

## **Creating a future while waiting for a residence permit: Temporary and irregular migrants in informal social infrastructures**

In this article, we analyse how temporary and irregular migrants resist bureaucratically induced waiting for decisions on their residence permit applications in the unknown future [l'a venir] by engaging with the present. We argue that through their engagement with the present they seek to create a future [un avenir] for themselves. Our approach challenges approaches to waiting as a passive experience of power. Drawing on ethnographic and qualitative research in Finland and Norway, we analyse how migrants draw on informal relationships, or what we term informal social infrastructure, to secure access to services and to transgress laws and policies aiming at their exclusion. We argue for an approach that considers waiting not as a pre-defined condition but as an induced temporal context within which migrants are oriented towards an unknown future. This creates spaces for action in the present through which the unknown future can be turned into a projected and desired future.

Keywords: irregular migrants, temporary migrants, waiting, asylum seekers, informal social infrastructure, Nordic countries

## **Introduction**

In the Nordic countries, the universal welfare state is supposed to take care of its residents from the cradle to the grave. However, this universality does not extend to individuals whose residence is categorised as temporary, because in a residence-based welfare state full access to services and rights depends on permanent residence. Migrants with temporary residence experience an opaque and marginalising welfare state.

In the 2000s, a new social division based on temporary vs. permanent residence has emerged in the EU and the Nordics. Before the pandemic, the number of temporary migrants, i.e., migrants with non-permanent residence permits, was on a record high level in the EU (OECD 2019). In the Nordic countries, the possibilities of receiving permanent international protection have been deteriorated especially since the long summer of migration in 2015. Finland introduced rapid changes to the Alien's Act that removed the possibility of acquiring protection based on humanitarian grounds and hampered asylum seekers' access to legal aid (Author A, 2020a). In Norway, new temporary regulations for asylum seekers were put in place according to which refugee status and residence permits may be withdrawn once there no longer is a need for protection. Sweden introduced a new temporary law that restricted the conditions for obtaining a residence permit even upon receiving refugee status (Elsrud, 2020). The asylum processes have become longer and complex (Author A 2020a) and the number of irregularised migrants increased.

The aim of this article is to analyse how migrants with temporary and irregular statuses create a liveable life in the present and aspire for a future for themselves in the context of waiting in Nordic welfare states (cf. Bourdieu 2000, pp. 225–226). We argue that the long bureaucratic processes that may include years of waiting in an asylum process and the decline in access to permanent residence statuses have created a landscape of temporariness experienced by individuals with non-permanent statuses as an unknown

future [l'a venir]. By focusing on the active efforts to create a future [un avenir], this approach allows us to go beyond analyses of waiting as a passive experience of loss of power (cf. Auyero, 2012; Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 226–228).

In this landscape of subjectively lived temporariness, social workers play a key role as street-level bureaucrats implementing and interpreting changing legislations (Lipsky 1980) and as gatekeepers controlling access to the welfare services. While the priorities set by public social work organisations may be very different from the needs of migrant service users, public social workers are limited in their practices by the legal framework. Because of this, informal actors can be more able to respond to the needs of migrants in non-permanent statuses (cf. Schrooten & Meeus 2020). We analyse how irregular migrants and asylum seekers draw on such informal actors, constituting what we term an *informal social infrastructure* referring to the supportive and sustaining functions of informal social networks. We draw on Simone (2004) who puts forth the concept “infrastructuring the social”, emphasizing the entanglement between “people as infrastructure”, state policies and economies (Simone, 2004: 411). The informal social infrastructures sustain the efforts of temporary migrants in navigating and restructuring their state of unknown future [l'a venir] into that of a future [un avenir].

Informal social infrastructures, such as social networks and personal relations, can facilitate and secure access to services, and in the long run to a more permanent legal status for migrants in temporary statuses. In our focus are temporary migrants and irregular migrants, i.e. ‘migrants in a situation of administrative irregularity’ (Moffette 2018, p. 13) due to not having obtained a residence status or who have had a status but later fell out of it. These migrants share a situation in which the public social services either do not know how to assist them, believe they do not have the right for assistance, or are unable to do so due to policy regulations.

The article draws on ethnographic and qualitative research conducted in Norway and Finland. Rather than an explicit comparison, the two case studies allow us to demonstrate the particularities of the universalism of the Nordic welfare state and how it treats asylum seekers and irregular migrants. For social work scholarship, the article offers a contribution to the analysis of migrants' conditions in insecure legal statuses. We highlight not only the bureaucratically induced waiting as creating a space for shaping one's future through engaging in work or studies, but also how changes in law might alter the situation and cause further complexities in terms of entitlement to a residence permit and access to welfare state services. This is particularly relevant in a context in which short-term and temporary residence permits are on the rise.

