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## – BORDERING, DIFFERENTIAL INCLUSION/ EXCLUSION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE UK

BURCU TOĞRAL KOCA

### Abstract

*Taking London as the research context, this article aims to explore the positioning of civil society actors in bordering the differential inclusion/exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees. To do this, and understanding borders/bordering as spaces and social institutions, the article investigates the ways in which civil society actors intervene against bordering, with a particular focus on the labour market and housing. The empirical analysis illustrates that civil society actors seek to open up new spaces of inclusion and new subject positions for refugees and asylum seekers other than those imposed by established bordering processes. However, the capacity of civil society actors to contest the differential inclusion/exclusion enacted in bordering remains limited in the face of constraints produced by neoliberalization and existing political dynamics. More importantly, civil society actors are likely to align themselves with established bordering processes and structures, thus reproducing the differential exclusion/inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees.*

### Introduction

In response to the rising number of asylum applications since the early 1990s, the UK's asylum and refugee policy has undergone several profound changes, giving rise to restrictive measures at both the national and local level (Zetter and Pearl, 2000; Zetter *et al.*, 2005; Darling, 2011a). Characterized by a policy of deterrence, these restrictive measures signify 'a persecutory regime of welfare disentanglement and social exclusion', especially for those seeking protection (Zetter and Pearl, 2000: 675). In particular, lengthy asylum procedures causing unreasonable uncertainty, limited access to social services and employment, as well as policies of forced dispersal and the weakening of social housing alongside the privatization of asylum accommodation, are among the many challenges confronting asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

More recently, this 'hostile environment' policy, first introduced by Theresa May in 2012, has manifested in the UK's response to Syrian refugees. Instead of opting for the European Union's quota system for resettling refugees on the basis of each country's population and resources (Balibar, 2015), in January 2014 the UK government introduced the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (VPR) programme for the most vulnerable Syrian refugees to be resettled in the UK (Gilbert, 2017: 12). Accordingly, in September 2015 former Prime Minister David Cameron announced the admission of 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020 in addition to those admitted under the existing asylum and family reunification schemes (*ibid.*). He justified this approach on the grounds that the proposed EU quota system encouraged people to make 'potentially lethal' journeys (Akkoç, 2015).

In the face of this restrictive approach coupled with the neoliberalization of the state, civil society has stepped in to provide the most basic services to asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. Indeed, the number of civil society organizations and initiatives has increased across the country, despite the decreasing number of asylum applications since

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2005 (Mayblin and James, 2019: 384). According to Mayblin and James, while this increase matched the rising number of asylum seekers in the early 2000s, the current proliferation of migration-related civil society actors can be explained through the growing demand on the third sector and the concomitant weakening of state support (*ibid.*). These civil society actors, ranging from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots initiatives to faith-based organizations and volunteers, offer multifarious support to refugees and asylum seekers. This growing reliance on civil society is not specific to the UK case. Against a backdrop of expanding bordering practices, we have also witnessed the consolidation of civil society involvement in the refugee issue across continental Europe, particularly since the large-scale refugee movements of 2015. In particular, civil society actors provide refugees with initial help and long-term support towards their settlement and inclusion in the cities of transit and arrival. Within this context, these actors tend to challenge and circumvent the exclusionary policies and bordering processes of the state.

Parallel to these developments, a growing body of literature has been dedicated to interrogating these expanding bordering practices and the new kinds of civic engagement with refugee communities that have evolved as a result. However, a significant research gap remains. Specifically, the role of civil society within bordering processes is rarely theorized or analysed empirically in border and migration studies (Toğral Koca, 2019). The main reason for this research gap is the traditional state-centric understanding of the issue, which sees borders just as territorial lines at the edge of nation-states and the preserve of state authorities. This understanding, first, underestimates the multiscalar dimension and spatially contingent nature of borders and bordering. The dominant tendency in border studies tends to ignore the local character of borders/bordering while overemphasizing the national and supranational (EU) levels. Only a few studies have investigated the effect of 'bordering on everyday life within the state' (Webber, 2012), and 'the many ways in which the state and its borders occupy a space in the city' (Young, 2011: 537; Lebuhn, 2013; Fauser, 2019). Second, and again related to this traditional state-centric understanding, the agency of multiple non-state actors involved in bordering processes has received scant attention. Even though critical border and migration studies has shed light on the agency of non-state actors in what Rumford (2008) terms 'borderwork', the role of civil society actors in bordering needs further theoretical and empirical attention.

Against this backdrop, the article aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the positioning of civil society actors in bordering processes and the ways in which they are involved therein. To this end, drawing on critical border and migration studies and moving beyond state-centric approaches that conceptualize borders as fixed territorial lines, I focus on bordering as spaces and social institutions that are embedded in differential inclusion/exclusion (Mezaddra and Neilson, 2011; 2012). This analytical framework is complemented by existing discussions about past and more recent solidarity movements, as well as critiques of humanitarianism, in order to uncover the multiple and contradictory positionings of civil society actors within bordering. Concomitantly, the analysis is carried out in relation to the existing contextual dynamics that tend to shape the positioning of civil society actors vis-à-vis bordering. This contextual analysis is particularly important, because the socio-spatial and political context sets the conditions for the emergence, existence and transformation of borders that are both situated and place-specific (Laine, 2016: 475–76).

Drawing on this spatially contingent character of bordering, the current study takes a specific urban setting as the research context. More concretely, without downplaying the role of territorial borders and nation-states, London is chosen to carry out the fieldwork. Given its long history of migration, the city offers an important laboratory framework with 'rich and heterogeneous' initiatives and encounters between various civil society actors and migrants (Miller and Nicholls, 2013: 459). In addition, many refugee and asylum-related organizations and initiatives are concentrated in

London (Zetter and Pearl, 2000). Acknowledging the multiple spaces of local bordering where migrants are subject to differential inclusion/exclusion, I focus in particular on the labour market and housing. Alongside identifying the involvement of civil society actors in these domains, the empirical research also offers insights into the structural changes and constraints that affect the positioning of civil society actors in other areas and within bordering processes in general.

