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Young Refugees' Integration Trajectories—The Critical Role of Local Resources in Germany

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Abstract: Though it is a global phenomenon, migration results in a variety of local outcomes. Depending on migrants' specific arrival contexts, countries of origin and migration motives, they are channelled into different categories. As a result, they encounter unequal access to different domains at the local level. This paper analyses how young migrants in vulnerable conditions are able to access and use local or localised resources and to what extent these resources enable them to overcome structural barriers over time. Our analysis builds on empirical findings from a case study in Dortmund, Germany, conducted through the EU-funded MIMY project. Drawing on narrative interviews with young refugees (aged 18–29), it highlights three specific cases where temporal and spatial factors shape individual integration pathways. The narratives highlight the barriers encountered by young refugees, most of which are related to migrant policy categories implemented at national or supra-national levels. In the arrival context, the young migrants are able—to varying degrees—to mobilise localised resources helping them overcome (at least partially) such mainly structural barriers. Focusing on the emergence and evolution of local integration landscapes thus reveals the importance of time and the difference time makes in terms of the availability of resources and legal frameworks.

Keywords: local resources; migrant integration; life stories; young refugees



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1. Introduction

“You know, here in Dortmund they [NGOs] have time for you, there are good people. They show you [to] go here, do this, do that. They are caring, this is important.” (Tamba).

Young migrants in vulnerable conditions encounter a range of barriers, possibly impeding their integration into local arrival societies. This opening quote from a young asylum seeker in Dortmund illustrates how the resources available in situ or at the local level enabled him to overcome some of the barriers encountered during his process of integration in Germany.

In Germany, as elsewhere, a migrant's legal status often predetermines his or her integration path. Which legal status is assigned can be quite arbitrary and merely based on factors such as a migrant's country of origin or migration route, which results in channelling migrants into different paths upon arrival (e.g., Findlay and Garrick 1990; Sandoz 2020). These paths have a significant impact on future integration outcomes, as they define migrants' access to resources, state support and/or language courses. They consequently determine future prospects, as clearly illustrated by the large variations in the rates for “migrants with a good chance of putting down roots in Germany” between countries of origin (BAMF 2022b).

Such overall, mostly structural conditions are however, contested by the everyday struggles and practices of migrants themselves (Hinger 2016). In addition to their individual agency, migrants are often able to overcome the constraints of their (legal) status, for example, through their access to key resources such as information, networks or individual

support. As the literature increasingly emphasises, such resources are often available locally (e.g., [Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017](#)).

In this paper, we juxtapose the predominantly structural barriers encountered by migrants that are often linked to their legal status (imposed on arrival) with their individual and collective practices that may or may not enable them to (at least partially) overcome these barriers. We argue that the temporal perspective is crucial when investigating the local experiences of young refugees, as exclusion through legal frameworks and inclusion through resource transfers evolve over time. Our analytical lens lies on the biographies of three young refugees in Dortmund, Germany. Such a lens not only enables us to investigate the meaning of the arrival time for the integration process, but it also allows us to show how individual histories lead to different integration paths at the local level. The discussion builds on literature focussing on the role of place (or the local level) in migration studies. In doing so, the paper explores how young refugees with distinct biographies are able to access and use local or localised resources and how far these resources enable them to overcome structural barriers over time.

2. Localising Migration—How the Spatial Context Shapes Integration Outcomes

The often-normative connotation of the concept ‘integration’ has been the subject of substantial criticism from scholars and stakeholders. One major point is that it assigns the main responsibility for integration to migrants, rather than opening up a wider discussion on the interaction between migrants and local populations (e.g., [Meissner and Heil 2021](#); [Schinkel 2018](#); [Dahinden 2016](#)). On the other hand, the necessity of an intersectional approach to overcome the dichotomous and essentializing understanding of integration, through taking transnational ties into account, is argued with an emphasis on the fact that two-way understanding of integration often only remains rhetoric ([Anthias 2013](#)). Another central critique regarding the concept is the unanswered question of “integration of whom, into what” ([Favell 2019](#), pp. 2–4). Thus, integration is not only a “fuzzy” concept, but it is also problematic as it often assumes the idea of migrant integration into a given nation ([Rytter 2019](#)), signalling a highly normative understanding and methodological nationalism ([Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002](#)). While agreeing with the many pitfalls associated with the use of the term, we follow the argumentation of [Spencer and Charsley \(2021\)](#), who propose continuing to use it, through focusing on the process itself, by acknowledging multiple factors and dimensions that might shape it, instead of defining a goal, i.e., “an integrated society” (p. 16).

Many researchers have pointed to the relevance of sub-European and subnational scales for integration processes (e.g., [Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2011](#); [Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017](#); [Bühr 2018](#)). Looking at such subnational levels, particular attention is assigned to the local level where the process of integration, the agency of migrants and their contribution to reshaping European societies become tangible. Localities define the context of integration encountered by young migrants, thus contributing to both the vulnerability and resilience of any migrant group. Taking place at the neighbourhood and municipal level, integration is articulated through everyday practices, resources and stakeholder interdependencies ([Humphris 2019](#)). The locality is the level where migrants and local populations encounter one another, where they negotiate access to resources such as housing, work, education, social services and networks. In this respect, it is also a key site for experiencing and possibly contesting constraining practices and regimes.

