

# **Migrant organisations, belonging and social protection**

The role of migrant organisations in migrants' social risk-averting strategies

## **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the ways migrant organisations (MOs) contribute to migrants' approaches to dealing with social risks. It draws on in-depth interviews collected among migrants who are engaged with different migrant-led associations and organisations in the Western part of Germany. The findings demonstrate that MOs offer a variety of opportunities that enable migrant populations to manage social risks in accordance with their individual needs and capabilities, social relationships, and access to welfare services. We identify three main functions of MOs, which illustrate the manifold ways they contribute to their members' social risk-averting strategies by affecting experiences of belonging: the networking, consultancy, and acquainting functions. While much social policy literature has focused on the barriers to using welfare services, we find belonging to facilitate diversification in migrants' social protection strategies. As MOs combine an informal community character with a formalised organisational setting, they provide sources of both belongingness and social protection, and thus importantly affect the ways people secure their livelihoods and wellbeing at different stages of migration.

## **KEYWORDS**

Migrant organisations, social protection, belonging, deservingness, transnational migration

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the face of increasingly complex patterns of mobility, a growing body of research seeks to understand the ways in which migrants manage social risks by assembling various sources of protection within and across borders (Amelina et al. 2020; Carmel & Sojka 2021; Faist et al. 2015; Godin 2020; Lafleur & Vintila 2020). According to the 2021 ILO report, social protection is a 'basic social right'. Nonetheless, millions of migrants around the world face manifold legal and practical challenges in dealing with social risks that may impede the realisation of their life chances and wellbeing. Research approaches to studying migrants' social protection conventionally concentrate on policy-making processes and welfare state structures that attempt to support vulnerable groups in their everyday struggles to secure their livelihoods (Sainsbury 2006). However, numerous studies indicate that migrants' abilities to manage social risks is, to a large extent, driven by informal sources of protection, including family and kin networks,

communities, neighbourhoods, and religious associations, as well as local and transnational NGOs (Dankyi et al 2017, Mumtaz 2021, Sabates-Wheeler & Feldman 2011, Saksela-Bergholm 2019). In fact, informal and network-based elements are often equally important parts of migrants' transnational social protection assemblages (Bilecen 2020; Boccagni 2017; Faist et al. 2015). Emphasising migrants' strategies, biographies, and agency in organising their social protection 'from below', these works demonstrate that migrants mobilise resources from people and institutions in different places, and that the boundaries between formal and informal protection are fluid and subject to change over time (Faist 2017; Serra Mingot & Mazzucato 2017). Formal protection provided by governmental institutions and organisations are thus not disconnected from the individual and collective activities taking place outside this formalised framework. Instead, they interact and complement each other in contingent ways, forming 'social protection assemblages' as relationally connected protective elements negotiated by social actors (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015). Thus, a comprehensive analysis of migrants' approaches to organising their social protection requires considering not only legal aspects of entitlement, but also individual encounters with social policy and subjective understandings of welfare in the context of their previous experience with organising social protection.

Previous literature, especially in the field of social policy analysis, has provided extensive evidence of the manifold *barriers* that migrants encounter in protecting themselves against social risks (ILO 2021; Eurofound 2015). This paper engages in these debates by assessing *enabling factors* that provide migrants with opportunities to organise their social protection in changing environments. Against this background, we argue that the services provided by migrant organisations represent inclusive sources of social protection, as MOs offer a variety of social services specifically tailored to migrants' needs while concomitantly supporting them in developing a sense of belonging. In the context of this paper, belonging refers to the sum of intimate feelings of 'being at home' and wider politics of belonging, which determine individual processes of forming attachment to people and places as possible sources of social protection (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2016; Youkhana 2015; Blachnicka-Ciacek et al. 2021). Considering that risk-averting strategies are shaped by a combination of membership and entitlements as well as personal interpretations of welfare and security, individual approaches to managing social risks develop in strong connection to shifting notions of belonging in the context of migration experiences. In this way, experiences of (un)belonging determine the ways people access and use protective resources.

In Germany, like in most other countries of the global North and West, the landscape of welfare has undergone fundamental changes with growing emphasis on activation, self-responsibility,

and autonomy (Klammer et al. 2017). Morris (2019) has termed these shifts in welfare logics as a ‘move from solidaristic models of welfare to individualized responsibility resting on ‘activation’ of the welfare subject’ (p. 2). Throughout these processes, the requirements for individuals to managing social risks have increased, placing issues of choice and autonomy as the guiding principles of social protection schemes. Thus, welfare states increasingly rely on individual accountability, requiring a ‘welfare subject’ (Morris 2019) with an aligning ‘welfare habitus’ (Jolivet & Pereira 2021). In Germany, MOs have become important actors in the course of enabling migrant populations to manage social risks. In addition to supporting their members acquire the necessary skills to claim their legal welfare rights (Aşkın et al 2018; Halm et al. 2020), many MOs also offer a variety of social services themselves (Hoesch & Harbig 2019; SVR 2020). While some pursue concrete plans for establishing sustainable forms of protection in certain fields, like long-term care, others aim for more cooperation and consolidation for facilitating larger-scale social services across a range of issues. Thus, the role of MOs nowadays reaches well beyond offering settings for migrants to maintain their ethnic ties or to foster exchange of information and informal support and ‘integration’ into the immigration society (for an overview, see Serra Mingot & Mazzucato 2017). We are only beginning to understand the role of MOs for migrants’ social protection and their contribution to new understandings of ethnicity and citizenship, and how they may contribute so that ‘diversity’ becomes a ‘new mode of incorporation’ (Faist 2009).

