



UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



BOUNDARY WORK

**– new interfaces between the state, civil society
and refugees in a self-reliance and return context**

PREFACE

Since 2019 refugees have had to establish themselves in Denmark and prepare to return to their home country at one and the same time. The increased focus on temporary protection in the Danish immigration legislation affects a wide group of people including not just the refugees but also the volunteers and caseworkers who support their social integration. For refugees, temporariness and uncertainty constitute fundamental conditions of life, while for professionals in municipalities and for local volunteers they change the framework conditions for their work.

This is the main conclusion of the research project *Boundary Work – new interfaces between the state, civil society and refugees in a self-reliance and return context*. This booklet provides a summary of the project and its findings. The project has created new knowledge about the changed interfaces between municipalities, civil society and refugees since the turn to temporary protection in Danish immigration law of 2015–2019. Following several changes in Danish immigration and integration legislation from 2015 onwards, the so-called ‘paradigm shift’ bill of 2019 manifested the increased focus on temporary protection and return taking place in Denmark’s immigration policy.

According to Statistics Denmark approximately 116,000 refugees and family members, including almost 30,000 individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine, held a temporary residence permit as of 1 January 2024.

The purpose of the project has been to create new knowledge about the changed interfaces between refugees, municipal caseworkers and civil society volunteers, as well as to reduce the social vulnerability of refugees by increasing their knowledge and options through strengthening cooperation between the three groups.

The research findings have gone through peer review and more publications are on the way. On the back of this booklet, you can find links to the project’s publications as well as to the project’s podcast series *The Great Reception* (in Danish).

FACTBOX: “Boundary Work - new interfaces between the state, civil society and refugees in a self-reliance and return context” was carried out in a collaboration between the DRC Danish Refugee Council, the Red Cross and researchers from AMIS – Centre for Advanced Migration Studies, Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen, during the period 2021–2024. The project is funded by the VELUX FOUNDATIONS’ HUMpraxis programme.

SUMMARY

THE BOUNDARY WORK project constitutes the most comprehensive study to date of the consequences of the 2015–2019 paradigm shift in Denmark’s immigration and integration legislation. The project focuses on how the changed legal conditions not only affect refugees, but also the volunteers and caseworkers who help refugees to gain a foothold in Denmark.

FOR REFUGEES with a temporary residence permit in Denmark, our research shows that they live with a high degree of uncertainty, which creates great pressure on individuals and families. The pressure is increased by the stricter requirements for obtaining permanent residence, an extended cessation window for residence permits, and revocation cases that often drag on for a long time. As a consequence of this development, refugee families experience increased inequality between genders and generations because spouses and children may have different residence permits, and because women and the elderly live with a higher risk of losing their residence permits.

FOR THE VOLUNTEERS who support refugees, our research shows how the legislation’s contradictory focus on return and integration places new demands on volunteers’ skills and commitment. Volunteers generally experience a greater workload, while refugees’ need for support is increasing. The paradigm shift means that some volunteers fear giving wrong guidance or hesitate to enter long-term relationships with refugees who may suddenly be gone. At the same time, our research shows that civil society volunteers often go to great lengths to support and help refugees in Denmark.

FOR CASEWORKERS, the project shows that uncertain residence conditions and the caseworkers’ obligation to constantly provide guidance on repatriation challenge their efforts to promote refugee integration through self-sufficiency. While caseworkers’ relationships with refugees and volunteers are burdened by changes in the law that increase the pressure on refugees, the cooperation between municipalities and volunteers remains important for refugees’ knowledge of support options in civil society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Our research shows that refugees have a great need for knowledge, guidance and information about their conditions and rights, for example in relation to residence permits. It is important that the authorities convey the rules for permanent residence and communicate their letters and other information for refugees clearly and in several languages.
- Refugees have an increased need for social and psychological support from municipalities and civil society, with a view to strengthening their agency.
- We recommend that, going forward, politicians look at what is needed to create better conditions for refugees' everyday lives and futures, be it in Denmark or in the country of origin.
- The project demonstrates the value of involving refugees in research and practice development. Refugees have first-hand insight into the challenges that they generally experience and are often part of wider local networks.
- Our research also documents the value of collaboration between research and practice. Scientific knowledge is strengthened through insights from practice, while the professional development of the partner organizations is informed by our research findings.

FINDINGS

The BOUNDARY WORK project presents the following findings for the three target groups:

REFUGEES

Following the paradigm shift, refugees in Denmark must navigate between opposing demands for self-sufficiency and integration on one side and temporary stay and return on the other.