Legal frameworks, in that sense, are of critical importance as they constitute the major structural barrier for newcomers through policies with increasing control over access to main domains of integration, such as education and the labour market. The work on migration channels (e.g., [Findlay and Garrick 1990](#); [Sandoz 2020](#)) is helpful in this respect, postulating that migrants are ‘channelled’ into different categories, which “operate selectively in the moulding of international migration flows” ([McCullum et al. 2013](#), p. 689). Such filtering also shapes “the nature of the migration experience” (*ibid.*), as it indicates uneven access to support structures among migrants. While primarily developed in the

context of labour migration, we argue that looking at the integration processes of migrants from this perspective enables us to understand the intricate mechanisms associated with the different categories of refugee arrival. To our knowledge, the concept of migration channels has not been applied in the forced migration field yet, and thus, the existing studies often focus on the policies and policymakers, and they lack the voices of migrants themselves. In that regard, this article can be seen as an effort to fill such a gap.

Following Massey (1999), we argue that states are critical bodies that channel migrants through various migration and integration policies that attempt to control not only the cross-border activities, but also the resources (and the access thereto) that are available to migrants with different profiles and country of origins. The relevance of the local level once again becomes prominent here, as—at least in the German context—it holds a certain amount of room for manoeuvre in applying and modifying some of these channelling attempts.

Accordingly, the local spatial context thus shapes the specific ‘opportunity structures’ (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2011) or ‘conditions of possibility’ (Sheppard 2002, p. 319) available to migrants (and non-migrants), capturing the different factors that influence the local integration of migrants. A series of empirical studies have since shown that apparently ‘similar’ local contexts with regard to economic, social or political characteristics can produce quite different outcomes with regard to the ability of migrants to gain access to resources, carve out a space for themselves and ultimately become full members of local societies. These opportunity structures tied to place are shaped by a range of contextual, compositional and collective factors (e.g., Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015; Jaworsky et al. 2012; Hickman and Mai 2015).

Migration scholars have highlighted various mechanisms—predominantly situated at the local level—which shape the different ways in which migrants gain access to social domains. Research into the concept of urban citizenship takes resource-focused discourses further, highlighting how cities are finding—sometimes progressive—ways of circumventing more exclusionary national-level policies (e.g., Bauböck 2003; Lemanski 2019; Varsanyi 2006). In a similar vein, albeit more critical of local-level interventions, research into ‘urban border spaces’ finds that the regulation of migration is increasingly taking place at the local level (Fauser 2017). Migrants themselves are embedded in local contexts where their everyday realities are played out (Ryan and Mulholland 2015). Their individual and collective responses to different barriers thus draw on locally available resources and are arguably highly dependent on them. Such grounding provides the basis for access to resources, including migrants’ ability to draw on social networks for support. Local and transnational (in)formal networks in that sense are also critical, as they channel information and act as intermediaries.

We approach the concept of resources from a broad perspective. To understand integration processes, we opt a Bourdieusian perspective (Bourdieu 1986), and we concentrate on the operationalization of different convertible capitals that are available at the local level, which are utilized to overcome structural barriers. An analysis of biographies, migration journey and experiences upon arrival in that sense is therefore fitting for our analysis since it provides us a detailed picture of how distinct individual and localised capital are employed. Through such an approach, it is possible to contextualise resources, “as temporal and geographic trajectories and dimensions of constituting and mobilizing capital are key to understanding how migrants make use of them” (Erel 2010, p. 647). Building on the concept of capital, studies have highlighted the importance of contacts with local stakeholders (Udayar et al. 2020) or shown that a lack of co-ethnic communities negatively affects employment opportunities (Cheung and Phillimore 2014). Adam et al. (2019) illustrates how—in addition to attitudes of the local population—social contact to refugees with similar experiences can be a resource itself. The literature on arrival infrastructures, on the other hand, highlights the role of infrastructures and services established by migrants from the older waves as critical resources (Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020).

Time is an important dimension to consider for understanding ever-changing localities and migration channels. Although not the core of this paper, it is critical to acknowledge the temporal dimension of arrival and historical development of arrival context. [Cottrell \(2015\)](#), for instance, argues that the social influence of time is often overlooked and explores the constitutive effects of time on refugee governance and politics (p. 23). With time, policies around migration and integration change and evolve, both at the local, national and supranational levels. With such changes, different cohorts of migrants are provided with different support systems and uneven access to different domains, which gives a critical meaning to the time of arrival. On the other hand, exclusively investigating these policies might mean less attention on everyday experiences, and thus, a broader exploration of how the longstanding context of migration changes and developments in the core realms of integration with a cross-national and temporal perspective is necessary ([Lucassen et al. 2006](#), p. 15). In addition, not only the policy conditions but also the economic situation of places is of importance at the time of arrival, as arriving during a recession, for instance, might have negative consequences on refugees, potentially even more than other migrant groups ([Fasani et al. 2022](#)).