Regarding data collection, alongside the documentary analysis of scholarly studies and reports by state and non-state actors, 15 semi-structured interviews with civil society actors were conducted in London in May 2019. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of civil society actors in terms of organizational structures, worldviews and the discursive and non-discursive resources upon which they base their activities, I include different types of civil society actors, including NGO workers, members of grassroots initiatives and volunteers. In addition, recruited through the support of my civil society interviewees, three Syrian refugees, one Somali refugee and one Kurdish refugee were also interviewed. These interviews provided valuable and significant insights for the contextualization of the research. At the interviewees' request, anonymity was preserved when integrating their accounts into the research.

In this article, I argue that civil society actors develop multiple and novel strategies to open up new spaces of inclusion and new subject positions for refugees and asylum seekers other than those imposed by established bordering processes. However, the positioning and capacity of civil society to contest the differential inclusion/exclusion enacted in bordering remains limited in the face of the constraints produced by neoliberalization and existing political dynamics. Indeed, civil society actors may even align themselves with the established bordering processes and structures, thus reproducing the differential exclusion/inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees.

### **The conceptual framework**

Moving beyond the traditional state-centric understanding of borders that takes bounded spaces for granted and views borders just as lines at the edge of the state, critical studies analyses borders as spaces and social institutions (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 59). In so doing, the focus turns to bordering processes and practices 'that exist in socio-cultural action and discourses [and] as institutions which have political, economic, cultural and symbolic meanings' (Paasi, 1998: 72). As such, rather than being solely a 'thing' like a wall, a fence or a bridge, or 'geographical lines of separation between nation states', borders should be understood through 'multiple legal and cultural, social and economic, symbolic and linguistic' practices (Mezzadra, 2015: 8–9). Inscribed in a 'play of power' (Foucault, 1980: 194), these discursive and non-discursive practices drive the 'processes of partition, filtering and hierarchization' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 67). In this respect, borders/bordering practices neither aim at total closure nor subject all people to the same bordering processes. Instead, borders/bordering tends towards the 'filtration and selection [of] impure or unwanted elements to be classified, removed and separated from more benevolent or beneficial flows' (Darling, 2011a: 264).

In reflecting on these discussions, some scholars utilize the conceptual frameworks of 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012) or 'inclusive exclusion' (Nyers, 2006), in contrast to the idea of borders as a device of sheer exclusion (Knönen, 2018: 54). Moving beyond the traditional binary formulation of inclusion and exclusion, these studies focus on the 'system of classification and subjectification through which categories of position and procedural process are established' (Darling, 2011a: 264). As the remainder of the article discusses in detail, legal and administrative categories such as citizen/non-citizen or asylum seeker/refugee/refused asylum seeker, alongside the markers of illegality, deservingness and legitimacy, form the dynamics of differential inclusion/exclusion. Furthermore, depending on class,

nationality, gender and other socio-cultural characteristics, borders create different spaces of exclusion and inclusion for different groups of migrants.

Critical scholarship also draws our attention to the processes of ‘proliferation’ and diffusion of borders/bordering in the contemporary world (Balibar, 2002; Rumford, 2008; Mezzadra, 2015). These processes signify the dynamism of borders and bordering practices, which are as ‘mobile [as the] people that they seek to control’ (Parker *et al.*, 2009: 586). Accordingly, scholars in the field foreground the spatial extension of the border beyond the frontiers of the nation-state (Balibar, 2002; Dikeç, 2009) and into various aspects of everyday life within the state (see Webber, 2012). More concretely, pointing to the spatially contingent nature and ‘multiscalar production’ of borders/bordering, Laine (2016: 465) aptly argues that bordering takes place at various spaces and localities, ranging from urban to national and regional zones. As already underlined, ‘the field of local border politics’ has received relatively little attention, both theoretically and empirically (Lebuhn, 2013). Only a few studies cast light on ‘the many ways in which the state and its borders occupy space in the city’ (Young, 2011: 537). As highlighted by Darling:

the city is situated as a strategic location for the enforcement of border control ‘within’ the nation-state, thereby feeding into wider discussions of the shift from territorially fixed border ‘lines’ to territorially diffuse border ‘functions’.  
(Darling, 2017: 183)

In this context, urban space also becomes a site of bordering through various mechanisms that filter, control and contain migrants, including identity checks, residence status controls, encampments, discrimination around access to various services, deportation, and the like (see Fauser, 2019).

Lastly, critical scholarship has broken with the traditional notion of borders in its focus on the expanding range of actors engaged in bordering processes. Despite their enduring and dominant role, states are thus no longer the only actors in the field—they cooperate, interact and compete with other players (Rumford, 2008). As Rumford’s (2008) notion of ‘borderwork’ suggests, states and their agencies (such as border guards, local government officials and immigration officers) are joined by civil society actors, smugglers and migrants as active participants in bordering processes. Despite these interventions, the role of civil society actors in bordering processes has received little empirical attention to date and needs to be further explored. Such an exploration produces a more critical understanding of the multiplicity of actors in general and the agency of civil society actors in particular in the process of bordering. To this end, I draw on the literature concerning past and more recent solidarity movements and initiatives and humanitarianism in order to explore the positioning of civil society actors within bordering.