- Refugees with a temporary residence permit live with long-term uncertainty about the future, fear of return and of being separated from close family members.
- Refugees often lack information about their rights and on how to obtain permanent residence.
- Refugee families live with unequal legal conditions because family members may have different residence permits across generations and gender, with women and the elderly having a higher risk of losing their residence permit.
- The temporary residence permits mean that family members are pushed out of sync and must deal with different time frames and conditions in their attempt to obtain permanent residence for all.
- The extended cessation window of a minimum of eight years (for most), lengthy cessation and revocation cases, and the increased requirements for permanent residence create a great deal of pressure on individuals and families.
- Refugees who cannot meet the stricter requirements for permanent residence find it particularly difficult to act on their precarious life situation, which is experienced as extremely burdensome.
- Young people in particular experience the difficult dilemma of whether to work in unskilled jobs with a view to fulfilling the occupation requirement when applying for permanent residence, or to study, with the risk that the authorities will withdraw their temporary residence permit before they can qualify for permanent residence.
- Refugees develop different tactics to deal with the complex legislation and their uncertain futures, for example by working hard to meet the requirements for permanent residence, by seeking support from local civil society organizations, or by volunteering.

VOLUNTEERS

After the paradigm shift, volunteers support-

ing the integration of refugees have had to deal both with the limited resources of the job centres in terms of helping with tasks that do not relate to employment, and with meeting refugees' increased need for material help and specialized guidance. At the same time volunteers must live with the risk that refugees will not be allowed to stay in Denmark.

- The new requirements for volunteers' skills and commitment may increase the specialization of voluntary social work. This can create challenges in terms of the sector's traditional core values, including the joyful and self-directed nature of voluntary commitment.
- When more tasks are pushed into the grey zone between the municipality and civil society, there are tasks that are not solved, and refugees risk being left without support if there are no volunteer group in their community.
- The legal changes increase the economic, legal and social support needs of refugees, which gives volunteers more tasks and reinforces their need to limit their involvement and to seek support from civil society organizations.
- The risk of having to part with the refugees with whom they have formed relationships affects volunteers emotionally. Some therefore hesitate to enter long-term relationships with refugees, while others experience strengthened relationships due to the vulnerable situation.

- Volunteers may fear giving incorrect advice regarding residence permits and therefore refrain from helping refugees with problems related to residence.
- Volunteers develop boundary work tactics to limit their involvement, for example by referring refugees to others with relevant skills for legal advice and support. Volunteers also experience having to prioritize between refugees when they cannot help everyone.
- Volunteers are making a large and significant effort to support the integration of refugees in Denmark at a time when the political focus is on self-sufficiency and return.

CASEWORKERS

Caseworkers who work with social integration of refugees after the paradigm shift must navigate between motivating refugees with temporary residence to language acquisition and self-sufficiency, as well as continuously guiding them about the possibility of state support for repatriation.

- Caseworkers are challenged by the constantly changing legislation, and by the fact that the activities in the self-sufficiency and repatriation programme have implications for refugees' ability to qualify for permanent residence. The caseworkers are not necessarily equipped to provide guidance on this.

In some cases, the deterioration of refugees' economic and legal conditions caused by the legal changes challenges the relationships of caseworkers with refugees and volunteers.

- Caseworkers' ability to build a trusting relationship with refugees is further challenged by the caseworkers' duty to guide refugees with less than five years of residence in Denmark about their right to state support for repatriation at all meetings.
- Caseworkers develop tactics to take the sting out of the repatriation guidance, as well as of sanctions and the ambiguous message about integration and return. Some involve civil society volunteers in their integration task.
- In summary, the research project shows that the turn towards temporary protection and return creates increased inequality between refugees across generations and gender, and that the legislation's dual focus on integration and return challenges the voluntary social efforts and makes it more difficult for caseworkers to integrate refugees into the labour market. These changed conditions call for special attention from legislators, from municipalities and from civil society organizations.

At the same time, the interfaces between municipalities, civil society and refugees are changing today, with public actors increasingly involving civil society actors in the provision of social services. After the paradigm shift, these interfaces are particularly challenged, as more tasks move from the public sector to the voluntary sector, and the increased focus on temporary residence makes it more difficult to build mutual trusting relationships across the target groups. Our research confirms the importance of close collaboration between municipality and civil society in relation to supporting refugees with temporary residence permits.

FACTBOX: BOUNDARY WORK is a practice–research project, where the researchers have discussed their observations and analyses with the practitioners continuously throughout to sharpen the scientific knowledge production through insights from practice, and to strengthen the organizations' professional development through research findings.

BACKGROUND

With the paradigm shift and other changes in Danish immigration and integration legislation during the period 2015–2019, decades of focus on integration have been replaced by goals of increased self-sufficiency and temporary residence.

Among the main elements are legal measures such as the new temporary protection status (§7.3). This temporary protection can be withdrawn when the situation in the home country is judged to have improved, even if it is still serious, fragile and unpredictable. In contrast to the past, all forms of asylum are granted as short residence permits of one–two years' duration and 'with a view to temporary residence'. In addition, there are stricter rules for assessing attachment to Denmark, as well as increased requirements for permanent residence and other measures that have strengthened the immigration authorities' ability to revoke or refuse to extend residence permits. Most refugees can only apply for permanent residence after eight years in Denmark, and then only if they meet a number of high requirements for e.g. self-sufficiency and language acquisition. This development places refugees under increased pressure and creates a fundamental uncertainty that permeates economic, social, familial and personal aspects of their everyday life.

