

Migrants, especially Refugees, in Brazil, the Middle East, Africa and Western Europe in Times of Covid-19¹

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1. General design and findings of our research

At the Center of Methods of the University of Göttingen we had plans to carry out fieldwork in Jordan and Brazil in the spring and summer of 2020, as part of two current research projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG): “Dynamic figurations of refugees, migrants, and longtime residents in Jordan since 1946”² and “Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany”³. We intended to hold follow-up interviews with refugees and migrants in both countries whom we had met and interviewed during previous fieldwork, and to conduct further group discussions and participant observations. In the light of the empirical findings resulting from four periods of fieldwork in Jordan, and from several months of fieldwork carried out in Brazil in 2019, we this time wanted to include groupings of refugees or migrants that we had not interviewed before.

But what could we do, when not only was it impossible for us to enter Jordan or Brazil, but, more importantly, the people living there, and especially migrants and refugees, are currently facing extremely precarious circumstances? At the sites of our previous fieldwork, we had worked with field assistants who themselves belonged to the groupings we were interested in interviewing. Some of them were people with whom we had already conducted biographical interviews. And we had kept in contact with many of our interviewees via digital media such as WhatsApp, Facebook or Skype, so that we decided to use these existing contacts. The follow-up interviews we conducted with migrants and refugees – including some currently living in western Europe – on their situation in times of Covid-19 made us painfully aware of the effects of the various lockdown measures and the loss of sources of income. This, as well as certain methodological considerations, led us to offer them an opportunity to conduct

¹ We conceptualize flight/refugee migration as a specific type of migration. In contrast to state-centred and legal distinctions between forms of migration (such as “labour migration” and “forced migration”), refugees are thus regarded here as migrants on a very general sociological level. For an overview of the debate on conceptual challenges in the fields of migration research and forced migration/refugee research, see Worm, Arne (2019): *Fluchtmigration aus Syrien. Eine biographietheoretische und figurationssoziologische Studie*. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag. (Engl.: “Refugee Migration. A Biographical and Figural Study of Life Histories of Syrian Refugees”). <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1228>. The following case studies represent very different courses of migration and current situations in terms of “legality” (from entry and life in a more or less stable and legalized framework to very precarious illegalized situations).

² This project (RO 827/20-1) is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) for the period April 2017 to February 2021 and is under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal (University of Göttingen, Germany). Team members: Dr. Ahmed Albaba, Dr. Johannes Becker, Dr. Hendrik Hinrichsen and Dolly Abdul Karim, M.A. (2017–2018). See <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/555157.html>

³ This project (RO 827/21-1) is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and is also under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal. The duration is from February 2019 to January 2022. Team members are: Eva Bahl, Dr. Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu, Lucas Cé Sangalli, M.A., Dr. Arne Worm. The student members of the research team, whose findings are also briefly presented here, are Margherita Cusmano, Tim Sievert and Tom Weiss. See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/607273.html>.

online interviews for us; in the case of the project in Jordan, this included interviews with members of their families in their country of origin. This turned out to be an extremely useful research method. Here, we will present some of our first findings and example cases. On the one hand, the data obtained gave us a more differentiated view of the life worlds of the refugees. And on the other hand, it inspired important methodological reflections on conducting online interviews and the significance of the setting in which the interaction takes place. An earlier project⁴ showed clearly that what refugees say depends heavily on the framing of the interview, and especially on the collective belonging of the interviewers (see Rosenthal, Bahl, Worm 2016/2017)⁵. For a number of years now we have kept in contact via social networks with refugees whom we interviewed between 2014 and 2018 in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa. This enables us to follow the long-term process of arrival, processes of re-migration or continuing migration. These interviews are frequently conducted by other members of our team, or field assistants who come from the same ethnic grouping as the interviewee, or have the same mother tongue (especially in the case of Arabic). This provides us with important data that helps us to analyse how and why different interviewers provoke differences in the way migrants present themselves, and how different discursive rules apply depending on who one is talking to.