### **Theoretical approach**

A key dilemma for social workers working with temporary and irregular migrants is between the professional values of anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices to service people in need and their role as civil servants obliged to follow policies and legislation that renders migrants 'illegal' and deportable (cf. De Genova, 2002; Parker, 2000). Indeed, it has been argued that social workers are collaborating with immigration controls and that their practices might be exclusionary and racist on the one hand (Humpries, 2004) and that they may adopt a hospitality-based practice in their work (Fell & Fell, 2014). Further, migration that is rendered temporary through bureaucratic means of governing migration challenge social work practices.

The organisation of welfare state services and social work is moulded for certain types of clients in specific situations. A major challenge for social work today is presented

by clients whose situation is defined by “socio-legal liminality, temporal fragmentation and non-linear patterns of mobility” (Boccagni & Righard, 2020, p. 375). Indeed, some contributions to this literature suggest a reorientation to the local city level or urban social work to advance a transnational paradigm of social work (Righard, 2018; Schrooten & Meeus, 2020). According to Schrooten and Meeus (2020), the urban infrastructure of social work does not involve only state institutions, but also civil society, which they term ‘arrival infrastructures’. The approach of arrival infrastructures focusing on semi-public localities, such as bars and shops and private spaces, including friends’ and acquaintances’ homes, that facilitate sociability, knowledge exchange and support among newly arrived people (Schrooten & Meeus, 2020: 418). This perspective allows for acknowledging the role of informal networks and organisations dispersed across traditional arrival districts. We engage with the notion of *informal* infrastructures, as the migrants in our research are people who have not recently arrived but whose legal limbo might have lasted for several years.

Social work practices are challenged not only by the transnational context but also by the multiplication of legal statuses and changes to laws which may cause a person to lose their entitlement to welfare state services, or to gain access to them, overnight. Elsrud (2020) argues that rejected asylum seekers face what she describes a ‘social death’ when Swedish social workers begin to ostracise young Afghans with changed legal status. Therefore, a focus on the temporality of migration control and bureaucratically induced waiting are key to unpacking the relation between contemporary migration and social work.

Research on the temporality of migration has highlighted experiences of ‘being temporary’ (Mountz, 2010) and the temporality of migration control (Griffiths et al., 2013; Tazzioli, 2018). An important factor in shaping the temporalities of migration are

the power dynamics of the border and residence permit systems which are contingent on temporal measurement. The allowed length of stay, the permitted number of work hours, and the pace of visa processing (Cwerner, 2001) are foundational of the EU residence permit system (Author C, 2021).

Waiting among migrants has been extensively researched in the last decade (Griffiths et al., 2013; Rotter, 2016). Waiting can be used to exercise control over migrant groups. Uncertainty caused by waiting is not a flaw but part of the immigration system (Whyte, 2011). Waiting has frequently been conceived of as useless and wasted time in contrast to a capitalistic notion of productive time (Gasparini, 1995). However, waiting can also amplify awareness of one's needs (Vanstone, 1982) and provide perspectives on migrant agency (Axelsson et al., 2017, Author B & X, 2018). Scholars have called attention to how people actively fill the waiting time by focusing on the present (“giving meaning to everyday life”) and the future (“directed towards desired futures”) (Rotter, 2016, p. 82). Such ‘active waiting time’ (Gasparini, 1995; Brun, 2015) includes activities such as praying, daily routines, and spending time with peers. Author B & X (2018) have shown how migrants can transform waiting into an active kind of time, by filling time with meaningful content through political mobilization and active efforts to create a future (also Author A, 2020a).

Migrants tend to build social networks that can be used when searching for jobs and accommodation (Fontanari, 2018). Axelsson et al. (2017) suggest that precarious work-time arrangements can be accepted to achieve particular life-course trajectories. Accepting precarious working conditions may function as a ‘strategy’ to mobilise resources and to build social networks to potentially enable better future employment (Deshingkar, 2019, p. 2647).

The possibility of waiting out precarious work and living conditions must be considered also from a legal and bureaucratic perspective. Temporary residence permits, with a rigid legal framework might drive migrants to accept flexible work in low-paid service work (De Genova, 2002; Author C, 2020). Thus, the escape from precarious conditions is not easily achieved only by waiting, but by managing to get a legal status valid for a longer period and with more encompassing rights.

Bureaucratically induced waiting and the temporality of migration control are a central perspective for examining power relations. Taking over someone's time and making them wait for an unknown time in the future [l'avénir], is both a form of demonstrating power (Bourdieu, 2000) and a technology of governance (Auyero, 2012). As personal time has a fundamental dimension of the social value of a person, so is waiting 'one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 228). Induced waiting can be understood as a form of bureaucratic violence (Author A, 2020a). We suggest that migrants resist such forms of violence by engaging with the present and through this engagement they imagine and create a future [un avenir] for themselves.