There are existing studies which compare the same group of migrants across different arrival times, investigating the influence of the changing politics by the individuals and present their lived experiences (i.e., [Brännström et al. 2018](#)). Alternatively, there is also research exploring how the different social and institutional dynamics of different arrival times played out, in addition to comparing similar and various groups of newcomers from such temporal perspective (i.e., [Lucassen 2006](#)). Such historical comparative perspectives are perceived compelling ([King et al. 2006](#)). Although this paper does not claim such a comparison as its main axis, it will first illustrate how time has been influential in regard to shaping the city of Dortmund as a place of arrival, and second how the arrival time influences the lived experiences, connected to the available localised resources.

3. Methodology and the Context of the Case Study

The findings presented in this paper stem from the EU-funded MIMY project. The project analyses the different integration patterns of young migrants in vulnerable conditions (aged 18–29) via local case studies in Europe, including the city of Dortmund, covered here. For our analysis, we follow an approach initially developed by [Glick-Schiller and Çağlar \(2011\)](#)—resonating with the work of [Hall et al. \(2016\)](#) on ‘migrant infrastructures’—which sees migrants as constitutive agents in the relative positioning of cities and highlights the relationship between migrants’ agency and the processes of urban restructuring and rescaling. Such conceptualisation corresponds with the notion of ‘positionality’, defined by [Sheppard \(2002, p. 308\)](#) “as a way of capturing the shifting, asymmetric, and path-dependent ways in which the futures of places depend on their interdependencies with other places”, thus stressing the connectivity of places across space and time. This relates to the way in which places are (re-)made and understood in relation to other places ([Massey 2008](#)). Accordingly, the following sections first introduce the case study, thus providing background details on the methodology used.

3.1. The Dortmund Context

With a population of 603,609 in 2019, Dortmund is the largest city in the Ruhr region, West Germany’s former industrial heartland, located in the federal state of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW). Originally one of the largest industrial agglomerations in Europe, the Ruhr received substantial numbers of so-called guestworkers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Following the recession in the mid-1970s, deindustrialisation led to the region’s economic decline, associated with a steep rise in unemployment and other social problems. These problems now belong to the past, and Dortmund’s population has recently been increasing ([Herfert and Osterhage 2012](#)), in line with the reurbanisation trend witnessed by several larger German cities.

In 2019, 19% of the city's population did not hold German citizenship. A further 16% had a so-called 'migration background', i.e., persons born outside Germany who eventually received German citizenship or those with at least one parent not born in Germany. Among those not holding German citizenship, Syrians had become, by 2019, the second largest group after Turks (MKFFI NRW 2020). Among all non-Germans, 36,600 persons (32%) had no permanent residence status in 2018, while 1800 had a *Duldung* (tolerated) status (MKFFI NRW 2020, p. 20).

In 2007, Dortmund was chosen as the site for a centralised NRW reception centre for asylum seekers, responsible for registering asylum seekers, conducting health and identity checks, and distributing refugees to housing elsewhere in the state. In 2015, with high numbers of (Syrian) refugees arriving in Germany, Dortmund thus became a refugee hub—a situation that persisted until NRW created further decentralised centres. Germany's asylum law (*Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz*) regulates the right of residence and sets the framework for determining access to social services (Menke 2020). These regulations are implemented by subnational levels (federal state, municipal). The federal states are responsible for the reception, accommodation and processing of asylum seekers. Residence permits are issued and benefits administered and provided by municipal foreigner and social departments, thus providing some leeway for localised decision-making and contributing to local variations within multi-level arrangements (e.g., Fauser 2017; Bogumil and Hafner 2021)¹.

Policymakers in Dortmund have been addressing the challenges associated with integrating migrants since the 2000s. In 2005, the *Masterplan Migration/Integration* was an important policy step in this respect, as was the establishment of the city's integration agency MIA-DO-KI in 2013. Two major challenges in terms of integration eventually led to the emergence of a dense migration/integration landscape of stakeholders and organisations. The first challenge arose with the arrival of particularly disadvantaged groups of EU migrants, mostly from Bulgaria and Romania, in the late 2000s, while the second arose with the arrival of unprecedented numbers of refugees from Syria and other countries between 2014 and 2016 and from Ukraine since early 2022.

3.2. Methodology

Empirically, we draw on narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) conducted with 19 young migrants in Dortmund, between June and December 2021. Such interviews allow interviewees to individually choose their narrative, including biographical information (George and Selimos 2018; Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). A chronological component is important, as the aim is to explore the intersection of local-level experiences, life stories and time, thereby also revealing how mobility and fixity are connected to inequalities (Rogaly 2015). From an interpretative perspective, oral histories and narratives potentially reveal the "how", i.e., how a story is told, how interviewees talk about events or experiences (Rogaly and Qureshi 2017). As Elder et al. (2003) have noted, the "lifecourse of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime" (p. 12).