The discussions on sanctuary movements of the 1980s point to the role of civil society and city authorities in challenging ‘policing and border controls that criminalize (as well as securitize) many migrants and asylum seekers’ (Squire and Bagelman, 2012: 146–47). Recent research also illustrates how different civil society actors have developed innovative discursive and practical repertoires of action in solidarity with refugees and against restrictive refugee policies (Ataç *et al.*, 2015).

On the other hand, critics of the paternalistic vision of solidarity initiatives and current humanitarian interventions draw attention to how civil society actors place migrants in new types of power relations (Anderson *et al.*, 2012: 76; Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017). It is argued that once civil society actors reify the statist categorizations and the differentiation between refugees who are worthy of protection and those who are not, they establish a hierarchical relationship between ‘protector’ and ‘protected’ (Squire and Bagelman, 2012: 147). Driven by an ‘apolitical’ moral and ethical imperative to relieve suffering, current humanitarian activities in particular not only

frame their objective as ‘the saving of lives’, but also as ‘selecting those that have priority for being saved’ (Fassin, 2012: 7). Accordingly, humanitarianism ‘always presupposes a relation of inequality and an “attitude of superiority” of humanitarian actors’ (*ibid.*: 4). From this perspective, by downgrading the agency of migrants and perpetuating their victimization, the humanitarian and support actions of civil society may result in (re) bordering, by performing the role of ‘policing, categorizing, and disciplining exceptional [migrants] and excluding the rest’ (Ticktin, 2006: 44).

In line with these discussions, I also understand borders/bordering as spaces and social institutions that are embedded in differential inclusion/exclusion and which play out through multiple discursive and non-discursive practices of both state and non-state actors. These bordering practices rely on legal (citizen/non-citizen) and administrative (asylum seeker/refugee) distinctions and differentiate migrants who are regarded as illegitimate, undesirable or burdensome from those who are not (Darling, 2011a: 263). As such, borders/bordering (1) creates spaces and processes of stratification, filtering, hierarchization and control; and (2) operates at multiple scales including the local one. Moving beyond the binary and straightforward articulation of exclusion and inclusion, this analytical framework helps us trace the more complex dynamics that place migrants into different subject positions within bordering processes. Furthermore, it also allows us to reflect on the spatially heterogeneous and contingent character of borders/bordering through contextual analysis.

### **Bordering as differential inclusion/exclusion**

A hostile environment and everyday bordering are now happening in the UK. It was a political decision to show that the government was stronger on immigration and it needed to be stronger on immigration because there is Brexit. And it needed to show that it was doing something (interview, grassroots activist).

This testimony aptly illustrates the current context framing for asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. Not only the restrictive entry regulations, but also the limitation of welfare and working rights characterize the country’s approach to deterring asylum seekers, as well as socially excluding and marginalizing those who have already been in the country since the 1990s (Mayblin and James, 2019). This restrictive agenda should be read alongside the restructuring of the welfare state that has fuelled public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers and led to them being treated as an ‘economic burden’ (Sales, 2002: 457). Through its policy of deterrence, the neoliberalized state has been able to address ‘minority demand for the provision of unpopular public goods, which [it] has a disincentive to adequately deliver on’ (Mayblin and James, 2019: 376).

Parallel to these changes and as also confirmed in all the interviews I conducted, asylum seekers and refugees have experienced bordering practices in their everyday lives ‘in countless locations within the national territory’, in spaces as diverse as ‘attending school, going to the hospital, applying for social housing, accessing emergency shelter services and calling for police assistance’ (McDonald, 2012: 134–35). While trying to access these services, they are continuously confronted with invisible borders and placed within hierarchical structures (Anderson *et al.*, 2012: 76).

More concretely, as in many other nation-states (see e.g. Hillmann and Toğral Koca, 2021), the UK’s asylum and refugee policy is based on a logic of differential inclusion/exclusion, whereby migrants have stratified access to asylum and refugee procedures and corresponding welfare rights based on their legal status, class and other socio-cultural positions. Within this stratified regime of rights, different groups are subject to different vulnerabilities and levels of destitution (Mayblin and James, 2019: 391). For example, asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers are subject to many

restrictions which exclude and marginalize them in a more visible way compared to other groups of migrants. This different subject position within the bordering processes as well as the hierarchization between different groups became more discernible following the introduction of the VPR programme. Under this programme, resettled Syrians are granted the same rights and benefits as are accorded to other recognized refugees. This means they have an immediate right to work, to benefit from welfare rights and to access statutory services such as health and education together with the right to apply for permanent residency after five years (Gilbert, 2017: 15). In regard to the lengthy asylum procedure, one Syrian refugee stated:

For me it did not take long. It depends on your case. If you say for example I come from the Gulf area, it takes a long time. And I came here through legal channels. After eight months, I had the family reunification (interview, Syrian refugee).

This stratified regime of rights and hierarchization hence draws on normative and political distinctions between the deserving/legitimate and undeserving/illegitimate. Indeed, as Darling (2011a: 266) demonstrates, ‘the figure of the “deserving” or “genuine” refugee’ has already become one key category, manifested in various governmental reports and in political discourse in the UK. These categorizations are not only normative and discursive divisions, but create very political and tangible subject positions which attribute different rights and entitlements to different groups. For example, regarding the current approach to Syrian refugees, one interviewee commented:

The Syrian refugees have a privileged position. They come through resettlement. They do not come through asylum. And they are good migrants. They are deserving migrants. Somebody from Angola does not enter this category. For example, Syrian refugees can get a fast-track appointment with the department of work and have easier access to other statutory services (interview, NGO worker).