Thus, based on qualitative interviews with members of various MOs in the North-West part of Germany, we highlight the largely neglected organisational aspects of migrants’ social protection. First, we will explore the role of migrant-led registered associations and congregations as sites that enable migrant populations to organise their social protection in the context of their personal needs, resources and preferences. Second, in search for the specific ways MOs affect social protection strategies, we will assess the role of these MOs as spaces that provide an opportunity to develop and experience belongingness in different stages of migration. Third, we combine the literature on social protection and MOs. Numerous studies emphasise the importance of MOs for political representation, religious lives, labour market inclusion, national incorporation, transnational attachments, and network formation (Fauser 2016; Lang 2021; Levitt 2004; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Pries & Sezgin 2012). This paper complements this literature by investigating the role of MOs for migrants’ social protection assemblages in Germany.

Recent studies emphasise that accessibility to social protection schemes is an important aspect to consider for understanding migrants' approaches to managing social risks (Amelina et al. 2020; Faist et al. 2015; Levitt et al. 2017; Sabates-Wheeler and Feldman 2011). Accessibility refers to the availability and utilisation of different forms of support and protection that can be restricted for migrants by lack of information, entitlement or material means (Eurofound 2015). Other barriers refer to gaps between available services and migrants' needs and interpretations of welfare, their 'welfare habitus' (Jolivet & Pereira 2021) as well as attributions of welfare abuse and dependency, which can result in migrants' avoidance of using formal protection (Osipovic 2015; Schweyher et al. 2019; Godin 2020).

Accessibility to social protection is shaped by public judgments of the legitimacy of welfare states and their logics and mechanisms. In this context, the notion of 'deservingness' was coined for studying public acceptance of social services and the legitimacy of welfare claimants (for an overview, see van Oorschot et al. 2017). These studies have found that people apply a combination of different criteria, including reciprocity, need or control, when forming their attitudes about the deservingness of different groups of welfare claimants (van Oorschot et al. 2017). The main result from surveys on deservingness judgments is that migrants usually rank among the least deserving populations.

While previous studies on deservingness have usually focused on perceptions among the public, a recent strand of literature specifically studied migrants' deservingness perceptions (Osipovic 2015; Schweyher et al. 2019). Osipovic (2015) showed that Polish migrants in the UK interpreted their entitlement to welfare as strongly contingent upon previous "contributions through work, payment of taxes and law abidance" (p. 729). These interpretations can lead migrants, when in need, to use alternative sources of protection, which can foster an underuse of welfare benefits despite existing entitlements. Schweyher et al. (2019) also found strong conditionality among Polish migrants' welfare perceptions in the UK, which was particularly prevalent for out-of-work benefits. They showed that claiming non-contributory schemes was associated with "migrant stigma", referring to stigmatisation of migrants as dependent and passive welfare recipients (Schweyher et al. 2019). Seeking to avoid this stigma can cause migrants to accept precarious jobs or living on savings rather than claiming out-of-work benefits.

Attributing deservingness based on the migrant / non-migrant binary thus indicates that access to formal welfare correlates with conceptions of belongingness to the system. In this way, discourses about who "deserves to belong" (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al. 2021) may have important

implications for migrants' access to resources relevant for social protection, and their concurrent approaches to managing social risks in a new environment. While numerous studies engage with policymakers' and public opinions about migrants' access to social protection, the small number of research exploring perceptions among welfare claimants, and migrants, was largely situated in the UK (Lubbers et al. 2018; Osipovic 2015; Schweyher et al. 2019).

In Germany, social protection services include a range of measures directly provided by government institutions and external organisations commissioned by the government, as well as voluntary schemes and corporate mechanisms. Germany is mainly a social insurance-based welfare state, thus access to most benefits is contingent upon previous employment in the labour market and subsequent contributions to the welfare system. Citizenship is not a precondition for access to insurance-based benefits, but it can shape access to residence and work permits as is the case for EU citizens. Newcomers who migrate to Germany and have not accumulated contributions through employment are largely excluded from these benefits (Schnabel 2020). Contribution based benefits are not typically associated with the figure of 'welfare-motivated migration' thus they are not that contested in public debates. This is different with Germany's means-tested, tax-financed, and residence-based benefits that are not contingent upon previous contributions and based largely on residency. Access to tax-financed benefits, most importantly, the basic income support scheme ("ALG II") used to be accessible by all legal residents (who are available to the labour market), though exclusions have been introduced that restrict access as to the length of stay (Werner & Martinsen 2018: 641). These exclusions were mostly introduced during EU eastward enlargement to restrict access to tax-financed benefits by EU-nationals (Werner & Martinsen 2018). Means-tested benefits, which are not based on previous contributions are mostly associated with a welfare stigma, which are one reason for their comparatively low take up rates (Harnisch 2019). Take up rates of means tested benefits can be further restricted for migrants when they perceive to be not deserving and through exclusion from the welfare state aim to (re-)negotiate and represent their sense of belonging.