Interviewees for this study were recruited through different channels, including the personal and extended networks of peer researchers, themselves refugees, who were involved in study, and a range of NGOs active in the migration/integration field. All interviewees were third-country nationals in vulnerable conditions. We understand vulnerable conditions as being confronted with one or more adversities in life (e.g., negative life events, discrimination) as well as having unequal individual access to the resources needed to overcome them, while at the same time recognising the agency of migrants to contest and possibly overcome systemic exclusion (Gilodi et al. 2022). Over half of our interview partners came from Syria, and the remainder came from a variety of other countries, namely, Iraq, Ghana, Guinea and Turkey. The majority had applied for asylum in Germany and held refugee status. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, German, English, Kurdish and Turkish.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed using the MAXQDA software package. A modified version of narrative interview analysis by Rosenthal (1993) was utilized for the analysis, which comprised the following stages: text analysis (main themes), analysis of structural content (e.g., events, timelines) and analytical abstraction (connecting different life phases/events). For the purpose of this paper, we draw on the individual stories of Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan², from Ghana, Iraq and Syria, respectively. All three had applied for asylum after arriving in Germany. In Germany, the likelihood of being granted asylum and a permanent residence permit varies considerably between countries of origin. In 2021, asylum seekers from Syria had an overall recognition rate (*Gesamtzuschutzquote*) of 62.6% and a rejection rate (*Ablehnungen*) of just 0.1% (BAMF 2022a)³. Iraqis were less likely to be recognised (31.9%) and more likely to be rejected (40.1%). Ghana is, however, regarded as a so-called safe country of origin, meaning that Ghanaians—and migrants from most West African countries—find it almost impossible to gain asylum (3.2%), while two thirds of all cases are rejected (66.0%). German authorities regard migrants from countries with a recognition rate exceeding 50% as having good prospects to remain in Germany (*Bleibeperspektive*) (BAMF 2022b). Currently, this only applies to asylum seekers from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia and Afghanistan, since 2022. The contrasting stories of these three young refugees allow us to illustrate the different channelling mechanisms of the German migration regime.

4. Variations in Refugee Experiences—The Cases of Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan

The following section draws on the cases of three young refugees. Their individual biographies, migration trajectories and context of arrival (place and time) illustrate the structural mechanisms used to ‘channel’ them into different categories of the migration system, thus giving each of them different starting conditions upon arrival. Their stories also reveal how they are able to access and benefit from different local resources which help contest and possibly overcome barriers.

4.1. Tamba

Tamba was born and raised in Ghana, which he defines as home. He left Ghana in 2013 aged 19 and was 28 when interviewed. His narrative revolved around his school trajectory in Ghana. A key turning point was when his parents were unable to afford to send him to high school. Only able to support the education of the first child, there was nothing left for Tamba and his other siblings. It is clear that household poverty was a key push factor prompting him to quit Ghana and head northwards.

“And I see, the family don’t have money and I wanted to do something; and there was no help; so, I try to come to Libya; and I forced myself to take the sea to Italy; and I came to Germany.”

The quote indicates both the helplessness of the situation and his own will to overcome poverty. It also highlights the hardships of his passage to Germany. While pointing out the difficult decisions he had to make, the quote also indicates his will to actively shape his path.

Tamba arrived in Germany in 2013, and Dortmund was where he was registered. Shortly afterwards, he was sent to a smaller city south of Dortmund. During his asylum process, he learnt from the officials that, as Ghana was regarded as a safe country of origin, applications for asylum from there were generally not accepted.

“[...] they said people from Syria are coming, so you don’t have asylum, in my country, you don’t have the [right] of asylum. They said, ‘you don’t have the hardships as others have’.”

In the quote, there is also a specific reference to “people from Syria”, who are treated in a different way due to their country being labelled as unsafe. After taking many risks to come to Germany, the rejection of his application for asylum further worsened Tamba’s already precarious position. Furthermore, he sees that things are much more difficult for “blacks” in Germany, thus pointing to an ethnic stratification of the migration regime:

“I really want a better future; but the problem is, you know, we Blacks, it is difficult for me here; it’s not easy at all. When you are a black person in Germany, especially people [like me], we come from outside, not that we were born here, when you are a black one here then you are different. We come from Africa, you know? You have to be born [in Germany], you have to marry before you can achieve what you want; you understand?”

Despite his application for asylum being rejected and thus not being granted a permanent residence permit, Tamba was granted a tolerated (*Duldung*) status, allowing him to temporarily avoid deportation.⁴ He stayed three years in Germany, with nearly no entitlements provided to him. He did not share any information on what happened during this period. Fearing deportation, he made his way to France in 2016, where he knew another Ghanaian who provided support:

“I have one person in Paris, he helped me. He sent me money, always. Because he knows, he said okay, you can pay me back [. . .] he is from my land. He kept me in Paris, found a place for me to sleep, found some black job⁵ to do.”

This highlights the importance of being able to draw on one’s own social network—compatriots in this case—when facing severe challenges. Nonetheless, such temporary relief did not allow Tamba to escape the subsistence level.

In 2018, the pregnancy of his German girlfriend changed Tamba’s situation. He returned to Germany with a valid option. When his son was born in 2019, he re-applied for asylum and was—as far as we can interpret his account—granted *Ausbildungsduldung* status. This status refers to a period of “toleration” during vocational training (an apprenticeship) attendance, and it was introduced in 2016 while he was in France. Another resource possibly enabling him to acquire permanent residence is a lawyer in Dortmund who told Tamba that being the father of a child born in Germany entitles him to a residence permit.