RESEARCH METHOD

The project's extensive, ethnographic data material was produced during eleven months of fieldwork among volunteers, refugees and caseworkers in three anonymized municipalities. It includes interviews with 75 volunteers, refugees, caseworkers and other stakeholders, as well as 170 observation notes from visits to voluntary activities, refugees' homes, job centres, and from collaboration group meetings and workshops facilitated by the DRC Danish Refugee Council and the Red Cross. These collaboration groups, consisting of refugees, volunteers and caseworkers from the municipalities, have developed several initiatives to strengthen the support for and agency of refugees with temporary residence permits. The project has thus engaged with the three groups in local and regional events, and the local anchoring of the project has been decisive in terms of ensuring broad participation.

The research findings have been validated through presentations and ongoing dialogue with the practice partners, the collaboration groups, the participating volunteer groups and volunteers from other parts of Denmark, as well as through double-blind peer review of research papers.

EXAMPLES FROM THE RESEARCH

I feel a bit like I am drowning in practical tasks, and then I must help with letters that I don't even understand.

Solveig, volunteer, 2021

Legal changes for the worse, always stricter, and we are the ones who have to tell them, so we are the boogeymen. It damages the refugees' trust, but also our cooperation with the volunteers.

Ali, caseworker, 2022

Now I have just had my residence permit extended, but in two years, what then? When my child is thirteen, and then they say 'Okay, you're going back'. Well, what should my children do? They have not learned Arabic. They can't read it. They don't know Arab culture. I think they will lose their future and that is what we are afraid of.

Munir, Syrian refugee, 2022

Self-sufficiency and return, it is increasingly all-consuming, because how do the refugees secure their finances and future? It's difficult to watch how their lives get harder and harder

John, volunteer, 2021

The majority of those on early retirement cannot afford to take their medication, whether it is painkillers, whether it is for their mental state, anxiety medication, or arthritis medication.

Karen, caseworker, 2022

Abia: *We always follow the rules. So it was a big shock that they wanted to send us back.*

Abbas: *[During my seven years in Denmark] I have built a beautiful, tall house and now they [the Immigration Services] have destroyed it.*

Syrian couple with cessation case, 2022

This creates some disharmony in the conversation space with the [refugees]. That on the one hand I must be a guide, and bolster and talk work. And then I finish by saying, 'By the way, have you heard about the repatriation act and the opportunity to travel home?'

Mia, caseworker, 2022

You may worry about getting too close to other people, refugees, who you may risk losing again.

**Lena, volunteer leader,
about missing refugees, 2022**

I have migraines and sometimes I feel sick at home, but I go to work anyway because I'm afraid of getting fired

Ayse, Syrian refugee, 2022

I think about it 24 hours a day, whether they will send me out or not. How will it end and what will happen to the children? I don't know what to do out of sheer powerlessness.

Coban, elderly Syrian refugee, 2022

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The BOUNDARY WORK project was developed in a collaboration between practitioners from the DRC Danish Refugee Council and the Red Cross and the researchers Marie Sandberg (PI), Ditte Shapiro, Katrine Sypli Kohl and Rikke Egaa Jørgensen from AMIS – Centre for Advanced Migration Studies, Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen.

DRC DANSK
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The project has created new knowledge about the reconfigured boundaries and relationships between municipalities, civil society and refugees after Denmark's 2015–2019 turn towards temporary protection and return.

The purpose of the project is to reduce refugees' social vulnerability through increased knowledge and agency in a strengthened collaboration between refugees, volunteers and caseworkers.

FUNDING

The project received funding from the VELUX FOUNDATIONS' HUMpraxis programme (2021–2024).

VELUX FOUNDATION

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS FROM THE BOUNDARY WORK PROJECT

Kohl, K.S. (2023). Disturbing intimacies: the pathopolitical governance of mixed-status families in times of return. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4): 1–18.

FORTHCOMING:

Sandberg, M., K.S. Kohl, D. Shapiro & R.E. Jørgensen (forthcoming). Boundary work in times of deterrence: emotionalization, interdependence and inequality at the interfaces between refugees, state and civil society.

Shapiro, D., K.S. Kohl, R.E. Jørgensen & M. Sandberg (forthcoming). Out of sync: temporal governance and agency in refugee families with temporary protection status in Denmark.

Shapiro, D., K.S. Kohl, R.E. Jørgensen & M. Sandberg (forthcoming): Boundary obstacles in social innovation: refugees, volunteers, and caseworkers navigating Denmark's paradoxical borderscape.

More publications are on the way.

