationships to the mental health of immigrants. At the core of the EST is the notion that the individual is at the center of multiple nested contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These contexts include the social aspects and physical structures with which individuals interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this chapter,



we first use the EST to discuss the contextual changes in the broader cultural and value systems that migrants experience. We then apply the EST to examine aspects of the HNC contexts, particularly those that reflect social and economic deprivation, and their associations with poor mental health among immigrants in Canada.

## Background

The Healthy Immigrant Effect (HIE) is the most prominent explanation of immigrants' physical and mental health in the research literature, and it has been observed in countries with large immigrant populations, including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (Emerson, et al., 2021; Kennedy et al., 2015; Lou & Beaujot, 2005; Markides & Rote, 2019). The HIE describes how the health of immigrants upon arrival is better, on average, than that of the native-born population of the host country. In Canada, comparisons of the mental health of immigrants to that of non-immigrants have confirmed that immigrants have better self-perceived mental health and lower rates of clinical illnesses, including depression and substance abuse, than non-immigrants (Ali et al., 2004; Lou & Beaujot, 2005). Explanations for the HIE include selective immigration policies, which favor younger migrants and screen for various illnesses, and the self-selection of individuals who might be more likely to have better physical and mental health than either those who remain in the country of origin or those in the destination (Kennedy et al., 2015).

Research suggests that the health of immigrants—especially their mental health—deteriorates with long-term stay in Canada (Ali, 2004; Salami, 2017; Lou & Beaujot, 2005). There is evidence for a “years since immigration” effect, in which average levels of mental health among immigrants decline, and emotional and mental health problems become more likely around ten years of stay in Canada (Ali, 2004; DeMaio & Kemp, 2010; Lou & Beaujot, 2005).

There are other demographic factors that have been found to affect the mental health of immigrants and which suggest some groups of immigrants are at higher risk for poor mental health. This includes age, for which the pattern of higher risk of mental illness, such as major depressive disorder, typically follows a U-shaped pattern over the life course, with worse outcomes during teenage and later years of life and a lower risk for illness in mid-adult ages (Islam, 2015; Patterson et al., 2013; Sutin et al., 2013; Xu & McDonald, 2010). Gender has also been found to be related to the mental health of immigrants. Immigrant women are susceptible to social risks, such as violence, that can enhance their vulnerability to poor mental health, making biological sex and gender important determinants of immigrant health (Daoud et al., 2012; Delara, 2016).

Cultural, religious, or racial background might be related to the mental health of immigrants in Canada (Khanlou, 2012), and these factors can intersect, forming

complex relationships that are difficult to parse out. Risks and trauma occurring in the country of origin, as well as differences in acculturation to Canadian society and the Canadian economy, might be contributors to differences in mental health among immigrants (Kim et al., 2013). Experiences of discrimination in Canada might be especially important among racialized immigrants, who make up the majority of newcomers to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). Indeed, DeMaio and Kemp (2010) found that being a “visible minority” was more predictive of a deterioration in mental health among immigrants than region of origin was.

### **Ecological Systems Theory and Immigrant Mental Health**

As described previously, research in Canada has primarily focused on individual aspects of immigrant mental health. There remains a theoretical and empirical gap in the literature on immigrant mental health and the physical and social contexts in which immigrants live. One way to conceptualize the role of context in immigrants’ mental health is Bronfenbrenner’s EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although originally developed in the 1970s to study child development, the EST has also been applied to research on the mental health of adults (Eriksson et al., 2018).

Bronfenbrenner postulated that individuals are situated in nested contexts; that is, each context lies within a broader one (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As shown in Figure 7.1, in the most proximate level of context, an individual has direct interactions with social microsystems and with the physical and material aspects of the settings in which they spend the most time and have the closest social connections (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Griffore & Phenice, 2016). The household context is constituted by the household’s social microsystems, combined with the psychosocial aspects of the household setting (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). In addition, based on the EST, individuals could also be indirectly influenced by the more distal exolevel contexts they are exposed to, including aspects of neighborhoods or communities (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Lastly, in the EST, broader economic and political systems and cultural values form a context that encompasses all other contexts and is known as the macrolevel context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The EST is a useful framework to conceptualize the potential relationships between physical and social aspects of context and the mental health of individuals. More recently, the EST has been used in social justice research to explore the relationship between broader social structures and the multiple contexts with which an individual interacts, as well as the consequences of contextual influences for the individual (King & Travers, 2017; Thurston & Vissandjée, 2005). For example, a study by Sterk et al. (2013) highlighted how the structural characteristics of the exolevel environment, such as a neighborhood with social disorder and resource deficiency, facilitate substance use behavior. Using the EST to frame research directs attention to the socioecological issues that perpetuate disparities instead of placing the responsibility on an individual, and it also highlights the

results of such disparities (King & Travers, 2017; Thurston & Visandjée, 2005). In this chapter, we extend the application of the EST to the mental health of immigrant adults in Canada. We first use the EST to frame the broader societal forces that impact immigrants. We then use it to guide our empirical examination of the exposure of immigrants to specific contextual factors and to two negative mental health outcomes: having fair or poor self-rated mental health (PF-SRMH) and having been diagnosed with a mood disorder (MD).

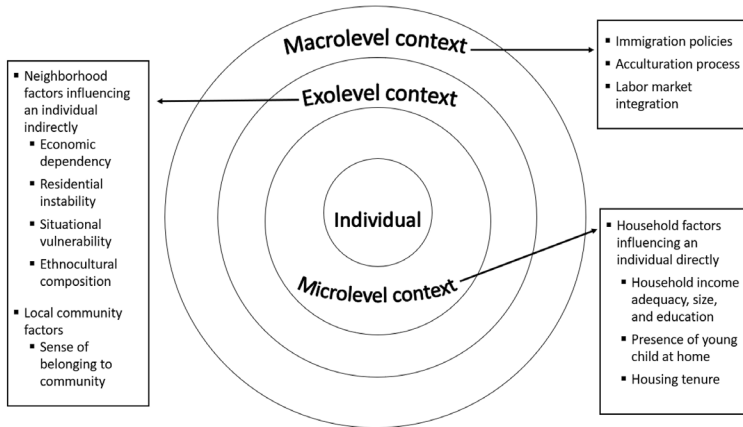


Fig. 7.1 – Illustration of ecological contexts based on the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and microlevel and exolevel contextual factors examined in this study. (own elaboration)

## Macro-Contextual Transitions and the Mental Health of Immigrants

Applying the EST to immigration suggests that transitions occur at multiple levels of ecological context when immigrants move from their countries of origin (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The most prominent ecological transition occurs at the macrolevel, when immigrants are introduced to new social and cultural values and economic systems (Cuéllar, 2000). The continued effort of Canadian immigration policy to attract people from around the world means immigrants bring a variety of cultural values and life experiences (Marsella & Yamada, 2000). Since the 1970s, higher numbers of immigrants of non-European origins have led to higher proportions of visible minority populations in Canada (Bélanger & Malenfant, 2005). Ethnic minority immigrants to Canada might not have the same level of ethnocultural affinity to the predominantly European–Canadian culture as previously arriving European immigrants did. The ecological transition to Canada might therefore be more challenging for ethnic minorities arriving to the country (Naeem et al., 2019). Individuals and families who originate from and have resided in places with strong non-Christian religious and non-European cultural influences on their life values and practices will most likely be inclined to continue those practices

after moving to Canada. Therefore, migration places immigrants in a position of needing to adapt to a different cultural context, and the associated adjustment processes can be psychologically taxing (Talebi & Desjardins, 2012; Samuel, 2009).

Immigrants also might have to navigate a different economic market system, which often poses a significant challenge to resettlement in Canada. Canada's immigration policy prioritizes its economic program, with the primary goal of strengthening Canada's labor force (Statistics Canada, 2022b). In 2021, 62% percent of permanent resident admissions to Canada were in the economic class (IRCC, 2022). Economic migration in Canada primarily uses a "point system" that favors younger age, higher education, and proficiency in English or French (IRCC, 2022). Deterioration in the entry earnings and increased unemployment rates were observed in some cohorts of immigrants who arrived in the 1990s, relative to previous arrivals (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2005). Barriers to economic integration for migrants have been attributed to a deficiency in official language competence, lack of recognition of credentials, reduced value of foreign labor market experience, and the unmet demands for Canadian work experience by the Canadian labor market forces (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2005).

### **HNC Contexts and Immigrant Mental Health**

In addition to the potential effects of macrolevel context, factors in households and neighborhoods could have an impact on mental health. Aspects of the household context that have been found to relate to mental health include household size and overcrowding (Dunn, 2002; Pierse et al., 2016; Ruiz-Tagle & Urria, 2022). Psychosocial aspects of households, such as family structure, including the number and ages of children, have also been found to be key determinants of mental health (Avison et al., 2007).

Along with psychosocial interactions among family members, socio-economic aspects of households, such as family income and the tenure of the dwelling, could determine mental health (Dunn et al., 2006; Robinson & Adams, 2008). Those living in low-income households have fewer material resources and less access to basic life necessities (Raphael, 2020). Living in a materially deprived household environment means poorer quality of life in general, including barriers in access to proper nutrition, health care, and educational opportunities (Raphael, 2020). Exposure to deprivation, whether short- or long-term, also magnifies life stress and has harmful effects on mental health (Knifton & Inglis, 2020). In addition to household economic conditions, household tenure—in the form of ownership rather than renting—has been suggested to be related to better mental health outcomes (Manturuk, 2012). Although those owning their homes might also face the stress of a mortgage, some research suggests that the poorer average mental health of those living in rental housing compared to those with ownership of their dwellings is mainly due to potential residential instability and the

mediating effects of a sense of control that might be associated with home ownership (Acolin, 2022; Manturuk, 2012; Robinson & Adams, 2008). In a recent study, Acolin (2022) analyzed data from 25 European countries and found that overall, owners compared with renters had higher life satisfaction and well-being. However, in countries where renters and owners had similar levels of residential stability, the outcomes appeared to be more similar.

In addition, the types of neighborhoods that individuals or families live in are largely dependent on their socio-economic status (DeLuca et al., 2019). Those with lower financial means tend to reside in and move toward disadvantaged neighborhoods, mostly due to external circumstances including urban renewal and eviction as well as barriers to affordability (Bartlett, 1997; DeLuca et al., 2019; DeLuca & Rosen, 2022). Those in lower socioeconomic positions are therefore more likely to be exposed to community stressors, neighborhood hazards, and reduced access to green spaces (Bolte, 2011; Schüle et al., 2019). Exposure to poor quality neighborhoods and barriers to living in a neighborhood with adequate resources and infrastructure reflect socioeconomic inequalities (Bolte, 2011).

There is considerable evidence that neighborhood- and community-level factors are related to health behaviors and mental health. This vein of research has examined various aspects of neighborhood-level socio-economic context, including proportions of low-income residents, concentration of ethnic and racialized minorities, residential stability, and perceptions of neighborhood problems and safety, as well as aspects of the “built environment” and their relationships to mental health outcomes (e.g., Kawachi & Berkman, 2003; Sampson, 2003; O’Campo, 2009; Gong et al., 2016). In the case of depression, the findings regarding the importance of these community-level factors have been mixed, although most studies find at least some associations between aspects of the community context and depression (Mair et al., 2008).

In Canada, some survey research has examined specific aspects of HNC contexts and immigrant mental health (Beiser, 2002; Emerson, 2021; Glazier, 2004; Mahmood et al., 2011; Salami et al., 2017). Durbin et al. (2015) found that in urban Ontario, Canada, recent immigrants were more likely than long-term residents to live in areas with the highest levels of deprivation and that living in these areas was associated with slightly higher use of mental health services. O’Campo et al. (2015) estimated multilevel models of the relationship between neighborhood measures—including neighborhood disadvantage, perceived neighborhood problems, and social cohesion—and several health outcomes, including depression and anxiety. However, immigrant status was used as a control variable in their study, and immigrants were not the focus of the analysis. Similarly, Matheson et al. (2012) examined the relationships between several aspects of neighborhoods, including the proportion of recent immigrants, and found that Canadians living in neighborhoods with higher proportions of recent immigrants tended to have worse outcomes than those living in

neighborhoods with relatively fewer immigrants. Similar results have been found in Australia, where higher ethnic diversity has been associated with several poorer mental health outcomes in the general population (Awaworyi et al., 2018).

Among immigrants and ethnic minorities, most studies on this topic have identified a buffering and protective effect of higher ethnocultural density on mental health, although the results have not been as clear for younger people (Emerson, 2021), and they have not been consistent across populations (Alegría et al., 2017). In a recent study, Canadian immigrant youth living in neighborhoods with a higher density of immigrants had lower odds of having a physician-diagnosed mood or anxiety disorder than those living in neighborhoods with relatively fewer immigrants (Emerson et al., 2022). The finding that immigrants tend to have better mental health if they live in a community with members of the same group has been interpreted as an indication that the resulting experiences of higher trust or social capital might act as buffers against acculturative stress and concentrated neighborhood disadvantage—and lead to lower experiences of daily discrimination or racism (Alegría, 2017). On the other hand, immigrants living in a neighborhood with lower immigrant density might have better social or economic integration into the host societies, a factor that potentially supports mental health (Brydsten et al., 2019).

## Objectives and Research Questions

Using a nation-wide dataset, we examine the differential exposure to unfavorable socio-economic and psychosocial factors in households and neighborhoods among immigrants and non-immigrants and examine the association of these contextual factors with self-rated mental health and the presence of a mood disorder among immigrants. Based on the EST, we examine microlevel contextual factors in the household and exolevel factors in the neighborhood and community contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). We first ask whether immigrants and non-immigrants differ regarding their exposure to the various household factors (including household income adequacy, household education level, crowding, presence of children, and dwelling ownership), neighborhood factors (residential instability, economic dependency, situational vulnerability, and ethnocultural composition), and, lastly, the factor of a sense of belonging to the local community. We then ask whether aspects of these contexts are associated with the mental health of immigrants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

## Methods

### Data and Variables

We used the 2015 and 2016 cycles of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) masterfile, provided by Statistics Canada through the Research Data

Centres program.<sup>1</sup> The CCHS is a cross-sectional telephone survey of Canadians that asks an annual sample of approximately 60,000 people about their demographic characteristics and health status. The survey covers all provinces and territories in Canada, but it excludes those living on First Nations reserves and in institutions, as well as full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces (Statistics Canada, 2016a).

Respondents' self-rated mental health status was collected on a five-point scale, which we dichotomized into "poor or fair" and "good, very good or excellent." The survey also asked respondents, "Do you have a mood disorder such as a depression, bipolar disorder, mania or dysthymia?"<sup>2</sup> and provided the option of a binary "yes/no." Although mental health assessments are more reliable when captured using continuous and multidimensional measures (Lahey, 2022), the survey asked for a binary, self-reported response that could be based on a diagnosis obtained previously by the participant through a detailed psychological or psychiatric examination. The immigration concept was based on whether respondents reported "ever having been a landed immigrant or permanent resident to Canada."

We were able to include several variables that captured socio-economic and psychosocial aspects of the household context. Socio-economic factors included household income adequacy, education, and size and ownership of the dwelling. Low, middle, and high income adequacy categories were based on total household income from all sources and the number of individuals in the household (Figure 7.2). We followed a categorization for income adequacy similar to that created by Statistics Canada previously (Lee et al., 2009).

Income adequacy category	Household Income in Canadian dollars (\$) categorized by family size (i.e., number of people in household)		
	1 or 2 people	3 or 4 people	5 or more people
Low	<\$14,999	<\$19,000	<\$29,000
Middle	\$15,000–29,999	\$20,000 to 39,000	\$30,000 to 59,000
High	>\$30,000	>\$40,000	>\$60,000

Fig. 7.2 – Categorization of income adequacy. (own elaboration)

1 This research was supported by funds to the Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN) from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and Statistics Canada. Although the research and analysis are based on data from Statistics Canada, the opinions expressed do not represent the views of Statistics Canada or the CRDCN.

2 Clinical depression is the persistence of a depressed mood and loss of interest in activities for prolonged periods of time. Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder in which an individual fluctuates between episodes of low-mood states, including depression, and elevated mood presenting itself as higher psychosocial energy and hypomania or mania (abnormally happy or irritable mood). The complete diagnostic criteria for these disorders can be found in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) (APA, 2013).

Household education reflects the highest level of education among all members of the household. Household size indicates the total number of people living in the respondent's household at the time of the survey, and we used this metric to derive an indicator of whether there were five or more people in the household (a proxy for household crowding). The presence of young children (under the age of 12) at home was based on the CCHS variables that capture the numbers and ages of children in the household.

The CCHS also directly asked respondents about their feelings of community connectedness using the question, "How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community? Would you say it is: Very strong? Somewhat strong? Somewhat weak? Very weak?" This indicator has previously been found to predict well-being among Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2016b).

Measures of neighborhood context were taken from the 2016 Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation (CIMD) dataset (Statistics Canada, 2019a). The CIMD is derived by Statistics Canada from census data, and the 2016 version was the most recent at the time of writing, aligned with the 2015–2016 CCHS data. The CIMD variables are calculated for each dissemination area (DA) in Canada, which is the smallest geography available in the census—an area the size of a few blocks and with a population of between 400 and 700 individuals (Statistics Canada, 2019b). The CIMD variables were merged with the CCHS dataset using the detailed geography provided for each CCHS respondent record.

The CIMD includes four area-level dimensions of deprivation with a focus on psychosocial aspects of the neighborhood (Matheson et al., 2012). Residential instability is calculated from the proportion of the DA population that had moved in the previous five years, the proportion that lives in apartment buildings, the proportion that owned their dwellings, the proportion living alone, and the proportion married or in a common-law partnership. The economic dependency dimension is calculated from the proportion aged 65 or older, local labor force participation, the ratio of employed people to the population, the demographic dependency ratio, and the proportion receiving government transfers, such as employment insurance, retirement benefits, or social assistance. The ethnocultural composition dimension is derived from the proportion identifying as visible minorities, the proportion that were foreign-born, the proportion knowing neither official language, and the proportion that were recent immigrants (measured by the proportion who had arrived within five years of the 2016 census). The situational vulnerability dimension is calculated using the proportion identifying as Aboriginal (Indigenous), the proportion of dwellings needing major repairs, and the proportion without a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2019a). For each of these dimensions, we used the quintile of the DA in which the respondent lived as the index measure.



A small proportion of cases were missing responses for one or more of the CCHS variables. Moreover, less than 2% of CCHS respondents were not matched to 2016 CIMD variables. For the household education variable, these were retained in a “not stated/no response” category. Other cases were handled through list wise deletion. The final weighted sample, including the immigrants and non-immigrants used for data analysis after deletion of cases with missing responses on the CCHS, was 83,007, of which 13,173 were immigrants.

## Analyses

First, we estimated the percentages of immigrants and non-immigrants for each HNC factor to understand whether immigrants were more likely than other Canadians to experience unfavorable exposures in these contexts. We then used a sequence of binary multivariable logistic regression models to examine the relative odds of an immigrant having fair or poor self-rated mental health and of having a mood disorder by categories of HNC context factors. We also controlled for variables that potentially affect the odds of poor mental health, including socio-demographic variables (age, sex/gender, marital status, visible minority status, and occupation), geographic residence, and length of time in Canada. Bootstrap weights provided by Statistics Canada and resampling estimation procedures were used to account for the complex (clustered and stratified) sampling plan (Gagné et al., 2014). Analyses used SAS v9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, N.C.).

## Results

As shown in Figure 7.3, immigrants were slightly more likely than non-immigrants to live in a household with low income adequacy, have five or more individuals in the household, live in a rented dwelling, and have a child at home under the age of 12 years. Non-immigrants were more likely to live in high income adequacy households, have one to two people in the household, and own their dwellings. The only unfavorable household factor to which non-immigrants had higher exposure than immigrants was living in a household with less than secondary school education.

Immigrants were more likely than non-immigrants to live in DAs that were in the highest quintile of residential instability (immigrants: 29.69% [95% CI: 27.84–31.55]; non-immigrants: 20.50% [95% CI: 19.69–21.31]) and considerably more likely than non-immigrants to live in DAs with higher proportions of immigrants and visible minorities. More than 50% of immigrants (53.5%, 95% CI: 51.6–55.41) lived in DAs in the highest ethnocultural composition quintile, compared to 13.4% (95% CI: 12.59–14.14) of non-immigrants. However, non-immigrants were more likely than immigrants to live in DAs with the highest quintile of economic dependence. Lastly, immigrants and non-immigrants were equally likely to report having a “very weak” sense of belonging to community,

	Immigrant		Non-immigrant	
	%	95% CI	%	95% CI
<b>Household income adequacy**</b>				
Low	6.22	5.51–6.94	4.13	3.88–4.39
Middle	15.01	14.00–16.02	10.81	10.45–11.18
High	78.77	77.58–79.96	85.05	84.58–85.52
<b>Household Education**</b>				
Less than secondary school	3.72	3.26–4.18	6.16	5.90–6.41
Secondary school	10.22	9.46–10.98	14.51	14.10–14.92
Post-secondary certificate or degree	81.51	80.47–82.65	75.55	75.03–76.01
Not stated/no response	4.55	3.86–5.24	3.77	3.52–4.02
<b>Household size**</b>				
One to two	41.25	39.57–42.94	55.28	54.63–56.20
Three to four	40.53	39.08–41.98	35.82	35.04–36.60
Five or more	18.21	16.76–19.66	8.90	8.45–9.34
<b>Dwelling ownership**</b>				
Owned	68.91	67.31–70.50	75.95	75.34–76.60
Rented	31.09	29.50–32.68	24.05	23.43–24.66
<b>Children under 12**</b>				
None	71.58	70.30–72.84	80.45	79.96–80.93
One or more	28.42	27.15–29.70	19.56	19.07–20.04

Note: 2015–16 CCHS data.