Nonetheless, Tamba regards himself as his biggest resource, with his life story illustrating a resilience to the barriers he faces. He stresses his self-sufficiency and regards receiving welfare as negative:

“I don’t want to join this social [system], always sit in a room and they give you 450 [Euros], that’s not my plan. I want to do something for myself. I’m young and have the strength. I want to work for myself. I am so strong, I want to use this strength to do something for my future. I don’t want to sleep, take money from the social [system], no. That’s not my style.”

Indeed, his difficult migration trajectory might have increased his resilience and contributed to his will to be self-reliant. One main aim for him is to gain financial independence and thus be able to support his son. Through the apprenticeship, he hopes to improve his chances of finding a job.

In addition, social contacts were important door openers for him. His girlfriend helped him get in touch with a local NGO that provides general support for migrants in Dortmund, runs a youth centre and offers language courses as well as counselling for young migrants with *Duldung* status. Tamba is enrolled in a language course there, hoping to improve his German language skills before commencing an apprenticeship as a plumber. Apart from the support provided, Tamba has also become friendly with people working for the NGO:

“They are [my] friends. If you want to tell them something, they want to hear it, they won’t ignore you; no. And if you have any problems, just tell us, and there are some, like few, they understand English, so the things would be easy to understand.”

This illustrates the importance of social contacts at the local level going beyond their mere usefulness as resources, particularly for younger migrants. Tamba has a few friends, including one German and two Ghanaians, without being too close to them. The distance he consciously creates is a strategy. He states that friendships might cause tensions or disagreements. Due to his precarious legal status, he wants to stay out of trouble.

Overall, he likes Dortmund mostly because of the people who are perceived as helpful:

“Dortmund is cool, for me. I like the people. [. . .] it’s good for me because everything you want to do, they will try to help you. If you want to work, you want to go to school [. . .]. Dortmund is a good place when you want to do something.”

He does not take it for granted that people provide him with help. Indeed, he emphasises that he would like to give back some of the support and kindness he has received.

Tamba still perceives himself as disadvantaged. His case clearly illustrates the impact of high structural barriers mostly tied to his precarious legal status and his unprivileged status as a “black” migrant from an African country which overall hinder his progress. However, over time, he has managed to overcome some of the barriers. While his own agency was an important factor, his—albeit limited—social network enabled him to access local resources in Dortmund such as a language course, vocational training, legal counselling or just social activities. These overall positive experiences link him to the city, fostering a sense of place attachment.

4.2. Omaid

Born and raised in Iraq, Omaid arrived in Germany in 2017. He was 28 years old when interviewed. There is a strong temporal structure in the narrative of his life story in Iraq before emigrating. The transition from Saddam’s rule to a phase of relative tranquillity and economic progress and the subsequent shift to the war waged by the Islamic State (IS) divided his childhood and youth into three phases, each with a significant impact on his livelihood and also coinciding with his own transition to adulthood.

Due to his family’s poverty, Omaid had to leave school in 6th grade to work and support his family. During the relative stability and economic development in the post-Saddam phase after 2003, Omaid moved to a bigger city where he was able to progress from kitchen cleaner to become chef at a 5-star hotel, constantly acquiring new skills. Yet, after the withdrawal of the US troops in the early 2010s, Omaid and his family, belonging to the Yezidi ethnic minority, became a target of the IS. The situation eventually became so instable and dangerous that he and his family were forced to leave Iraq at the time of his transition to adulthood.

Omaid preferred not to disclose details about his journey to Germany. He did, however, highlight one event, which turned out to have a critical impact on his integration in Germany. En route to Germany, he was picked up by the police in Romania, and his fingerprints were taken under duress. Upon arrival in Germany some months later, this meant that his application for asylum was turned down due to the “first safe country” principle under the Dublin Regulation⁶. As a consequence, he risked deportation to Romania, to where he did not want to return because he regarded Germany as “the best country” due to the opportunities for work.

A crucial resource was a lawyer in Dortmund who fought for his right to remain in Germany. The procedure took two years, during which he had no secure legal status or access to free language courses, vocational training schemes or the labour market. The enforcement of border and migration rules thus caused a delay and threat to his arrival process, despite him being most likely eligible for a residence permit as a member of a threatened ethnic minority from a region engulfed in civil war. His inability to attend a German course not only meant that his language skills did not improve but also that he had to spend two years waiting for a decision from the authorities. During this period, he mainly relied on co-ethnic social contacts:

“But in two years you cannot learn the language and you have no contact with the locals. Foreigners speak their mother tongue among themselves. [. . .] You [should] do B1 and have to be in contact with people, with Germans for example. I cannot learn the language from Kurds and Arabs. When I’m at home, I speak Kurdish. On the street I speak Kurdish or Arabic or Turkish. You learn many languages but not German because [. . .] everyone speaks their own language. That is why we are unable to learn German.”

Omaid found out that institutions or employers often require a so-called B1 or advanced level of German language proficiency, which can take two to three years to attain. He perceived this requirement as a high barrier to integration, though he acknowledged the importance of language to build up a local social network and to improve his labour market prospects.

Despite these barriers, Omaid is active at the local level in Dortmund. During the two years he had to wait for the decision on his case, he kept himself busy through voluntary work with a larger welfare organisation associated with the Catholic church. This engagement was initiated when Omaid met someone from that organisation while in refugee accommodation:

“I was in the shelter. There I met someone who worked for an organisation and who recommended me to work there. I was very happy there. When they spoke in German, I was happy. My mother tongue is for use at home, but German is for the city.”