Another important development underlined by both civil society actors and refugees is the expansion of ‘borderwork’ to include new actors—both state and non-state. Immigration officers, employers, landlords, health service employees and professionals in the education system all come to fulfil the role of border policing in the everyday lives of migrants at the local level (Coleman and Kocher, 2011). For the people I interviewed, this is the outcome of the hostile environment policy used to deter migrants. Apart from the intensification of regular border checks with visas and passports, since 2013 every employer, landlord, educational institution, doctor or social service provider is required to check whether a person has the right to stay in order to receive these services or to take employment. For example, if these individuals employ a person without a valid work permit or rent an apartment to somebody lacking a valid residence permit, they face hefty fines. Accordingly, ‘urban services, civic and public spaces, and workplaces thus become precarious sites which may display the punitive reach of border enforcement at any time, often at the discretion of those enrolled as “responsible” citizens’ (Darling, 2017: 184). One interviewee noted, for example:

As an asylum seeker, you are supposed to have free access to any emergency services and primary care. They have a pass; however, they campaign right now for ‘patients not passports’.<sup>1</sup> Because the Home Office has been getting information from the National Health Service [NHS] about patients’ legal status.

1 The ‘patients not passports’ campaign provides ‘a toolkit designed to support you in advocating for people facing charges for NHS care, and in taking action to end immigration checks and upfront charging in the NHS’ (patientsnotpassports.co.uk, 2019).

The NHS is sending information to the Home Office. They can profile people, find them. The NHS is like the police working with immigration enforcement in a very unjust way. A lot of people are too scared about the NHS. Because some of them do not have [legal] status (interview, volunteer).

### **Changing state-civil society relations**

This hostile environment has developed alongside the weakening role of both the state and local authorities in providing support and benefits to asylum seekers and refugees. For example, with regard to VPR, local authorities' participation in the programme is voluntary and depends on their capacity to ensure effective resettlement. In other words, they have to prove that they can fulfil the post-arrival requirements for resettlement, including initial reception arrangements, provision of housing, registration with the health and education services and orientation support (Gilbert, 2017: 18). As the civil society actors I interviewed told me, many boroughs in London do not want to participate in this programme because of the financial and infrastructural burden that refugees could bring. In response, and as further underlined by interviewees, the VPR programme was complemented by the introduction of the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) in July 2016. Under this scheme, rather than the local government officials or contracted NGOs providing the resettled refugees with the necessary support—ranging from organizing accommodation to accessing education and health services and finding employment—these roles were taken on by members of the local community such as teachers, medical professionals and social workers (HM Government, 2018: 5). Even though this scheme was justified as promoting stronger links between different groups in the community and opening up new ways for volunteer engagement and participation in public policy (*ibid.*), it also signifies the outsourcing of state tasks to civil society. This shifting of responsibility is evident in the account of one interviewee:

If you look at all local governments at the moment in London, and across the country, they are pushing community sponsorship. Local councils refuse to [participate in the] Syrian resettlement programme. It is a commitment of five years of supporting the families; what the government says instead is, why don't we have community sponsorship. And they ask faith groups and civil society to pick up the cost. The Home Office will inspect to see it is up to standard. Community organizations have to raise money and say they can support the family for a maximum of two years. So, local council has to support five years and civil society two years. This is a classic example of how the state shifts the burden to civil society. This is how the Syrian resettlement is restructured around community organizations taking the burden (interview, NGO worker).

Indeed, this 'outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure' (Rosol, 2011: 239) to civil society has been in place across the global North since the 1980s, with the rise of neoliberalism and the resultant austerity regulations. In what Rose (1996) identifies as 'governing through community', civil society is recruited by the state to assist in all manner of structural problems. These include unemployment, poverty and discrimination—and now, increasingly, refugees and asylum seekers (Toğral Koca, 2019). Existing research on the UK also underlines that more asylum seekers and refugees have become dependent on civil society organizations and personal networks in the face of restrictions on their welfare entitlements (Mayblin and James, 2019: 379). This correlates with the fact that—especially around London—the number and scope of civil society actors supporting asylum seekers and refugees has proliferated as the number of clients has increased and local and national support services have been curtailed (Zetter and Pearl, 2000: 681). Furthermore, not only British people



and established residents but also refugees themselves have become engaged in support work. One interviewee welcomed this development, saying that the involvement of refugees allows for a different kind of lobbying and advocacy than is done by established NGOs and grassroots organizations (interview, NGO worker). For the same interviewee, this is mainly because refugees' voices and their concrete experiences find a place within public perceptions and policy discussions.

In this specific context, my empirical research identified multiple and often interrelated bordering practices encompassing legal, linguistic and social barriers, housing problems, social marginalization, unfamiliarity with the norms and rules of the labour market and asylum process, as well as health problems mostly associated with the traumatic experiences of forced migration—all of which produce different subject positions and condition the dynamics of differential inclusion/exclusion in the London context. The following section explores some of the bordering processes and the positioning of civil society actors in relation to employment and housing.

### **Employment: informality and precarity**

The labour market is a significant domain in which migrants in general are subject to different bordering processes. The empirical research demonstrates that different NGOs, grassroots initiatives and groups of volunteers have developed multiple strategies to circumvent the spaces where migrants are subject to varying degrees of stratification, filtering, hierarchization and control. Through their support services, ranging from legal and practical advice to language support and job training, these civil society actors seek to create new spaces of inclusion and empowerment and new subject positions for asylum seekers and refugees. More concretely, facing limited state support for language learning, defined as one of the biggest challenges for labour-market integration, many organizations and initiatives offer free language courses with the support of volunteers.

Civil society actors mentioned in interview that there are several projects funded by the National Lottery which run mass programmes for training and education to increase the integration of refugees within the labour market. One of these programmes, run by an NGO interviewee, involves working with businesses to offer internships and long-term positions depending on the qualifications of refugees. The same programme also provides refugees with skills-based workshops and supports them in preparing their CVs and familiarizing themselves with the job market in London. Another volunteer who had been involved in one such initiative told how the Refugee Council is cooperating with Starbucks in a similar venture through the Starbucks Employment Support Programme (interview, volunteer). This programme offers refugees pre-employment training and long-term employment opportunities in Starbucks stores across London (see Refugee Council, 2020). The Refugee Council also supports refugee health professionals to 'reconnect with their professional careers and work within the NHS' through the Building Bridges Programme (*ibid.*).