Our experience with online interviews has shown us their advantages and disadvantages compared to face-to-face interviews. We have learned that digital forms of communication have certain disadvantages when making initial contact with someone, and especially when conducting a biographical interview, because physical co-presence helps to establish trust and to grasp meanings between the lines, emotions, which are usually expressed through body language. But in our experience digital follow-up interviews are a good way of maintaining contact. And the interviewees concerned tell us that they appreciate being able to stay in contact with us in this way.

In general, we can say that the online interviews conducted so far have provided us with data that is extremely valuable for our research. The advantages of this method can be summed up as follows:

1. The inclusion, or better participation, of our field assistants in the gathering of empirical data means we can continue discussing the research results, as well as their own experiences in the field, with them.
2. Our field assistants have carried out further interviews for us with people in their social environment, including members of their own family of origin, and
3. they have provided us with data concerning the situation during the current pandemic.

⁴ The comparative project “The Social Construction of Border Zones: A comparison of two geopolitical cases” (RO 827/19-1; see <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/477891.html> [accessed: 7 July 2020]) was led by Gabriele Rosenthal and funded by the German Research Foundation. For this project, Eva Bahl, Gabriele Rosenthal and Arne Worm did field research at the Moroccan-Spanish border, and Prof. Dr. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev and Dr. Nir Gazit at the border between Israel and Egypt.

⁵ Rosenthal, Gabriele / Bahl, Eva / Worm Arne (2017): Illegalized migration courses from the perspective of biographical research and figurational sociology: the land border between Spain and Morocco. In: Rosenthal/Bogner (eds.): *Biographies in the Global South*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 185-208. In German: Rosenthal, Gabriele / Bahl, Eva/ Worm, Arne (2016) *Illegalisierte Migrationsverläufe aus biografiethoretischer und figurationssoziologischer Perspektive: die Landgrenze zwischen Spanien und Marokko*. In: *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 17 (3), Art. 10. Free download: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2686/4012>.

4. This helps to give a clear picture not only of differences in the particular situations of the refugees or migrants interviewed, but also of how they are affected by the measures taken by the government in the country where they are living (e.g. loss of income, reduced salary as in Jordan, interruption of language and integration courses as in Germany).
5. In the case of individuals with whom we have previously conducted a biographical interview with a subsequent case reconstruction, it is additionally possible to show the biographical genesis of their patterns of interpretation and action with regard to the current Covid-19 crisis.
6. We gain insights into how people react to Covid-19, and how these reactions are influenced by their collective history and changing discourses in respect of epidemics and infectious diseases in their home region or country. In general, we get a good picture of the public discourses and regulations issued by the authorities in each country, and whether these are accepted or rejected. The most striking case here is Jordan, where the interviews reflect a general acceptance of the measures taken by the government.
7. We can see whether, and to what extent, past experiences of epidemics, and of the state healthcare system in general, have been passed on in families and local communities to the following generations, and especially whether they play a role in the current situation.
8. Our interviews also show to what extent migrant networks, NGOs or religious institutions have gained importance, or lost it, in the current situation. We can discuss this here only very briefly. But in general we can say that support is sometimes only offered in return for promises of solidarity, and can result in greater social control.
9. Not least, this design enables us to give financial support to our field assistants, as well as the interviewees, who received an expense allowance from us for their participation in the interviews.

Below, we present the *initial findings* along these dimensions resulting from our research in Jordan and the Middle East, Brazil and western Europe. In the coming months we will conduct further interviews: in particular we want to counteract the tendency to focus on the perspective of male migrants/refugees in our project samples. A certain male-centredness or a failure to represent the perspectives of people of different genders* has often been addressed in the context of refugee research⁶ – a tendency which, as we have self-critically noted, is also manifested in this report. However, we were able to interview some women in both projects despite considerable difficulties in accessing the field, and we also worked with women as field assistants.