\*:  $\chi^2$  significant at  $P \leq 0.05$ , \*\*:  $\chi^2$  significant at  $P \leq 0.01$ 

Fig. 7.3 – Exposure to household contextual factors by immigration status. (own elaboration)

	Immigrant		Non-immigrant	
	%	95% CI	%	95% CI
<b>Residential instability**</b>				
Q1 (lowest)	15.69	14.24–17.15	19.54	18.67–20.40
Q2	17.75	15.65–19.55	19.76	18.84–20.67
Q3	17.10	15.50–18.70	20.93	19.91–21.95
Q4	19.77	17.92–21.61	19.28	18.30–20.26
Q5 (highest)	29.69	27.84–31.55	20.50	19.69–21.31
<b>Economic dependence**</b>				
Q1 (lowest)	24.15	22.42–25.88	23.99	22.95–25.04
Q2	23.64	21.51–25.77	20.43	19.38–21.48
Q3	20.52	18.50–22.54	19.44	18.42–20.46
Q4	18.24	16.29–20.18	17.84	16.95–18.74
Q5 (highest)	13.46	11.82–15.09	18.30	17.48–19.12
<b>Situational vulnerability**</b>				
Q1 (lowest)	29.76	27.78–31.74	25.69	24.55–26.84
Q2	22.25	20.24–24.27	21.05	20.00–22.10
Q3	17.86	16.02–19.75	20.03	18.99–21.07
Q4	15.92	14.13–17.71	17.79	16.91–18.66
Q5 (highest)	14.18	12.52–15.84	15.44	14.72–16.16
<b>Ethnocultural composition**</b>				
Q1 (lowest)	3.23	2.89–3.57	20.66	19.92–21.40
Q2	6.02	5.52–6.53	21.37	20.50–22.25
Q3	12.92	11.90–13.94	22.77	21.73–23.81
Q4	24.28	22.53–26.03	21.83	20.78–22.88
Q5 (highest)	53.55	51.68–55.41	13.37	12.59–14.14
<b>Sense of belonging to community**</b>				
Very strong	20.97	19.73–22.12	16.86	16.42–17.30
Somewhat strong	48.19	46.75–49.63	49.93	49.32–50.54
Somewhat weak	23.25	22.08–24.43	25.68	25.12–26.23
Very weak	7.58	6.88–8.28	7.53	7.20–7.86

Note: 2015–16 CCHS data and Canadian Index of Multiple Deprivation indicators.

\*:  $\chi^2$  significant at  $P < 0.05$ , \*\*:  $\chi^2$  significant at  $P < 0.01$ 

Fig. 7.4 – Sense of belonging to local community and exposure to neighborhood context measures by immigration status. (own elaboration)

	Poor or fair self-rated mental health (PF-SRMH)		Mood disorders (MDs)	
	Immigrant OR	95% CI	Immigrant OR	95% CI
<b>Household income adequacy</b>				
Low	1.656	1.044–2.626*	1.868	1.201–2.904*
Middle (ref)	1.000		1.000	
High	0.964	0.701–1.326	0.687	0.483–0.977*
<b>Household Education</b>				
Less than secondary school	0.897	0.571–1.410	1.000	0.620–1.615
Secondary school (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Post-secondary	0.625	0.435–0.898	1.044	0.747–1.461
Not stated/no response	0.487	0.228–1.042	0.693	0.341–1.409
<b>Household size</b>				
One to two (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Three to four	1.277	0.918–1.778	0.884	0.640–1.222
Five or more	0.947	0.617–1.454	1.018	0.661–1.568
<b>Dwelling ownership</b>				
Owned (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Rented	1.056	0.779–1.432	1.310	0.976–1.758
<b>Children under 12</b>				
One or more	1.257	0.902–1.752	1.253	0.889–1.766
None (ref)	1.000		1.000	

Notes: \* = significant at  $P < .05$ , \*\* = significant at  $P < 0.01$ .

Models adjusted for age, gender, province, occupation, visible minority status, time in Canada.

Fig. 7.5 – Adjusted associations between household context factors and mental health outcomes among immigrants in Canada 2015–2016. (own elaboration)

but immigrants were more likely to report a “very strong” sense of belonging. Figure 7.4 presents the results of a series of logistic regression models that examined the associations between household context factors and the two indicators of mental health: poor or fair self-rated mental health and the presence of a mood disorder. Income adequacy was a significant predictor for both mental health outcomes; immigrants in low income adequacy households had higher odds of having PF-SRMH (OR: 1.66, 95% CI: 1.04–2.63) and nearly twice the odds of having an MD (OR: 1.90, 95% CI 1.20–2.91) compared to those in middle income adequacy households. Although not significantly different than the reference categories, the odds of having a mood disorder were higher for immigrants living in a rental dwelling, those living in a crowded household, and those with one or more children under the age of 12 years at home.

In Figure 7.5, we summarize the results of a series of logistic regression models examining the associations between neighborhood- and community-level contextual factors and the two mental health variables among immigrants. Immigrants’ odds of poor or fair self-rated mental health appeared to generally increase for quintiles representing higher situational vulnerability and ethnocultural composition, although most categories were not significantly different than the lowest reference quintile. Immigrants living in DAs with the highest situational vulnerability had significantly higher odds of reporting PF-SRMH (OR 1.6, 95% CI: 1.08–2.37), and, although statistically insignificant, the other categories’ odds ratios suggest that higher situational

vulnerability might be associated with higher odds of PF-SRMH (Figure 7.6). Similarly, immigrants in DAs with the highest quintile of ethnocultural composition scores had the highest relative odds of poor self-rated mental health, compared to those in DAs with the lowest ethnocultural composition (OR: 2.12, 95% CI: 1.34–3.46). Community residential instability and economic dependency were not significantly associated with PF-SRMH.

We did not find significant associations between higher deprivation measures in the neighborhood context and the presence of mood disorders, after adjustment for individual socio-economic factors.

Lastly, the sense of belonging to the local community factor was clearly related to both dependent variables. After adjustment for the individual socio-demographic factors, immigrants reporting a “very weak” sense of belonging had nearly four times the odds of having PF-SRMH (OR: 3.97, 95% CI: 2.78–5.67) and two and a half times the odds of having an MD (OR: 2.56, 95% CI: 1.78–3.67), compared to those with a “somewhat strong” sense of belonging.

	Fair or poor self-rated mental health		Mood disorder	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
<b>Residential instability</b>				
Q1 (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Q2	0.710	0.429–1.174	1.020	0.680–1.531
Q3	0.859	0.570–1.295	0.761	0.496–1.167
Q4	0.859	0.560–1.317	0.916	0.614–1.367
Q5	1.057	0.718–1.556	0.964	0.657–1.416
<b>Economic dependency</b>				
Q1 (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Q2	1.245	0.867–1.787	1.202	0.853–1.696
Q3	1.264	0.894–1.788	1.145	0.803–1.633
Q4	1.419	0.944–2.134	1.166	0.789–1.724
Q5	1.189	0.774–1.829	0.872	0.588–1.295
<b>Situational vulnerability</b>				
Q1 (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Q2	0.989	0.671–1.457	0.975	0.690–1.377
Q3	1.013	0.696–1.476	0.876	0.605–1.268
Q4	1.209	0.811–1.803	1.143	0.794–1.644
Q5	1.594	1.077–2.361*	1.182	0.785–1.781
<b>Ethnocultural composition</b>				
Q1 (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Q2	1.315	0.793–2.179	1.200	0.678–2.123
Q3	1.568	0.928–2.651	1.255	0.714–2.206
Q4	1.550	0.958–2.510	1.094	0.634–1.888
Q5	2.155	1.344–3.455**	0.916	0.537–1.563
<b>Sense of belonging to community</b>				
Very strong	0.734	0.477–1.130	0.830	0.557–1.236
Somewhat strong (ref)	1.000		1.000	
Somewhat weak	2.500	1.830–3.415**	1.434	1.066–1.929*
Very weak	3.968	2.775–5.672**	2.559	1.782–3.673**

Notes: \* = significant at  $P < .05$ , \*\* = significant at  $P < 0.01$

Models adjusted for age, gender, province, occupation, visible minority status, time in Canada.

Fig. 7.6 – Adjusted associations between neighborhood and community context factors and mental health outcomes among immigrants in Canada 2015–2016. (own elaboration)

## Discussion

We found evidence of slightly higher exposure among immigrants to potentially unfavorable social and economic contexts. At the household level, these included living in households with low income adequacy, potential crowding, and living in rented dwellings. Immigrants were more likely to live in households with higher education levels, however. At the neighborhood level, immigrants were more likely to live in neighborhoods with high residential instability and higher proportions of residents who identify as a visible or ethnic minority. Immigrants were somewhat less likely to live in neighborhoods (dissemination areas) characterized by the highest levels of economic dependence and situational vulnerability than non-immigrants were.

When we examined the associations between these contextual factors and our two mental health outcomes, we found few strong predictors of either poor or fair self-rated mental health or mood disorders among immigrants. An important finding was that low household income adequacy was a significant predictor of both fair or poor self-rated mental health and of having a mood disorder. The other measures of household-level context were not associated with either mental health outcome, however.

Two community-level contextual factors were found to have significant associations with at least one of our mental health measures. Living in a neighborhood with high situational vulnerability and living in a neighborhood in the highest quintile of the CIMD ethnocultural composition measure were associated with higher odds of poor or fair self-rated mental health for immigrants, compared to those in the lowest quintiles. “Situational vulnerability” in the CIMD includes the proportion living in dwellings in major need of repairs, which might reflect the physical conditions of the neighborhood; the proportion without a high school diploma; and the proportion identifying as Indigenous.

The CIMD ethno-cultural composition measure includes the proportion of the population with no knowledge of either official language, as well as the proportion of recent immigrants in the neighborhood. Its positive association with poor mental health might initially appear contrary to expectations because previous studies have found higher ethnic density and the presence of one’s own ethnic group in the neighborhood or local community to be protective for mental health (Emerson, 2021). However, the CIMD ethnocultural composition measure is intended to capture marginalization and social segregation from “mainstream” society, higher levels of which are potentially detrimental to mental health (Emerson, 2021; Matheson et al., 2012). In the development of the Canadian Marginalization Index, Matheson et al. (2012) also found a similar association between the ethnocultural composition factor and the self-rated mental health of Canadians in general.

There is a history of research finding that aspects of neighborhood disadvantage pose a risk for psychiatric disorders (e.g., Faris & Dunham, 1967; Rudolph et al., 2022). However, the importance of neighborhood factors in determining mental health have been somewhat inconsistent, likely due in part to the different conceptualization and measures of “deprivation,” and the varying definitions of neighborhoods or communities (Mair et al., 2008). Our findings indicate that some aspects of neighborhoods and community context are indeed potentially important for the mental health of immigrants in Canada, although more research is required to understand the mechanisms of these effects.

The strong association between a sense of belonging to local community and poor mental health might be explained using “acculturation theory.” According to Berry and Hou (2016), acculturation is a “set of cultural and psychological changes that follow contact between two cultural groups and their members.” Successfully “integrated” migrants are those who have developed a high sense of belonging to their host communities while maintaining connections to values and cultural practices of their countries of origin (Berry & Hou, 2016). This is contrasted with a situation in which there are discrepancies between the expectations of the host country and the migrants arriving to it, resulting in either assimilation or marginalization, both of which could lead to acculturative stress (Berry, 1974; Berry & Hou, 2016). A weak sense of belonging to community could therefore reflect acculturative stress. Aspects such as access to social resources and networks are beneficial and have a buffering effect on acculturative stress, whereas living in areas with social disorganization has a detrimental effect on well-being and mental health (Faris & Dunham, 1965; Sampson, 2003).

Some recent research has suggested that multiple dimensions of connectedness could be considered part of a single construct of “social integration.” From this perspective, the development of strong social networks and sources of social support, experience of discrimination, conflicts within the family, employment, and labor market connectedness are all different types of social integration, each of which has potential implications for mental health. In Sweden, low levels of social activity, trust in others, and social and practical support were important variables explaining the lower mental health among immigrants, compared to the native-born population (Brydsten et al., 2019). A study in Australia found that feelings of loneliness, reflecting one aspect of social integration, were related to poorer mental and general health among humanitarian migrants (Chen et al., 2019). A study among immigrants to Norway found social integration to be generally positively related to mental health, although some gender differences were noted (Dalgard & Thapa, 2007). In the Netherlands, it was found that more social integration among Somali refugees might have had an unanticipated negative effect of increasing perceived discrimination through more exposure to Dutch natives (Kuppens & van den Broek, 2022).

## Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. The CCHS is a large and nationally representative sample, and the CIMD is a useful index in Canadian social research. However, there were variables that we were not able to include in the analysis. Immigration program, or whether immigrants arrived as economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers, or family members, is a potentially important dimension related to both socio-economic conditions in Canada and mental well-being.

Furthermore, although the CIMD includes useful area-level measures of social context, some research has suggested that aspects of the “built” or physical environment, such as traffic, noise, and access to green spaces, might be equally important predictors of mental health (Mair et al., 2008). Additionally, the dissemination area geography used does not necessarily correspond to people’s own definitions of their neighborhoods.

A limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature, due to which we cannot infer that certain HNC factors cause a risk for poor mental health. Although we found positive associations between some categories of HNC context factors and mental health outcomes, reverse causation should also be considered. It is possible that, instead of unfavorable social and economic factors in the HNC posing risks to mental health, individuals living with poor mental health are more likely to dwell in unfavorable HNC contexts.

Lastly, this study uses self-rated mental health (SRMH) as one of the outcome variables. The association between SRMH and other mental health measures might differ for important dimensions (Mawani & Gilmour, 2010), including age, which we control for in our analyses. Moreover, the immigrant population in Canada is not homogenous, and different interpretations of survey questions on mental health might pose a limitation. However, the self-rated health measure has been validated across ethnic groups in other contexts (Chandola & Jenkinson, 2000).

## Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, we found evidence for the role of household income adequacy and for some of the more distal exolevel (neighborhood and community) contextual factors in relation to immigrant mental health, especially a sense of belonging to one’s local community but also local ethnocultural composition and neighborhood situational vulnerability. We did not find evidence that household or family composition, neighborhood economic dependency, or residential instability were important predictors of mental health among immigrants. Returning to Bronfenbrenner’s framework, our results support the general conclusion that factors at the immediate household and distal neighborhood and community

levels are important in determining immigrant mental health. Further research is required to better understand the mechanisms underlying these associations and whether other aspects of the neighborhood or community environment, such as feelings of trust or density of social networks, can explain our findings. Longitudinal research that can help unpack the causal direction, as well as research that can disaggregate the experiences of different subgroups of newcomers, might be especially helpful.

Regarding policy implications, the finding that low income adequacy was the sole household-level predictor of poor mental health indicates that immigrants living in low-income households are an important focus for programming related to immigrant mental health. We also find that a sense of belonging to the local community has strong protective benefits for the mental health of immigrants, which suggests that programs and social policies that foster the social integration of immigrants at the neighborhood and community level might be as important as economic integration in promoting well-being among immigrants (Brydsten et al., 2019). Our finding that those in neighborhoods with a high ethnocultural composition have poor self-rated mental health is further evidence of the potential role of low social integration in the poor mental health of immigrants. Lastly, further research is needed to understand the possible relationships between immigrant mental health and the “situational vulnerability” measure.

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# CHAPTER 8

Arriving for Years: Reflections on the Transformative  
Challenges and Opportunities of Institutional Integration  
Work With Refugees in Berlin-Marzahn

Lisa Sophie Sommerfeld

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## Abstract

This chapter presents theoretical and empirical extracts of my PhD research on refugees' arrival and integration processes and their establishment of a new life in an outlying district of former East Berlin. It addresses the research gap concerning comprehensive, qualitative scientific evaluations of integration-related work in an urban institutional context in Germany. The reflections and findings in this paper refer to field work conducted in 2017, 2020, 2021, and 2022 on the local situation in the Berlin neighborhood of Marzahn-Nord.

As a starting point and framework for my reflections, I use Martha C. Nussbaum's normative and philosophical work on human capabilities. With Nussbaum's theory, I approach the diverse arrival and integration processes of refugees as holistic, collective processes of pursuing universal human claims that are critical for a life in dignity. Further, I argue that the processes around arrival and the establishment of a new life in Berlin are broadly connected to processes of social and institutional innovation and urban transformation, as several social policies intervene in both

processes, especially through local state-funded programs and institutions. This chapter provides insights into previously under-collected data on the perceptions and experiences of institutional actors regarding a) the counterproductive impacts of formal frameworks and bureaucratic structures on the local institutional integration work with refugees and b) the potential for both temporary practical innovations within local institutional integration work and the long-term transformation of local working and integration conditions.

The considerations and findings on institutional integration work in this chapter are to be seen in the context of Germany's complex welfare state (and its associated bureaucracy and formal frameworks), which supports social, economic, and political rights and offers various benefits to the citizens—but also contains notable obstacles and limitations regarding its accessibility and effectiveness as well as concerning its sustainability and coherence. Nevertheless, the challenges and opportunities within institutional integration work that are presented and discussed in this study reflect the perceptions and experiences of individual local actors on their working conditions and do not represent an evaluation of actual institutional working outcomes nor the entirety of my scientific PhD research.

Moreover, the reported circumstances can be exacerbated by further factors, such as the broader economic situation in Germany and Europe or the general level of acceptance of integration-related social policies within civil society. As this chapter also shows, even supplementary volunteer work can have an unintended, counterproductive impact on integration processes and integration work. Because migration and integration are such complex processes, and because the related social policies and local integration work connect multiple societal domains, the (political) debates around migration and integration are often controversial, and related research is volatile.

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## Introduction and Background

Many European cities are dealing more intensively with their role as arrival points for refugees and migrants since asylum applications have been increasing across the region in recent years. Thus far, the highest number of asylum applications among all EU countries since 2014 was documented in Germany. Between 2014 and 2017, most of those applicants were Syrians, Afghans, or Iraqis. Since February 2022, many Ukrainians have also arrived in Germany as refugees of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine (European Commission 2022). The subsequent need to provide accommodation, social work, psychological care, and institutional infrastructure for refugees made the connection between (im)migration processes, social policies, and urban development—as well as the need for research on that connection—even more visible. However, the topics of

migration and integration have again become the subjects of controversial public discussions across Europe, fueling the restrengthening of right-wing parties. A growing cleavage between a welcoming population and more reluctant—at times xenophobic—parts of society can be observed in the European discourse. This is also reflected in the appearance of pro-immigrant cities and others that are less engaged with supporting the arrival and local integration of refugees and migrants (Hillmann & Samers 2023: introduction).

Additionally, in the case of Germany, migrant integration policies have been developed dissimilarly from those of most other European nations (Scholten et al. 2016). There are several reasons for this. One is that Germany is a decentralized federal state in which the responsibility for migrant integration policies is dispersed among the national government, regional states, counties, and cities. Another reason is that even though the territorial reunification of Germany took place more than 30 years ago (in 1990), differences between the former East and West Germany remain when it comes to migration and integration. East Germany's former migration system was characterized by an isolationist foreign policy and a strict border regime, which led to fewer migration experiences than in West Germany. In contrast, the migration policy of former West Germany was driven by an economic-oriented "guest worker" recruitment strategy, which had no concrete objective of permanent admission and social integration for most migrants, because migration was mainly seen as temporary solution to labor shortages (Chin 2007; Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration in Germany [DOMiD] n.d.; Spicka 2019). For decades, the significant differences in the two former political systems and migration regimes in Germany impeded the development of a sustainable integration system, and until today social policies work on the repercussions of the different traditions. One step to promote an enhanced integration system that connects former East and West Germany as well as different policy areas and levels of German government was the development of a National Integration Plan in 2006 and a National Action Plan on Integration in 2007 (Scholten et al. 2016).

My PhD focuses on the local urban level in former East Germany by studying the case of Marzahn-Nord, which is an outlying neighborhood of Berlin that did not experience much diverse immigration prior to 2014, except for immigration from former Soviet countries and Vietnam. Then, in 2014, the neighborhood became a main arrival point in the city for refugees from Arab countries (mainly Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis). By now, many municipalities in the eastern part of Germany have also become important arrival points for migrants. Nonetheless, compared to former West German cities, many of which have developed "well-institutionalized practices of cooperating with migrant organizations" (Scholten et al. 2016), the integration infrastructure in the former East German areas remains more or less inactive, and migrant community or diaspora knowledge is not available to support newcomers (Hillmann 2022; Hillmann & Alpermann 2018; McGee 2018). Additionally, many citizens in the former East Germany and those from the

former Soviet Union have experienced and are still experiencing the effects and consequences of rapid political and social changes themselves (Asikainen 2023; Kubiak 2021).

Marzahn-Nord is of particular interest because it is a neighborhood whose urban and social development has been targeted for several years by state-funded interventions, due to the area's socio-structural and infrastructural challenges, such as its peripheral location, a relatively high percentage of unemployed people, and population loss, especially of younger citizens.

This chapter explores challenges and opportunities within institutional integration work in Marzahn-Nord with the focus on potentially supportive and hindering factors for sustainable innovation and transformation processes. In Section 1, I introduce the theoretical framework for my research. In Section 2, I outline Germany's integration narrative and its associated institutional settings, with a focus on the main aspects that relate to refugees in the country. Section 3 focuses on the research questions and the empirical research case, including my methodology and my findings.