#### BELONGING, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS

Recent approaches to the study of belonging emphasise the different dimensions of this concept. According to Antonsich (2010), belonging develops as a combination between intimate experiences of feeling 'at home' in a certain place on the one hand, and politics of belonging on the other. The latter refers to "the struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of such a community" (Yuval-Davis 2016:368). Youkhana

(2015) defines belonging as “alterable attachments that can be social, imagined, and sensual-material in nature” (p.16). This emphasis on “the material-semiotic and space-sensitive” aspects of belonging “reveal[s] activities that produce belonging on different temporal and spatial platforms and within more or less institutionalized (repeated, per-formed, etc.) everyday practices, (imposed) rituals, and ‘regimes of belonging’” (Youkhana 2015, p. 16). Carmel and Sojka (2021) applied the concept of belonging to the study of social policies and migrants’ access to social protection. They studied how social policy makers assess migrants’ legitimacy of claiming welfare benefits based on different ‘rationales of belonging’. Accordingly, the specific combination of rationales employed in a specific welfare context influences political justifications “for the exclusion of specific categories of migrant[s] from accessing benefits (e.g., returning national citizens who had grown up elsewhere), for the hierarchical privileging of social rights for some EU migrants over others” (p. 661). The authors argue that the concept of belonging is better suited to capture the many facets of membership and entitlement rules than connate terms like deservingness and ‘welfare chauvinism’, which they deem unable to capture the complexity of links between welfare logics and migrants’ accessibility to social benefits. In both the UK and in Poland, they found the combination of welfarist and temporal-territorial rationales among social policy makers to promote exclusionary perspectives towards migrants. According to the authors, this attitude among policymakers promotes “transnational un-belonging” (p. 663), which refers to the exclusionary logics of national welfare states. Considering the implications of policymakers’ rationales of belonging for migrants’ access to welfare benefits, it seems necessary to also consider migrants’ own experiences of belonging and their effects on accessibility to social protection resources. This seems especially relevant for international migrants, whose social relationships, activities, and entitlements stretch beyond the borders of a single welfare state.

Recent scholarship has stressed the role of (transnational) social networks as important sources of both support and belonging (Bilecen 2015; Boccagni 2014, 2016; Dankyi et al 2017; Mumtaz 2021; Sabates-Wheeler & Feldman 2011; Palash & Baby-Collin 2018). In the face of exclusionary politics of belonging and the various challenges in accessing welfare (Eurofound 2015; Käkelä 2022), inclusionary social networks based on trust, mutual exchange and solidarity thus represent alternative sources of belonging rooted in intimate experiences of being ‘at home’ (Antonsich 2010). In this way, they constitute relevant informal channels for organising social protection (Bilecen 2020; Boccagni 2014). This becomes particularly evident in the German context, where growing emphasis on individual responsibility, self-reliance and autonomy fails to promote an equally inclusive environment for migrants (Klammer et al. 2017;

Meyer 2019). Against this background, alternative sources of belonging and support gain particular relevance, including informal social networks, as well as civil society and migrant-led organisations (Halm et al. 2020; SVR 2020).

Previous research has identified associations and organisations that are led by migrants, and which serve migrants' political participation and religious lives as possible sources of belonging in transnational spaces (Amelina & Faist 2008; Fauser 2016; Levitt 2004; Portes et al. 2007; Pries & Sezgin 2012). Scholars suggest various typologies and definitions of what exactly constitutes MOs. Pries and Sezgin (2012:9) define organisations as 'arrangements of cooperation', that are defined by three core characteristics: i) defined goals and aims, ii) membership criteria and iii) an internal structure that defines organisational functions, positions, and roles. MOs are thus organisations that are managed by migrants and serve migrants' needs and rights. Levitt (2004) studied transnational religious organisations and found that religious associations, like churches, foster migrants' 'seamless' movement between sending and receiving countries' structures. In this respect, MOs are unique places that provide opportunities for people to manage the challenges that are inherent to transnational lives. Additionally, the author emphasised that churches provide opportunities for migrants to organise themselves and to form "powerful, well-established networks where they can express interests, gain skills, and make claims with respect to their home and host countries" (Levitt 2004: :2). In this respect, MOs strengthen migrants' position in transnational spaces and ultimately ease processes of developing a sense of belonging (Amelina & Faist 2008).

Their importance for experiences of belonging notwithstanding, MOs are rarely debated as sources of social protection. If ever, studies investigate developmental efforts of Hometown Associations (HTA) in immigration countries or not-for-profit organisations in the Global South in the absence of formal protection (Orozco 2003). However, research suggests that the role of MOs regarding social protection is largely underestimated (see also Serra Mingot & Mazzucato 2017). Due to their profound professionalisation in recent years, which also affects their ability to raise funds from various institutions, many of these organisations have substantiated political and sometimes economic power to engage with governments. Thus, they have become important partners for governmental institutions and welfare associations in issues related to social protection and political participation of migrants (Aşkın et al 2018; Halm et al. 2020; Hoesch & Harbig 2019; SVR 2020).