## **Method and Data**

Our article draws on three data sets: participant observation collected at an asylum-seekers' protest called Right to Live in the centre of Helsinki in 2017, four reception centres and two detention centres and 41 qualitative interviews with Afghan and Iraqi men and women in various locations in Southern Finland in 2017-2019. The second data set is ethnographic research conducted in Oslo and Bergen, Norway in 2011-2015 among irregular migrants including participant observation at political demonstrations organized

in Oslo and Bergen and interviews with 52 irregular migrants. The third data set consists of qualitative interviews with 41 non-EU migrants with changing temporary statuses (asylum seekers, students, workers) struggling with experience of temporariness and precarious working conditions, conducted in Finland 2014-2015, 2017-2019 and 12 follow-up interviews in 2020. The migrants were 20-40 years old women (18) and men (23) who had been in Finland 2-3 years before the initial interview. These data sets have been analysed using thematic qualitative content analysis, focusing on the themes of borders, work and subjectivity and struggle.

To analyse the data from different contexts, gathered at different times by us separately, we had long discussions on the diverse contexts of the empirical data, our results, and their interpretations specifically in relation to experiences of time and waiting. The combination of the analysis of the three data sets from two countries provides a broad framework for discussing experiences of waiting and irregularity **both** in the Nordic welfare states **and** beyond **the** specific national or local contexts. **The Nordic welfare states' constitutions have several communalities, such as their ideals of universality, policies designed to limit social inequality, and the role of street-level bureaucrats, such as social workers, in integrating migrants and refugees. To convey the particularities of the national contexts, as well as the more Nordic specificities, we will discuss the particularities of the Finnish and Norwegian contexts.** We selected representative cases of the larger data to illustrate our argument in this article. By focusing on migrants with temporary statuses while encompassing complex subjective shifts between migratory categories, we strive to avoid a categorical fetishist (Apostolova, 2015) view on migration.

During data collection, all authors paid close attention to its ethical dimensions: interviewing people who are in precarious situations carries intense requirements

regarding ethical conduct, responsibility, and sensitivity. We explained to our participants the aim of our research, emphasised that any participation was voluntary, and ensured that they knew they could withdraw from the interview at any given moment. We clarified that we had no impact on their future asylum claims. We anonymised the research participants by giving each of them a pseudonym and withholding any potentially revealing information.

### **The welfare state imposing waiting**

Finnish and Norwegian asylum regimes differ in the length of reception services provided to those who are waiting for the decision. In Norway, the possibility of obtaining a temporary work permit for asylum seekers with a final rejection was reduced in 2003. In 2004, asylum seekers with a final refusal were deprived of the offer to live in an ordinary reception centre, apart from families with children and unaccompanied minors. The aim was to reduce the inflow of asylum seekers, to pressure rejected asylum seekers to return voluntarily, and to ease pressure on the limited reception capacity. This policy was discontinued because the financial burden was shifted on to the municipalities that started offering various forms of social assistance to homeless people. A person with a rejected appeal on their rejected asylum application from the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) can stay at an asylum reception centre but will have their financial benefit reduced. They cannot apply for a different type of residence permit. This should be done from the person's home country.

A rejection from the UNE is final, and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) cannot change this decision. An asylum seeker in Norway can be granted a temporary work permit if they have had their asylum interview (or are from Syria, Eritrea

or Turkey) and have a valid passport (or live in an integration reception centre, and the UDI is in no doubt about their identity), and they have not received a decision on their application for protection. A person who has had their appeal rejected by the UNE loses the right to health care and medical assistance (although they have the right to ‘emergency health care’) and the potential temporary work permit. Emergency accommodations run by voluntary organizations exist for people without legal residence who do not have a place to live. These emergency accommodations are primarily used by deprived EEA citizens, but sometimes also by persons without legal residence from non-EU countries.

In Finland, when the Administrative Court decides on the appeal of a rejected asylum application, reception services end immediately (Author A, 2020a). Responsibility for the basic services of rejected asylum seekers moved from the central government to municipalities under the Social Welfare Law. Because of the legal changes made in 2016 and the removal of humanitarian protection as grounds for a temporary residence permit, rejected asylum seekers who cannot be deported or cannot return, remain as irregular migrants. The ending of reception services means that an asylum seeker and their family are no longer entitled to accommodation and sustenance but are only entitled to temporary shelter, often on a day-to-day basis, and essential care provided by municipal social services. Asylum seekers have the right to work until they receive a final decision on the asylum application. While their application is pending, they can apply for another type of residence permit, for work, studies, or family. Work permits are subjected to a labour availability assessment and obtaining one requires a valid passport, while study-based permits require demonstration of sufficient funds (6720 € per year available on the bank account) and a private health care insurance. Since 2018, an asylum seeker applying for a study permit must cancel his/her asylum application.