### **Theoretical Approach and Analyses: The Transformative Potential of Integration Processes**

My theoretical focus lies on Martha C. Nussbaum's further development of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach as a guiding framework for integration narratives and policies (Nussbaum 2010; Sen 2005) as well as its possible link to the German integration narrative, strategy, and institutional work. I am interested in exploring the transformative potential of migration- and integration-related challenges for institutional work in an urban context. I formulate two theoretical theses:

- 1) (Social) integration can be a process characterized and measured by the quality of being able to use and develop capabilities in a society.
- 2) Integration processes can promote innovation and transformation in a social institutional and urban context.

#### ***Integration Processes: Using and Developing Capabilities***

Feinstein et al. (2022) highlight that although studies on integration are increasing, they frequently concentrate on single, specific aspects of integration, such as economic integration. In their 2020 work on refugee integration in Canada, Europe, and the United States, Donato and Ferris found only three research projects on refugee integration processes that focused on multiple fields (see Beversluis et al. 2016; Phillimore & Goodson 2008; Puma et al. 2018). To support the sustainable integration of refugees with comprehensive opportunities and resources, further research on "integration across a variety of dimensions" (Feinstein et al. 2022) is needed. Such studies can provide "more careful and accurate analysis of

factors affecting refugees' experiences" (ibid., referring to Borselli & Meijl 2020; Phillimore 2020; Ward et al. 2020).

To address the need for comprehensive studies on multiple aspects of integration processes and support a holistic understanding of integration, I chose Nussbaum's capabilities approach as the theoretical framework for my research (Nussbaum 2006). Nussbaum outlines a list of essential basic human abilities that accounts for all people within a society, independent of cultural differences (Nussbaum 2010: 19, 376 ff., 528 f.), and which can serve as an evaluation frame and progression guide for societies (see the list in Nussbaum 2010: 529–539). The capabilities approach is an ethically evaluative concept (Clark 2009) that can be applied to the integration processes of newcomers in the overall society. Using Nussbaum's capabilities approach, "the myriad dimensions of migrant life" (Hillmann & Samers 2023: 1) can be recognized. Furthermore, because Nussbaum's theory goes beyond a narrow economic perception of societies and integration (Nussbaum 2006), the capabilities approach can be useful in the establishment of an approach that utilizes the potential of migration for a collective, integrative urban transformation.

### ***Approaching Integration Processes as Drivers of Innovation and Transformation***

Langer et al. (2019: 17), who study innovation in social services, describe innovation processes as a "response to a perceived challenge [...] implemented with a promise of change, improvement, and sustainability." Following that definition, innovation has three central elements: changes, risks, and new solutions. Furthermore, local innovation processes can reach a wider institutional and political context beyond the neighborhood level through "good practice examples"—and they can manifest innovation and inspire broader transformation (ibid.: 19). In contrast to innovation, which is introducing something new, transformative processes change what already exists (in composition, structure, character, or condition), according to the World Social Science Report 2013 (International Social Science Council & UNESCO 2013).

Of particular relevance to my research in Marzahn-Nord is that migrant and refugee activities can be considered "crucial" for local innovation processes as well as for urban transformation and regeneration (Hillmann 2019: 28) and that the formation of integration related social policies and the associated institutional work can affect such activities. Analyzing the institutional integration work with and for refugees on the local level can highlight further possibilities for improving bottom-up processes and locally specific negotiation processes and practices with the potential for social and institutional innovation and transformation. Furthermore, to have transformative effects in a broader context, innovative processes must also be evaluated and implemented in a sustainable way. Nonetheless, as Gauci diagnosed for the European Commission in 2020, "monitoring and eval-

uation, as well as sustainability of projects, remains limited. These are areas where further action is to be encouraged” (Gauci 2020: 2). A universal framework like Nussbaum’s capabilities approach can be helpful for evaluation and application-oriented analyses on innovative institutional work practices and integration policies. This is the case because, as Chiappero-Martinetti et al. (2017) note, “claims about social innovations are normative claims about improvements and well-being. [...] An Implicit or explicit normative vision shapes the selection process.” Such a normative vision based on Nussbaum’s capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2006) would also contribute to disrupting what Hillmann and Samers (2023) describe as “conceptual distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ [...] [without] denying the specific material circumstances, institutional barriers, and fears that migrants face.”

Nussbaum herself and other philosophers and scientific researchers have already demonstrated and discussed how the capabilities approach can be used for political analyses and recommendations in various domains, such as healthcare and education (e.g., Alkire 2008; Walker 2003). Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on the limits of monitoring and evaluation methods, noting that any evaluative instrument or guiding framework has a range of relative usefulness and does not automatically allow for cause-and-effect analyses (Wittlif 2018). Integration processes and the effectiveness of integration policies should not be approached by monitoring and evaluation alone but instead require several complex scientific analyses.

Moreover, the theoretical construction of the “integration” phenomenon has its own limits. Following Hillmann and Samers (2023), it is important to recognize that “cities might implement ‘integration policies,’ [but] this does not necessarily mean that migrants live with the telos of ‘integration’ [...] but rather conduct their lives as anyone else would, [...] under often difficult intersectionalized conditions.”

### **The Institutional Setting: Including Refugees in German Integration Services**

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the political narrative was not that of a declared “immigration country,” and Germany’s migration regime was, for decades, mainly shaped by selective temporary labor migration, which led to structural, social, and legal discrimination against the recruited workforce (Chin 2007; DOMiD 2023; Klusmeyer & Papademetriou 2009; Scholten et al. 2016; Spicka 2019). Although Germany’s recent migration politics have been characterized by a notable shift in the migration narrative toward increasing support for long-term integration processes, the focus remains on selective workforce recruitment (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community [BMI] 2023b). Furthermore, the present integration policy “includes all people who live permanently and legally in the country” (BMI 2023c), which excludes many refugees who lack permanent residency (Martin et al. 2016: 29). For example, refugees without an official resi-

dence permit in Germany have no access to the established “integration courses,” even if they have lived for several years in Germany, and despite these courses being considered “the instruments that are most important for the labour market integration of refugees” (ibid.: 30).

Following Nussbaum’s approach, Germany would need to provide more balancing support for refugees, because many of them remain highly vulnerable. Asylum seekers are often dealing with difficult psychological circumstances after traumatic experiences during the flight process as well as with the demanding process of understanding the complex, overwhelming bureaucratic structure in Germany (Ward et al. 2020).

Acknowledging the necessity of initial support for refugees in Germany, especially regarding orientation and language skills, some cities were able, with the help of the integration ministers of the German federal states, to acquire national funding for optional orientation courses that are free of charge and do not have strict requirements (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [BAMF] 2017). The courses are particularly useful when newcomers lack reading and writing skills or have no experience with institutional education systems. Germany’s national government agreed to a total of 40 million euros in funding for the courses in 2023, but it is unclear whether the funding will remain for 2024 (BMI 2023d).

The subjects of the courses (e.g., work, shopping, medical care, media use, local orientation/traffic, and manners and customs in Germany) are treated relatively theoretically, and practical social interactions are mostly omitted from the programming—except for smaller field trips, such as to libraries or markets (BAMF 2017 & Emminghaus et al. 2021). Following Nussbaum’s (2020: 110) view, integration should be about “what [people] are actually capable of doing and being,” and concrete supplementary possibilities for social interactions, participation, and capacity building should therefore be included in the course structure (Emminghaus et al. 2021). Supporting the self-reliance of newcomers in Germany aligns, generally, with the German government’s stated policy goal to “enable actual participation in all areas, especially in social, economic and cultural life [and to] support this with comprehensive integration offers” (BMI 2023c). Therefore, services like early orientation courses are important for the integration processes and need further financial support and development.

## The Empirical Research

The empirical research focus of this chapter lies on a) the counterproductive impacts of formal frameworks and bureaucratic structures on local institutional integration work with refugees and b) the potential for both temporary practical innovations within local institutional integration work and the long-term transformation of local working and integration conditions. These analyzed findings can be further assessed with the help of Nussbaum’s approach in supplementary research.



My empirical research and findings were organized around these two questions:

- 1) Do institutional actors in Marzahn-Nord experience factors related to bureaucratic structures and formal frameworks that have a counterproductive impact on social integration work with refugees? If so, how do the institutional actors describe the consequences for the institutional integration work?
- 2) Which factors that promote temporary, practical innovations within institutional social work and which opportunities for long-term transformation of local working and integration conditions in the context of neighborhood development can be identified?

### *Methodology*

To answer these research questions, I chose an actor-centered approach. I collected the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of local institutional experts in the fields of local social work, migration and integration, and socio-spatial urban development, and of refugees living in Marzahn-Nord through qualitative, guided interviews in 2017, 2020, and 2022 and a quantitative questionnaire in 2021. In total, I conducted 20 interviews. Additionally, 300 resident refugees were included in a quantitative survey. Of those participants, 31—or 10% of the approached and statistically relevant population—completed questionnaires that were usable for a comparative evaluation. Refugees of legal age who met the following requirements were included: living in Berlin since 2014 or 2015; currently living in the neighborhood of Marzahn-Nord (in their own flat or refugee accommodation); and originally from Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq. All participants held a residence permit in Germany. I provided the questionnaires in five languages: Arabic, Persian, Pashto, German, and English—and I offered support through a professional translator and language mediator (for Arabic, English, and German) in cases of illiteracy or dyslexia or upon personal request.

For the interview evaluation, I used Mayring's method of qualitative content analysis. The standardized survey was evaluated statistically with the help of the SPSS and R programs.

The limited access to participants (through the survey and interviews) in this explorative research study in Marzahn-Nord reflects two dynamics. First, the neighborhood is relatively small and has a relatively small number of local institutional actors. It also lacks a migrant networking community with corresponding contact partners. Second, in the period of my field work, pandemic-related lockdown restrictions prohibited close contact and longer meetings in public places or institutions. This made it particularly difficult to establish contact with interviewees and contributed to challenging research conditions. Consequently, only a few isolated, individual physical or digital contact possibilities occurred, and the findings presented in this chapter are based on restricted access to the research field. None-

theless, my empirical findings offer previously under-collected data that provide insights into the current dynamics and effects of institutional approaches.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

I will now present and discuss the findings of my research in Marzahn-Nord regarding counterproductive impacts related to bureaucratic structures, institutional and administrative frameworks, and the formation of funding programs. I will then examine the factors and practical possibilities within institutional integration work that increase the opportunity for innovation and transformation in my research area.

### ***Counterproductive Impacts on Institutional Integration Work***

In addition to the various positive effects of integration offers and services and the diverse benefits provided by Germany's social policy system, counterproductive factors exist within the integration and institutional work system. These factors limit the crucial continuity and accessibility of institutional integration offers and services. I will start by outlining four central aspects that were described by my interviewees as having counterproductive impacts on their integration work. Then, I will discuss five broader factors. Some of the aspects presented here are also reflected in the first integration reports about Marzahn-Hellersdorf from 2020 and 2022 as well as in Gauci's (2020) report for the European Committee of the Regions on integration of migrants in cities, which I will refer to at useful points.

**First**, there is an insufficient and unstable supply of economic resources and too few employees for the quantity of work, which can lead to both individual restraint and sacrifices in the institutional integration work. This often produces unsuitable working conditions for the actors.

One of my interview participants, who works in a migration- and integration-related institution at the district level, described the unsecure and unsustainable conditions for institutional integration work using the example of the Berlin Integration Fund (Bezirksamt Marzahn-Hellersdorf 2023):

*"The Integration Fund could finally be transferred. But it is threatened every year. Just recently, in 2021, it was supposed to be completely canceled. We all have been very lost for a while; we were in dire need and had to worry for half a year about whether we could still have funds at all. Currently, the fund itself is not in question anymore for this year, but a cut was announced: 75% for 2023. This reduction is now maintained. And so it goes from year to year."*

Another example is the discontinuation of the Social City urban development program in the neighborhood. Prior to 2020, the state-funded Social City program was implemented in Marzahn-Nord. The new, enhanced version of the program

(called “Social Cohesion – Shaping life together in the neighborhood”) has not been implemented in the neighborhood thus far. Only the Office of District Coordination remains for post-processing in the case area. This office is, however, a temporary institution with very limited resources and options for action.

**Second**, the institutional formations and legal frameworks are not adequately distributing and connecting the limited resources, responsibilities, and tasks within the local system of integration work. These working conditions can lead to situations in which institutional actors make impromptu decisions resulting in informal solutions, work strategies, and practices.

This work environment is connected to the relatively new development of a more sustainable national integration policy and system in Germany, where some “responsibilities remained fragmented horizontally between different departments (Interior, Education, Social Affairs), as well as between different government levels (states, national government)” (Scholten et al. 2016). Gauci (2020) explains that, as a result, many cities “are often left to deal with issues that the national level has been unable to address.” In turn, local informal solutions and partnerships evolved as a response to the “limited capacity of government” (ibid.) and became crucial for the implementation of integration-related procedures.

In Marzahn-Nord, the Office of District Coordination and the Integration Office are examples of central coordinating institutions working with insufficient staff, insufficient security of economic resources, and partly unclear and impractical formal procedural frameworks. The interviews I conducted highlight the immense workload and responsibility of these institutions. Both institutions serve as local nodal points for information exchange and meetings of various institutional actors and some civil organizations concerning integration work with refugees. Although they lack formal recognition or responsibilities regarding many aspects of their operations, they must work comprehensively to guarantee a minimum of effective integration work. The following quote by an employee of the Integration Office describes their working environment:

*“The tasks that the office has to deal with are diverse. For example, it’s about the refugee shelters. There, we are not directly responsible, that is the State Office for Refugee Affairs, but we are contacts for the operators and also for the residents themselves anyway. We untie different knots. We try to get people talking to each other, so everyone knows each other. We try to speak to all kinds of refugees that we have in the district and to have all on screen. This is of course an extremely high standard that we cannot live up to. And something always goes wrong. We also take a close look at the existing welcome classes or help to create more. We are dealing with the integration fund. And so on. So, it’s already a lot to do, but of course we have to talk additionally a lot with various senate administrations and at state level to advertise for our interests. And finally, we also have a lot of paperwork.”*

**Third**, the understaffed institutions are often unable to offer ongoing, personal contact adapted to the diverse needs of the heterogeneous group of refugees. Therefore, in many cases, only a minimum level of the necessary individual and comprehensive integration work is feasible.

For example, according to an actor from a local social work institution, a “women’s meeting place” in Marzahn-Nord, which was intended exclusively for women, has been functioning as the main institution for individually focused integration work with refugees—for women and men alike. This reflects the fact that institutional “one-on-one” integration services and regular meeting places are scarce in general—and especially for male refugees in Marzahn-Nord.

**Fourth**, factors within the current bureaucratic work system, including complex institutional structures, formal frameworks, and administrative tasks, can have a counterproductive impact on the range of integration work and hinder refugees’ access to integration services or integrative benefits.

This access is further limited by the difficulty of communicating and providing information on an administrative, bureaucratic level in the German language. Therefore, personal assistance from professionals and translators is crucial for newcomers after they arrive to Germany.

The long duration of many asylum procedures for refugees is itself an example of complicated, obscure bureaucratic processes with disintegrative effects—especially when no integration services are accessible during this period. Another institutional actor working in administration at the district level who I interviewed shared their position on these circumstances:

*“That means they’ve been hanging for four, five years in the process. They can’t work, they can’t attend a German course, cannot attend an integration course, cannot find an apartment. My thesis is that you have to have a reason to learn the language. If I don’t even know if I’m allowed to stay in Germany, and if I feel like that every day I’m not wanted, that nobody wants me, that I’m just a stupid refugee, I cannot feel like learning the language.”*

This quote also reflects situations of discrimination, or at least the perception of such. Feinstein et al. (2022) describe how discrimination not only reduces opportunities for refugees but also deepens existing socio-cultural and economic divisions. Feinstein et al. (ibid.) add that structural discrimination has a negative impact on “building social bonds,” which limits “the maintenance of cultural integrity [and refugees’] participation in society.” I will continue with that point in the following section, where I outline five additional, broader aspects that were described by my interviewees as negatively influencing the integration work processes and results in Marzahn-Nord.

### *Situations of structural and individual discrimination*

The latest report from Germany's official anti-discrimination agency states that 43% of all reported discrimination experiences were ethnically related, which is the highest percentage of all reasons for discrimination. It also noted that "discrimination by government agencies now accounts for a quarter of all consultation requests" (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2023). In the case of Marzahn-Nord, my interviewees shared several examples of situations related to structural and individual discrimination concerning refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq—but broader evaluations on this topic should be done.

My interviewees often described issues related to accessing the labor and housing markets. The following quote from an employee in the field of socio-spatial institutional integration work in Marzahn-Nord reflects the difficulty of accessing the labor market:

*"If things go well, the residence permit is a subsidiary protection for three years. This is the best you can get right now. Then you have a temporary work permit. But then the big problem is to find a company that employs a refugee or trains an apprentice, without knowing whether the apprentice can stay. It doesn't happen often."*

This issue is also recognized and described in other publications. For instance, the Bertelsmann Foundation reported that "employers willing to employ refugees face legal obstacles and bureaucratic delays that prevent them from educating or employing asylum seekers, tolerated refugees and even recognized refugees. [...] Employers who are willing to employ asylum seekers or refugees thus often feel insecure" (Martin et al. 2016: 31). Furthermore, self-employment is not currently a legal option for many refugees.

My interviews indicated that the local integration work is unable to overcome the structural, discrimination-related obstacles making it harder for refugees to establish a new life in Marzahn-Nord, including the reported difficulty many residents face moving out of the refugee accommodation and into self-rented flats. Therefore, data collection regarding structural discrimination experiences and scientific analyses of such data needs further development (Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung [DeZIM] 2021). Ahyoud et al. (2018) recommend the use of surveys that show to what extent individual experiences of discrimination are repeated, as one indicator of structural disadvantages.

In addition to the factor of structural discrimination, there is a relatively high percentage of right-wing voters in Marzahn-Nord: In the February 2023 election for the local house of representatives, the right-conservative Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party gained 28.8% of all votes in the neighborhood, which was the highest percentage of any party (Statistisches Landesamt Berlin n.d.).

Social programs and organizations with an antixenophobic and democracy-building agenda are addressing this phenomenon in the neighborhood, such as the Coordination Office for Democracy and the Partnership for Democracy, as well as the PAD, which offers preventive services in the case area (Koordinierungsstelle für Demokratieentwicklung Marzahn-Hellersdorf n.d.).

***A lack of communication and collaboration among institutional actors and towards refugees and civil society***

In 2017, two years after the acute installation of emergency aid and shelters for refugees in 2014 and 2015 and a subsequent period of institutional work overload across Berlin, new state-funded programs, positions, and institutions for the purpose of refugee integration were implemented in Marzahn-Nord. Those included Berlin's first "long-term modular accommodation for refugees" (MUF), Berlin's first "integration management" within the Berlin Creates New Neighborhoods (BENN) program, a "refugee coordinator," and new positions in the "integration office." However, according to one of my interviewees who is an employee of an institution dedicated to social and urban development, this transformation of my case area in former East Berlin into a main refugee arrival point occurred with limited outreach to the existing actors and citizens in the neighborhood. The interviewee added that since 2017, the newly implemented institutions have not been centrally coordinated; they remain formally separated and belong to different senates and administrative frameworks (Bezirksamt Marzahn-Hellersdorf 2023).

Therefore, there are missing links in the neighborhood-oriented institutional integration work, which makes not only coordination but also evaluation more difficult—and forces individual actors to compensate for the gaps. In the European Commission's 2020 publication, Gauci notes a need for greater coordination "between different services at the municipal level [...] as well as between different levels of government." Furthermore, institutional frameworks must be further adapted to the complex, multidimensional processes of migration and integration. Considering the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, this can be done through integrated policymaking "that transcend the boundaries of established policy fields and [...] institutional responsibilities of individual departments," such as by "putting in place adequate institutional arrangements, public administration practices, mechanisms, capacities, budgetary arrangements and resources" (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs 2018: 3).

Moreover, sustainable integration work requires a certain level of collective support and is more likely to occur when tolerated or appreciated by the affected subjects and the civil society. Collective support requires adequate communication and information. Furthermore, as reflected in the literature, the "importance of bottom-linked collective initiatives for social cohesion [and for] the process of knowledge production" (Hillmann 2019: 27) is evident, and it is also a base for the success of local integration processes. Therefore, communication and collab-

oration in both directions (“bottom-up” and “top-down”) should be improved and expanded. As a 2018 United Nations report stated, “promoting integration implies finding ways to foster cooperation and common approaches among institutions at all levels dealing with closely interrelated issues. [...] It also encompasses various modalities of engagement of non-state stakeholders in decision-making.” The following aspect and case are also relevant to the factors of collaboration and communication.

### *A lack of intercultural competences and knowledge in the institutions*

The need to bolster intercultural knowledge and competencies among the institutional staff is very relevant. This is reflected by my interviews as well as the first integration report on Marzahn-Hellersdorf, which states, “The strategy of intercultural, diversity-conscious, and non-discriminatory recruitment should be implemented in Marzahn-Hellersdorf so that the diversity of the population is reflected in the administrative staff and administrative actions. Greater value should be given to the importance of intercultural competence in applications” (Bezirkssamt Marzahn-Hellersdorf 2020: 21).

Of particular interest in this matter is the example of the BENN program. Most of my interviewees viewed the program as having significant potential to improve local integration work; however, in practice, the work within the program was deemed very ineffective due to a lack of intercultural knowledge and an unwillingness to work in a pro-active and integrative manner. Generally, the implementation of BENN in the same building as the District Coordination Office was perceived as a positive sign for intercultural and collaboration opportunities. Nonetheless, cooperation and effective work procedures were not possible. This is an alarming circumstance because the BENN project was specifically implemented to address the significant need for an integration workforce in the neighborhood. Additionally, one of my interviewees who works at a migration- and integration-related institution on the district level, described how it was not possible to replace unskilled, ineffective employees for years, until recently, because of the existing bureaucratic structures and institutional regulations: “The structures did not enable to replace or extend the staff—the structures in the administration are just super difficult to manage exchanging employees.”