In Germany, a large variety of MOs comprises religious, ethnic or home-country related associations mostly in the legal form of registered associations (*eingetragener Verein*: e.V.).

While they used to occupy a marginalised position in the public sphere ('Ausländervereine'), they are nowadays important partners for welfare institutions and policymakers and firmly established in their local neighbourhoods and communities (SVR 2020). Their work usually involves support of migrants to participate in the German civil society, but they also foster migrants' home country attachments through their transnational activities (Pries & Sezgin 2012; Levitt 2004). In this way, MOs form unique spaces, which are shaped by a complex interplay between various expectations and their multifaceted responses (see also Aşkın et al. 2019).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research for this paper stems from a large collaborative research project that examines the role of MOs in the German welfare structure. Together with our collaborators, we conducted expert interviews, document analyses, interviews with representatives and members<sup>1</sup> of MOs, and collected ego-centric network charts of both representatives and members of MOs (add after review). Results presented in this paper are based on a subset of 18 semi-structured interviews and two group discussions with 31 members of 16 MOs conducted between October 2020 and October 2021. We identified registered MOs based on publicly accessible information in three cities in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The goal was to reach a variation of MOs in terms of emigration country, size, and function. Therefore, we contacted congregations and registered associations of different sizes that address migrants with different legal statuses and migration histories through different means (telephone, personal contacts, email, websites). This allowed us to cooperate with various organisations ranging from small congregations and interest groups to well-established associations with a large range of activities and diverse target groups and professional structures. In doing so, we aimed to assess how various services of different types of MOs contribute to migrants' risk-averting strategies. Altogether, we spoke with 16 women and 15 men with different ages and socio-economic profiles, including teenagers, apprentices and university students, parents, and grandparents, employed and unemployed adults who had spent between two years and the entirety of their lives in Germany (see Table 1 below). While some reported on their asylum applications, others had obtained their visa through study or work, or they had obtained German citizenship. With this variation in the sample, we explored the wide range of ways in which people draw on MOs for securing their social protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Regardless of any official membership status, "member" is used instead of "client" because we found MOs not to think of the people they work with as clients, but more inclusively as "members".



<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>MO</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Place of origin</b>	<b>Number of years spent in GER</b>
<b>Aysun</b>	Mosque	female	54	Turkey	46 (1975)
<b>Najim</b>	Lomingo e.V.	male	17	Syria	4 (2017)
<b>Linh</b>	Culture & Hope e.V.	female	53	Vietnam	41 (1980)
<b>Levent</b>	Alevite Congregation	male	41	Germany (Turkey)	Birth
<b>Esma</b>	Lomingo e.V.	female	49	Syria	6 (2015)
<b>Hamid</b>	Lomingo e.V.	male	19	Afghanistan	4 (2017)
<b>Orhan</b>	Dersim Congregation	male	52	Turkey	25 (1996)
<b>Suleika</b>	Kurdo e.V.	female	43	Syria	6 (2015)
<b>Rondek</b>	Yesidi Congregation	female	32	Iraq	6 (2015)
<b>Haias</b>	Yesidi Congregation	male	32	Iraq	6 (2015)
<b>Alexian</b>	Path e.V.	male	29	Germany	Birth
<b>Thomas</b>	Path e.V.	male	24	Germany	Birth
<b>Hadi</b>	Path e.V.	male	13	Iraq	10 (2011)
<b>Hoshyar</b>	Path e.V.	female	21	Iraq	10 (2011)
<b>Ufuk</b>	Gemeinsam Dortmund e.V.	male	31	Germany (Turkey)	Birth
<b>Admir</b>	Hope e.V.	male	40	Albania	16 (2005)
<b>Mamadou</b>	Fubido e.V.	male	57	Guinea	26 (1995)
<b>Bafode</b>	Fubido e.V.	male	39	Guinea	20 (2001)
<b>Halima</b>	Together e.V.	female	68	Marocco	50 (1971)
<b>Nawal</b>	Together e.V.	female	26	Marocco	2 (2019)
<b>Zohra</b>	Together e.V.	female	45	Marocco	8 (2013)
<b>Aziza</b>	Together e.V.	female	34	Germany (Marocco)	Birth
<b>Ikram</b>	Together e.V.	female	36	Marocco	15 (2006)
<b>Samya</b>	Together e.V.	female	28	Syria	5 (2016)
<b>Fadila</b>	Together e.V.	female	45	Syria	6 (2015)
<b>Jakow</b>	Russian Congregation	male	42	Russia	22 (1999)
<b>Anastasia</b>	Russian Congregation	female	53	Ukraine	23 (1998)
<b>Emin</b>	Vereint e.V.	male	42	Germany (Turkey)	Birth
<b>Anthea</b>	GriBo e.V.	female	53	Greece	40 (1981)
<b>Marija</b>	Kulturraum e.V.	female	30	Bosnia	23 (1998)
<b>Helias</b>	GriBo e.V.	male	34	Germany (Greece)	Birth

*Table 1: Sample overview*

MO representatives or staff were involved in our research in various ways. They supported us in selecting members for interviews, establishing contact, and arranging the interview setting. In some cases, they were present at the interview and offered invaluable support, especially with translation. In the changing context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted interviews either on-site or through digital means of communication. Ethics throughout our research were assured through providing extensive information on the context and goal of this research project. Moreover, participants were handed a form of consent with information on our approaches to collecting and handling data, which was signed by both researchers and participants. This agreement was carefully formulated in cooperation with our university's law officer and existing data protection regulations. All information on MOs and individual research participants is anonymized and treated strictly confidential and only for scientific purposes.