Some initiatives and mentorship programmes are designed mainly for female refugees. One of these works to connect female refugees with professional women from multiple sectors across London (interview, grassroots activist). Through this programme, female refugees are supported to identify their employment goals and assisted with searching and applying for jobs as well as finding internships and volunteer positions. Apart from these practical interventions against bordering in the labour market, civil society actors including unions, community networks and faith organizations engage in political struggles through advocacy and campaigning to demand better work conditions and regularization for migrants (see also Chimienti and Solomos, 2011). Nonetheless, all the civil society actors pointed to the constraints that the established bordering practices and precarious modes of existence in the labour market place on their actions in the field.

First and foremost, bordering and the accompanying differential inclusion/exclusion in the labour market is more visible when it comes to the division between asylum seekers and refugees. While refugees have the right to work, asylum seekers are not permitted to join the labour market or to work in 'shortage-occupation' jobs until a positive decision on their application has been made. Against this backdrop, activists specializing in employment support and programmes such as those mentioned above mainly target refugees:

There are Refugee Councils here; they are extremely helpful. There are organizations helping people find employment. There are organizations offering job training. For example, there is one organization offering training in a bakery. They work with local bakeries. But these people have refugee status; they are eligible for a lot of things (interview, volunteer).

Similarly, another interviewee, who runs training and education programmes to integrate asylum seekers and refugees into the labour market, underlined that outcomes are highly dependent on the legal status and rights of their clients (interview, NGO worker). Emphasizing that even though they do not check their clients' status, the interviewee told me that current or refused asylum seekers are not allowed to benefit from many similar support structures, and one of the hardest things for asylum seekers is the long waiting period for a decision on their application. This is confirmed by other civil society actors, who state that the decision process usually takes years; according to one volunteer, this time lag is intentional and strategic, with the aim of deterring people from seeking protection in the UK (interview, volunteer). By law, if a decision is not reached within six months, asylum seekers have the right to ask the Secretary of the State for permission to work. However, as one NGO worker explained:

This possibility [exists] only in law. I experienced that people have applied for permission to work, but none of them were granted it. So, the law allows it, but it does not work in practice. So, the government does not want to say it has not been fair; you can go for it, but actually [the government] does not want it, it denies it. To the public imagination, they try to look humane. How can somebody survive without a job? So as a tolerant UK what we say is after six months, you claim the right to work. It is a fallacy, it is just a myth that does not exist (interview, NGO worker).

During this waiting period, asylum seekers are only allowed to engage in voluntary unpaid work or to do internships. Thus, excluded from gainful employment, they struggle in very destitute and precarious conditions. They receive welfare payments of £36.95 per week, roughly a third of the income of the poorest 10% of UK households (Mayblin and James, 2019: 375). Attracting much criticism from civil society, these policies of limited support and limited access to the labour market are justified as part of the so-called hostile environment policy (*ibid.*). Mayblin (2016: 194) argues that this approach also needs to be read alongside debates on deserving/undeserving migrants that frame asylum seekers as 'undeserving' welfare recipients who should be marginalized in order to protect the community against perceived threats. In this context, and as widely expressed by the civil society interviewees, irregular and precarious work has become unavoidable for many current and refused asylum seekers as well as for recognized refugees, who work mainly in shops, restaurants and the construction sector.

The field research also demonstrated that female asylum seekers and refugees are particularly prone to abuse. Some are forced into begging and prostitution. Indeed, existing patriarchal roles intensify this gender dimension of differential inclusion/

exclusion. One of the NGOs focusing on the labour market integration of refugees stated that ‘among our clients, men find jobs before women because it is often the women who have to take care [of] the children’ (interview, NGO worker).

Another important dynamic of bordering processes is that of de-qualification, which means that highly qualified refugees likewise face precarious working conditions and are often unable to find work appropriate to their skills. According to one interviewee who supports the labour-market integration of refugees:

you have two extremes in London as well as in other cities. You have refugees who have no basic work skills in the British context. They work in low-skilled and less-paid jobs. And [at] the other extreme, you have highly skilled labourers; sometimes they come on a working visa or student visa and then need to switch to refugee status. And if their certificates are not recognized in the UK, they mainly go the training route. And then they will go to lower denominator jobs (interview, NGO worker).

A similar account was provided by a Syrian refugee, who reported that there are many Syrian doctors in London; however, because recognition of their qualifications takes a long time, they end up working in unqualified jobs. In this context, ‘cross-border mobility often spells a radical devaluation’ of the competences of skilled and qualified workers (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2011: 141). In other words, those traditionally viewed as skilled workers are turned into unskilled labourers through bordering (*ibid.*). Furthermore, for one of the interviewees, some of these jobs—such as the Starbucks Employment Support Programme and voluntary work—are likely to contribute to this process of de-qualification and devaluation: ‘Targeting mainly young refugees and offering merely short-term solutions, such programmes, indeed, prevent refugees from specializing in real jobs at the outset’ (interview, volunteer). The interviewee further added that ‘parallel to the difficulties in accessing higher education, young refugees are stuck in these precarious [jobs] for years’. As such, rather than responding to the structural sources of differential inclusion/exclusion, these programmes only provide a means to deal with the symptoms that arise therefrom.