Situations like this can lead to inactivity or resignations in an administrative area and hinder progress in local institutional work. Recent improvements for better intercultural working conditions in Marzahn-Nord can be seen in enhanced interventions like intercultural awareness trainings for employees in institutions at the district level since 2020 (ibid.: 23).

### ***Limited access to psychological therapies and treatment for refugees***

Psychological support offers are crucial for the success of integration work but often are unavailable for refugees. My interview participants noted that in the first years after the arrival of refugees to Marzahn-Nord (mainly from 2015 to 2017), many newcomers were clearly struggling from acute trauma and mental distress. Since then, additional long-term traumas have been recognized among the refugees. However, depending on an individual's legal status and language skills, access to therapeutic services is very limited. The following statement from one of my interviewees who works in a migration- and integration-related administrative institution shows a personal realization of being unable to provide support to a client facing trauma:

*“It is very difficult. Many tend to pop up as addicts or as hustlers or something. They are shouting, breaking things, vagabond around at night, etc. And if you then trace the matter back, you realize, yes, that they have been carrying around traumatic stress disorder for a long time. And then, it is not like we can say: “There’s therapy here, all wonderful.” It depends very much on the status and the corresponding status of health insurance. Because such psychotherapy is of course expensive. In addition, talk therapy makes no sense without an interpreter. And that is only offered by some providers, and they have very, very long waiting lists. Well, we really have a lot of psychosocial cases for which we have no capacities in therapeutic or group help refugee projects.”*

### ***The relatively isolating architecture and anonymity of the neighborhood combined with the spatially excluded and externally managed refugee accommodation***

Based on the experiences and perceptions of my interviewees, the isolating structure of vast social housing projects and the rare collective use of public spaces in Marzahn-Nord appear to hinder integration processes and personal interactions. This aspect could be addressed by extended and more sustainable versions of existing programs, like the aforementioned Social Cohesion program. The implementation of this socio-spatial program in the case area of Marzahn-Nord would be a first supportive action. On the broader district level (Marzahn-Hellersdorf), the aspect of social space development has again recently become a target of social policy and urban development programs that can also impact my research area (ibid.: 20).

In addition to the neighborhood architecture, the location, management procedures, and regulations of refugee accommodations in Marzahn-Nord can have a disintegrative effect on refugees. This is due to very limited promotion of self-reliance and rare opportunities for the residents to participate and make active choices regarding their living spaces. The disintegrative effects are exacerbated by the existing control mechanisms in the accommodation that are connected to



different institutions and actors at various governance levels. For example, one of my interviewees noted that the local management of the refugee accommodation has no decision-making authority concerning who can move into the accommodation. Instead, such decisions are made at the national and city levels. Furthermore, the local MUF-management is obliged to officially unregister a person who is absent for two weeks or more. This shows that, in the case of refugee accommodation, the local integration work is formally restricted by national and regional frameworks and therefore regulated by actors who are not necessarily in direct contact with the refugees nor informed about specific local situations. As a result, local actors often must address acute situations without having the full authorization to do so. One interviewee who works with refugee accommodations described how the local MUF management tries, to the extent possible, to “regulate everything individually with a sense of proportion.”

Several consequences of the described negative impacts on institutional integration work are also reflected by the perceptions and experiences of refugees. Three primary findings of my additional survey with refugees are as follows:

**First**, in the case of my survey group, only three participants reported that they had participated in an integration course, which includes German language lessons. This indicates that the vast majority of the refugees who participated in my survey (90%) had no access to an integration course, even though the courses should theoretically be provided and are obligatory for refugees with a permanent residence permit. Additionally, more than half of the refugees stated that they were unable to officially attain a level of German language skills that allows for independent use of the language in everyday life (indicated by levels B0, B1, or B2). Nonetheless, 38% of respondents were able to attain a basic level of German language skills (A0, A1, or A2) on their own or through other accessible language courses in the neighborhood. Only four participants stated that they had no official proof of language skills at all at the time of my fieldwork.

**Second**, more than 80% of the questioned refugees were unfamiliar with the local institutions and programs for integration work, including offered services, possible integrative benefits, and opportunities for social connections. Only three refugees stated that they had actual contact and interaction with the BENN program or the District Coordination Office.

**Third**, the number of survey participants who were unsatisfied with the living conditions in the refugee accommodation was equivalent to the number of refugees who were satisfied with the living conditions. Nonetheless, living in a refugee accommodation negatively affected the well-being of most participants.

However, it should be noted that the experiences of the interviewed refugees in Marzahn-Nord concerning their arrival and integration processes were diverse, and the responses also included various positive perceptions. In general, despite

the factors limiting access to integrative benefits and reducing the effectiveness of integration work in Marzahn-Nord, most of the refugees included in my study reported trust in (90%) and appreciation for (60%) the German institutions and their regulations and legal frameworks. This example indicates a bias in the perceptions of the institutional actors who are often confronted with challenging local cases and multiple ongoing political and social crises. My full PhD work, which includes various perceptions of the questioned refugees, provides a broader perspective.

***Opportunities for Innovation and Transformation Within Institutional Integration Work With Refugees and the Conflicting Role of Volunteer Work***

As my findings show, and as the discourse around migration and integration reflects, several perceived challenges occur in the field of institutional integration work in Germany. Therefore, innovative strategies and solutions can also emerge and promote transformation processes. Furthermore, the question of who takes what amount of risk and responsibility in such processes appears in my findings and should be addressed in further research.

My research findings in Marzahn-Nord indicate that the following factors can increase the potential for innovation and transformation: a) bolstered (urgent) communication and information gathering through additional institutional staff/positions, professional development, and intensified networking activities with enhanced top-down and bottom-up information flow (including from civil society and newcomers) and b) situational, irregular (and often informal) work activities and spontaneous improvisation by institutional actors. In those factors lies the potential for new input and inspiration, new approaches, and innovative local working methods that address the changing local situation and new working tasks.

The European Commission noted in 2020 that due to limited time and resources, local innovative solutions are created, including informal channels for sharing information and networks (Gauci 2020: 2). And Langer et al. (2019: 18 f.) note that when new and overarching networks of so-called “innovation alliances” arise, they can perform “a distributed and collective action that not only breaks routines but also challenges the framework conditions of existing processes.”

In the case of Marzahn-Nord, several strategies were utilized to address the increasing tasks of integration work with refugees under the aforementioned difficult circumstances. For example, social media and communication apps have become the primary means of sharing urgent information for both institutional networking and individual refugee-case communication. My interviewees described social media and communication apps as mostly informal but regularly used tools for exchanges between institutional actors and individuals or groups of refugees. This development was catalyzed by pandemic-related restrictions in Berlin 2020 and 2021. The following quotes (the first from an actor in the field of social neighborhood work and the second from an actor at an administrative

institution for migration and integration on the district level) reflect the mostly informal and personal handling of social media and communication apps within current institutional integration work in Marzahn-Nord:

*“There are many women who have my private number and who also write on weekends—that they have received mail or have a problem. I have contacts with them through WhatsApp, through email, but mostly through WhatsApp, for example for bringing me documents. WhatsApp, even without Corona, works for me. Has also worked before. But I don’t give my number to everyone.”*

*“Refugees do a lot via WhatsApp and Facebook. But I can’t. I have a data protection officer, I cannot even convene a Zoom conference. But there are quite a lot of people in the integration work that work with WhatsApp and Facebook and communicate their offers over it. And they do that somehow in the framework of the project—even when that’s not being specially funded or anything, but I can’t do that directly. But I think it makes sense.”*

These quotes show that there are opportunities and risks associated with informal, innovative work tools and strategies. On the one hand, modern communication techniques were described in the interviews as crucial for personal support and interaction. On the other hand, the privacy of those involved is not officially secured, and the necessary resources and capacities for this kind of communication are thus far not provided by state institutions or programs. This study does not address the question of how personal selection processes and delegated responsibilities are handled—nor the factors of individual risk and self-protection. Therefore, further discussion regarding how to transform this informal mode of communication into an official work tool of integration services is required. This should occur in a way that prevents a loss of trust in the existing exchange between the individual refugees/migrants and the individual institutional actors.

Generally, the factors that can support local innovation processes (such as enhanced bottom-up processes, improved networking, and situational work practices) can also have counterproductive impacts on local institutional integration work if they are not formalized nor supported with sufficient capacities and resources. Specifically, transparent communication (internal and external) regarding the necessary changes to institutional work practices and long-term local transformation processes is central to sustainable innovation processes. This is especially important in the case of an increased activation of parts of civil society and the inclusion of volunteer work in the broader tasks of institutionalized integration work—as has been the case in the matter of refugee arrival and integration in Marzahn-Nord.

Often, voluntary work by the civil society in Marzahn-Nord has filled gaps in integration work and services, especially concerning one-on-one communication with refugees. This is perceived and judged by the institutional actors who I in-

interviewed as important but also challenging. One of my interviewees who works for a state-funded, integration-related program described the situation with volunteers as follows:

*“We have many problems with volunteers, because in the end they simply can go and do not have to bear the consequences—because they are not responsible. The main problem is actually: This helps manifesting an asymmetry. There are these drawers of exoticization accompanied by a certain self-aggrandizement. Some say, ‘Only I can help—I will show the way.’ Plus, the state-bashing. So, a kind of megalomania. If then, for example, a refugee doesn’t accept their offers or is not on time—then it tips over very quickly into a strong rejection. Then quite quickly they are overwhelmed by their own helplessness.”*

As this quote underlines, volunteer work can be a “double-edged sword” (Bunderson & Thompson 2009) accompanied by “dysfunctional practices” (Sandberg & Robichau 2022). In their paper “Struggling with Meaningfulness when Context Shifts,” Florian et al. (2018) describe how the discourse regarding volunteer work with refugees, as well as the motivation among volunteers, has shifted since 2014. They also note that the position of volunteer work in Germany became more challenging: “Societal discourses portrayed this volunteer work as extraordinarily meaningful. [...] Later, shifting discursive and organizational contexts challenged their framings. Instead of letting go, [this process] triggered volunteers to reframe their experience in dysfunctional ways in order to sustain their sense of meaningfulness” (ibid.).

The example of volunteer work for refugees in Marzahn-Nord highlights how the challenging conditions of institutional integration work and the related, controversial discourse on migration and integration are connected to the potential for wider misperceptions and social conflicts. Such an atmosphere of divergent perspectives can hinder constructive exchange and limit the likelihood of collective solutions. Consequently, the European Commission (Gauci 2020) judges the increased “reliance on volunteers” as negatively impacting the sustainability of institutional activities “although it does contribute to making integration a shared endeavor.”

Whether immigration processes will generate resources and provide potential for helpful innovation and a sustainable, integrative urban transformation or instead deepen social conflicts and socio-spatial disparities in cities depends, among other things, on the shape of integrative social politics, including institutional work, political fundings, and local interventions. One of my study’s participants, who works in the area of district administration, summarized the main conclusion when they stated the following:

*“In the end, we can only change the integration offers and work, not the people.”*

## **Conclusion: Flight- and Migration-Related Integration Work as a Lighthouse**

The theoretical analyses in this chapter have shown that integration processes can be characterized and addressed by the quality of being able to use and develop capabilities—and that migration and integration processes can promote innovation and transformation in social, institutional, and urban contexts. In particular, the empirical findings highlighted that addressing new local circumstances, like the arrival of refugees to Berlin, can lead to improvisation and promote supportive, but often initially informal, innovative work strategies in integration-related institutions. However, factors that hinder a broader and more sustainable implementation of useful innovative work practices also became evident.

The two primary obstacles for sustainable integration work identified by my research are a) that the institutional social work system is overburdened and under equipped and b) that refugees, in particular those without a permanent residence permit, are not officially a primary target group of the German integration narrative and policies. These two factors are reflected by an enduring lack of sufficient resources and instability in funding of refugee-related local integration work in the Berlin neighborhood of Marzahn-Nord. Additionally, my research identified ambiguities in the distribution of tasks and responsibilities and communication difficulties in interdisciplinary and interdepartmental cooperation. Furthermore, impractical bureaucratic structures and institutional frameworks that are connected to overstraining administrative tasks have counterproductive impacts on integration work in Marzahn-Nord.

Bureaucratic structures can be useful in limiting the arbitrary use of state power and impeding corruption processes by binding institutional work to verifiable laws and administrative procedures. However, the existing formal regulations, combined with the insufficient economical resources and understaffed work areas, do not meet the practical needs in the institutions and neighborhood.

Moreover, institutional integration work can be influenced by further factors, such as the broader economic situation in Germany and Europe or the general acceptance of integration-related social policies within civil society. As this chapter shows, even supplementary volunteer work can have an unintended, counterproductive impact on integration processes and integration work.

Improving the conditions of institutional integration work in Marzahn-Nord as well as increasing the possibility of sustainable innovation and transformation processes requires intercultural competencies and collaboration among institutional actors and politicians at all levels, including the continuous coordination of (sufficient) resources and tasks among the various integration-related and socio-spatial municipal and local services, projects, and fundings. This should be supported by a comprehensive understanding of existing and missing opportunity

structures and pathways to self-reliance for migrants/refugees.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach offers comprehensive criteria for the evaluation and shaping of integration-related institutional work and can support existing services and actors who already promote and foster collective, integrative development of urban neighborhoods. Nussbaum's approach would also encourage civil society and individuals to act further in this direction. This outlook aligns with the first integration report on Marzahn-Hellersdorf, which states that analyzing integration processes on a local level "should be an incentive for the many actors who are involved in integration work every day—whether full-time or on a voluntary basis—in their efforts to achieve a peaceful, tolerant and solidary cooperation" (Bezirksamt Marzahn-Hellersdorf 2020: 3).

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# CHAPTER 9

## Negotiating the Spaces of Self-Employed Asian Migrants: The Dong Xuan Center and Thai Park in Berlin as Case Studies

MinJi Kim

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### Abstract

Berlin has gradually become more diverse as the number of migrants living in the city increases. Although the presence of Asians in the city's food scene has been apparent since the 2000s, there has been limited research analyzing them as active actors who contribute to spatial transformation at the local level. This chapter aims to explore how two groups of Asian migrants, Thai and Vietnamese, have become active urban actors in Berlin's new spatial production through their involvement in entrepreneurial economic and spatial practices via municipal documents, the marketplaces' official websites, and field research. The research compares two Berlin marketplaces from the perspective of migrants' backgrounds, their self-employed economic engagement, and the spatial formation of the markets. Additionally, the chapter addresses spatial conflicts related to legal matters and explores how migrants have engaged in planning processes.

## Introduction

The recent petition to preserve Berlin's so-called "Thai Park" has highlighted an ongoing issue threatening the existence of the vibrant Thai market, which is located on the west side of the city. Since Thai Park has been involved in conflicts with its neighbors, challenges have repeatedly emerged. This phenomenon is also found in other migrant-run marketplaces within Berlin. In the eastern part of the city, the Vietnamese-operated Dong Xuan wholesale center serves as an additional illustration of difficulties between a migrant-run marketplace and local authorities regarding land use issues (Schmiz & Kitzmann, 2017). These spatial disputes motivated me to examine not only the contentiousness of spaces managed by migrants but also the role of migrants in spatial transformation more generally. Migrants have often found themselves in a marginalized position rather than being recognized as active "urban actors," particularly within the context of urban planning processes meant to address such challenges.

Thus, this chapter aims to explore how Asian migrants have become urban actors in Berlin's spatial transformation by engaging in economic and spatial practices as entrepreneurs and by participating in the negotiation process related to the spatial conflicts. This study adopts two Asian marketplaces,<sup>1</sup> the Vietnamese-run Dong Xuan Center and Thai Park. Adopting Lefebvre's (1991, p. 26) approach to the production of social space, this research considers the migrant entrepreneurs in the two cases to be urban actors who were actively involved in the establishment of the marketplaces. It investigates how migrants became engaged in self-employed economic practices since their arrival, and it examines their roles in the spatial evolution of the marketplaces. Furthermore, by tracing how migrants' position has shifted from a marginal position in the opportunity structure (Hillmann, 2011) to an active role in economic practices and new spatial production, this chapter conveys how they engaged in spatial negotiation to address spatial contentiousness.

Concerning the contentious nature of these two Asian marketplaces, previous research has revealed the precariousness associated with the management of migrant spaces by Berlin's local authorities (Kreichauff et al., 2020; Schmiz, 2016; Schmiz & Kitzmann, 2017; Haid, 2017). My research builds on the existing literature by providing a more recent overview of the transformation process, with an emphasis on the role of migrant entrepreneurs in the process of spatial production and transformation. The local scale of spatial production and the related planning process are examined because research on these issues has mostly been at the broader regional and national levels, which do not always align with more local levels (Dimitriadis et al., 2021). Despite local authorities' efforts to support multicultural spaces, Schmiz and Kitzmann (2017, p. 3) note that national-level policies limit the integration possibilities of "ethno-cultural diversity into German planning culture," because the policies maintain

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1 In this study, "Asia" refers to East and Southeast Asia.

strict planning frameworks and an ethno-assimilationist approach.

This chapter begins by outlining the theoretical foundations that support the approach viewing migrants as urban actors who contribute to urban spatial production. It then introduces the research framework used to compare the two cases as well as the methodology employed. Subsequently, the chapter describes the contextual background of the case studies and analyzes them in detail. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments presented and offers suggestions for further research.

### **Migrants as Actors in Spatial Transformations**

In the contemporary city, migrants have actively been engaged in urban economic and political transformation as part of the global migration process (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009; Hillmann, 2021). Nevertheless, they have primarily been seen as occupying a marginal position, situated at the edges of the host society. This research adopts the term “marginal” from Hillmann (2011, p. 16), because the term focuses on the shift of migrants’ position in urban development. Hillmann explains how the term better reflects the dynamic status from “perceived as marginal” to “a more central position” than “precariousness” does. Traditionally, migrants have been seen as passive participants in the urban context, subject to an invasive process of change. To comprehend this, it is essential to grasp the migration backgrounds. This element significantly influences migrants’ social and political status, often leading them to pursue self-employment, as shown in my case studies. In this regard, Kloosterman, Van der Leun, and Rath (1999) emphasized the significance of understanding ethnic entrepreneurship within a broader context that embeds social, economic, and politico-institutional factors, as encapsulated in the concept of the mixed embeddedness.

This chapter further extends this concept with a focus on spatial and cultural perspectives. Despite the increasing role of migrants (who are perceived as marginal) in economic, social, and political aspects, research has not often focused on their spatial contribution as entrepreneurs, especially at local levels (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). Aytar and Rath (2012) explain that easy immersion into migrant-run culinary experiences allows for the enjoyment of leisure and consumption in a particular place. According to Rudolph and Hillmann (1997, p. 5), this was already reflected by the growing migrant-run food sector in Berlin. As migrants’ economic accomplishments gained visibility, it led to a shift in perception (Sales et al., 2011, p. 204), gradually elevating the popularity of migrant-operated spaces.

Specifically, this research focuses on the spatial formation process by migrants. Lefebvre highlights the production process, which mobilizes spatial elements such as resources and tools (1991, p. 26). Accordingly, he distinguishes society



members through daily routines and reproduced by social relations (*ibid.*). Thus, this research sees migrants as society members who take an active role in spatial production.

Moreover, a transnational comparison of the arrival and home cities contributes to the understanding of how migrants regard space production in relation to their attachment to other places, such as their places of origin (Anthias, 1998, p. 55; Bromber, 2013, p. 63). In this sense, it is important to assess how migrants link their emotions or imagination to places in their hometowns. In both of my study cases, migrants utilized spatial elements of their hometowns in new marketplaces.

## **Research Framework**

The analysis of the two cases mainly draws on municipal documents, two cases' websites, and social media profiles. The aim of the research was to understand the role of migrants in spatial production, and it was useful to investigate how they marketize the marketplaces as well as what they express through social media. Furthermore, this research is related to my dissertation project and based on findings from field research that included 23 semi-structured interviews with Asian entrepreneurs in Berlin, numerous casual interviews, and field observations conducted between 2021 and 2023. The interviewees included two Thai vendors, an association related to Thai Park, and three entrepreneurial tenants of Dong Xuan Center.

To answer the main research question, this study compares two cases in four parts that address each of the following: migrants' contextual backgrounds and positions, the production of market spaces, the contentiousness surrounding the spaces, and the planning process that aimed to resolve the challenges. First, the study contextualizes the two Asian groups' migration backgrounds from a social and political perspective via media analysis and existing literature, to better understand their paths to self-employment. Vietnamese and Thai migrants have different historical backgrounds, but, as ethnic minorities in Berlin, both groups have many self-employed members due to underprivileged social and political conditions after migration.

Second, this study explores how the two self-employed migrant groups established their respective marketplaces via a literature review. The Vietnamese case involves a wholesale market, located outside Berlin's inner city, that obtained legal permission to operate from the time of its formation. In contrast, the Thai case is an open-air market that is held on specific days within the inner city and which was initiated without legal clarity regarding its operations. Despite their different contexts, both migrant groups engaged in spatial activities that eventually led to their spatial representation and the establishment of diverse cultural destinations in Berlin. Furthermore, through media analysis, this study investigated how transnational design ideas are mobilized in the process of spatial production.