The changes to legal regulations demonstrate the temporality of laws that structure the living conditions of temporary and irregular migrants. The changes are confusing both to the migrants and to the social workers who in their daily tasks need to make choices on who to assist with what, based on which argument and regulation. In the following three sections we discuss how irregular and temporary migrants draw on the informal infrastructure to navigate the welfare state system and resist bureaucratically induced waiting through their engagement with the present.

### **Creating informal infrastructures through political mobilisation**

Political mobilisation is one way in which asylum seekers and irregular migrants engage with the present in the context of bureaucratically induced waiting (see Author A 2020, Author B and X 2018). In 2011-2015 in Bergen and Oslo and in Helsinki in 2017, asylum seekers and irregular migrants organised protest camps that lasted for several months. As similar protests in other European cities, these protests served several purposes: to make visible the collective presence of an otherwise marginalised population, to serve as a platform for demands regarding political rights and welfare services and to set up informal infrastructures for the provision of welfare services. In what follows, we focus on the latter purpose of and analyse it from the asylum seekers' perspective of engaging with the present to create a future from themselves.

In February 2017, Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers who had pending applications or had their applications rejected by Finnish Immigration Service (Migri from now on) set up a protest camp called Right to Live in the centre of Helsinki with the aid of Finnish activists. The protesters demanded for the right to legal assistance in the asylum process, suspension of deportations and rectifications to decisions made by Migri and safe

accommodation and basic sustenance for individuals whose reception services had abruptly ended (also Author A 2020a). In a few weeks, the demonstration grew into a protest camp consisting of several tents in which the activists prepared and served tea and offered a free warm meal once a day.

The protest camp was set up in the city centre, which allowed for the protesters to maximise media attention and engagement with passers-by and politicians. Author A was present when two municipal social workers visited the protest but remarkably the workers stood outside the tents drinking tea without engaging with the protesters (Fieldnotes author A). Similar ambivalence towards the protest by Finnish authorities could be observed in the following field note extract:

A police officer is visiting demo [the protest camp] after an incident in which one of the activists tried to harm himself. The police officer tells Mohammad and Dawood that she understands the desperation of those who have lost their reception services and asks if anything could be done to prevent such incidents. Dawood says that self-harm is a representation of people's desperation when the country they thought would protect their human rights is sending them to the streets. The police officer asks if the Deaconness Foundation or the Refugee Welcome network could help with providing accommodation to rejected asylum seekers. Dawood says that the emergency shelter is not sufficient: "It is open from seven in the evening until the morning, but during the day you cannot stay in the shelter, nor is there any place to keep one's belongings. If the shelter is full, you have to go somewhere else, so it becomes impossible for children to attend school". (Fieldnotes author A).

Remarkably in this exchange, the police officer suggests that rejected asylum seekers should resort to the informal networks rather than seek help from municipal social services. This exchange reveals that while the right for basic accommodation offered by municipal social services might seem sufficient on paper, in practice night shelter is insufficient. Individuals cannot keep their belongings in a shelter and children cannot attend school from a shelter. Children's right to education, guaranteed in international human right treaties, is not met. The discrepancy between principle and practice forces rejected asylum seekers to rely on informal social infrastructure for their basic needs, such as accommodation. Author A observed several occasions of trying to organise accommodation to rejected asylum seekers at the Right to Live protest camp.

On one occasion, Iraqi and Finnish activists were organising help for an Iraqi family of five who had received a second negative answer from the administrative court which ended their reception services in a small municipality in central Finland. The municipal social services had arranged a temporary accommodation for the family. The family got in touch with a Right to Live activist, saying that they only had 30 euros cash to buy food and did not understand what will happen to them. The latter was because no one had interpreted their expulsion order written in Finnish. The Iraqi activists in Helsinki acted as informal interpreters and explained the situation to the family. Several Finnish activists got in touch with a representative of the social services in the municipality. The representative of the social services responded to the phone calls with annoyance and explained that the family had not been thrown to street and that emergency accommodation had been organised. In Helsinki, one of the Finnish activists, a former social worker, explained to Author A that it's best avoid pressuring the social workers because of their discretionary power. If they feel pressured, they might consider 30 euros to be a great deal of money that should last the family of five for a month. She also brought

up a structural problem in how the Finnish social services operates: the client usually is compensated for food expenses retrospectively upon presenting receipts for the purchases. In this case the family did not have other savings than the 30 euros and did not know how the Finnish system works. In the end, the activists from Helsinki collaborated with activists in a bigger city near-by to organise more flexible help to the family hidden from the official social services. Later they organised a more stable accommodation in the metropolitan region and helped them to renew their asylum applications (Fieldnotes Author A).