### **Housing: forced dispersal and the privatization of housing**

Housing is another site marked by widespread destitution among asylum seekers and refugees and by various bordering mechanisms. The data gathered through empirical research illustrate that NGOs and grassroots initiatives mainly offer counselling and assistance with searching for private and shared flats as well as applying for housing benefits. The civil society interviewees also referred to several innovative initiatives, such as Refugees at Home and Room for Refugees, connecting those with a spare room in their houses or flats to refugees and asylum seekers in need of accommodation. As expressed by one of the interviewees, ‘these initiatives are very helpful because people sometimes just need a room until they can save money to pay the rent, deposit and things like this’ (interview, grassroots activist). The Refugee Council also assists newly recognized refugees in applying for loans or grants to help with deposits (Refugee Council, 2020). The Council further provides landlords with a deposit bond on behalf of refugees if they cannot afford to pay it themselves (*ibid.*). In addition, because many of the landlords and housing agencies do not accept housing benefits, some charities offer rooms in shared houses which can be paid for with benefits (interview, grassroots activist). These accounts were confirmed by one Syrian refugee who found a flat with the support of a civil society organization:

Housing is not only expensive, but if you are a refugee, you are subject to double discrimination. I had to look for a place for a long time and had to stay

in a room in a shared apartment with my kids. Every time when I went to see a house, the agency always said we do not accept people living off benefits. Because most of the landlords are afraid that refugees cannot pay the rent. The law here does not allow landlords to kick you out after three months.

The housing-related problems should also be read alongside the structural changes which constrain interventions by civil society actors in this domain. In the UK, as in some other EU countries such as Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, there is a policy of dispersal to ‘spread the burden’, controlling and deterring asylum seekers (Darling, 2017: 182). This policy was introduced in 2000 in response to the concentration of asylum seekers in London and the South East (Zetter *et al.*, 2005: 171; Darling, 2016a: 485). In fact, in 1998, many London boroughs had already started ‘dispersing asylum seekers outside London to areas where empty housing was available’ due to the limited resources and lack of local authority housing (Sales, 2002: 463).

In 2012, another important change was implemented; namely, the privatization of asylum accommodation, whereby the government signed contracts with private providers for the management of asylum accommodation. This system—known as Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services (COMPASS)—led to the transfer of ‘accommodation provision from a mixture of consortiums of local authorities, social housing associations and private providers, to just three private contractors’ (Darling, 2016b: 230). Following this change, the private contractors became the dominant actors, and local authorities and civil society actors lost significant influence and control over asylum housing (see Darling, 2016a).

This exclusionary system of bordering (Webber, 2012) has important repercussions for asylum seekers as well as for refugees. First, as a ‘“no choice” option’, the policy of dispersal feeds into ‘a feeling of loss of control over their lives and a sense of liminality, or limbo, imposed by the process’ (Hynes, 2009: 18). According to Hynes, ‘having no choice about which city and what type of accommodation to live in and then being relocated several times’, asylum seekers face difficulties in maintaining and/or establishing social networks, thereby furthering their social exclusion and marginalization (*ibid.*). The civil society interviewees active in the social and economic integration of migrants also stated that they experience difficulty in reaching asylum seekers whose social networks have been disrupted through the relocation process. This is reaffirmed by Zetter *et al.*, who argue that:

dispersal has fractured the connection between refugees/asylum seekers and their well-established frameworks of community support and organizational structures previously available in London and the South East. The dearth of associational structures in the dispersed locations has been particularly problematic for ethnic groups new to the UK that lack footholds in pre-existing social and ethnic networks. (Zetter *et al.*, 2005: 172)

Indeed, the relocation process, albeit in different forms, continues even after refugee status is granted, as explained by an NGO interviewee:

I think one of the interesting [things is] what happens once you get status. They have to move from accommodation centres. Sometimes that means people have been living in London for years and then all of a sudden, they have to move to Manchester. So, this means uprooting people. They are disrupted. They have kids going to school and they have neighbours. And then all of a sudden, they have to move in London or away from London. The transition period is very difficult. Because the rules are different (interview, NGO worker).

Homeless Link, a national membership charity for organizations working directly with homeless people, stresses the difficulties of this transition period for refugees who may end up destitute and homeless (Homeless Link, 2017). Concentrating its support mainly in areas with high levels of asylum support accommodation and in big cities such as London, Homeless Link argues that many refugees find themselves homeless and on the street, as it is difficult to get support from the state and local authorities during the transition period (*ibid.*).

A second, related problem is that asylum seekers and refugees are often forced to live in areas which lack job opportunities (interview, grassroots activist). This situation puts them in a disadvantaged position for labour-market integration, compared to those living in places where employment opportunities and support structures are more developed and better aligned. As Scholten *et al.* (2017: 10) highlight, the dispersal policies and resulting restriction on residential mobility disregard 'economic opportunity structures' and could block the integration of refugees into the labour market in general if they have to live in places where there are no opportunities. Besides, this forced dispersal is likely to place asylum seekers in a hostile environment, furthering their marginalization and spaces of contestation. A number of civil society interviewees stated that they concentrate their activities in neighbourhoods of London characterized by a xenophobic environment and social deprivation. They organize welcome meetings, dinners and other social activities in order to challenge these contestations between migrants and established residents and to transform negative public attitudes. Indeed, the accounts of refugees also indicate that their preferences concerning location are highly conditioned by the specific attitudes of different neighbourhoods towards migrants. They mostly prefer to settle in West London, which is safer and has established support networks, rather than East London or other parts of the city, because of the hostile and violent attitudes towards migrants there.