At the welfare organisation, he was active in different projects. Through his volunteering, he gained three German acquaintances. He is aware that without such contacts, making progress in learning German is difficult. Voluntary work has thus become a strategic resource for building local social capital.

He started a language course two years after arriving in Germany and after finally receiving the residence status allowing him to remain. Unfortunately, shortly after it started, COVID-19 regulations unexpectedly suspended the course, again interrupting his integration trajectory.

Omaid is career oriented; his ultimate aim is to work as a chef or open his own restaurant. There are, however, barriers to this plan, of which he is aware. On the one hand, he lacks the necessary financial capital to open a restaurant. He explained that because of his legal status, he was not eligible for a bank credit, meaning that he could not yet become self-employed. On the other hand, and similarly to the case of Tamba, he could not start an apprenticeship without adequate German language skills.

Despite living in Dortmund for four years, Omaid has made little progress in integration due to the above-mentioned barriers. Even so, he has become quite attached to Dortmund:

“To be honest, I find Dortmund the most beautiful city in Germany. When I go to [neighbouring] Essen, I get so annoyed. Yes, I find Dortmund a great city. The streets are wide. I don’t care about the people. Whether many refugees live here, or Germans. It doesn’t interest me. What is important is how you live in this city. In every city you have difficulties. But in Dortmund I don’t think there are any big difficulties.”

This place attachment resonates with Tamba’s account, although they have different views on how far this is connected to their relationships with the local population or specific people living in Dortmund. Omaid and Tamba both separate structural barriers from local resources, which then also translate into positive experiences (locally).

4.3. Ahsan

Born and raised in Syria, Ahsan is 25 years old. Living in Dortmund for 8 years, he arrived in Germany as an unaccompanied minor (UAM) in 2013. At the age of 13, he and his family moved to Damascus from southern Syria. One year later, the Syrian civil war broke out. Without providing further details, he mentioned being arrested in Syria during this period. Ahsan left for Egypt at the age of 16. He spent a year in Egypt, but it was not possible for him to attend school there. These circumstances made him consider migrating to Germany. Arriving in Italy by boat, he travelled on to Germany.

As an unaccompanied minor, his accommodation path differed from that of older migrants. Along with other UAMs, he was housed in a facility run by a church in Dortmund, where he remained until he was 18 years old and able to rent his own apartment. Although not mentioned by him, it is likely that this was made possible through financial support from his family.

Ahsan has goals for the future and approaches them strategically. He enrolled in a language course to advance his German skills. After receiving the B1 language certificate, he was able to obtain a secondary school leaving certificate, enabling him to enrol in an apprenticeship scheme, which he successfully completed. After that, Ahsan went to university and gained a bachelor’s degree in fine arts. He worked for some time and is currently studying for a second bachelor’s degree in natural sciences.

Early on, Ahsan realised that language proficiency alone was not sufficient and that socialising to practice his German was key to improving his language skills. His first study phase was at a private university where, although courses were taught in English, he intentionally teamed up with Germans. His strategy apparently succeeded, enabling him to have everyday encounters with native speakers because they “realised how advanced my German language skills were.” This example shows that his advanced English skills as well as the financial resources to pay for a private university clearly opened up opportunities for him—opportunities not available to Tamba and Omaid, for example.

Nonetheless, it took time for Ahsan to build up a social network. At the church facility, he made no friends. His first friendships were established around 2015, coinciding with the arrival of substantial numbers of Syrians in Germany and Dortmund as well as with starting the educational path outlined above. This steppingstone resulted in an expansion of his social network, highlighting the potential for young people of encounters in different settings. Though Ahsan has a few German acquaintances as well, he differentiates between them and Syrians:

“I really first made friends in 2015 [. . .]. [This was] the first time where I said, this is a friend of mine, and that I can imagine establishing a friendship with him until the end of my life, so to speak. I have two friends, from Syria like me. I also have German friends, but I’m not sure that we will remain lifelong friends. The other two friends are also like me: they have studied, they work. We meet almost every week.”

After his arrival, Ahsan’s highlighted two important developments in Germany. The first was the emergence of broad support for migrants. When Ahsan arrived in 2013, he had no access to many services and infrastructures in Dortmund, many of which only developed in summer 2015 with the arrival of large numbers of refugees. Alongside new NGOs, more established welfare organisations also extended their scope to refugees and their integration at that time. In addition, significant changes to migration and integration policies on different scales were introduced after his arrival. Ahsan provided one clear example of where this lack of support hindered any possibility to reunite with his parents or to access specific services:

“In 2013 or maybe 2014 I could have brought my parents to Germany. I lost the right [to do so], because I didn’t know my way around and nobody told me what I could do. For example, now a little thing, I never received any child allowance. Because I didn’t know how to apply back then, and I never met my [assigned] legal guardian. I had a guardian from the municipality who actually could or had to do that for me. But I never met her. She never told me what I could do.”

This shows that while the local social departments have procedures for UAMs, the system was over-burdened at that time and did not function properly. Ahsan was upset about the lost opportunity for family reunification, especially since his father—whom he was close to—died in 2014. Although being the most important thing for him, his family is currently spread over different locations, with his mother in Dubai and his four sisters in different German cities.