The case of the Iraqi family demonstrates two key temporalities at play in the asylum system: the long *durée* of the bureaucratic process creating a temporal frame of an unknown future [l'avenir] – over two years in the case of the Iraqi family - on the one hand, and the sudden temporal rupture when a decision comes that results in a dramatic change in one's life. It also reveals the limitations of a nationalist social work practice when confronted with clients who do not have national or English language skills and who are not familiar with logic of welfare system (Jönsson 2014; Lorenz 2006). In such instances, informal social structures can be more flexible and respond quicker to urgent needs. However, these depend on the existence of activist networks and knowledge about the networks and are thus fragile.

Social networks established from a precarious position can provide assistance and necessary help. In Norway, irregular migrants are allowed to live at reception centres also after they have received rejection on their application and second appeal. Yet, many irregular migrants prefer to leave both because they are more exposed to deportation in a reception centre, and because life there is characterized by waiting, stuckness and repetition. As an Ethiopian irregular man told Author B:

“Maybe in one reception building there are 63 people. There are too many voices, no sleep, people are walking all the time in the corridors- it is very difficult. Also, the toilets are no good, because too many people, and it’s not clean. (...). Tradition, language differences, and religion are also different. (...). This is very difficult in reception life, oh, three years like this – it’s like a prison. Always eating, sleeping, eating, sleeping, eating, sleeping. The same situation, it’s hard.”

Many irregular migrants Author B talked with in Oslo left the reception centres and alternated between friends’ places, to avoid draining their hospitality. Eyob, a 30-year-old unmarried man from Eritrea explained Author B that he had his asylum application rejected in 2009 because the government did not believe that he came from Eritrea and argued that he was from Ethiopia. He said: “I want out of the system. I want to work”. Some while ago, he had a contract with a cleaning company, but they fired him because he did not obtain the permission to work. Afterwards he had worked for four companies informally, but had discontinued because it was too much work and not fair payment.

His Eritrean friends suggest that he should go to Eritrean political demonstrations, to register with one of the Eritrean parties, and frequent the Pentecostalism church, because this could help him in his asylum application process. Eyob explains, “If you go to Pentecostal church, this is forbidden in Eritrea”, adding, “UDI and religious persons are pressing us to do unnecessary things to stay here in Norway. They don’t want the truth. They push me to do false things.” When Author B meet Eyob, he had not worked for two years:

“After that, I get a home from my friends, because in our culture and country everybody helps each other. It is normal, everything you get help for. If I need lunch – they just buy to me a burger or something. I don’t smoke, I don’t drink, so I’m free from all that. I am not addicted. I just need food – to eat once a day is enough for me.”

Informal social networks have become a regular form of achieving accommodation as seen also in the Finnish case. While irregular migrants have legal rights, these rights are open to discretionary interpretation. One consequence is that rights are not always covered by the state but left up to the informal social infrastructure to cover. When irregular migrants try to find their ways through the bureaucracy, this process does not only require various documents which can be hard to deliver, but also long waiting time for answers during which migrants are not necessarily provided a place to wait. Social networks, including friends, become their safety net, offering accommodation if only in shorter period of times. Such assistance is limited, both timewise and in substance. It is not based on rights but on friendships, which can be fragile and open for abuse. Yet, these networks become imperative for migrants in their efforts to change their present stuckness into a future for themselves.

### **Working in the context of waiting**

A key mean through which asylum seekers and irregular migrants engage with the present and seek to create a future is through work. Research participants in Norway and Finland refused to wait for an unknown future [l’avenir] imposed by the residence permit bureaucracy and instead had clear plans of making a future [un avenir] for themselves by first volunteering at the reception centre or finding a job in the precarious labour markets,

commonly in restaurants, in care and cleaning, construction or in small services such as garages. Working in the context of bureaucratically induced waiting also depends on informal infrastructures and can entail new risks as employees can easily exploit asylum seekers and irregular migrants with a relatively low risk of being caught.

Even when asylum seekers and irregular migrants find paid work, these are mostly casual jobs with low and irregular pay that are less useful when applying for a work-based permit. Yet, in Finland (not an option in Norway) some succeed in getting a secure job with sufficient pay in a sector that is freed from labour market assessment and are able to secure a work-based residence permit. Here again, personal relationships and accumulated experience-based knowledge play a key role.