Interviews followed an interview guideline that covered questions about participants' migration history, their experience with their MO and strategies for dealing with social risks related, but not restricted to, education, care, labour, and health. Interviews range from 40 minutes to two hours, including completion of ego-centric network charts (which are not discussed in this paper) and were transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service. All interviews were conducted in German, while MO staff offered their support with translations when participants preferred this.

Data analysis followed grounded theory approaches that allowed for structuring the data and for determining relevant aspects of social protection in a context of respondents' individual networks and activities for managing social risks within and across interviews through coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin 1994). Data collection and collaborative coding and analysis sessions were conducted by a team of five researchers from Germany with various backgrounds in sociology, political sciences and psychology, education, and development studies. Codes were inductively generated, combined, and related to one another individually and through team meetings and discussions. The emerging codes covered migrants' social protection experiences and strategies regarding their strive for independence, welfare selectivity and constant striving to attain a safe and reliable life in changing environments.

#### THE ROLE OF MOs FOR MIGRANTS' SOCIAL PROTECTION IN GERMANY

The findings of our research illustrate how MOs address the various social protection needs and challenges of migrant populations in Germany (Aşkın et al 2018; Halm et al. 2020). Although their main organisational goal is not in the provision of social protection, we find that MOs play an important role for migrants' approaches to managing social risks. Specifically, we identify three main functions through which MOs enable their members to organise matters of social protection in accordance with their individual needs, resources, and preferences. Their *networking function* allows migrants to link with each other and with other stakeholders involved in the provision of social protection, and thus enables them to access and accumulate social capital. Their *consultancy function* is evident in MOs' provision of reliable and trustworthy information and services to migrants, which represent immediate sources of social protection. Finally, their *acquainting function* refers to low-threshold services that enable migrants to access welfare state services. We will show that the ways migrants benefit from these functions are related to MOs' contributions to developing experiences of belonging.

Migration, belonging and social protection: migrants' strive for independence

Migration urges people to reorganize their lives and relationships in a new place. The findings in our study indicate that processes of renegotiating social protection assemblages (Bilecen & Barglowski 2015; Faist et al. 2015) and establishing belonging in a new context are intertwined and prone to various challenges. Especially the more recent migrants as well as participants with an insecure legal status experience particular challenges to their social protection, often related to their economic situation. Most of our respondents reported various barriers to using welfare support related to negative experiences with staff (see also Käkälä 2022) and complex bureaucratic procedures, as well as lack of trust, fear of stigma, costliness and complexity of access. These experiences can significantly hinder migrants in finding stability in their lives and in developing a new sense of belonging. Orhan, who had migrated from Turkey in 1996, described the challenges he encountered when first arriving in Germany in the following way:

And you suddenly get here. You are nothing here, then you need to start from scratch, because without language skills you won't get anywhere. And you can put your diploma on the wall, but it doesn't help me in the beginning. And I also needed to make an application for asylum. (Orhan, 52 years old, Turkey)

For Orhan, issues of legal status, language and recognition of previously obtained qualifications represented particular barriers for finding employment as a key step towards finding orientation and belongingness in a new environment. The importance of participating in the labour market and associated financial autonomy for finding a new sense of belonging was a recurrent theme across various interviews. At the same time, values of independence and financial autonomy associated with employment strongly affected participants' 'welfare habitus' (Jolivet & Pereira 2021) and subsequent welfare selectivity. While health benefits offered by German state institutions were thus largely considered uncontroversial and accessible, most participants expressed great unease with using means-tested unemployment benefits<sup>2</sup>.

And these thoughts, this insecurity, and, yes, sure, because you receive State support, but I wasn't used to expecting anything from others. For me, this was, I would say, not good. (Orhan, 52 years old, Turkey)

I can't expect anything from the *Jobcenter*. That is the State, for example, if I make debts, then I also must pay these debts. That means, the State doesn't help me, either. (Linh, 53 years old, Vietnam)

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<sup>2</sup> In Germany, these are provided by the 'Jobcenter', organised by the Federal Agency for Work (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) in cooperation with municipalities ("Kommunen") and cities.