Third, this research examines the challenges faced by the two migrant-operated spaces. The cases have encountered contentious (political) situations, including issues related to specific ethnic groups' imagery, illegal activities, and urban development expansion. In both cases, land use conflicts arose due to the presence of unofficial commercial activities, and the spatial configuration of migrants collided with local authorities. Land use conflicts—a focus of this thesis—are relatively common in migrant-run spaces within cities (Isin & Siemiatycki, 1999). This part of the study actively utilized analysis of social media and municipal documents to understand stakeholders' positions and relationships through their official publications.

Lastly, the study explains the steps and processes for migrants to be recognized as “official” urban actors who can participate in the “official” urban planning process to resolve conflicts. It took considerable time for participatory planning processes to be adopted and for migrants to achieve political recognition as urban actors capable of contributing to urban spatial transformation. As a counterpart, the bottom-up approaches to the conflict are also introduced.

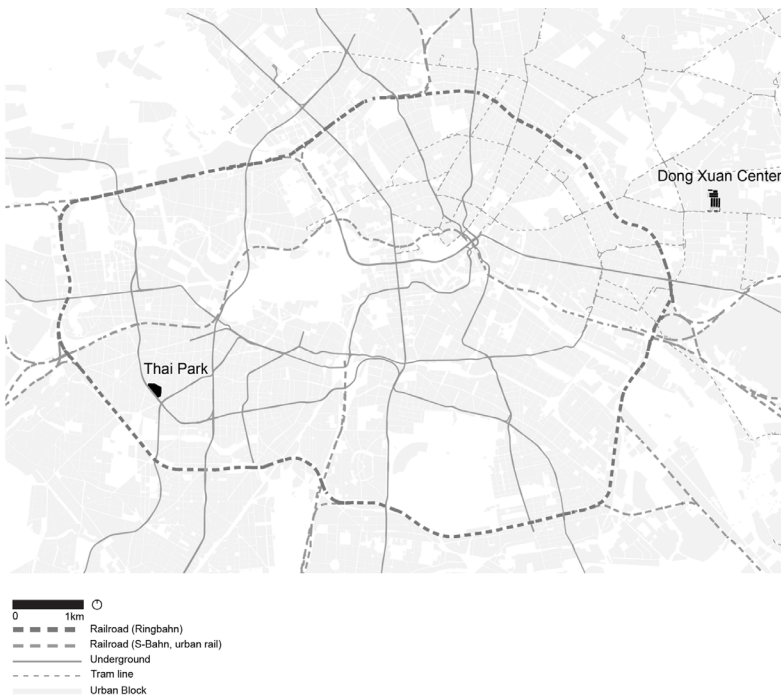


Fig. 9.1 – The location of Thai Park and Dong Xuan Center and public transportation networks in Berlin  
Source: Author, based on Google Maps | protected by copyright.

## Dong Xuan Center

The Dong Xuan Center, one of the largest indoor Asian markets in Europe, plays a vital role in supporting Vietnamese small businesses across the city. Located approximately 7 kilometers from the city center, the Dong Xuan Center is accessible via several tram lines that connect the central area of Berlin to the outlying areas in the eastern part of city. The Dong Xuan Center is bordered by Herzbergstrasse to the south, Vulkanstrasse to the west, and Reinhardtsbrunner Strasse to the north, with other industrial buildings in the surrounding area. It occupies around 165,000 square meters in a former industrial area.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike many other capital cities or metropolises around the world that have a prominent Chinatown as a representation of Asian spatial presence and the large Asian population, Berlin does not have a Chinatown nor a dominant Chinese community.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the Vietnamese population holds a significant presence among Berlin residents with a migration background. Among the top ten countries of origin for migration in Berlin, Vietnam is the only Asian country, accounting for approximately 2% of the total migrant population (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2020). In 2020, the Vietnamese community in Berlin was estimated to include around 19,475 individuals, making it one of the largest Asian communities in the city (*ibid.*). Vietnamese influence is evident in the city's retail sector, with a multitude of Vietnamese-owned businesses and stores, including flower shops, nail studios, hairdressers, and food establishments. These businesses are found in areas with substantial Vietnamese populations, such as the districts of Marzahn and Lichtenberg, as well as scattered throughout the city.

To understand how the Vietnamese population became so prominent, it is necessary to examine the migration backgrounds of the two primary Vietnamese groups in Germany. Individuals from Southern Vietnam, often referred to as “boat people,” arrived as refugees in West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s. The Vietnamese refugees in West Berlin were relatively dispersed throughout the city, and they benefited from social welfare programs, such as language courses, which aided their integration (Hillmann, 2005, p. 88). Hillmann also mentions that due to the political circumstances, these migrants opted against returning to Vietnam, which further facilitated their integration into Germany. On the other hand, the second group of Vietnamese individuals came from Northern Vietnam as contract workers (*Vertragsarbeiter*) after 1987, primarily to work in factories—such as those producing textiles and metals—where no professional training was required

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2 This site has a history of industrial use since 1872, with various products manufactured there over the years, including alcohol measuring equipment, carbon lamps, silicon carbide heating rods, war-related products during both World Wars, and eventually coal. However, in the late 1990s, coal production ceased with the intervention of a US company, and only a small number of the original industrial buildings remain next to the Dong Xuan Center.

3 The early Chinese community in Berlin was established in the City West district of Charlottenburg in the 20th century, mirroring the historical backgrounds of Chinatowns in other cities (Kim, forthcoming). However, due to the impact of World War II and the division of Germany, a significant number of Chinese migrants returned to China.

(Hillmann, 2005, pp. 90–93). Consequently, the social conditions of these two Vietnamese groups differed within the city of Berlin. After German reunification, the contract workers who came to East Germany lost their legal status and jobs. To secure their livelihoods, many of them turned to self-employment; it was the only way for them to obtain a lawful residence permit. This led to a sudden increase in Vietnamese-owned small businesses in Berlin, and the Vietnamese in West Berlin followed the example set by their compatriots in East Berlin (Hillmann, 2005).

Nonetheless, operating a business was challenging for Vietnamese entrepreneurs, as they had to contend with prejudices linked to their image and limited business prospects. Following the termination of contracts held by Vietnamese migrants in East Berlin, their ambiguous legal status led to the emergence of frequent criminal activities. These illicit activities shaped a prevalent image of Vietnamese populace in eastern Berlin that subsequently expanded to include the previously well-regarded Vietnamese population in western Berlin, influencing perceptions throughout the city (Bösch & Su, 2018, p. 12). As a result, many Vietnamese businesses initially hid their Vietnamese identity and instead adopted other Asian identities, such as Chinese, Thai, or Japanese. Some simply used the word “Asian” on their storefronts. Exacerbating the situation, Vietnamese migrants were compelled to compete with other migrant cohorts following the influx of new migrants from Africa and Eastern Europe that coincided with the implementation of more stringent asylum regulations (Bösch & Su, 2018, p. 4).

The presence of Vietnamese gastronomy in Berlin increased starting in 2002, when there were initial project ideas to create ethnically themed areas, including an “Asiantown” or a Chinatown<sup>4</sup> on both the east and west sides of Berlin. At the time, the city of Berlin demonstrated its interest in Asian entrepreneurs for political and economic integration reasons. However, the plans were unsuccessful due to a lack of communication between the local authorities and migrant groups and a failure to consider the peculiarity of the ethnocultural aspects (Schmiz, 2016, p. 11). Nonetheless, the discussions about creating an Asian-themed area provided an opportunity for Vietnamese entrepreneurs to establish businesses with openly Vietnamese identities (Bui, 2003, p. 204; Schmiz, 2016, p. 6).

It was around this time that the Dong Xuan Center<sup>5</sup> was built in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg, which is home to a large Vietnamese population. In 2005, Nguyen Van Hien built the Dong Xuan Center at its current location after purchasing the land two years earlier. Nguyen, a former Vietnamese contract worker who became unemployed after German reunification, drew inspiration from a similar wholesale market in Poland while he was running his previous clothing

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<sup>4</sup> See Schmiz (2016) for further information.

<sup>5</sup> Before the current Dong Xuan Center was established, entrepreneurial Vietnamese initiatives resulted in a wholesale market nearby in the mid-1990s with more than 50 traders and 100 employees (Hillmann, 2005, pp. 95–96; Schmiz, 2016, p. 7).

shop. He named the center “Dong Xuan,” which means “spring meadow” in Vietnamese, a reference to a traditional and symbolic market of the same name in the city center of Hanoi, Vietnam. The Dong Xuan Center in Berlin has since surpassed its Hanoi counterpart in size and significance.

The tenants of the Dong Xuan Center are predominantly Vietnamese, and the area has been coined “Little Hanoi.” However, it is also home to communities with other migration backgrounds. Currently, around 80% of the tenants are Vietnamese, while the remaining businesses are owned by Indian, Chinese, and Pakistani individuals (Figge, 2019). The center serves as a vital hub for the Vietnamese community in Berlin, not only as a distribution center for products but also as a significant source of employment and income for many small business owners. According to Weißenhorn (2018), around 1,500 Vietnamese individuals worked there as of 2018, while Mai (2020) put the number at around 2,000 as of 2020. With over 400 businesses, the Dong Xuan Center wields considerable economic influence (Das Dong Xuan Center, 2020). Additionally, the center hosts diverse cultural programs, including Asian New Year festivals and even private celebration parties. It also serves as a platform for artistic exhibitions, such as an exhibition by Vietnamese artist Sung Tieu. The center is not only a trading place; it also facilitates communication and integration through initiatives funded by the Lichtenberg district, such as the installation of a suggestion box (Kummerkasten) as a communication tool.

In response to the increasing demand from locals and tourists, Dong Xuan GmbH, the entity responsible for running and managing the Dong Xuan Center, envisioned the creation of “Asiatown” and applied for building permission in 2008, with the aim of expanding the existing center. The Asiatown plan involved adding more cultural buildings and a hotel (guesthouse) to accommodate visitors, taking inspiration from the Chinatown model. However, this plan faced pushback from the local authority concerning land use. According to Schmiz and Kitzmann (2017, p. 6), the expansion plan ignited disputes regarding tolerated zoning regulations that do not officially permit retail stores in the area. Specifically, the disputes pertained to the Urban Development Plan for Industry and Commerce and the Urban Development Plan for Centers. The former was challenged based on the presence of retail stores in the area, while the latter was questioned regarding the role of the location in relation to its function as a regional commercial center.<sup>6</sup> These conflicts hindered further developments. Additionally, the preexisting image of illegal activity influenced the city’s hesitance to embrace the idea of an Asiatown within the Dong Xuan Center (Schmiz, 2016). There have been reports of fires at the center, and the center has been repeatedly suspected of involvement in illegal activities, such as cigarette smuggling.

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6 See Schmiz and Kitzmann 2017 for further information.

However, the Dong Xuan Center holds value as both a retail store and a wholesale market, distinguishing it from other wholesale markets. Restructuring the center to allow only wholesale operations would likely result in many retailers losing their jobs, and it could lead to the loss of a vital source of goods and community connection. Thus, Dong Xuan GmbH found itself embroiled in a power struggle with the local authority regarding the expansion of its buildings; its notable touristic, cultural, and economic value; and the tolerated special regulation (Kreichauf, Rosenberger, & Strobel, 2020, p. 50).

It was not until the summer of 2016 that the construction of the guesthouse (H24 Hotel Berlin-Lichtenberg) was completed, marking the first non-commercial expansion. The following expansion, the Culture House (Kulturhaus), which is located along Herzbergstrasse on the industrial heritage site, was built between 2018 and 2022. However, during the construction, the Culture House faced delays because the city no longer tolerated the special rule allowing retail shops in the industrial area. To address the issue, Dong Xuan GmbH participated in a formal planning process with the local authority starting in 2018 (Simon, 2021). Four assemblies, held between 2018 and 2021, aimed to reach an agreement on the development and resolve the contentious legal issues.

The following excerpts, from an assembly in 2021, depict the viewpoints of the two opposing stakeholders. The quotations highlight yet another tolerated special regulation allowing the center to operate on Sundays and remain closed on Tuesdays, an uncommon practice in Germany, and the exploitation of female workers in terms of working conditions. The former tactic is one of the ways the center appeals to both locals and tourists, producing a larger number of visitors. Based on field observations, this strategy made Sundays the busiest day at the center. The following quotes are from the assembly meeting in 2021 between the local authority and the Dong Xuan GmbH.

*“Lichtenberg’s building councilor (Baustadtrat in German, SPD) Kevin Hönicke demanded legal clearance to remove the special regulation tolerating the opening hours on Sunday without permission and addressing the issue of extremely low-paid hairdressers. This could burden the workers there, especially women. In addition, the Lichtenberg district office requested clarity on the development plan (Bebauungsplan) that the retail shops in the wholesale halls can be relocated directly to Herzbergstrasse with official permission, and the office hoped that the working conditions can be better controlled.”*  
(cited from Simon, 2021, my translation)

This statement was then refuted by Nguyen, who stated the following:

*“The proposed changes and potential relocation of the retail shops can lead to a decrease in the cultural value of the center and may not be well-received by clients who are accustomed to the current location.”* (cited from Simon, 2021, my translation)

## Thai Park: From a Picnic Spot to an Official Street Market

Thai Park, as an open-air market, showcases Berlin's multiculturalism in a public park by attracting a diverse range of visitors, including residents and tourists. It opens every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10 am to 8 pm. Thai Park is held in Preussenpark in Berlin's Wilmersdorf district, approximately 6 kilometers from the city center. The park, which was designed in 1905 as a monument to Prussia's past, covers an area of around 55,000 square meters and is bordered by Brandenburgische Strasse, Fehrbelliner Platz, Wuerttembergische Strasse, and Pommersche Strasse. The park's accessibility via public transportation (it is located between two subway stations) and its greenery make it a popular destination for both locals and tourists. The park is characterized by a spacious meadow surrounded by old trees, making it an ideal location for picnics, sun bathing, and outdoor activities during the summer.

Preussenpark's transformation into an international food spot reflects the type of migration that occurs from Thailand to Germany, especially among Thai females, who mainly operate the Thai food market stalls. The gender ratio of Thai migrants in Germany is skewed heavily towards females, with approximately seven times more females (around 49,031) than males (around 6,440) in 2021 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). Since the 1960s, many Thai female migrants have come to Germany to marry German men or other foreigners (Sinsuwan, 2018, p. 7). Many Thai female migrants face difficulty learning German and have a limited education, which restricts their employment opportunities in the local labor market (Ayuwat & Piayura, 2020, p. 265; Sinsuwan, 2018, p. 9). As a result, many Thai women in Germany have decided to pursue self-employment or work as housewives.

The characteristics of Thai female migrants in Germany, as highlighted by Ayuwat and Piayura (2020, p. 266), include a strong sense of community and social bonding within the Thai community. Although the migrants adapt well to German culture, social activities and mutual assistance are highly valued among Thai migrants, leading to gatherings and shared experiences within their community (Thongsawang, 2017, p. 5). In Berlin, Thai female migrants have gathered at Thai run cafes or public spaces to continue their social activities, with some gatherings even attracting tourists. The promotion and dissemination of Thai culture by those of other nationalities (Ayuwat & Piayura, 2020, p. 267) further contributes to the visibility and popularity of Thai cultural activities in public spaces.

The emergence of Thai Park as a culinary destination in Preussenpark began in 1992 with four German-Thai families who regularly held picnics in the park, bringing their own homemade dishes (Thai Park in Berlin, 2021). The fact that Thai culture is well-known beyond the Thai community (Ayuwat & Piayura, 2020, p. 267) has contributed to the transformation of regular picnics held by Thai families or Thai females in a public place into a marketplace, namely Thai Park.

The park's resemblance to the Sanam Luang, a large field in front of the sacred Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace in Bangkok (Tippawan, 2014, p. 21), may have influenced the decision of Thai families and female migrants to use it as a regular picnic spot.

The original market was established on the green meadow and had a casual, picnic like atmosphere. This is why Thai Park was formerly referred to as "Thaiwiese" (Thai meadow) in German. People spread out mats, sat on the grass, and set up umbrellas. They brought cooked meals in picnic-style food boxes, relishing the experience of sharing both the food and their life stories. As the community grew, more families from Thai, Laotian, Cambodian, and Filipino backgrounds joined, sharing their traditional foods. Gradually, the picnickers started to bring cooking utensils so that they could prepare simple dishes. Because the attendees knew each other, implicit rules developed; for instance, different people would bring different types of food. They laid out around 10 to 20 mats upon which they sat and shared meals when their children returned from playing. The children of those who sold food at the time would eat on the side and then spend time playing and resting. The space served as a leisure area for the families. Then, in the mid-2010s, the trend of picnicking in the park gained popularity, and the number of mats gradually increased, surpassing 100. Local businesspeople recognized the potential and began to establish small stalls to sell their hometown foods, which further increased the popularity of Thai Park. This was due to the addition of various Asian cuisines similar to Thai cuisine, contributing to the diversity of national dishes available.

However, as the market grew, concerns about disturbances were raised. The market operated informally without official permission from the local authorities, which led to complaints from residents of the neighborhood. Issues such as noise, litter, and congestion became a source of contention in the area. Safety and sanitation concerns also emerged, prompting local authorities to crack down on the market. Police and city officials made regular visits to the park, confiscating goods and equipment from vendors. These enforcement actions created tension within the community. Despite the official interventions, the food vendors would temporarily leave with their belongings to avoid the authorities and then return to resume selling their food. This repetitive pattern of evading officials and continuing the market operations became a kind of "theatricality of polyvalent performances," as described by Haid (2017, p. 296).

In the summer of 2017, the district office of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf began discussing issues related to Thai Park, including hygiene concerns, damage to sun bathing lawns, and violations of park regulations (Woolsey, 2017; Das offizielle Hauptstadtportal, 2022). One year later, the district office, by resolution of the district council (BVV, Bezirksverordnetenversammlung), began to develop a redesign plan to address these issues while considering the importance of the market's unique atmosphere and the park's accessibility to all visitors. The goal was to find a design solution that would clearly define the market



area and preserve the green meadow (Das offizielle Hauptstadtportal, 2022). A plan to close the market was suspended pending the final decision on the redesign. The uncertainty surrounding the market's existence threatened the livelihoods of Thai vendors who relied on it for employment (Brühl, 2019).

At the first civic engagement process, more than 100 residents selected a new concept for the park from a student landscape competition, and it was published in 2019. It was then developed by the landscape architect Chapatti Staubach. The concept was presented at a town hall meeting in February 2020. The new concept included three different types of areas within the park: a nature park, a traditional park, and a modern active park. In the active section, a new space was established for a 1,200-square-meter market. This space was intended for 60 new tent-like stalls, reducing the number of stalls from the previous 100. Additionally, the other parts of park were designated for playgrounds and leisure areas.

In 2021, after a lengthy process that began in 2018, an agreement was reached to approve Thai Park as an official market. Citizen participation was emphasized from the early stages of the process to ensure that diverse perspectives were considered. The collective efforts of the Thai vendors, who established an association in December 2020 (Thailändischer Verein in Berlin e.V.), empowered Thai women to participate in the official participatory planning process with the district office. This association served as an organizer for the vendors by supplying shared assistance tools and representing them in the planning process.

The nexus Institute, as a mediator of the civic engagement process, employed various methods to evaluate and collect ideas.<sup>7</sup> The final design of Thai Park was the outcome of extensive consultation and collaboration among various stakeholders, including politicians, local businesses represented by the newly formed association, experts, specialists, and citizens. The new plan that was approved in 2021 incorporated the creation of an official market area that was temporarily adjusted during COVID-19. The originally planned 60 stalls were replaced with 30 stalls and related infrastructure, as well as regulations ensuring safety and sanitation through the issuance of legal licenses (Rote Karte). The market's official reopening took place in August 2021 under the name "Thai-Streetfood-Markt." However, the vendors bring and install their own tents, a task that cannot be completed by one person alone. As a result, the vendors typically rely on support from family members and relatives, or they hire workers under legal contracts. Moreover, they use their own sources of heat for cooking and reusable utensils, which they bring home for washing due to the lack of access to anything other than drinking water.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the district office (2022), the project process included a citizen meeting (February 2020), an online event for evaluation and idea collection (February to October 2020), expert interviews with representatives of the main user groups (October 2020), and thematic specialist discussions between representatives of the specialist offices, planning office, relevant actors, relevant user groups, and randomly selected citizen (at the end of April and beginning of May 2021). Additionally, an interactive online public citizen meeting was held.

In addition to the public process, there were bottom-up efforts to preserve the Thai street market. An exhibition called “Beyond the kitchen – Stories from the Thai Park” was held at the Museum Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf from March to July 2020. Collaborating with the *un.thai.tled* artist collective, the exhibition aimed to draw attention to the Thai market and showcase the migration backgrounds of Thai women by tracing the biographies of the cooks and the development of Thai Park. The exhibition contributed to forming a community of memory around the market, and it included depictions of the original Thai market (see Figure 9.2) (Museum Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, 2020). Furthermore, in 2021, a German film and TV production company, Tokee Bros, shot a travel documentary featuring Thai Park as a multicultural culinary destination in Berlin. These bottom-up efforts, including the exhibition and documentary, played a role in raising awareness about the Thai Park and its cultural value, contributing to the ongoing discussions and decision-making process regarding the market’s future.