Basir from Iraq was living as an asylum seeker in Finland, which he after many attempts via different routes into Europe had managed to reach together with his family. They were placed in a reception centre in eastern Finland, but Basir did not wish to merely wait.

When I came here first in 2015, I had the interview in 2016. I told them I need to develop my project, because I want to learn to become a mechanic, I don't want to just stay like that. We were leaving [eastern Finland] because there is no work. I got work [there] but only seasonal [work] for 2-3 months. (...) So, I decided I want to work, and I want to study [elsewhere]. (Basir's interview)

Basir sought to develop a project instead of being reduced to a governable subject. He left his family to southern Finland to find work, which he did first in construction and later as a newspaper deliverer. He also investigated his possibilities of fulfilling his dream for further education and managed to be accepted in a vocational college. Now his life was not filled with waiting but with activity from early morning to late afternoon.

It took several years to get a decision on the asylum application, a time during which his personal relationship situation changed. Basir and his wife separated, followed by a negative decision on Basir's asylum application, while the rest of the family was granted asylum. The four years of bureaucratically induced waiting had shaped his personal relationships and had profoundly impacted on his children. His children, Basir pointed out, had no connection to Iraq, and would therefore describe themselves as coming from Finland.

To continue residing in Finland, Basir filed an application based on his family ties to his children but, he also considered applying for a student residence permit. Basir's aim was to legalise his status in Finland to create a future for himself. This was facilitated through a network of migration activists, who "have more experience than my lawyer", Basir concluded. Moulded around the accumulated knowledge and experience of the migration system in Finland, the informal social infrastructure assisted Basir in navigating this system and finding ways to legalise his status.

The long waiting time in getting a decision on one's asylum application or appeal impacts the migrants' everyday lives. Through bureaucratically induced waiting many migrants in precarious legal statuses live in a temporal lag in relation to a national norm where life keeps up with the normative rhythm of work and studies (Author B and X, 2018, Author C, 2021b). This temporal asymmetry caused by the border and residence permit system inflicts marginalisation, as certain subjects are temporally kept at a distance with reduced possibilities for participation in society. However, the informal social infrastructure supports precarious migrant subjects' aspirations to create a future for themselves and in doing so disrupts the exclusion caused by the temporal asymmetry.

## **Following one's aspirations for the future**

While asylum seekers have a right to education, entering formal education might be in practice impossible. Here again informal social infrastructures play an important role in helping young people create a future for themselves.

When Author B met Iranian Mahdi, he was 22 years old and had lived in Norway for seven years with his mother. He had converted to Christianity and was an active member of the Labour Party's youth section. Mahdi and his mother had received a negative answer on their asylum application after two years in Norway and decided to leave the reception centre. At that point they received some money from the government (1000 NOK, about €100 per month). Their application had been rejected and they feared deportation. "Better to live somewhere where it is difficult to find us," Mahdi recalls. They had lived twice in a church asylum for half a year. During this period, Mahdi had the right to attend secondary school because he was under the age of 18. Because they had left the reception centre, Mahdi had to work in addition to completing his secondary school. He worked from 3 pm to 11 pm every weekday. Mahdi recalls: "I was almost falling asleep at school. The teachers told me to focus on school. But when I told them [about the situation], they understood that I had to work." Being tired and unable to focus on his education, Mahdi's grades suffered, and he lacked some subjects necessary to apply for his desired studies at the university. "I need to build up my future now! It is now that the people of my age are studying", Mahdi explained. Deciding to take the necessary subjects through a private school, he had paid the tuition fee, followed classes, and prepared for the exam. Half laughingly and half flabbergasted he said, "I got all the way, but then I could not do the exam! I paid

17,000 NOK [appr. 1700 EUR] without being allowed to take the exam, because there it stopped: I don't have a national identification number. I have a DUF and a d-number, but those numbers are not working in many places."<sup>1</sup> Mahdi had realised too late that he could not register for the exam without a national identification number. Now he had found a solution on how to take the exam: "But you are always dependent upon finding a nice person who can do it – that goes for everything." (Author B fieldnotes)

Mahdi's irregular status had consequences for his education because his work distracted his schooling. Following his hope to secure a desired university degree, Mahdi was in the end in need of a "nice person" to bypass the digital border to take the exam. Mahdi seems both frustrated and relieved for the assistance of someone else: while he had managed to arrange everything as an independent person reaching adulthood in the process, at the very last minute this independence became an illusion as his irregularized status meant that he needed help from 'someone nice'. The capacity to not only imagine a better future, but also to actively engage in and shape that future through studies or work, was facilitated by the informal social infrastructure.