In addition to an overall strive for independence, we found various structural factors to influence welfare selectivity of this kind. Firstly, migrants are often aware of the heated debates of ‘welfare abuse’ by international migrants and concomitant political discourses about migrants’ “welfare tourism” (for an overview, see Godin 2020). Avoiding financial state support may thus be a way to also avoid “migrant stigma” (Schweyher et al. 2020), especially for those who have a strong desire to be self-sufficient. After all, for many migrants, their migration was a project towards gaining independence and autonomy in a context that they deemed safe and meritocratic. Secondly, feelings of discomfort or lack of congruence between supply and demand also determines welfare selectivity. For Najim, an adolescent from Syria who had arrived in Germany four years prior to the interview, support offered by the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Agency for Work) simply did not correspond with his needs:

I believe this Bundesagentur für Arbeit is very helpful, but also sometimes they expect very much from people (laughing.) Well, yes, what do you do now? Why don’t you go to school? Why don’t you work? Yes, I have different plans, but these plans don’t fit with their rules, that’s why you must do something. Yes, this can be a little bit, not so helpful, the way I would like it to be. But it’s helpful, it still helps, that you can do something. (Najim, 17 years old, Syria)

In the context of their strive for independence, on the one hand, and sometimes challenging experiences with welfare institutions, on the other, our respondents have developed alternative social protection strategies, which correspond with their personal needs and preferences. In search for inclusionary protective mechanisms that resonate with an independence-oriented “welfare habitus”, our participants had developed diverse social protection strategies. While we find family members and friends, to play an important role (Bilecen 2015, 2020; Boccagni 2017; Faist et al. 2015), MOs represent another core element in these assemblages. In the following sections, we illustrate the ways MOs contribute to social protection strategies especially as they meet migrants’ aspiration to find a sense of belonging.

### MOs as sources of social protection

MOs influence the ways people assemble resources for organising their social protection in various ways. Primarily, MOs are integral parts of participants’ social networks and subsequently influence and extend their members’ social capital as a key reference point for seeking support. Suleika, who had arrived in Germany in 2015, considered Kurdo e.V. to replace the neighbourhood she used to have in Syria, as a space where she can discuss problems,

questions, and ideas with others. Members of congregations especially emphasised the familial atmosphere in which they feel safe and free to discuss personal problems, regardless of their length of stay in Germany. Levent, among others, pointed at the important role of friendships emerging from regular meetings and activities at their Alevite congregation and the functional as well as emotional support especially for elderly migrants: “[They] have manifold competence gateways and [they] help each other sometimes, with knowledge or with spirit.”

In addition to facilitating occasions for informally exchanging information amongst each other, contacts inside the MO act as “brokers” that link our participants with other relevant actors outside the MO. Social capital built within the MO thus extends beyond the organisations’ boundaries. Thus, MOs provide ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ social capital (Achbari 2015, drawing on Putnam 2000). When explaining the various ways in which members of his Dersim congregation benefit from each other’s networks, Orhan referred specifically to the possible benefits for finding employment:

Or this one guy works at the factory, and he knows, this factory recruits new employees (...) I also knew someone, who already knew, whether this place will still be vacant or not and if there were any job announcements. So, they also supported me there (Orhan, 52 years old, Turkey).

In addition to providing opportunities for extending social capital as a basis for informally sharing knowledge and information, MOs themselves offer a variety of activities and services, which many of our participants used in their attempts to counteract social risks, particularly regarding unemployment. Linh, whose family had moved to Germany from Vietnam when she was twelve, told us that, during an event organised at Culture and Hope e.V., she learned about apprenticeship options as a nurse, which she and her daughter then both pursued. Moreover, the staff gave explicit advice regarding application procedures:

They have information, where the place for applying is. For example, the address and everything. And where your application will have good chances. And she [representative of MO] said, only [this employer] is good for you (laughing silently). (Linh, 53 years old, Vietnam)

These examples show how MOs facilitate access to networks and information as well as individual services, thereby circumventing formal support schemes for finding employment. Additionally, MOs further assist migrants in accessing welfare state benefits by providing relevant information and supporting bureaucratic procedures. In the face of a complex and

incomprehensible welfare landscape, Orhan ascribed particular importance to the MO as a guiding chaperon:

What else can we do, where can we find help? And which organisation does this, which institution does that, or which agency does that, yes. Yes, do we go to the employment agency here, yes, there you can also seek help, or can you do an apprenticeship, then you can take this course, yes (Orhan, 52 years old, Turkey).

In this way, internally organised services can also contribute to members' increased familiarisation with available welfare state services, and thus further enhance their capacities to manage their social risks with a range of protective resources. Additionally, assistance with bureaucratic affairs facilitates increased confidence in dealing with formal requirements for utilising respective support. Linh, for example, told us that Culture and Hope e.V. had helped her with documentation for her health insurance company. Orhan referred to examples in which members in his Dersim congregation helped each other with document translations and filling in forms, but also with finding solutions for legal questions or problems with agencies. Thus, MOs complement existing social protection mechanisms especially by offering a range of opportunities for people to assemble protective resources in accordance with their individual needs and preferences.

In sum, we find MOs to perform three major functions, which make them a relevant influencing factor enabling our participants to organise matters of social protection. Firstly, a *networking function* allows for informal exchanges of ideas and information. Secondly, a *consultancy function* facilitates access to alternative sources of social protection offered within the MO that help circumvent welfare support. Thirdly, an *acquainting function* enables access to formal support mechanisms by developing abilities to make use of them. To investigate these various roles more closely, we now turn to the influence of belonging on participants' strategies for managing social risks.