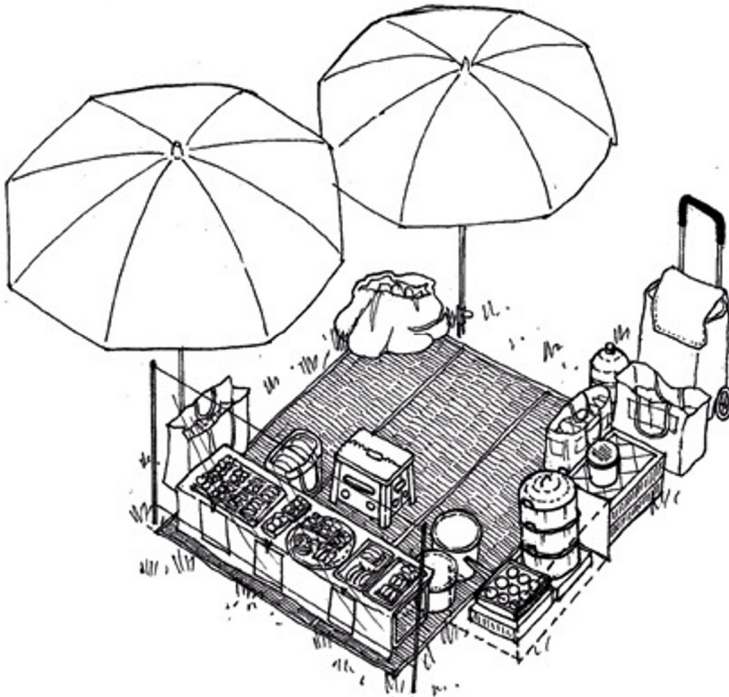


Fig. 9.2 – The makeshift Thai Park kitchen

Source: Drawing from the exhibition “Beyond the kitchen - Stories from the Thai Park” by Hatairatana in 2019  
<https://www.villa-oppenheim-berlin.de/ausstellungen/archiv-ausstellungen/jenseits-der-kueche-geschichten-aus-dem-thai-park> | protected by copyright.

## Conclusion

The comparison of the Dong Xuan Center and Thai Park shows how migrants have played an active role in the process of multicultural spatial production. Both Vietnamese and Thai self-employed migrants in Berlin actively engage with the spaces daily, promoting diversity in Berlin and profiting from the touristic and economic potential of their marketplaces. A broader perspective on migration backgrounds, extending Kloosterman et al.'s (1999) mixed embeddedness concept, helps situate migrants' space through understanding their social, political, cultural, and economical positions. Thai Park has been shaped by aspects of Thai culture and the social circumstances of Thai migrants, while Dong Xuan Center has predominantly been driven by economic motivations reminiscent of those found in Chinatowns in other cities, which serve not only as commercial zones but also multifaceted cultural spaces.

Furthermore, issues regarding legal land use have hindered migrants' further use of the spaces in this study. Both of the study's cases continue to face the risk of having to relocate or close due to land use regulations. However, it is important to focus not only on the illegal aspects of the spatial activities but also on aspects related to their historically formed marginal positions and subsequent political participation in the planning process. To participate in the negotiation process of conflictual spaces, Thai female migrants formed an association, reflecting migrants' ability to be active urban players. Similarly, the Dong Xuan Center GmbH joined an official negotiation process with the local authority, weighing their desired expansion plan against tolerated activities.

This research emphasizes the need for a sustained focus on the ongoing, unfinished negotiation process of the two marketplaces and associated forthcoming actions. Subsequent research could address the following topics pertaining to these cases and other migrant-run marketplaces. Although migrants are actively engaging in the urban planning process, they are still often treated as a homogeneous group. It is important for future research to recognize that these migrant groups are composed of diverse subgroups. In the case of the Dong Xuan Center, it remains crucial to gain insights from a broader range of perspectives, including not only those of the municipality and Dong Xuan Center GmbH but also of business owners, workers, neighboring entities, and local residents.

This is evident in the case of Thai Park as well, where varying viewpoints on preserving the park have emerged. Firstly, the park underwent renovation in 2019, resulting in a departure from the original form developed by the initial members. The sense of community among acquaintances has faded, and a new business model has emerged. The changes primarily affected the marketplace's design. A casual, picnic-like market with a natural ambience was transformed into a more formal setting with kiosks and stringent regulations. My interviews revealed a nostalgia among the founders and longstanding customers for the previous type

of market. The substantial design alteration affected not only visual aspects of the market but also the overall atmosphere, leading to a distinct transformation of the social space.

Furthermore, the new legal framework applied to Thai Park transformed the nature of the community that utilizes the space as well. The initial community was opposed to the concept, and, as a result, they gradually withdrew during the planning phase that coincided with the establishment of the vendors' association. Consequently, two divergent opinions emerged during efforts to preserve market place: one emphasizing community ties and the other focused on business aspects. The former expressed remorse attributed to a weakened sense of community and chose to depart from their roles as vendors, while the latter proactively abided by the regulations proposed by the local authorities.

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## **SECTION 3**

### **Multiple Crisis and the Future of Migration**



## **CHAPTER 10**

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# CHAPTER 10

## Possibilities for the Reintegration of Returning Migrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for the Place of Origin: The Case of Lampung, Indonesia

Helmia Adita Fitra

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### Abstract

The sudden health crisis and concurrent economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled urban dwellers in Indonesia to choose the safest option: returning to their hometowns. This paper illustrates the potential of reintegrating returning migrants during the pandemic and its implications on development, focusing on Lampung Province as the study area. Using a mixed-methods analysis, this study included a Likert scale to measure local acceptance and an open-ended question to capture local opinions toward returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated that returning migrants have a moderate chance of being reintegrated into Lampung society; the locals had an overall accepting attitude, but ambivalence on certain items, especially in terms of economic and health concerns. Thus, entrepreneurship and health monitoring programs for returning migrants should be included as a part of reintegration programs in Lampung, especially during a pandemic situation.

## Introduction

No one was prepared for the shocking news announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) about the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, which triggered multiple global crises, including economic recessions, health crises, and humanitarian crises (Arifin & Wiraputra, 2020; Bhagat et al., 2020; Malhotra et al., 2020). In 2020, Berg et al. demonstrated that COVID-19 had disrupted many vital sectors, including education, employment, supply chains, transportation systems, and sociocultural life (Berg et al., 2020). In fact, prior to the pandemic, many countries were already struggling to provide suitable services in these critical sectors and achieve sustainable development as specified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The COVID-19 pandemic has hampered progress toward the SDGs (Habitat, 2020). Cities in particular have borne the brunt of the pandemic, which has left urban dwellers vulnerable due to increased difficulties in accessing healthcare, inadequate housing, lack of water and sanitation, uneven transportation infrastructure, and insufficient employment opportunities (Habitat, 2020). Migrants living in cities have been especially susceptible to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, experiencing financial difficulties such as delayed salary payments, pay cuts, and layoffs. These pressures have often left them with no choice but to relocate to areas with lower living expenses, including their places of origin (Awasthi & Mehta, 2020; Khanna, 2020; Menon & Vadakepat, 2020). The escalating return migration phenomenon during the pandemic is evidenced by the proliferation of news articles demonstrating the increase in homeward migration (Maiti et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on human migration worldwide at both the international and national levels, including in Indonesia. Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia (Pariona, 2018), and it ranked second among countries with the highest number of infectious COVID-19 cases in Asia at the start of 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). Despite its large population and high population density in urban areas, Indonesia did not implement a nationwide lockdown. Nonetheless, the “Large-Scale Social Restrictions,” commonly known in Indonesia as *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar* (PSBB), was a policy implemented by the Indonesian government to restrict people’s mobility. In contrast to other policies that severely restricted travel, such as in the United Kingdom (Fu et al., 2022), PSBB permitted travel in limited circumstance (Pitoyo et al., 2021).

Even though Indonesia is a large archipelago, this travel policy had the potential to facilitate the spread of the COVID-19 virus from the island of Java, Indonesia’s most populous island, to other areas. Lampung, a province located on the island of Sumatra, is located near the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, which was the worldwide epicenter of COVID-19’s spread in July 2021 (Abdurachman et al., 2021). In addition, Indonesia has a *mudik* culture, in which migrants return to their hometowns annually, usually during public holidays such as Muslim

holidays, Christmas, and the New Year. Mudik typically increases the number of migrants returning to their places of origin (Pitoyo et al., 2021). In the case of a pandemic, this return migration wave poses a threat to the local populations in the migrants' places of origin. This is due to the nature of contagious diseases, which are easily transmitted by human travel, such as migration (Saker et al., 2018). In addition to endangering the health of the local population, the return of migrants from big cities during a pandemic has other consequences on the development of their places of origin, especially when the majority of migrants return home due to economic hardship. The increased focus on the spread of viruses that returning migrants may bring to their places of origin, as well as the economic failures that drive migrants home, has inspired this study to question the reintegration process of returning migrants during the pandemic. This study, therefore, poses the following questions: How welcoming are local populations to the return of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic? And what are the chances of migrants reintegrating into the local population in their places of origin? In accordance with these questions, the purpose of this article is to determine the degree to which local populations accept the arrival of migrants in a pandemic situation and assess the potential for returning migrants to reintegrate.

The structure of this paper consists of five sections. The first section discusses the background of this study. The second section provides a review of the literature on return migration and how return migration affects the development of the place of origin, using the case of Indonesia. The third section discusses the research design of this study, while the fourth section demonstrates the local attitude toward return migration and its implications for the development of Lampung Province as the place of origin. The fifth and final section outlines pragmatic recommendations to support return migration policies during a pandemic and thereby actively promote development of places of origin.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Return Migration and Local Development***

In the context of regional development, the consequences of return migration for the development of places of origin are debated. Some scholars have argued that the decision to return has either insignificant or negative effects on the development of the places of origin (King et al., 1984; Lockwood, 1990; Rhoades, 1978; Slater, 1979). A lesson from Spain, for instance, demonstrated that return migration has no impact on social and economic development because the benefits are accrued only by individuals and families (Rhoades, 1978). Slater (1979) and Lockwood (1990) added that, typically, urban job skills have no utility in the agricultural sector, which discourages migrants from investing their capital in the sector. King et al. also found that, in the case of northern Portugal and southern Italy, returning migrants do not improve agriculture nor establish rural industries. Most returnees seek to build a luxurious house and open a small shop or bar to

support themselves. Meanwhile, many returnees returned to rural areas with limited infrastructure, isolated locations, and scattered populations—conditions that make economic improvement in the places of origin unlikely (King et al., 1984).

On the other hand, a number of scholars have asserted that return migration is advantageous for the social and economic development of the places of origin. The benefits come from the transfer of savings, knowledge, skills, and other forms of capital accumulated by migrants during their migration period and brought “back” to their hometowns (Le et al., 2021; Ryndzak & Bachynska, 2022). Several studies also indicate that returning migrants have a significant opportunity to contribute to the development of their places of origin, particularly in terms of income levels, employment, and the healthcare and education sectors (Bucheli & Fontenla, 2022).

### ***Reintegration Upon Return***

Another issue that arises after return is the reintegration process. Kuschminder (2022) emphasized that the attitudes of local inhabitants toward returnees are a crucial factor for the reintegration of returning migrants. If locals have an inclusive attitude toward returning migrants, the chances of successful reintegration are higher, and returning migrants can participate in the development of their places of origin. In addition, government support through the availability of adequate infrastructure and reintegration programs that can accommodate the needs and manage the capital, both tangible and intangible, that migrants bring is as significant as inclusive attitudes of local inhabitants in determining the success of reintegration. In Shenzhen, known as “China’s Silicon Valley,” for instance, there is a return migration policy that targets talent, which is the primary economic driver in a knowledge economy, rather than raw materials and resources (Wang, 2022). Shenzhen appears to be preparing a variety of internet based industries to attract skilled and knowledgeable migrants, such as by bolstering investment with large companies (e.g., Alibaba, Huawei, and TikTok). This makes Shenzhen one of most popular destinations for migrant returning to settle in China. Moreover, Shenzhen’s welcoming and tolerant city culture remains a major draw. Shenzhen demonstrates that an inclusive attitude towards returning migrants is essential for attracting and retaining talent (Wang, 2022). The case of Shenzhen demonstrates a clear connection between the successful reintegration of migrants and the development of their places of origin.

### ***Return Migration in the Indonesian Context***

In the Indonesian context, migration is commonly perceived as a decision made at the household level rather than an individual one. It is often viewed as a coping mechanism in response to crises, and expectation is that individuals will return to their place of origin upon achieving their strategic goals in other locations (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014b). Karimi (2017) found that the

cultural norms of Indonesian society have historically promoted migration as a means of acquiring knowledge and human capital, with the expectation that migrants will eventually return to their place of origin.

However, while migration studies have generally examined high-income nations and the return of highly skilled migrants, producing a “brain gain” effect in the country of origin, the situation in Indonesia differs (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014a). Indonesia is the second-largest source of international migrant workers in South-east Asia. The majority of these workers are young individuals with limited skills who are employed on a temporary basis and believe that return is essential (Achsin & Hazairinputra, 2021; Anwar, 2015; Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014a). In addition, Suyanto (2020) demonstrated that most Indonesian migrants are involved in domestic jobs that are commonly known in Indonesian as “bau, berat, bahaya,” (3B) or “smelly, heavy, and dangerous.” These domestic jobs include work in households and nursing homes or on plantations. Although migrants may be in vulnerable situations due to limited skills and temporary labor contracts, they are regarded as significant contributors to the national development (Achsin & Hazairinputra, 2021). The Indonesian government therefore started to set up a reintegration program for them in 2010 (Anwar, 2015). In addition, the reintegration program is actually a mandate of Law No. 39 of 2004 on Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers, which stipulated that the government bears a responsibility to protect and empower migrants and returning migrants (Anwar, 2015).

In general, the reintegration programs in Indonesia emphasize the training in entrepreneurship and empowering returning migrants. The return migrant entrepreneurship training, which is part of the reintegration program, aims to encourage returnees to become entrepreneurs who can create their own jobs and improve their families’ welfare (Anwar, 2015). Another reintegration program is the so-called “Desa Migran Produktif” (Desmigratif), or “Productive Migrant Village.” This program involves a collaboration between migrants and local governments, with the aim of providing information on migration and thereby empowering migrants, prospective migrants, and migrant family members (Rahmayanti, 2021). However, some migration scholars in Indonesia argue that Indonesia’s reintegration programs are less inclusive. They note that not all returning migrants are migrant workers; for example, migrant students need attention from the government (Muhidin, 2018). Furthermore, Indonesian government-initiated reintegration programs seem to only accommodate migrants who worked abroad (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014a). This is despite the fact that many Indonesians have migrated to other provinces within Indonesia (Pardede et al., 2020).

## Methodology

This study was conducted inductively to explore local acceptance to the return

migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The province of Lampung, whose migration culture dates back to the Dutch colonization of the early 1900s (Ministry of Village, Underdeveloped Area Development and Transmigration of Indonesia, 2015), served as the case study. Respondents for the study were identified by online invitations sent between August 10, 2021, and October 1, 2021. This study employed a mixed-methods analysis, using statistical descriptive analysis to assess the findings regarding local acceptance and thematic analysis to assess the answers to an open-ended question. Participants had to be Lampung residents who were living in the province at the time of the survey and who had the experience of interacting with returning migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic in their neighborhood. After removing invalid data (e.g., duplicate data and non-eligible respondents), this study collected 165 respondents. Respondents were then asked to complete an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire had two sections. In the first section, respondents were asked to rate their acceptance of returning migrants on a scale from 1 to 5. A rating of 1 indicated the lowest degree of agreement (i.e., strong disagreement) and a rating of 5 indicated the highest degree of agreement (i.e., strong agreement). The following statements were included:

- (1) I welcome the return of migrants to my neighborhood.
- (2) I believe that returning migrants will not transmit the virus and harm my neighborhood.
- (3) I believe returning migrants will bring economic benefits to my neighborhood.
- (4) I believe the returning migrants will bring social benefits to my neighborhood.
- (5) I have no qualms with interacting with migrants who returned home during the pandemic.

This study collected respondents' degree of agreement, indicating their attitude, by calculating the mean, median, and index scores. Below is the index of the Likert scale:

- 0%–19,99% = strongly disagree (strong exclusive attitude)
- 20%–39,99% = disagree (exclusive attitude)
- 40%–59,99% = ambivalent (ambivalent attitude)
- 60%–79,99% = agree (inclusive attitude)
- 80%–100% = strongly agree (strong inclusive attitude)

The second section of the questionnaire was an open-ended question. This was designed to allow respondents to share their opinion on return migration during the pandemic. The responses typically revealed new issues that were not captured by the closed questions. Using MAXQDA, this study conducted interpretative thematic analysis on respondents' unexposed opinions by

examining the repetition of words in answers to the open-ended question, “What do you think of return migration in your area?”

## Analysis and Results

### *Profile of the Respondents*

Respondents included both native-born and migrant Lampung residents, as shown in Figure 10.1.

<b>Category</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Immigrant residents	82	49.70%
Native residents	83	50.30%

<b>Gender</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Female	92	55.76%
Male	73	44.24%

<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Single	109	66.06%
Married	56	33.94%

<b>Age (years old)</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
15–25	82	49.70%
26–35	62	37.58%
36–45	9	5.45%
46–55	5	3.03%
56–65	7	4.24%

<b>Educational Background</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Lower secondary education	3	1.82%
Upper secondary education	39	23.64%
Bachelor's or equivalent level	73	44.24%
Master's or equivalent level and above	50	30.30%

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>(N)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Civil servant	13	7.88%
Educator	39	23.64%
Employee	37	22.42%
Entrepreneur	5	3.03%
Freelancer	4	2.42%
Medical staff	1	0.61%
Non-skilled labor	1	0.61%
Researcher	1	0.61%
Retiree	2	1.21%
Student	40	24.24%
Unemployed	22	13.33%

Source: Result of a sample of 165 residents surveyed in Lampung Province, 2021

Fig. 10.1 – Profile of respondents. (own elaboration)

This study involved slightly more native residents than residents who had migrated to Lampung. The gender distribution of this study’s respondents was nearly equal, with slightly more females than males. The majority of respondents were single, with ages ranging from 15 to 35. The majority of respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree and were working predominantly as employees, educators, or students. Nonetheless, some respondents were unemployed and retired. Local Acceptance Towards Returning Migrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic Based on the survey, this study assessed the degree to which locals agreed with several statements regarding their feelings toward returning migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 10.2). Despite expressing concern about the potential transmission of the virus and skepticism regarding the possible economic benefits of returning migrants, respondents tended to agree with the statements. Beyond the health and economic concerns, respondents appeared receptive to the return of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the findings, the respondents were open to accepting returnees and believed the return of migrants would increase their sociocultural assets. Furthermore, they were strongly receptive to future interactions with returning migrants.

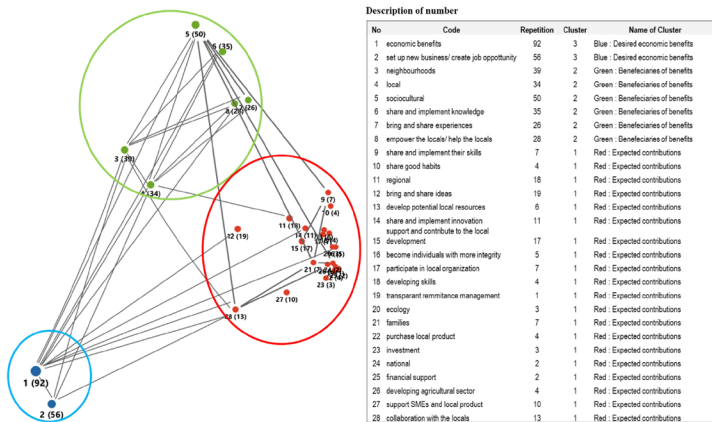


Statements	Mean	Median	(%)	Response	Indication
1. I welcome the return of migrants to my neighborhood during the COVID-19 pandemic.	3.4	4	68.96	Agree	Inclusive
2. I believe that returning migrants will not transmit the virus and harm my neighborhood.	2.8	3	55.39	Ambivalent	Ambivalent
3. I believe the returning migrants will bring economic benefits to my neighborhood.	3.3	3	65.57	Ambivalent	Ambivalent
4. I believe the returning migrants will bring sociocultural benefits to my neighborhood.	3.7	4	74.43	Agree	Inclusive
5. I have no qualms with interacting with migrants who returned home during the pandemic.	4.1	4	81.09	Strongly Agree	Strongly Inclusive

Source: Result of a sample of 165 residents surveyed in Lampung Province, 2021

Fig. 10.2 – Local acceptance towards returning migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In general, it can be said that residents of Lampung were accepting of returnees in pandemic situation. However, their perspectives vary depending on the specific matter. Because the pandemic has had a significant impact on the local and global economic and health sectors, the ambivalence of the local population towards the economic and health conditions of returning migrants is understandable. Moreover, some respondents were pessimistic regarding the likelihood that returnees would bring economic benefits to their native Lampung Province. Similarly, in terms of health, a number of respondents were skeptical that returning migrants would not spread COVID-19 virus to residents in their places of origin. Furthermore, the present study investigated the overall opinion of respondents on return migration in Lampung Province during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using MAXQDA, this study identified three clusters of respondents' opinions based on a comparison of the relationships between codes (see Figure 10.3). The clusters include the expected contributions of returnees upon their return (the red circle), the beneficiary groups of return migrants (the green circle), and the desired economic benefits of return migrants (the blue circle).



