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Responding to the Respondents: Taking the Research Agenda Forward

Response to the Comments on Homberger et al. (2022)

The comments on our paper (Homberger et al. 2022) highlight the value of mutual exchange and feedback. They add emphasis but also take forward some aspects of our analysis.

In our paper we argued that to understand municipal responses to migrants with precarious legal status, it is necessary to explore the relational dynamics within municipalities and their relationships with civil society organizations (CSOs). While vertical and horizontal governance arrangements have been studied, the differing responses within a municipality between departments and between politicians and administrators can only be understood by revealing the differing interests and power dynamics within and between them that lead to their framing of their roles and perceptions of the deservingness and rights of the migrants concerned. Moreover, CSOs are themselves diverse in their interests and perspectives, shaping their negotiations with municipal actors on local practices and on their roles within them. Beyond the role of service provider, CSOs can be gatekeepers to municipal

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services and, together with some municipal actors, central to an »infrastructure of solidarity«. Through this relational lens, we argued, we can throw light on the complex and dynamic web of negotiated pathways to inclusion or exclusion of migrants with precarious legal status at the local level.

A core theme that emerges from these six responses is support for disentangling the collective agency of and within a city, while developing in a number of important respects the approach that we proposed.

First, based on their own empirical work, Flamant (2022), de Graauw (2022), Lebuhn (2022) and Schilliger (2022) endorse the importance of understanding differing and conflicting rationales *within* public administrations – between departments, between political proponents and administrative units. Flamant reminds us also to recognize conflicts between politicians, and to look for the low-visibility policies that can be one outcome of those tensions; while Schilliger notes that a gap between a policy and its implementation can be another. De Graauw similarly points to differences between administrators with differing roles, who thus have differing goals, missions, cultures, and accountability mechanisms that influence their perspectives and responses. She also reminds us to consider not only municipal responses that protect rights but how they can address negative rights, ensuring that administrators do not act in a way that harms rights (such as transferring personal data to enforcement authorities); and how municipalities can develop new modes of democratic participation. Oomen (2022) reminds us how significant the framing of an issue is in terms of the consequences that follow from it. We must, finally, not look for responses to precarious migrants as if that were a single group but acknowledge, as Schilliger emphasizes, the likely impacts of multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities and different axes of discrimination, not least those of gender, class, and race.

Second, Oomen speaks of a »city society« that »transgresses the classic state/civil society divide«. If critically examined, the boundaries between public bodies and civil society organizations, she argues, are blurred and permeable. Flamant and de Graauw further emphasize how diverse civil society organizations are and that not all are in agreement on cooperation with municipalities. Even without a specific brief in support of precarious migrants, CSOs can nevertheless be a crucial part of the infrastructure of solidarity. Within this range, Lebuhn rightly underlines the importance of trade unions and, more broadly, local labor markets.

Third, as emphasized by Gebhardt (2022), Flamant, Lebuhn, and de Graauw, city networks have to be factored into an analysis of local outcomes, fulfilling a number of technical and political roles. The emerging literature on these networks has important insights for a focus on precarious migrants, as for migration studies on a broader scale.

Fourth, the complex relation between cities and national governments is in itself a force that shapes local approaches – as argued by Gebhardt and illustrated by Oomen – and deserves more attention. Lebuhn encourages us to examine closely, in particular, how the pandemic-related policies have been used to allocate power at one level or another as well as to recognize how relationships between and within tiers are not static but evolving over time.

An additional point that is raised in the responses and that takes our thinking further relates to the »indeterminate, constitutive, fragmented« nature of law (Oomen). In our analysis we emphasized a dominance of residential legal status over various social rights and a de facto hierarchy of rights that is reinforced in local discourses and practices. Yet rights defined in national laws are not so clearly delimited as it might seem, leaving, as Flamant emphasizes, scope for municipalities to interpret them in different ways. Oomen and Lebuhn both give examples of how cities acted creatively to provide access to health and shelter for persons without secured residence and hence pragmatically widened the scope of eligibility. Managing conflicts and contradictions between relevant areas of legislation thus emerges as a key municipal competence in effective support or exclusion of precarious migrants.

Finally, Gebhardt rightly suggests that a focus on the concrete rationales behind local policies toward precarious migrants might lead us to overlook the existence of more wide-reaching implicit or explicit ideas of urban citizenship for all residents. Exploring whether and, if so, the degree to which such ideas exist at municipal level, how they developed historically, and why would be a valuable and highly relevant context in which to understand the more focused framing of our target group.

We are very grateful for these comments and hope that this ongoing discussion turns out to be fruitful not only for our own research but for the wider research agenda on migrant precarity.

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