#### MOs, social protection and belonging

The ways in which our participants organise their various forms of informal and formal social protection in the context of their MOs are inextricably linked to experiences of belonging. Drawing on our interviews, we identified two main modes of belonging: There are those whose transnational ties complement a sense of belonging with Germany as a place of settlement. In these cases, ties with more than one nation state are not mutually exclusive, but equally important elements of participants' identities and life worlds. As this includes a sense of

belonging with the welfare state in which they now reside, these migrants typically find Germany's welfare mechanisms for securing social protection accessible. Others, by contrast, face challenges in combining and navigating concomitant expectations of various countries throughout their migration journeys. These participants highlight experiences with exclusionary politics of belonging, which also affect their utilisation of welfare services and ultimate approaches to assembling protective resources. In this way, different experiences of place-belongingness (Antonsich 2010) with the destination context affect perceptions of its welfare system and subsequent strategies for managing social risks in diverse ways, turning the MO into a multifunctional element of social protection assemblages (Aşkın et al 2018; Bilecen 2015; Boccagni 2017; Faist et al 2015).

Participants who expressed belongingness to Germany despite occasional difficulties in renegotiating experiences belonging are predominantly well acquainted with the German welfare system. For them, citizenship and entitlement represent key factors facilitating access to its social services. Most of them are first-and-a-half or second-generation migrants who were either born in Germany or had socialised into it as children. This familiarity with the system and legally secured access to its resources promotes an image of the welfare state as a safety net in cases of need. Levent, for example, grew up in Germany as a child of Turkish guest workers. While he emphasised his self-sufficiency, he attributed his ability to be independent to his father's hard work not only for their family's well-being, but also for their developed sense of belonging to Germany. He highlighted specifically that he had become acquainted with the German welfare landscape early on, and thus felt to require less assistance than those who are less familiar with the system. Similar impressions were shared by numerous second-generation immigrants we spoke with. For them, familiarity with the welfare system is closely linked to the place-belongingness they express with Germany, termed by Antonsich (2010) as the intimate feeling of being at home in a physical place. Although these participants do not ascribe importance to their MO as immediate sources of social protection, MOs importantly affect their belongingness with the German welfare state. This concerns especially those migrants who are faced with exclusionary practices and increased racialization and othering (see for the UK context, Sime et al. 2022). In their function as networking places, MOs offer unique opportunities for engaging with the social and cultural roots inherited by their families. For Levent, events and activities organised by his congregation allow him not only to spend leisure time with friends, but also to speak the language of his community and to engage in traditions. From his perspective, this ability to establish and maintain transnational ties importantly affects a sense of belonging in the country of settlement:

The Alevite congregations accomplished a lot in a sense that these children and teenagers can carry their identities in Germany with self-confidence, as the new normal, with naturalness. (Levent, 41, born in Germany to Turkish parents).

In this way, the MO as a facilitator of transnational relations importantly contributes to these participants' belongingness with their country of settlement, and ultimately their familiarity with its welfare system as a safety net.

While participants like Levent did not consider their MO to influence their own social protection strategies, they emphasised their supportive role for other migrants with greater demand for assistance. Levent is himself actively involved in his congregation, helps members fill in documents and frequently aids over the phone. Ufuk, a son to Turkish guest workers, who studied teaching and now works as a Maths and Physics teacher, also grew up in Germany and now supports people who are not as well acquainted with the system as himself:

When my father came here in December '81, I think he would have been very grateful if he had had a place like this to go. People who speak his language. Of course, he forged ahead, went to school and found a job. However, it would have been so much easier if he had had someone who speaks his language. Someone who also supports him when visiting the authorities. Just to be there. Even if he understood the language. Two years ago, I went to the education authority [*Schulamt*] with a woman. She is a physicist, speaks perfect English. We went there and she solved all her problems in English. Then, I said to her, 'I didn't have to be there.' However, she said, 'Yes you did, as mental support, just so I was not alone'. (Ufuk, 31, born in Germany to Turkish parents)

Other participants, however, faced challenges in reconciling their involvement in transnational spaces with physical notions of belonging. For Carmel and Sojka (2021), this state of 'transnational un-belonging' is a result of the cumulative effects of selective institutionalised rationales of belonging "that together negate, rather than promote, transnational belonging" (p. 663). According to the authors, transnational un-belonging is manifest in migrants' transnational exclusion from welfare mechanisms. Similarly, Antonsich (2010) highlights a necessity for assessments of belonging to consider not only place-belongingness based on feelings of being at home, but to also include the effects of politics of belonging. We found participants, who express this inner turmoil between physical places, to ascribe particular importance to their MO both for their belonging, and for organising social protection. Aysun, a 54-year-old woman, who migrated from Turkey in 1975, for instance, scrutinised her belonging in the following way:



We do not belong anywhere, I think. [...] It's a strange feeling. There, we are foreigners. Here, we are foreigners. Sometimes that's a strange feeling, honestly. Sometimes, when I think about why we didn't stay in Turkey, we would have starved to death (laughing silently). Sometimes it hurts. For example, one day, when I came home one night in winter, I parked in front of my door, just down this road. And a German came by and said, 'You damn foreigners! Go away from here'. [...] That hurts. Because, we have been here for 45 years, and we didn't do any harm to anyone. (Aysun, 54 years old, Turkey)

With this lack of belonging to any physical place, we found these participants instead to have developed an alternative sense of belonging based on their social relationships. For them, the MO has become 'a second home' and even 'family' by offering a safe space that connects memories of the past with today's everyday life challenges. This was also Hamid's point of view, who came from Afghanistan in 2017. While he had needed to turn his back on his origin country, he faced stigma and exclusion in Germany. For him, Lomingo e.V. provides an alternative place of belonging:

At Lomingo, we are one big community; we are like one big family, no matter what religion, what nationality, what skin colour we have. We are always friendly; we are always together like friends, like a big family (Hamid, 19 years old, Afghanistan).