Third, the privatization process in general and the emergence of COMPASS have led to concomitant cuts in support for civil society organizations which specialize in housing refugees and asylum seekers (Darling, 2016a: 495). As Darling's research demonstrates, following the privatization of asylum seeker accommodation, 'any money over and above the running costs of accommodation is cycled back into the shareholders of a private contractor, rather than into third-sector organizations or asylum support programmes' (*ibid.*). He further argues that the current COMPASS system reflects the neoliberalization of state functions, treating asylum as a business and governing asylum accommodation in the interest of profit (Darling, 2016b: 230–1). In this context, as expressed by the civil society interviewees, the capacity and resources of both civil society and the local authorities are limited when it comes to offering long-term accommodation.

This incapacitation of civil society and local authorities is further exacerbated by existing pressures on private housing and the weakening of social housing. For example, local authorities are unwilling to participate in the Community Sponsorship Scheme, which requires the accommodation of resettled Syrian refugees under the VPR programme, because of the shortage of both private and social housing in London (Gilbert, 2017: 7). Likewise, both civil society actors and refugees pointed to the rising rents and gentrification process affecting many London neighbourhoods as the biggest challenge in finding accommodation for refugees. Even though the housing-market crisis has hit other city residents as well, refugees are the most impacted due to their precarious legal and social position.

Lastly, some of the civil society actors and refugees argued that the integration of landlords into local bordering and policing creates a significant impediment to refugee housing. For one of the interviewees, the immigration controls on landlords aim not only to control migrants and integrate various actors into the system of enforcement, but also to ensure that the general population within the housing stock is 'improved' and mitigate the risk of new migrant populations arising (interview, grassroots activist).

The interviewee added that there is never any consideration that such control measures might lead to migrants becoming homeless.

### **Integrating civil society actors within established bordering processes**

The previous sections demonstrate that practical interventions by civil society actors working to mitigate bordering processes are limited by the existing policy framework and structural dynamics. The field research also reveals that these very contextual factors have led to structural changes with far-reaching implications for the positioning of civil society actors within bordering processes. More concretely, civil society actors also reproduce and align themselves with established bordering processes and state structures. As I now outline, these processes mainly play out through unequal power positions between the state and non-state actors involved in 'borderwork'.

#### – Precarity, limited agency and the instrumentalization of civil society

Concomitant to the neoliberalization process characterized by fiscal austerity, privatization and the weakening of the welfare state, both existing scholarship and the interviews with civil society actors undertaken as part of this research underline that civil society actors have to struggle with decreasing funding on the one hand, and increasing client demand, on the other. For example, while the Refugee Council and Refugee Action were given large contracts by the Home Office in the 2000s and took over delivery services, since 2010 such contracts have disappeared (Mayblin and James, 2019: 391). More recently, 'the Home Office has contracted out welfare support advice services for those in the asylum system to just one organization, Migrant Help' (*ibid.*: 379). In this context, civil society organizations have to run their operations under precarious conditions characterized by short-term employment contracts and funding which comes mainly from the National Lottery, private donations and, in limited cases, from the EU.

This precarity unavoidably constrains the agency of civil society actors in promoting a radical break with established bordering processes and is especially detrimental for small organizations. To put it differently, and as exemplified in relation to the labour market and housing, rather than subverting the bordering embedded in structural inequalities, civil society actors' interventions are, in certain cases, more prone to developing short-term solutions for asylum seekers and refugees. Because of financial constraints, the activities of civil society actors may end up as 'pragmatic responses, a generally poor quality of service provision, very limited access to public resources, lack of co-ordination and networking, and limited professional capacity' (Zetter and Pearl, 2000: 675). As confirmed by one interviewee, the activities of civil society actors are sometimes poorly monitored and there is no quality control over some of their practices (interview, NGO worker).

Furthermore, many of the refugee support organizations 'find that securing funding and meeting the rising demand for services divert resources away from other activities, such as campaigning' (Mayblin and James, 2019: 379). More importantly, civil society actors have to tone down their discourse and activities in line with established bordering processes in order to compete for the available funding. According to my interviewees, several civil society organizations, especially national charities, are given money to moderate public attitudes vis-à-vis migration and to address the hostility in the public imagination. In this way, civil society actors are instrumentalized by the state to address 'unwanted mobilities'. Criticizing national organizations for their so-called failure in the Brexit process, one interviewee argued that:

Many national organizations could not take a strong line and remained moderate. They do an appeasement strategy and [the result is] Brexit. The reason why we have got Brexit is in part the failure of civil society to stand up with migrants ... Migrants' civil society has failed. Those are the national

organizations. They hold [government discussions], they speak to the government but they have absolutely no understanding [about] what happens locally. So, most of these national NGOs are policy work, very few actually do frontline service delivery. Why we were successful, we do case work, and public campaigns (interview, grassroots activist).

Other grassroots activists and volunteers also argued for the need to trace the differences between large NGOs and grassroots organizations—which are smaller communities, but are much more independent and effective at the local level.

This instrumentalization of civil society is manifested in the selectivity of the state in terms of funding (Toğral Koca, 2019: 556). In other words, the state supports complicit projects which serve statist and control-oriented activities. According to one of the grassroots activists, homeless charities in particular are deliberately targeted by the state as they can enforce immigration control:

In the UK, there is no corruption in terms of financial misuse, but corruption in terms of networks and influence. There are problems with migrant charities as well as the homeless sector. These charities are agencies that provide services, however they have very large contracts from regional governments to work with migrants. What they did was they shared data with the Home Office about where these migrants were for enforcement purposes. So the corruption comes in the relationship between and within contacts (interview, grassroots activist).