Source: Result of comparing the relationships between codes using MAXQDA, 2021

Fig. 10.3 – Codes relation of respondents' opinions on return migration. (own elaboration)

As shown in Figure 10.3, respondents' opinions indicate that they expect to receive economic benefits from returning migrants even in a difficult situation such as a pandemic, despite the fact that previous results show that respondents are skeptical about the economic benefits that returning migrants might bring. Many respondents predicted that returnees will establish businesses and invite the locals to collaborate upon their return. One respondent stated, "I do expect that migrants who return to Lampung can reintegrate and set up new jobs by involving their neighbors to work together" (translated answer of open-ended question, R081). Although the opening of a new business and involvement of locals in that business was the most desired benefit, locals also sought other benefits from the return of migrants, such as migrants inspiring young people to be more productive, migrants becoming agents of change by becoming involved in local governance, and migrants sharing and contributing their migration experience and knowledge with locals. As one respondent noted, "Another thing migrants can do is share their knowledge with locals, particularly local youth, such as how to earn a living" (translated answer of open-ended question, R098). In addition, a substantial proportion of respondents reported that the migrants' benefits, regardless of how great or small, should be shared with at least their neighbors or locals from the village where the migrants originated. One respondent shared his experience: "Returning migrants only benefit their families in my area. There is no discernible benefit to the community, let alone the village" (translated answer of open-ended question, R048). This experience indicates that the return of migrants has not yet significantly benefited the local population. Hence, there are respondents who expect that the return of migrants will benefit the residents during COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one respondent stated, "I hope that returning migrants can collaborate with the local residents and create the employment opportunities not only to improve their respective families' economies, but also to improve the local economy after they return from migration" (translated answer of open-ended question, R082). According to the majority of respondents, neighbors are the smallest unit that should benefit from a migrant's return. If this condition is met, the locals will view the return of a migrant as significantly beneficial.

### ***Implications of Return Migration to Lampung During the Pandemic***

Ideally, return migration would result in higher levels of development through improved income, labor, health, and educational outcomes, as migrants bring not only the capital skills but also social norms that they acquired during their migration (Bucheli & Fontenla, 2022). In addition, return migration can support socioeconomic development by improving local networks and productivity. In these regards, migrants are likely to take risks and entrepreneurial motivations, compared to non-migrants (Bensassi & Jabbour, 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic situation, which has caused multiple crises, has affected the situation of migrants both directly and indirectly. Thus, level of local acceptance in migrants' places of origin might differ from the level in more typical circumstances.

In this regard, the case of Lampung Province demonstrated that returning migrants faced more challenges in terms of health and economic concerns because the locals showed their hesitation in accepting the returning migrants into their society, especially during the pandemic situation. Residents' expectations that returning migrants should bring "benefits" rather than be a "burden" on their home communities appear to further reflect the economic difficulties migrants face. It is therefore crucial to include entrepreneurship programs for returning migrants in reintegration programs, especially during a pandemic. Such programs could help fulfill locals' expectations because they can encourage returning migrants to create their own jobs and improve the welfare of not only their families but also the welfare of other residents. Moreover, to ensure that the return of migrants does not endanger residents, it is also necessary to include a program to monitor returnees' health during and after their return. This program could include data collection, migrant vaccination, and accessible health services for returning migrants.

## Conclusion

This study examined the extent of local acceptance to migrants returning during COVID-19 pandemic. The study considered perspective of local resident on return migration during the pandemic to be as important as the situation of returning migrants during the pandemic. By taking Lampung Province, Indonesia, as a study area, this study determined that, amid a pandemic, people of Lampung expressed a generally accepting attitude toward returning migrants. Only a few locals voiced concern about return migration in Lampung, particularly in relation to residents' health. In addition, recession caused by the pandemic pushed others to question potential economic contribution of returning migrants in Lampung. Moreover, the study's findings indicate that people of Lampung are generally receptive to migrants returning home during pandemic and believe that return migration will be advantageous to them. In addition, local opinions demonstrate that there is an expectation that return of migrants will benefit at least migrants' neighbors. One of the most anticipated economic benefits of returning migrants is the potential establishment of a new business in the migrant's place of origin that invites locals to participate. According to findings of this study, returnees must meet the expectations of locals in order to be welcomed during a pandemic. From case of Lampung, it appears that migrants who returned home during a pandemic still have possibility to reintegrate into their local community, especially if their return benefits the locals. Thus, the active role of the local government in enabling returning migrants to meet the expectations of local population is essential to the successful reintegration of migrants. In the context of a pandemic situation, confluence of an economic downturn and a profound health crisis necessitates that reintegration initiatives extend beyond mere assistance for migrants seeking to return to their respective places of origin. Implementing a comprehensive health monitoring system for returning migrants, coupled with entrepreneurship training, can serve as a viable approach to maintaining productivity of returning migrants.

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# CHAPTER 11

## Current and Future Evolution of Drought Risk in Ethiopia: A Framework to Inform Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation Policies

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### Abstract

This paper explores how climate change, humanitarian access restrictions, and the COVID-19 pandemic compound the effects of the current drought in Ethiopia, driving rapidly increasing levels of food insecurity and internal displacement in the country. This study applies a storyline approach to investigate changes in drought risk for Ethiopia, combining vulnerability, hazard, and adaptive capacity information for current and projected climatic and socio-economic conditions using a subnational composite indicator. The drought vulnerability assessment is carried out using the INFORM Severity index developed by the Joint Research Centre of European Commission to support decision making during humanitarian crises and disasters. The analysis shows that future drought is likely to increase the number of people in need of food assistance—according to both current population numbers and future population projections—and that many millions of people will be displaced as a result. If humanitarian aid and assistance are maintained at recent levels, these findings show that the amount of required funding will increase substantially. The framework presented in this study can be used as a policymaking tool to provide information on how to better prioritize future “Loss and Damage” funding and investments in adaptation and mitigation, thereby reducing population vulnerability and exposure.



## Introduction

Droughts are considered among the most destructive natural disasters due to their long-term and widespread impacts. They are characterized by prolonged dry periods when precipitation is well below average, and they have both immediate and cumulative consequences (Carrão, Naumann, and Barbosa, 2016). Droughts exert a significant impact on the environment and society by reducing the availability of groundwater and the volume of water in reservoirs, resulting in agricultural and livestock losses (Mera, 2018). These natural hazards also have indirect impacts that are often difficult to quantify in economic terms but can nonetheless cascade quickly. Droughts can lead to food insecurity, malnutrition, and, in extreme cases, starvation and widespread famine, resulting in internal and cross-border displacement. Furthermore, the damage and costs related to droughts' social outcomes are usually underestimated and insufficiently researched, despite their significance from humanitarian and economic perspectives (Williams and Gray, 2020; Thalheimer, Choquette-Levy, and Garip, 2022).

Climate change is expected to increase the risk of droughts in many vulnerable regions of the world, particularly those where people are dependent on farming or pastoralism for their livelihoods (IPCC, 2022). A growing consensus in scientific community indicates that higher temperatures and changing precipitation levels caused by climate change will result in increasing risks for food security because global crop and livestock areas will become climatically unsuitable (Pörtner et al., 2022). As a result, the variability in food stocks and livelihoods could trigger social tensions and violence, which, in turn, could increase the risk of new displacement or force people to move if their livelihoods are insufficient for their subsistence. The most severe consequences will be faced by developing and climate vulnerable countries that lack financial, technological, and institutional resources to cope with the consequences of droughts and whose economies mainly rely on natural resources (Ngcamu and Chari, 2020).

Located in the northeastern part of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is experiencing one of the most severe droughts in recent history, following five consecutive failed rainy seasons (WFP, 2022; WHO, 2022). Ethiopia is a landlocked, low-income country with the second largest population in Africa and an economy heavily dependent on agriculture, which accounts for almost half of the gross domestic product. The current drought represents a tipping point in the region as it compounds the effects of various other challenges, such as prolonged internal conflicts (e.g., the Tigray War), political instability, COVID-19, locust infestations, occasional flooding, the global energy crisis, and the far-reaching impacts of the international armed conflict in Ukraine (Woolfrey, Bizzotto Molina, and Ronceray, 2021; European Commission, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). This situation has led to a significant increase in the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity and internal displacement, reaching 11.8 million and 0.85 million, respectively, in January 2023 (OCHA, 2023a). The projections for this

humanitarian crisis are highly concerning, not only for the affected populations, but also for foreign societies and economies that could be indirectly impacted.

With its extensive global connections, Europe is not only vulnerable to the impacts of regional natural hazards but also to those emerging in remote locations. Extreme natural hazard events can have wide-ranging and transboundary consequences through both trade and financial flows. The European Union (EU) maintains a key role in delivering humanitarian aid and assistance to those affected by human-induced disasters and natural hazards (European Commission, 2021b). It provides support for various interventions during emergency situations, including but not limited to food and nutrition, shelter, healthcare, water and sanitation, and education. Furthermore, the EU claims to play a key role in the ongoing shift towards a more inclusive, sustainable, and prosperous human society. This means promoting a move towards sustainable production and consumption patterns around the world while maintaining benefits of economic growth and preventing the exacerbation of social tensions.

In this work, a storyline approach is used to connect remote climate hazards both current and projected with the associated impacts on European foreign policy in Ethiopia. Storylines are a physically self-consistent unfolding of past and future events used to explore plausible climate change impacts and their consequences. For our analysis, we explore how climate change, humanitarian access restrictions, and the COVID-19 pandemic compound the effects of the current drought. The risks posed by these compounding factors are evaluated within the framework of INFORM Severity Index (ISI), which is used to provide a measure of the severity of the current drought in Ethiopia and to evaluate potential responses in European humanitarian aid and relief. In our specific case, drought risk refers to the number of people likely or anticipated to become food insecure and/or internally displaced (IDPs) due to a drought event.

Our analysis makes valuable contributions to three strands of the literature. First, it aligns with research conducted on the impacts of climate change, providing specific insights regarding the intensity of an event, as well as the society's exposure, vulnerability and lack of coping capacity at the time of the natural hazard occurrence (Zarafshani et al., 2016; Hagenlocher et al., 2019; King Okumu, 2019; Marzi et al., 2021).

We also expand on the literature about compounding and cascading impacts by assessing the impacts of humanitarian access restrictions and COVID-19 (Shepherd et al., 2018; Lawrence, Blackett, and Cradock Henry, 2020; de Brito, 2021; Sohn and Kotval-Karamchandani, 2023; Thalheimer, 2023). Second, we expand on the literature about the damages and costs related to droughts by considering their effects in terms of internal displacement and food insecurity (Gerber and Mirzabaev, 2019; Frame et al., 2020; Mishra, Bruno and Zilberman, 2021; Muñoz, Whitten, and Bonnett, 2023).

In many cases, the economic assessment of drought effects primarily revolves around the agricultural impacts, while the widespread cascading impacts are underestimated. This is largely because impact of drought on food insecurity and human displacement is not immediately discernible and may take a considerable amount of time to become evident. Third, we strengthen the literature about disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation in the context of humanitarian crisis (Hillmann et al., 2015; Sudmeier-Rieux et al., 2016). Understanding the characteristics and the development of drought events and their societal impacts is crucial to anticipating and reducing their negative impacts. In the discussion section of our results, we will address the policy implications of our case study as well as the empirical evidence regarding the determinants of climate change and its socio-economic impacts on vulnerable countries.

The paper is structured in the following way. The first section will provide a brief literature review of the connection between drought, food security, and internal displacement, as well as a contextualization of Europe's role as a humanitarian actor in the world. The second section will provide a description of the storyline concept, the theoretical and modelling framework we used to develop our analysis. The third section will present the main results of the different scenarios modeled on the case study of the Ethiopia food insecurity crisis, and it will present associated policy implications. The fourth and final section will summarize the main results and provide some general remarks on the study.

### ***The Role of Drought in Shaping Food Insecurity and Internal Displacement in Ethiopia***

Ethiopia has faced recurrent droughts that have extreme consequences on its population. Drought in Ethiopia is caused by variations in the global atmospheric circulation, which are caused by abnormal sea surface temperature patterns resulting from El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events (Gitima and Mersha, 2020). The influence of the ENSO in Ethiopia is an important factor determining the weather and the associated success of an agricultural season, but there are other climatic factors in place (e.g., the Intertropical Convergence Zone, the upper-level Tropical Easterly Jet, and the low-level Somali Jets).

Climate is an important factor in agricultural productivity since its changes affect all dimensions of food security (i.e., food availability, food accessibility, food utilization, and food systems stability) as well as other aspects of human life (e.g., employment, health, and human security) (USAID, 2016). With the growing consensus in the scientific community regarding the increased frequency and intensity of climatic shocks due to anthropogenic impact (Pörtner et al., 2022), a primary mechanism linking climatic and other shocks with migration decisions is food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined as “a lack of regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2023).

Ethiopia is one of the most food-insecure and famine-affected countries in the world; it also has one of the highest rates of IDPs (Endalew and Muche, 2015; Tesfaw, 2022). In rural areas of the country, food insecurity patterns are seasonal and linked to rainfall patterns (hunger trends decline significantly after the rainy seasons), which makes rural communities highly vulnerable to changes in climatic conditions (WFP, 2014). Food security in the country is also particularly vulnerable to a series of natural hazards, such as desertification, drought, and flooding, which have a negative impact on livestock, farmland, and overall nutrition. Among these natural hazards frequent and prolonged droughts are severely affecting the country and they are projected to occur more often due to climate change. The effects of droughts occur in the form of no rain, a shortage of rain, or late rain, and they can result in massive crop failure, loss of valuable livestock, and major livelihood crises. Although the effects of drought primarily revolve around its impact on agriculture and food insecurity, its consequences can also materialize through social outcomes such as migration and displacement. Several scholars have explored the link between food (in)security and migration, showing how different patterns of human mobility occur according to the severity of food insecurity a population faces (Gray and Mueller, 2012; Murali and Afifi, 2014; Adaawen and Schraven, 2019; Megerssa and Bekere, 2019; Thalheimer, Choquette-Levy, and Garip, 2022).

Migration is often used as a strategy by households to supplement and diversify income sources in situations of food insecurity (Amsalu, 2019). Gray and Mueller (2012) investigated the implications of drought for population mobility in the rural Ethiopian Highlands. The authors found that men from land-poor households use long-distance, labor-related migration as a coping strategy following drought periods. This research aligns with the investigations carried out by Mersha and Van Laerhoven (2016), who observed increased mobility among male-led households in the Ethiopian Highlands, particularly during periods of drought, compared to female-led households. These results support the assumption that mobility serves as a key strategy to cope with drought impacts, especially for the most vulnerable and those exposed to natural hazards. However, when the ability to earn a livelihood or to work in agriculture is eliminated, it can also potentially displace many people and, in some cases, permanently alter population distributions. Hermans and Garbe (2019) suggest that drought increases mobility, primarily by triggering short-term migration to nearby destinations to cover immediate needs like food shortages. Ali and Ainebyona (2019) investigated how a prolonged drought impacted the livelihoods of pastoralists in the Hawd region of Ethiopia, forcing several of them to migrate to urban areas. The authors found that pastoralists attributed their forced movements to several factors, such as loss of crop land, severe death of livestock, and disruption to the seasonal mobility of herds.

Overall, the connection between drought, food insecurity, and human mobility appears to be highly contextual and dependent on the vulnerability of a population, which can be exacerbated by the role of natural hazards and climate change. The

severity of a natural disaster, coupled with the impact of compounding factors, might play a crucial role in determining the access to food and secure livelihoods, which might have a significant effect on the human mobility decision-making process of vulnerable populations. Traditionally, migration has been considered as an adaptation strategy to increased rainfall variability and food insecurity, but when these conditions persist or intensify over time, they can also trigger new internal displacement.

### ***Europe's Role in the Context of Humanitarian Crisis: A Developmental Policy Perspective***

The EU is the world's largest humanitarian donor, providing aid and assistance for affected populations in over 110 countries. The EU's policy framework for humanitarian assistance is outlined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (European Commissions, 2016), which shows the EU's commitment to fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. EU humanitarian action also follows the principle of solidarity, as declared in the Lisbon Treaty, which indicates that the EU should provide assistance, relief, and protection for victims of natural and man-made disasters.

The achievement of these long and short-term objectives relies on cooperation between international partners, non-profit organizations, and United Nations organizations (UN). The New European Consensus for Development (2017) is a key action framework for development and cooperation aiming to reduce poverty; ensure sustainable development; promote democracy, human rights, and inclusive societies; and tackle environmental and climate challenges. Some of these initiatives have been included in the European Development Fund and the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, which have been key in supporting countries most in need of overcoming long-term developmental challenges, especially those in the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS). The EU current budget for cooperation with third countries in the 2021–2027 period is equal to €79.46 billion, representing a 12% increase compared to the previous long-term budget for 2014–2020.

African countries are major recipients of food security and nutrition funds issued through various channels, such as the Global Public Goods and Challenges (GPGC) thematic program, the Horizon 2020 Work Programme (H2020), and the National Indicative Programmes (NIPs). With the GPGC thematic program, around €1.5 billion was allocated for projects targeting “food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture” between 2014 and 2020, with sub-Saharan African countries being the main recipients. The Long-term Europe-Africa Research and Innovation Partnership for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (LEAP-AGRI), which is part of H2020, has financed almost 100 projects related to food security and nutrition challenges in Africa (Agricultural

Research Council of South Africa and Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2020). The NIPs, which are agreements between a country's government and the local EU delegation on sectoral priorities, represent an important tool to assist developing countries in addressing food security. During the 2014–2020 period, for instance, the EU and the Ethiopian government identified two focal sectors: sustainable agriculture and food security (€240 million) and health (€200 million). The NIPs have aligned with the EU's vision for development co-operation within the EDF funding cycle by addressing food assistance needs as well as also other national development goals agreed upon by beneficiary nations and EU institutions (DG ECHO, 2013; Alliance, 2018).

Recently, the EU has renewed its aim to become a multilateral entity and geopolitical player by improving the coherence between internal and external action. The EU has promoted better coordination and partnership by acting as a major player of Global Network Against Food Crises and of the international Coalitions for Action on “Achieving Zero Hunger” and “Fighting Food Crises along the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus.” These two coalitions aim to address the root causes of food crises and promote sustainable solutions to enhance the prospects for peace. Furthermore, Europe has developed policies and actions related to forced displacement from the perspective of development and the humanitarian aid within the so-called “external dimension” of the EU's migration and asylum policy (Kraler, Katsiaficas, and Wagner, 2020). The external dimension highlights the importance of the EU's relationship with third countries to address the root causes of migration by taking a cross-sectoral and combined policy approach that addresses matters including development cooperation, security, visas, trade, agriculture, investment and employment, energy, environment and climate change, and education. A similar concept was included in the last two EU climate change adaptation strategies, which emphasized the usefulness of increasing support for international climate resilience and DRR (European Commission, 2013; European Commission, 2021). The EU was one of the first organizations to strengthen multilateralism by playing an active role in several initiatives (e.g., the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the Task Force on Displacement, and the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement) aimed at addressing the issue of climate-related displacement (DG ECHO, 2022). Furthermore, through the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, directed to support the OACPS countries, the EU funded more than 140 projects addressing, directly or indirectly, climate-related displacement and food insecurity through the implementation of DRR activities.

This section has offered a concise overview of the relevant role played by the EU in the context of humanitarian crises. Many of the EU's humanitarian actions focus on meeting essential human needs while also addressing vulnerabilities and fostering resilience to ensure sustainable development in the long run. Using this information, we can better support the prioritization of the policy challenges and opportunities emerging from the case study and analysis.

## Material and Methods

### Conceptual Framework

To understand the risk posed by climate change in remote locations, we use concept called climate storylines. Storylines are physically self-consistent cause-effect pathways of past events or plausible future events that can be used to evaluate the effects of a wide variety of circumstances, including those related to climate change hazards, climate change adaptation measures, and socio-politics (Young et al., 2021). Event-based storylines focus on plausibility rather than probability when assessing high-impact events, and they can provide information to support decision-making (Sillmann et al., 2021). This approach allows for exploration of specific risk transmission pathways, which can provide information on socio-economic sensitivities and vulnerabilities to remote and cascading climate events, without full attribution of every causal factor (Ciullo et al., 2021; Hurk et al., 2023).

The impact transmission pathway for Ethiopian drought risks case study is related to historical trade links and dependencies on humanitarian and development work. Ethiopia is highly dependent on food imports from major global food producers, such as the EU, the United States, and Russia, which makes it vulnerable to remote supply failures and associated price hikes at world markets. Furthermore, large parts of the Ethiopian population depend on international humanitarian aid for their well-being. In 2023 alone, the EU has allocated more than €80 million to humanitarian projects supporting conflict- and drought-affected populations in Ethiopia. For our storyline, we explore how climate change, humanitarian access restrictions, and the COVID-19 pandemic compound the effects of the current drought (Figure 11.1). The aim is to connect current and projected climate hazards in remote locations with the associated impacts on European foreign policy in Ethiopia, particularly concerning the humanitarian costs related to the numbers of food-insecure and internally displaced people.

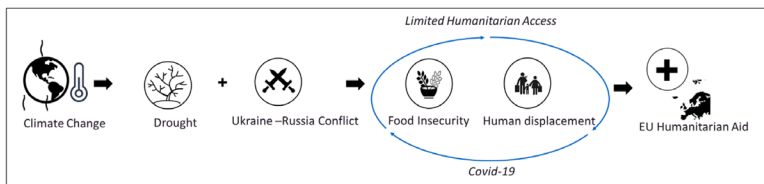


Fig. 11.1 – Storyline pathways adopted to investigate current and future drought risk in four regions of Ethiopia (Oromia; Somali; the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region; and the Southwest Region). (own elaboration)

In our analysis, we consider an event-based storyline to depict and assess drought risks in four regions of Ethiopia (Oromia; Somali; the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region; and the Southwest Region), focusing on

the effects of drought in terms of food insecurity and displacement. The storyline approach is used to connect remote current and projected climate hazards and their associated impacts on European socio-economic activities within the INFORM Severity framework.