Experiencing (un-)belonging in this way, these participants, while also emphasising their desire for self-sufficiency, show a higher tendency towards organising their social protection outside the welfare system. Challenges of access and lack of belonging to the system are mutually reinforcing, which fosters the role of alternative spaces both for belonging and social protection. These participants thus tend to rely more strongly on their own social networks, which includes the MO.

Considering the importance of the MO for accessing social protection resources as described above, the specific functions relevant for our participants' purposes depend on the respective context. Aysun and Linh, for example, who had spent most of their lives in Germany, are technically familiar with the system and know how to access respective resources. However, their doubtful belongingness affects their reluctance to make use of them. For them, the MO's *networking function* plays a key role for circumventing formal sources of support by exchanging information on vacancies or further training opportunities, among others, with their friends at the MO as discussed in the previous section.

By contrast, participants who had more recently arrived in Germany often faced a wider range of challenges obstructing their accessibility to protective resources, including lack of language skills and knowledge, but also legal challenges. In these cases, the MO's *acquainting function* facilitates easier access to State institutions by aiding with translations and formalities. Moreover, specific services organised within the MO, including language courses or information events, represent internal opportunities for accessing alternative sources relevant for managing social risks. Ultimately, these services can also contribute to migrants' participation in immigration country institutions. In this way, the *consultancy function*, which refers to services and activities taking place within the MO itself, can overlap with the *acquainting function*. Additionally, the *networking function* has important implications not only for participants' abilities to discuss problems with people in similar situations, but also for further establishing a sense of belonging in the context of these relationships. As networks also facilitate access to information both within and outside the MO, there are further overlaps with the *consultancy* and *acquainting* functions. Based on individual combinations of these functions, MOs may thus importantly contribute to migrants becoming increasingly acquainted with their new environments, with implications for both their sense of belonging and social protection.

### CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Social protection remains a major challenge for many migrants and their families around the world (ILO 2021). Many people on the move experience severe limitations to accessing and using welfare provision (Eurofound 2015). While material and legal barriers may restrict its overall accessibility, limited claims for welfare are often due to social and cultural factors. Mismatches between formally organised welfare services and migrants' needs and preferences in accordance with their 'welfare habitus' (Jolivet & Pereira 2021) may thus promote lack of trust, ambiguous deservingness perceptions as well as avoidance of a 'migrant stigma'. In cases of welfare take-up, migrants often encounter a 'culture of disbelief and discreditation' (Käkelä 2022). Despite their emphasis on individual responsibly, self-reliance and autonomy, formal protection systems thus often lack accessibility and inclusionary practices (Klammer et al. 2017). In response, migrants have been found to rely on family ties, social relationships, and communities within and across borders as informal and more inclusive forms of support and protection (Bilecen 2015; Boccagni 2017; Faist et al 2015). This paper contributes to the debates on migrants' social protection assemblages by emphasizing the largely neglected role of migrant organisations in the provision of social protection. Drawing on fieldwork and in-

depth interviews with migrants from various countries of origin in Germany, we have drawn attention to the manifold ways in which MOs contribute to migrants' social protection. Specifically, we have identified three functions that enable their members to access and accumulate a range of resources relevant for protecting themselves against basic social risks: their networking, consultancy, and acquainting functions. Linking the protective contributions of these functions to varying experiences and needs for belonging, we have also drawn attention to the connections between evolving belongingness and social protection assemblages. While those with an advanced sense of place-belongingness with their destination context benefit especially from the MO as a place of identification in transnational perspective, participants with more complicated experiences of belonging rely more strongly on the MO as a provider of social protection. For the former, MOs as complementary sources of belonging promote inclusionary perceptions towards the welfare mechanisms of their destination context. For the latter, MOs as alternative sources of belonging importantly fill the gaps between welfare structures and the needs and challenges of migrant populations in Germany (Aşkın et al 2018; Halm et al. 2020, SVR 2020).

Aşkın et al. (2018) critically assess political and public debates about MOs which tend to focus on their either 'integrating' or 'segregating' role (see also, Pries & Sezgin 2012; Halm et al. 2020). Our findings also confirm that MOs are multifunctional organisations with high degrees of responsiveness to individual needs, which make them important players in the field of migrants' social protection. MOs fulfil significant tasks to reduce the vulnerability of a variety of migrant populations. Social protection systems should thus acknowledge and strengthen MOs as indispensable elements of welfare arrangements, which significantly contribute to increasing the well-being and social status of different groups of migrants and alleviate basic social risks and vulnerability. Including MOs both in future research and cooperation with governmental organisations can help to better understand and benefit from the various ways in which they affect equality and social justice of migrant populations. To develop a more detailed understanding of the ways MOs contribute to social protection strategies, future research needs to carefully consider the multi-layered interplay between different places and actors, including the organisational element of risk-averting strategies.

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