– The reproduction of statist categorizations

Another fundamental dynamic that reflects the integration of civil society actors into bordering processes is the reproduction of statist categorizations in and through the actions of civil society actors. As already highlighted, legalistic and normative categorizations such as legitimate/illegitimate and deserving/undeserving migrants are important drivers of bordering. According to the field research, the good/bad dichotomy especially informs the work of certain civil society actors. One group of civil society actors and refugees noted that when it comes to migrants from Africa in particular, even the progressive charities try to justify their support with reference to potential social benefits. On the other hand, in the current context Syrian refugees are more likely to be defined as ‘legitimate’ refugees deserving support. Hence, civil society actors tend to define the parameters of their support in line with the statist categorizations which feed into bordering. This in turn threatens to ‘become complicit in an increasingly repressive migration regime by reproducing hegemonic inequalities and hierarchies’ (Fleischmann and Steinhilper, 2017: 18).

However, we also need to refrain from the homogenization of individuals’ daily experiences with bordering. People may be subject to different categorizations when they do not fit the accepted refugee profile, as underlined by a Syrian refugee:

The first time when I went to apply for asylum, she said to me you do not look like a refugee. There is a profile in their mind. I said I did not come here to take money from your government, I cannot go back, that is why I am here. And your government signed the agreement about human rights and it is my right to be here. So that is why we really need to change these stereotypes about refugees (interview, Syrian refugee).

This bordering also works through the victimization of migrants, seen as powerless, voiceless, and in need of protection. In certain cases, following the critiques of solidarity initiatives and humanitarianism, civil society actors structure their activities around this victimization, putting migrants in new power relations (Toğral

Koca, 2019: 557). To put it differently, by denying the agency of migrants, victimization contributes to the positioning of asylum seekers (and refugees) as ‘individuals to be cared for’ and thus acts ‘to reproduce not only a position of the [civil society actors] as a generous “good citizen”, but a positioning of [asylum seekers and refugees] as victims to be accommodated, cared for and pitied’ (Darling, 2011b: 415). As such, refugees and asylum seekers are de-subjectified by being cast as passive targets of aid and charity (Anderson *et al.*, 2012: 78). In the words of one NGO interviewee:

Some of the charities tend to define migrants in a certain way: that is, every migrant is poor, every migrant is powerless lacking certain kinds of qualification and socio-economic capital. We do not talk about the most common denominators, we do not talk about entrepreneurs and investors. You know these migrants are employing people and migrants are suffering from different hardships. The media only wants to talk about migrants dying, starving or coming by boats. They do not want to hear that migration is an everyday experience (interview, NGO worker).

The testimonies of the refugees confirmed this victimization and the reproduction of power positions. They are uncomfortable with the ‘politics of pity’ (Aradau, 2004) and not being seen as ‘human, as people with skills and equal fellows’ (interview, Somali refugee). A Syrian refugee woman who organized cooking classes and then opened her own catering company stated in her interview:

When I started doing cooking classes, I tried to promote issues about what is happening in Syria. Every time when people come and ask me whether I need money, I always refuse. I said, you paid for your dinner and I cooked. I appreciate their support. But your attendance is a support. I do not take more than this. They are surprised when a refugee refused to take extra money. I am not homeless, I have a house, I have a life, I have a job, I have everything. I did not come here for financial support. No! (interview, Syrian refugee)

This victimization cannot be isolated from the context shaped by the existing political dynamics. This is particularly evident in the following account of another interviewee:

The state creates the conditions that allow the victimization and we civil society perpetuate that, because we do not go beyond the ‘save’ model, and we do not build a model that helps interact in other ways. Civil society in the UK focuses on how to save migrants. It does not say how the state can benefit from the migrants’ experiences. We do not have funding for that. The funding is for the crisis work. There is no structure to discuss the migrants’ experiences in another way because migration is still seen as a very special area, not seen as a mainstream area (interview, grassroots activist).

### Conclusion

This research demonstrates that civil society actors strive to open up new spaces for new subject positions through various innovative and novel strategies beyond those imposed by bordering processes. At the practical level, they help ‘improve the quality of life for [refugees and asylum seekers] living with precarious status in the city’, challenging differential inclusion/exclusion by increasing access to housing and the labour market as well as to other services and social rights (McDonald, 2012: 139). Especially some of the more independent grassroots initiatives tend to offer very



tangible means and support structures. Having different experiences of bordering within the shared space depending on their legal/administrative status and socio-economic characteristics, asylum seekers and refugees utilize these support structures differently to negotiate the range of bordering practices.

However, the research also illustrates that the existing political context and established bordering processes limit the scope for agency by civil society actors. In particular, neoliberalization and the resultant incapacitation of civil society and local authorities, as well as the continual constraints of the state's restrictive practices, are important factors that challenge the transformative power of civil society. In this regard, there is little room left for civil society actors to work against the existing stratification, filtering, hierarchization and control in a radical way. Rather, they are forced to provide short-term and sometimes pragmatic 'solutions' in accordance with the 'neoliberal norms of market competition [and] economic efficiency' (Darling, 2016b: 230).

Furthermore, thinking of the positioning of civil society within local bordering processes alongside these structural dynamics brings the instrumentalization of civil society actors into sharper focus. In particular, the neoliberal logic of outsourcing state tasks to civil society organizations serves to sustain the dynamics of differential inclusion/exclusion within bordering. In being mobilized by the state to address various local problems, civil society actors may find themselves integrated into formal state structures and, in the case of migration, become agents of bordering processes themselves (Pruijt, 2003: 134; see also Toğral Koca, 2019). Consequently, not only do some civil society actors reinforce bordering by reproducing the established legalistic and normative categorizations and victimization of migrants, but the programmes and practices of social inclusion in general, 'which are almost always seen as unambiguously benevolent', can function as devices of bordering (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 67).

To conclude, when discussing bordering—and the role of civil society actors in particular—we need to apply a more critical understanding to the process, moving beyond generalizations that tend to position civil society actors in opposition to the state. This further invites us to use a contextual analysis in order to trace how certain bordering practices and mechanisms emerge and become conditioned by specific structural factors as well as the existing power constructs.

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