The second was the formation of a substantial community of Arabic-speaking migrants. Ahsan felt frustrated at the beginning, mainly because of the unfamiliarity of his situation. It was uncommon to hear Arabic or see signs in Arabic at that time in the city. With the arrival of more Arabic-speaking refugees from Syria and elsewhere, it eventually became much easier to gain access to co-ethnic communities.

Having to become self-reliant as a minor and a refugee in a foreign country without a family close by, Ahsan had no other choice but to integrate:

“When I came [to Germany], there was no choice. Either I integrate or I don’t. I couldn’t somehow connect there with an Arab or with Germans. [. . .] I really only had Germans, and that’s why I actually find it quite good, it isn’t bad. It helped me a lot to integrate faster. But still, it was difficult at the beginning because I really had no other choice. I had no one to tell me what to do, where and how. I had to do everything on my own. I really was left on my own at that time and had no one else.”

Ahsan is driven by a will to achieve something in life. His own aspiration may be driven by his parents' aspirations as well. Apart from aiming for a successful career, he also became engaged in supporting refugees arriving after him. In summer 2015, when many refugees arrived at Dortmund train station, he was among the self-organised civil society groups helping newcomers. As he had not enjoyed such a reception himself, seeing so many people organising support was emotional for him. This solidarity was a turning point for him, leading to him joining a refugee organisation and dedicating much of his time to volunteering. This work included counselling, helping with paperwork, doing translations, or accompanying newcomers to the city's foreigner departments.

After eight years in Dortmund, Ahsan is very "satisfied" with the city. Resisting pressure from his sisters, who live elsewhere in Germany, Ahsan prefers living in Dortmund. One main reason is that he knows the city very well, and he recognises its opportunities:

"If I want to work, I can work the next day. I take up every opportunity to find work, to have free time, to do something with friends. It's actually a big city that's also small. I know many [people] and when I walk on the street, I'm like, I know everyone on the street, and everyone knows me, you know?"

Ahsan's story highlights how he used individual as well as local resources to progress in life. Like Tamba and Omaid, he has developed a strong sense of belonging to the city, mostly based on familiarity, a good relationship with the local population and a large social network. He also thinks that prejudices—for example, those faced by Syrians—can be overcome through encounters with other young people.

5. Discussion

Migration regimes on national or supra-national scales evolve over time and are highly stratified with regard to the desirability of certain groups of migrants. Contingent on both time and place, such systems have a channelling effect, predetermining (a) whether and to what extent migrants are entitled to services and other support after arrival, and (b) their integration process over time. As migrant lives are embedded spatially, and because arrival contexts can vary considerably with regard to opportunities for migrants, their ability to participate in social arenas and gain access to resources such as housing, information, education/training/employment or services is highly localised and thus contingent on place.

As seen, legal status and entitlements are very much linked to the channelling of migrants and provide a framework for understanding their experiences at the local level (e.g., Sandoz 2020). For young migrants in vulnerable conditions, legal status is often the most decisive determinant, as it has a major impact on the integration process of migrants. Legal status determines opportunity structures, for instance, to what extent refugees are entitled to welfare and services. Consequently, an insecure legal status is synonymous with barriers to accessing resources. Legal status is highly dependent on a migrant's country of origin, thus producing a highly hierarchised global migration landscape which sorts migrants into different categories even before they arrive at a new destination (Elrick and Winter 2018; Ellermann 2019). For Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan, these translated into different starting conditions after arrival, as illustrated by the two opposite outcomes of the asylum procedure for Tamba and Ahsan. Omaid's case highlights the intermediate 'grey zone', with his lack of knowledge about asylum procedures resulting in his case being formally assigned to Romania and, consequently, in his precarious legal status in Germany. Refugees with *Duldung* status, as is the case with Tamba and Omaid, are excluded from most support structures and face certain limitations. For instance, they were initially housed in a refugee shelter, with no freedom to choose their place of residence. During that period, they also had no access to the labour market. Due to their status, free language courses were not available to either of them. Unlike Tamba and Omaid, Ahsan, with his secured residential permit as a recognised refugee, did not encounter such barriers.

As an overarching parameter intersecting with their biographies and their arrival contexts, time shapes the integration of young refugees. Related to both the migration

regime and the spatial context, the temporal element is evident in the trajectories of all three young refugees. Accordingly, access to entitlements and opportunity structures is not static but subject to change. Arriving in Germany before or after 2015 made a significant difference with regard to integration. In response to the challenges related to the “long summer of migration” in 2015, the 2016 National Integration Act marked a turning point in policymaking (Hess et al. 2016). For instance, asylum seekers with good prospects of being granted asylum gained access to the labour market, while recognised refugees were obliged to take integration courses. Furthermore, the *Ausbildungsduldung* was introduced for the duration of vocational training and a subsequent two-year period to search for employment, possibly leading to a regular residential permit being granted. Yet, not all refugees were able to benefit from this reform. Constrained by the Dublin procedure and his lack of German language skills, Omaid was initially excluded from the scheme. In Tamba’s case, it was the other way around: despite being a migrant from a so-called safe country of origin, he was able to access this training opportunity. However, as his asylum application in 2013 preceded the introduction of the scheme, he only became eligible after re-entering Germany in 2019—unlike asylum seekers arriving after 2015.

