

Following their lead: Transnational connectivity and mobility along family figurations in displacement

Transnational lives are not the exception but rather a reality of displaced peoples' everyday lives. This became obvious in our research with refugees in Germany, in which we used a figural approach to better understand their situation and how they overcome protracted displacement. By focussing on the social constellations in displacement, a figural approach can offer practitioners a new way to identify how to best support displaced people.

A figural approach offers a new perspective to displacement in two critical ways: First, displaced people, whether they journey alone, with family or in a group, are not considered in isolation but rather as part of different social constellations—or in other words, by the networks, power relations and dependencies in which they are inevitably embedded. The approach reveals social settings in which some displaced people find protection with the help of others, while others risk 'living in limbo' because they lack much-needed support.

Second, the figural approach is not place-based or bound to a certain territory. When considering possible solutions, the question is not where a person would like to build a secure and productive life, but rather how (s)he finds a 'durable solution'. Building a new life may require back and forth mobility within one or between two or more countries—in other words, a translocal and/or transnational way of life. Binding displaced people to a certain place obstructs this necessary mobility and may paradoxically make them more, rather than less vulnerable.

Transnational family figurations in displacement

Everyone belongs to multiple social constellations or 'figurations'. Among the refugees in Germany whom TRAFIG researchers interviewed, family figurations were especially prominent as they decisively shape their everyday lives—particularly when refugees have been separated from close family members, and/or when kin networks are dispersed across multiple countries. Consider the following three figurations and their policy implications:

Figuration of the lone yet connected traveller.



Characteristic: Many displaced people embark on irregular (and therefore unsafe) journeys alone but are nevertheless connected to relatives in their country of origin, at their destination or in a third country. In some cases, these relatives support the journey financially, logistically and emotionally.

Policy implications: Legal pathways must be provided. Upon arrival in Europe, familial ties within the European Union should be immediately assessed. Asylum procedures should be carried out in the country where close relatives live. If contact persons already live in Germany, the lone travellers should be given the option to move to that persons' place of residence.

Figuration of the transnationally separated family.



Characteristic: Many nuclear families have been separated along the journey—often for an indefinite time. One family member now lives in Germany, while others remained in the country of origin or in a country of first reception. Family members in Germany often try to

reunite with their family. But when efforts to reunite the family via legal pathways fail and irregular pathways are deemed too costly or dangerous, the separation can become protracted. Families are then forced to organise their lives across a distance.

Policy implications: Refugees need to be informed early about available options for family reunification and be legally supported in procedures. Family reunification procedures must become quicker, more transparent and consider solutions to hurdles that the applicants find challenging to overcome, such as alternative ways to prove one’s identity. In general, transnational connectivity should be supported, for example, by securing access to information and communication technologies in contexts of reception and providing cheap, reliable and legal ways for sending remittances.

Figuration of the transnationally extended family.



Characteristic: Extended families are often spread across multiple countries, for example Syria, Turkey, Germany, Sweden and Canada. Nonetheless, they

maintain contact and often provide financial, emotional and mobility support, especially in times of need—some may even visit each other if visa regulations and their legal status allow. Nearly all refugees in Germany are part of such spatially dispersed extended family networks.

“... transnational lives are not the exception but rather a reality of displaced peoples’ everyday lives. This becomes obvious when we use a figurational approach to understand and overcome protracted displacement.”

Policy implications: Not dependent family members are not entitled to family reunification and can thus not reunite with, for instance, their sister or cousin in another country. Alternative safe pathways should be initiated that allow for secure mobility along extended family networks. Humanitarian Admission Programmes that entail a private sponsorship element, as Germany had implemented in 2014, provide such opportunities. But not all family members wish to reunite at the same place. In this case, families can still be supported by simplified means of remittances and by easing visa restrictions for making family visits.

Following their lead ...

The needs, everyday practices and mobility intentions of displaced people are shaped by their specific position in and the geographic dispersion of their family. Transnational family figurations are critical for moving out of protracted displacement and for rebuilding a new life in Germany or beyond. The problem is that conventional practice often limits rather than enables the connectivity and mobility of displaced people across countries in the name of finding individual or collective solutions at one place (either local integration, voluntary return or resettlement).

Policies and practices that limit, obstruct or deny the transnational and translocal reality are doomed to fail in resolving protracted displacement. Worse, they may serve to prolong it by inadvertently pushing people toward irregular and unsafe practices to survive. Displaced people already make use of mobility and connectivity as a way out of their protracted ‘limbo’; it is high time to follow their lead.

This practice note is based on Christ, S. et al. (2021). *Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Germany: Empirical findings and reflections on mobility and translocal connections of refugees living in Germany* (TRAFIG working paper no. 10). Bonn: BICC. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.5841892](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5841892)

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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant No 822453



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Publication date: December 2021

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.5845868](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5845868)

Copyediting / Layout: Heike Webb / Gizem Güzelant

Editorial design: kipconcept gmbh