This study's conceptual framework is based on risk concepts implemented by the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR, 2015). It encompasses three dimensions of risk: hazards and exposure, vulnerability, and lack of coping capacity. These dimensions are interrelated, considering the risks posed by both natural and human hazards as well as the risks faced by the population. Hazard-dependent factors are examined in the hazards and exposure dimension, while hazard-independent factors are divided into two dimensions: vulnerability, which evaluates the strength of individuals and households in a crisis, and lack of coping capacity, which considers institutional factors that could reduce the risk and mitigate the impact of disasters.

### ***Data and Methods***

In this work, the INFORM Severity Index is applied to assess the severity of the humanitarian crises associated with each storyline's actual data (factual scenario) and modelled scenarios (counterfactuals). The ISI is a composite indicator, developed by the Joint Research Centre, that is used to measure the severity of humanitarian crises in a specific country or region (Poljansek et al., 2020). The index serves multiple purposes, such as providing a shared and objective understanding of the severity of a crisis, supporting decision-making process for the allocation of resources, and monitoring the evolution of the severity of a crisis. The application of the ISI can be used to evaluate potential humanitarian and relief responses by the EU, in line with this study's aim to inform future EU policy development in the areas of external relations.

The INFORM Risk model aligns with the UNISDR definition by integrating three aspects of vulnerability. The hazard and exposure dimension includes physical exposure and physical vulnerability, while the vulnerability dimension focuses on the fragility of the socio-economic system. The lack of coping capacity dimension addresses the resilience to cope and recover. The ISI integrates the components in a multilayer structure composed of three key dimensions: impact of the crisis, condition of affected people, and complexity of the crisis (Figures 11.2a and 11.2b). The "impact of the crisis" includes geographical impacts (area affected) and human impacts (displacement and fatalities), irrespective of the event intensity. The "condition of affected people" is represented by the number of people in need and physical, social, mental, and economic effects of the crisis. The "complexity of the crisis" relates to the factors affecting the operational environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. A total of 31 indicators are used to represent each specific crisis of the affected country or region. Most of these have a relative and absolute component intended to recognize the size of a crisis relative to the



size of the population in the considered country or region.

The ISI overall score is obtained from individual scores of each components using a combined arithmetic and geometric average (Figure 11.2b); the overall score ranges from very low (1) to very high (5) (Figure 11.2c). This structure aims to ensure that all crises receive attention proportional to their severity, including the need for humanitarian assistance. The score is more sensitive to the “condition of affected people” than the “impact of the crisis” and the “complexity of the crisis” (Figure 11.2b). Of particular importance to this analysis, the “complexity of the crisis” dimension estimates the complexity of delivering humanitarian assistance (i.e., the constraints in reaching people in need during humanitarian emergencies). The index uses data from the humanitarian access composite indicator developed by the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS, 2019; Poljansek et al., 2020).

The ISI weighting scheme is designed in line with the overall humanitarian mission response to ensure a basic quality of life and protect the dignity of those in need of humanitarian assistance. The total population living in the crisis affected area is included in Level 1, and those directly affected are shifted to Levels 3 through 5, depending on the severity of their needs. The different levels are assigned according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) categories: (1) Minimal/None, (2) Stressed, (3) Crisis, (4) Emergency, and (5) Catastrophe/Famine. The estimates are based on either the Centre for Humanitarian Data database maintained by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2023c) or the IPC database (IPC, 2023).

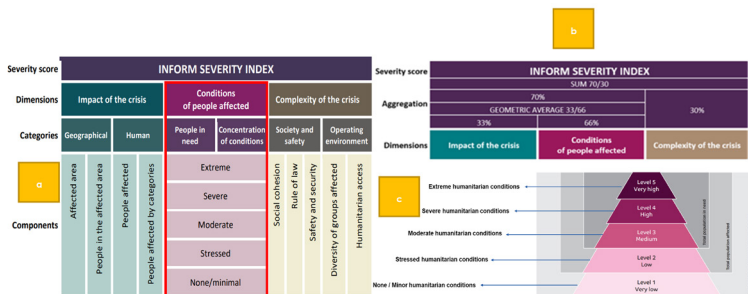


Fig. 11.2a – Theoretical framework of INFORM Severity Index. Figure 11.2b – INFORM Severity weighting scheme.

Figure 11.2c – INFORM Severity Index humanitarian conditions associated with each level.

Source of figures: Poljansek et al. (2020) | protected by copyright.

In the analysis for this study, the factual condition is the food insecurity condition in the four main drought-affected regions (Afar, Oromia, Somali, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region) from the start of the crisis to the present. Climate change is likely to put further dangerous pressure on food security by increasing the frequency and magnitude of extreme events, threatening, in turn,

food production and distribution as well as the livelihoods of many people. In our counterfactual analysis, we add future scenarios of climate and population change to the ISI.

Two Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) scenarios are considered to embody the impacts of strategies and policies that specifically address challenges for food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture (FAO, 2018): towards sustainability (TSS) and stratified societies (SSS). On the one hand, the TSS scenario envisages more equitable societies in which multiple Sustainable Development Goals targets are nearly universally achieved and where agriculture moves towards sustainability. The TSS scenario is considered similar to the first Shared Socioeconomic Pathway (SSP1), “Sustainability.” SSP1 represents a sustainable development scenario in which global cooperation, low population growth, and higher incomes result in low challenges for climate change mitigation and adaptation. On the other hand, the SSS scenario emphasizes the effects of leaving the current and future challenges facing food and agricultural systems unattended. The SSS scenario is somewhat analogous to the fourth Shared Socioeconomic Pathway (SSP4), “Inequality.” SSP4 is defined by high challenges to adaptation and low challenges to mitigation in a world with increasing disparities in economic opportunity and highly unequal investments in human capital, especially in poorer countries. The TSS and SSS scenarios are respectively coupled with the Representative Concentration Pathways (RCPs) 4.5 and 8.5. Under the TSS scenario, associated with RCP 4.5, agricultural greenhouse gas emissions are expected to lie within the range of 3.2 to 6.4 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub>eq by 2050. However, in the SSS scenario, emissions are projected to exceed 8.5 gigatons of CO<sub>2</sub>eq by the end of the designated period.

The population in the two FAO scenarios varies according to the UN’s medium variant, which takes into account the past experience of each country to project future levels of fertility and mortality while also reflecting uncertainty about future changes based on the past experience of other countries under similar conditions (FAO, 2018). According to FAO projections, Ethiopia’s population is expected to increase from 112 million in 2020 to 188 million by 2050. To analyze the evolution of food security, the FAO considers both the prevalence of undernourishment and the number of undernourished people according to the FAO Global Agriculture Perspectives System model (Kavallari, Conforti, and Van der Mensbrugghe, 2016). Under the FAO framework, food security is ensured by domestic production and/or the ability of the country to pay for imports.

In addition to the impact of climatic factors on food (in)security, we also include potential shocks from COVID-19 and humanitarian access as counterfactuals. The severity of humanitarian crises measured by the ISI is affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which leads to an increase in the number of people in need due to the confirmed cases and fatalities caused by the virus. This increase in the number of people in need can exacerbate the impacts of other crises, such as the

drought and the Russo-Ukrainian War. Obstructions to emergency assistance compound the impacts by disrupting efforts to provide humanitarian access to those in need. The Tigray War in Ethiopia is an example of a crisis that could result in a partial blockage of access. Although these events—the drought, the Russo-Ukrainian War, COVID-19, and the Tigray War—had virtually no chance of occurring concurrently, Ethiopia currently faces all four.

For our analysis, we seek to assess future humanitarian needs arising from the increasing number of food-insecure and displaced people in Ethiopia due to drought. To do so, we base our calculations on the following: the January 2023 projections of food insecurity and displacement; the projected number of people in need and IDPs under different FAO scenarios, calculated with the ISI; the estimated cost per metric ton to procure, distribute, and monitor food distribution activities in a food insecurity emergency derived from the 2023 OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan; and the immediate humanitarian needs of IDPs derived from IOM Drought Response Plan 2023. In a food insecurity crisis, the ISI labels people in need of humanitarian assistance as being under stress levels 3, 4, and 5, which, according to the IPC classifications, indicate situations of crisis (3), emergency (4), and famine (5), respectively. The OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 highlights the identified needs as well as the strategic objectives to pursue in a humanitarian crisis by standardizing the target units and the deliverables while considering cost differences in modality, geographic area, population groups, and timing (all prices are in US dollars). The cost of the food response is determined by multiplying the total quantity of food to be distributed in 2023 with the estimated cost per metric ton to procure, distribute, and monitor food distribution activities, which is submitted by international donors and humanitarian partners. The IOM Drought Response Plan 2023 addresses the immediate humanitarian needs of IDPs and host communities by considering basic humanitarian and protection needs. In this section, we have discussed the consequences and impacts related to drought risks in Ethiopia, showing how the effects of climate and socio-economic scenarios associated with compounding shocks are expected to amplify the impacts of current and future drought risks.

## Results

The beginning of the drought in Ethiopia in late 2020 coincided with the outbreak of the internal conflict in the Tigray region. Because of this violent event, political instability has spread to other parts of the country, such as the Afar, Amhara, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, affecting the local populations and other persons of concern (e.g., IDPs and refugees) living in these areas. However, it was only in 2022 that the drought's effects on the country's food security situation started to significantly affect the population. Accordingly, our factual condition was the food insecurity condition as of January 2022, prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War (Figure 11.2a–c). At that time, the estimated number of people in need of food assistance was 0.3 million. In January 2023, the number had

risen to 11.8 million. For comparison, we considered the situation prior to the Tigray conflict as a drought background information to show how the severity of the crisis might have changed with a different socio-economic context in the country (no Tigray conflict). Implementing the January 2022 factual conditions in the INFORM framework, we see that the ISI score varies from a value of 2.7, in the case of a pre-Tigray conflict situation, to 2.9 after the outbreak of the conflict.

In our analysis, we developed several counterfactuals by combining climatic (the intensity of drought) and non-climatic perturbations (e.g., food insecurity, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and COVID-19) coupled with the current and future challenges associated with food insecurity. As a first counterfactual, we added the effect of COVID-19 to January 2022 estimates, and the ISI score moved to 3.1, indicating a harsher crisis. Nevertheless, it was only with the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its collateral effects, such as the rising costs of imports for fuel and food as well as Russian fertilizer prices, that the crisis has exponentially worsened.

The compounding effects of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on the drought have resulted in an additional 11.5 million people in need and a remarkable increase in the number of people displaced (from 0.3 in 2022 to 0.85 million in 2023). This situation has shifted the INFORM score to a value of 3.4, and it rises to 3.9 when the effects of COVID-19 are also considered. As a third counterfactual, we assessed the effect of food security in Ethiopia along with that of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war under RCP 8.5-SSS (Figure 11.3).

This scenario is characterized by various levels of economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions and impacts of climate change, as well as by different agricultural paths (e.g., the coexistence of subsistence agriculture and low-quality commercial agriculture for mass consumption under concentrated control) that severely affect food insecurity in the country. In the case of the third counterfactual, those suffering from food insecurity are estimated to increase to 25.8 million by 2050. This increase is computed by multiplying the current population in need by the fractional increase in future need, which increases the ISI to 4.1.

Adding the effects of COVID-19 further increases the index to 4.2 (very high). As a fourth counterfactual, we considered the effects of moderate climate change mitigation and population growth under RCP 4.5-TSS, which reduced the number of food-insecure people to 5.4 million. Correspondingly, the ISI decreased from 3.7 to 3.6. However, it increased by 0.3 (to 3.9) when we considered drought coupled with the effects of COVID-19.

As a next step, we assessed the potential humanitarian needs associated with the number of food-insecure people and IDPs due to drought. Offering humanitarian aid is an essential component of managing prolonged crisis scenarios since it not only preserves lives but also mitigates the shortages and deprivation that

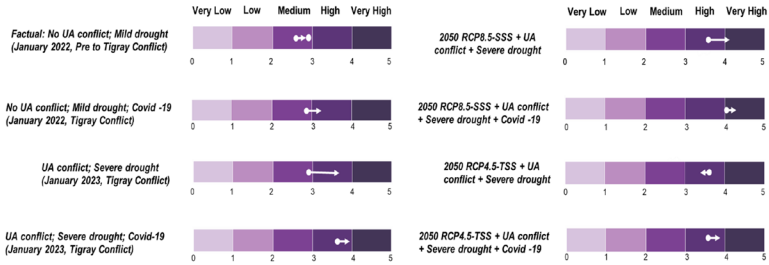


Fig. 11.3 – INFORM Severity Risk Index scores for Ethiopia associated with changes in food insecurity in the four drought-affected regions in Ethiopia (Oromia; Somali; the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region; and the South West Region) for the factual, primary counterfactual, and micro-storyline counterfactuals. UA conflict refers to the Russo-Ukrainian War; HA refers to humanitarian access; and RCP 8.5-SSS refers to food insecurity projections for 2050 (own elaboration).

contribute to such crises. Humanitarian aid provides essential support for people in need, including through food assistance, shelter, healthcare, and protection, to help them survive and cope with the challenges they face. At this stage, we evaluated the needs of food-insecure individuals, who are defined as those experiencing acute malnutrition at a high level (IPC 3 to 5) and who do not have regular access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for normal growth, development, and a healthy lifestyle.

Furthermore, we estimated the requirements of IDPs, who continue to reside in substandard shelters and lack access to basic services or who have returned to their places of origin but face significant difficulties in meeting their most basic needs. Humanitarian aid can play a critical role in addressing the underlying causes of displacement and helping IDPs rebuild their lives. This support can involve efforts to promote peace, stability, and security in conflict-affected areas, as well as helping IDPs return to their homes, integrate into new communities, and rebuild their livelihoods. The per capita costs were multiplied by the number of severely food-insecure individuals and internally displaced persons in each scenario and then compared to the baseline. This comparison was used to determine the quantity and percentage change of humanitarian aid (HA) needed to address a food security crisis in the country, as shown in Table 11.4.

By multiplying the per capita costs by the number of severely food-insecure people and the number of IDPs, we compared each scenario to the baseline and thereby estimated the amount and the percentage change in humanitarian aid (HA in Table 1) required to respond to a food security crisis in the selected country. Results show that the combined effects of the drought and the Russo-Ukrainian War could lead to a significant increase in humanitarian aid needs (4,000% on average) in only 12 months. When considering the worst-case scenario (RCP 8.5-SSS) in 2050, the number of people in a situation of acute food insecurity in Ethiopia rises steeply compared to the baseline scenario

(January 2022) and, similarly, the HA needs are multiplied 87 times. The towards sustainability scenario (RCP 4.5-TSS) showed a reduction in the number of people in need and in HA needs when compared to other scenarios.

Overall, future drought will increase the number of people in need of food assistance and the number of displaced people based on current population numbers and future population projections. To manage similar humanitarian crises in the future, it is essential to further investigate the impact of compounding risks and the role of current and future policies in influencing food security outcomes and human mobility patterns.

Scenario	Food-insecure people (in millions)	Food requirements (in millions of US dollars)	Internally displaced people (IDPs) (in millions)	Humanitarian aid needs of IDPs (in millions of US dollars)	Overall INFORM Severity score (valued 0 to 5)
Factual January 2022 (No UA conflict; mild drought)	0.297	31.8	0.297	7	2.9 (Medium)
Counterfactual January 2023 (UA conflict, severe drought)	11.8	1,274 (+4,000%)	0.850	20.06 (+187%)	3.7 (High)
Counterfactual 2050 (UA conflict, severe drought, RCP 8.5)	25.8	2,779.1 (+8,700%)	1,853.576	43.74 (+524%)	4.1 (Very High)
Counterfactual 2050 (UA conflict, severe drought, RCP 4.5)	5.4	563.8 (+1,700%)	0.376	8.9 (+27%)	3.6 (High)

Fig 11.4 – Humanitarian aid requirements under the different factual and counterfactual scenarios, based on the humanitarian cost per person in need of aid and obtained by dividing the total appeal requirements, in \$, taken from the OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 and the IOM Drought Response Plan 2023, by the total number of food-insecure people and internally displaced people (IDPs) targeted by each plan, respectively. (own elaboration)

### Policy Implications

The storyline on the current and future drought risks in Ethiopia presents several policy implications on cascading impacts and the effects of future policy decisions. The analysis aims to assist decision-makers by offering a concrete framework

for addressing uncertainty and considering plausible scenarios that combine physical climate information with the human dimensions of climate change. In the following paragraphs, we present an overview of some key implications related to the Ethiopian storyline that are intended to inform both national and international stakeholders engaged in humanitarian crisis contexts.

First, our analysis reveals relevant impact transmission pathways for Europe, which is one of the main providers of humanitarian aid in less developed countries. The Horn of Africa region is a relevant recipient of humanitarian and developmental funds targeting the effects of climate change and disaster impacts, which are also directed toward the needs of refugees and displaced persons. Several Ethiopian policy documents highlight the negative effects of climate and natural hazards, such as droughts or floods, but they do not comprehensively address the associated human mobility risks and opportunities (Mombauer, Link, and van der Geest, 2023). Ethiopia's Disaster Risk Management Policy (2013) does not make specific reference to disaster displacement or human mobility, apart from a brief reference to the effect of drought on migration of pastoralists. Ethiopia's National Adaptation Plan (2019) highlights a balanced view of human mobility in the context of climate change, recognizing the forced nature of movements due to frequent and intense natural hazards and the potential of migration as an adaptation strategy.

However, the plan does not outline concrete measures. Accordingly, the EU could act as a facilitator to arrange voluntary resettlement and migration opportunities for vulnerable communities. The EU's support could include, but is not limited to, identifying safe and suitable locations for resettlement or relocation; providing adequate housing (e.g., sanitation, utilities, services, and transport), employment, and skills development opportunities for migrants and displaced populations; and supporting climate risk micro and sovereign insurance solutions. These initiatives could also be framed and discussed in national forums, such as the Ethiopia National Partnership Coalition on Migration, which could allow Europe to better acquire information on how to secure its budget and, at the same, strengthen new partnerships with local stakeholders.

Second, our analysis reveals the importance of anticipating and understanding future needs and adopting transformative action to adapt to and reduce the impacts of climate change. For the EU, attending to pre- and post-event risks and impacts constitutes an opportunity to further promote solidarity-based adaptation and risk reduction to avoid and manage future displacement and food insecurity. The cycle of disaster management is already an integral part of the EU's humanitarian response; it has a dedicated budget and is a key element of the EU's long-term disaster risk reduction agenda (Morinière et al., 2022), but it might benefit from being further integrated into both long-term development measures and humanitarian responses (Raikes et al., 2021). Integrating human mobility considerations into Ethiopian national DRR strategies might be an effective option

for reducing disaster risk and minimizing the negative consequences on people's lives and well-being of their communities. One approach is to enhance community level climate resilience by developing plans for providing temporary shelter and essential services to mobile populations during disasters, ensuring access to clean water, sanitation facilities, healthcare, and food supplies. Another viable option involves establishing effective early warning systems that consider the needs of mobile populations, such as pastoralist and rural farmers, and using them to provide those populations with timely and accurate information through mobile phone alerts, community-based warning systems, and radio broadcasts.

The results of this analysis are useful to inform both local and international policy makers on the importance of enhancing disaster risk reduction, climate change mitigation, and adaptation strategies. By drawing on past experiences and memories, the storyline approach facilitates a holistic and comprehensive understanding of not only the scale and severity of climate risks but also their interconnected nature and cascading propagation within complex systems. The approach provides insights for the EU on how to better prioritize its external funds in the context of EU external action resilience policies, EU foreign aid strategies, the Global Stocktake of adaptation efforts, and the "Loss and Damage" debate.

## Conclusions

This paper assessed the current and future risks related to the ongoing drought in four regions of Ethiopia. The storyline approach, implemented in the context of the INFORM Severity Index framework, provides information on cascading impacts of current and future drought risks in the country. The ISI Index meets the growing demand for quantitative information on humanitarian crisis severity, which is beneficial for an effective and operational crisis response. The index complements the INFORM Risk Index, which is used to inform and support a variety of stakeholders (UN agencies, donors, NGOs, etc.) in the decision-making phases of disaster risk management, with the objective of communicating the status of humanitarian crises in a systematic, comparable, and objective manner across different hazard events (natural, anthropogenic, and/or socio-natural) and different geographical levels (subnational, national, and regional).

In this study, to develop micro-storylines within the ISI framework, we added climatic perturbations (drought) and non-climatic perturbations (e.g., food insecurity, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and COVID-19) to the factual crisis. Unlike simple climate risk assessments, the storyline approach allowed us to evaluate the effects of a variety of factors (climate change hazards, climate change adaptation measures, and socio-politics) on pathways of plausible future events. By using factual-counterfactual pairs, these storylines relate the effects of climate change to actual well-known historical events and thereby provide a clear frame of reference that fosters understanding of the magnitude and mechanisms of climate change impacts for various stakeholders.



The analysis shows how the impact of drought, compounded by the effects of the war on Ukraine and COVID-19, will increase the number of people in need of food assistance according to both current population and future population projections, and many people will be displaced as a result. Moreover, if sustainable climate and socio-economic measures are not implemented, the repercussions of droughts, such as food scarcity and the displacement of people, are anticipated to intensify, thereby heightening the demand for humanitarian assistance. Future research could examine the relationship between the number of people who do not have access to humanitarian aid and the resources needed to at least maintain aid within recent historical levels.

Europe's capacity to function as a key humanitarian player in the future will depend on several factors. These may include the availability of financial resources for humanitarian aid, the political will of European leaders to prioritize humanitarian issues, the ability to effectively coordinate with other humanitarian organizations, the capacity to respond to both sudden and protracted humanitarian crises, and the ability to adapt to changing global dynamics and emerging humanitarian challenges. Additionally, the success of Europe's humanitarian efforts will depend on its ability to address the root causes of humanitarian crises and work towards long-term solutions that promote sustainable development and social resilience.

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