Mahdi is aware of the urgency of time passing. He must study at the university *now*, with students of his age, even though it might have been easier to pursue studies at a later stage after the waiting period for a regularised status is over. Uncertain as to when this might happen, if at all, convinced Mahdi to take control of his own future. While studying is both transforming waiting time to active time in the present and creating a future, it can also be considered as an everyday form of resistance against the restrictive

asylum policies and their temporal regimes. Simultaneously, it can be considered as a reappropriation of time and everyday practices of sociability (Gatta 2012).

The interrelation between bureaucratically induced waiting and the role of the informal social infrastructure in actively creating a future can also be identified in the story of Akhil. Akhil had fled from Iraq with his family. The family members ended up in different Nordic countries, Akhil and his two siblings in Finland at the end of 2015. He described that he came from a rich family, had studied art and had recently been accepted to a university in Iraq to study dentistry. After two negative decisions on his asylum application in Finland, his mental health started to deteriorate. Living in a small city, he met a restaurant owner who invited him to help prepare food for an art exhibition. Without previous experience of cooking, he seized the opportunity:

This summer went so amazing with the opening of the restaurant. (...) And then, the Madam artist, she gave me advice. She said, why don't you apply to a chef's school? I was like: Really? Chef school, oh my God! I was like yeah it is much better than nothing, I could at least... Artist, dentist, chef - why not! (Akhil's interview)

Akhil's personal connections to the restaurant owner and the artist provided him with opportunities to engage in paid work and gave him ideas for future educational. He got accepted into a study program and could apply for a study-based residence permit. He started working in the metropolitan area to save money for the private health insurance required for a study-based permit in addition to working as an unpaid trainee.

Author C and Akhil met again in 2019, 18 months after the initial interview. He had been able to finish his studies and was working as a chef. When we started talking about the residence permit, he got agitated, swore, and then apologized for his behaviour. Migri was causing him anxiety. Akhil had applied for a permit issued for graduates to look for a job but had been waiting for nine months. The reason was a new law introduced in 2018 that prevented asylum seekers from applying for a student residence permit. However, Akhil had filed his application for a study-based permit before the law came into effect. At the time of the interview, he was caught in a circle of appeals and his study permit was to expire in a few weeks.

Like many newly arrived migrants, Akhil's experiences were shaped by both the temporality of law and bureaucracy. He described the arduous waiting for the residence permit while the government was introducing new restrictive laws – a government he was supporting by paying taxes but without having the right to vote, Akhil stated. From the perspective of bureaucratic temporality, the changes in law made implementation confusing: Did the law include only those who had applied after the law was passed, or everyone with pending applications when the law was passed.

Akhil's story demonstrates that even though he was able to actively counter the timely process of waiting for a decision on his asylum case via his personal contacts who advised and helped him in applying for a student permit, the temporality of the residence permit system continued to impact his life. When temporary residence permits are issued, migrants are produced as always situated on the border with the ongoing concern of securing one's legal status and avoiding expulsion. This makes them more vulnerable to

changes in laws and regulations, which can disrupt or invalidate their efforts to create a future.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have demonstrated how informal social infrastructure can support temporary migrants in their efforts to create a future [un avenir] for themselves. While bureaucratically imposed waiting creates an unknown future, which could be experienced as ‘wasting one’s time’, migrants can find ways to find alternative avenues to claims for residence, such as work or studies, as well as access to welfare state service. Still, temporary migrants’ efforts to resist bureaucratically imposed waiting are dynamically affected by the temporality of law that can change overnight.

Analysing migrants’ engagement with the present offers an important corrective to top-down notions and imaginaries of migrant integration as a straightforward path. For temporary and irregular migrants creating a future in seemingly universal welfare states requires innovative struggles and finding alternative paths – struggles supported more by the informal social infrastructure rather than formal social services. As we have shown, these informal social infrastructures assist migrants in providing access to the reluctant welfare state. Nevertheless, informal social infrastructures are built on asymmetric power relations and structures of personal dependence that might bring novel risks in the migrants’ everyday lives.

Our findings have several implications for social work practice and the wider Nordic welfare state system. Social work should better account for individual needs even when these individuals do not have language skills or knowledge of the welfare system. Increased effort to recognise migrants’ diverse legal conditions beyond neatly defined administrative categories as well as providing training in immigration law and rights for

social workers is needed. Now, social workers often lack basic knowledge regarding immigration legislation and are unable to assist in residence permit applications – often irregular and temporary migrants’ most urgent needs

The reliance on informal social infrastructures among migrants who aim to actively create futures for themselves should be recognised when basic services for irregular migrants are planned. Here developing outreach work to better respond to the specific situations and conditions of irregular migrants is key. Policies guaranteeing irregular migrants access to basic rights without the fear of deportation should be developed. The presence and human needs of irregular and temporary migrants needs to be acknowledged and included in Nordic welfare states at the national and local policies and social work practices.