The case of Ahsan is somewhat different. Being Syrian as well as arriving as an unaccompanied minor (UAM), he immediately obtained recognised refugee status, arguably channelling him into a less complicated integration path. He arrived prior to the development in Dortmund of an acknowledged migration/integration infrastructure including a dense network of civil society organisations, NGOs and local administrations as well as more professional procedures for UAMs. The timing of his arrival resulted in barriers which he would most likely not have encountered after 2015. Moreover, the rise in the number of Syrian refugees substantially increased Ahsan’s chances to establish co-ethnic social networks, in contrast to his pre-2015 social isolation. This shows that time is also decisive in the context of Dortmund, as well as what is locally available. As seen, the wealth of local possibilities for integration through the wide availability of opportunity structures (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2011) evolved in time. Moreover, Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan were able to build on local resources encountered in the arrival context. These include local “foci-aided encounters” (Hans and Hanhörster 2020) involving the local population and professionals in the field of migration and integration. For all three, such local contacts were instrumental in overcoming at least some of the barriers. Tamba, whose status was the most precarious, was able to access counselling, a language course and eventually an apprenticeship as well as finding a lawyer to help him secure a more permanent status. His girlfriend at the time and her knowledge of a local NGO were crucial for opening these doors. Through a social worker at the refugee accommodation where he was initially housed, Omaid received support in finding housing. He also started volunteering at that welfare organisation. This helped him build up local contacts and improve his German, thus overcoming some of the barriers resulting from his status. Ahsan, who arrived before many organisations and services were established, was able to gain local contacts and improve his language skills through schools he attended as an unaccompanied minor. He became deeply involved in the field of refugee integration in 2015. It is noteworthy that local civic society organisations not only function as local resources but also enable young migrants to become part of the local resource landscape themselves.

The stories of Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan show how they use local resources to overcome structural barriers, such as those imposed through migration regimes at national or supra-national levels. Despite the different needs of these young refugees due to their distinct biographies and migration journeys, local resources—mostly in the form of social capital—prove to be critical. Time is accordingly important, as the resources available to migrants change over time, as do the localities. Obviously, these three young men also rely on their own resources, such as being supported by family members (Omaid), their economic and cultural capital (Ahsan) or their individual determination (Tamba), which illustrates the importance of investigating the individual cases for a deeper understanding.

6. Summary

Based on empirical material from a study covering young migrants in vulnerable conditions in Dortmund, this paper shows how young refugees arriving in Germany are “channelled” into different categories very much linked to their countries of origin. These categories translate into unequal starting conditions with regard to how time can be spent, wellbeing, and access to services and other resources. Time and place are contingent in this respect, as the policy framework surrounding migration is also evolving. Furthermore, migration also contributes to the ongoing demographic transformation of the host society, resulting in shifts in the political, public and media debates around the issues of migration and integration. For Germany, the arrival of large numbers of refugees in 2015 can be regarded as a turning point with regard to these time–place contingencies.

Building on migration scholarship emphasising the role of the local level (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017), we argue that localised resources can enable migrants to overcome some of the barriers they face during their arrival and integration trajectory. Focusing on specific spatial contexts highlights the importance of everyday lives and struggles as well as the social realities of migrants.

Using three distinct biographical narratives of migrants’ arrival, we unravel the many barriers faced by these young migrants in vulnerable conditions. Again, time is an important factor. The access to social domains varies considerably, thus shaping individual experiences. We go on to show how young migrants use local resources in their struggle to overcome barriers and exclusion, imposed by higher (national, supra-national) levels. The availability of such resources is time dependent. On the one hand, the time of a migrant’s arrival in connection with the migration regime valid at that particular moment (e.g., legal frameworks, migrant categories) shape—and often constrain—the opportunities of migrants to become full members of local societies. On the other hand, localised resources such as migrant self-help organisations, refugee organisations, co-ethnic or co-national social networks of migrants and formal support structures evolve over time. For young migrants, social encounters with the local population are of particular importance. While not all young migrants have the same ability to acquire the necessary language skills, Tamba, Omaid and Ahsan, albeit at different times, all benefitted from local contacts and sometimes professionals in the field of migration and integration who provided crucial support such as language learning, legal counselling or social encounters as well as from stimulating their own civic engagement. The interplay between barriers, resources and evolving practices is thus very much shaped by biographies, place and time. Looking to the future, further research on the role of various localised resources in integration appears fruitful.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed ethnographic account of the intricate ways of how migrants struggle with bureaucracies after arrival, see the excellent comparative study by Eule et al. (2018).
- ² Interviewee names were pseudonymised.
- ³ The remaining 37.2% belong to cases without further proceedings.
- ⁴ The *Duldung* (tolerated) status, while allowing people to stay in Germany temporarily, does not entail a regular residential permit. It thus merely suspends or delays deportation.
- ⁵ Referring to informal/unregistered work.
- ⁶ Dublin Regulations refer to a system and criteria determining which an EU Member State is responsible for processing applications for asylum/international protection (BAMF 2020).

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