## Notes

1. Norway has two kinds of identification numbers: national identity numbers and d-numbers. A d-number is a temporary identification number given to individuals who have applied for asylum, or if they have a residence permit and are going to stay in Norway for less than six months. The DUF number is the registration number in the computer system of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration.

## References

Apostolova, R. (2015) Of Refugees and Migrants: Stigma, Politics, and Boundary Work at the Borders of Europe. *American Sociological Association Newsletter*, September 14.  
Author, A. (2020a).

- Author, A. (2020b).
- Author, B & X (2018).
- Author, C (2020).
- Author, C (2021).
- Auyero, J. (2012). *Patients of the state: The politics of waiting in Argentina*. Duke University Press.
- Axelsson, L.; Malmberg, B & Zhang, Q. (2017). On waiting, work-time and imagined futures: Theorising temporal precariousness among Chinese chefs in Sweden's restaurant industry. *Geoforum*, 78, 169–178.
- Boccagni, P. & Riguard, E. (2020). Social work with refugee and displaced populations in Europe: (dis)continuities, dilemmas, developments. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(3), 375–383.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford University Press.
- Brun, C. (2015). Active waiting and changing hopes: Toward a time perspective on protracted displacement. *Social Analysis*, 59(1), 19–37.
- Cwerner, S. (2001). The times of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(1), 7–36.
- De Genova, N. (2002). Migrant “illegality” and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 419–447.
- Deshingkar, P. (2019) The making and unmaking of precarious, ideal subjects – migration brokerage in the Global South. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(14), 2638–2654.

- Elsrud, T. (2020). Resisting social death with dignity. The strategy of re-escaping among young asylum-seekers in the wake of Sweden's sharpened asylum laws, *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(3), 500–513.
- Fell, B. & Fell, P. (2014). Welfare across borders: A social work process with adult asylum seekers. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(5), 1322–1339.
- Fontanari, E. (2018). *Lives in transit: An ethnographic study of refugees' subjectivity across European Borders*. Routledge.
- Gasparini, G. (1995). On Waiting. *Time & Society* 4(1): 29–45.
- Goldring, L., Berinstein, C., & Bernhard, J. K. (2009). Institutionalizing precarious migratory status in Canada. *Citizenship studies*, 13(3), 239–265.
- Griffiths, M., Rogers, A. & Anderson, B. (2013). *Migration, Time and Temporalities: Review and Prospect*. COMPAS Research Resources Paper. Oxford: COMPAS.
- Humphries, B. (2004). An unacceptable role for social work: Implementing immigration policy. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(1), 93–107.
- Jönsson, J. (2014). Local reactions to global problems: undocumented migrants and social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(1), 35–52.
- Landolt, P., & Goldring, L. (2015). Assembling noncitizenship through the work of conditionality. *Citizenship Studies*, 19(8), 853–869.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lorens, W. (2006). *Perspectives on European Social Work: From the Birth to the Nation State to the Impact of Globalisation*. Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Meeus, B., van Heur, B., & Arnaut, K. (2019). Migration and the infrastructural politics of urban arrival. In B. Meeus, K. Arnaut, & B. van Heur (Eds.), *Arrival infrastructures: Migration and urban social mobilities* (pp. 1–32). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Moffette, D. (2018). *Governing Irregular Migration: Bordering Culture, Labour, and Security in Spain*. UBC Press.
- Mountz, A. (2010). *Seeking Asylum. Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border*. University of Minnesota Press.
- OECD (2019) *International Migration Outlook 2019*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Parker, J. (2000). Social work with refugees and asylum seekers: a rationale for developing practice. *Practice*, 12(3), 61–76.
- Righard, E. (2018). Conceptualising social work through the lens of transnationalism. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 8(4), 245–253.
- Rotter, R. (2016). Waiting in the asylum determination process. *Time and Society*, 25(1), 80–101.
- Schrooten, M. & Meeus, B. (2020). The possible role and position of social work as part of the arrival infrastructure, *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(3), 414–424.
- Simone A (2004) People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture* 16(3): 407–429.
- Tazzioli, M. (2018). The temporal borders of asylum: Temporality of control in the EU border regime. *Political Geography* 64: 13–22.
- Vanstone, WH. (1985). *The stature of waiting*. Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Wallimann, I. (2014). Transnational social work: a new paradigm with perspectives. In C. Noble; H. Strauss and B. Littlechild (Eds) *Global social work – Crossing borders, blurring boundaries* (pp. 15–26). Sydney University Press.
- Whyte, Z. (2011). Enter the Myopticon. Uncertain Surveillance in the Danish Asylum System. *Anthropology Today* 27(3): 18–21.