We will continue to work with field assistants and train them, for example, in the necessary interview techniques. And we will try to motivate all of them to interview members of their family in their country of origin. Our aim is to make a contrastive comparison of the different case studies, which in this report are simply assembled like a mosaic. With regard to our method, it is important to note that after receiving audio recordings of the interviews conducted by our field assistants, we then interview them and ask them to tell us briefly about

⁶ See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena (2014): Gender and Forced Migration. In: E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long and N. Sigona (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 395-408.

their own experiences with making these recordings. We organize transcription and translation of the audio recordings so that all our team members can understand them. We currently have recordings in eight languages.

On behalf of the whole team I would like to express our gratitude to all our interviewees, who for reasons of data protection we refer to here only with masked first names (and in some cases masked place names), as well as to those who supported us as field assistants and themselves conducted follow-up interviews. Without all of you, this report would not have been possible!

Gabriele Rosenthal
Göttingen, Germany, July 2020

2. Interviews with refugees in the Middle East

When the first Covid-19 case was announced on 2nd March 2020, the reaction of the Jordanian government was swift and restrictive. King Abdullah II declared a state of emergency under the terms of the “National Defence Law” on 17th March 2020. The disease was thus placed in the same category as “war, disturbances, armed internal strife, public disasters”, which shows how seriously it was taken from the beginning.⁷ The aim was to make Jordan free of “internal” cases of Covid-19. That this policy (and the political discourse in Jordan in general) was couched in terms of “national defence” is also shown by the fact that armed soldiers (and armoured vehicles) were deployed to enforce the subsequent lockdown in urban areas. Anyone who violated the lockdown was threatened with immediate arrest and imprisonment. On 28th June 2020, the Jordanian health minister, Saad Jaber, declared that the coronavirus had “dried up and died” within the country.⁸ However, 14 new cases of Covid-19 were announced on 5th July 2020. On that date, a total of 1,164 cases had been registered since the beginning of the crisis.⁹ At the time of writing, the state of emergency has not yet been lifted.

Jordan has been hard hit by the pandemic. Its economy was weak before the outbreak, and through the immediate and complete closing of the borders it lost its income from tourism, one of the most important sectors. And for the very high number of poor families – whose members are unemployed or who live in urban areas with no land they can cultivate – the period of the lockdown was extremely challenging, despite increased government relief. Nevertheless, most people supported the government’s strict policy. Indeed, during this period up to 90% of the people approved the government’s actions, while only 40% did so before the outbreak.¹⁰

Here we will discuss interviews we conducted in Jordan during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ahmed Albaba (a German citizen of Palestinian origin) and local field assistants from Amman conducted a total of ten interviews in April and May. Our main focus will be on two interviews with individuals whom we will call Nadeem and Masoud. They both live in Amman, Nadeem since the 1990s, and Masoud since 2016. Nadeem came as a Palestinian refugee from Kuwait in 1990/91, and has Jordanian citizenship. Masoud is a refugee from Iraq who has lived in

⁷ UNDP Jordan (2020): Jordan National Defence Law and COVID-19. Online: <https://tinyurl.com/y9v2oy49>

⁸ Al-Rai, 28.6.2020, online: <https://tinyurl.com/y99y44d8>

⁹ Roya News, 5.7.2020, online: <https://royanews.tv/news/218315>

¹⁰ UNDP Jordan (2020): Jordan National Defence Law and COVID-19. Online: <https://tinyurl.com/y9v2oy49>

Amman since 2016 without a residence or work permit.¹¹ Both interviews were conducted in Arabic by Ahmed Albaba via Skype. We will discuss in particular the discursive “rationalization” and the emphatic “modernity” displayed by the interviewees when talking to us.

The interview with **Nadeem**¹² shows how his perceptions of the pandemic and of the measures taken by the government changed, which corresponds to what we were told by other interviewees. Nadeem lives in a densely populated district of Amman with a high number of Palestinians. Nadeem, who is in his early fifties, was born in Kuwait. He migrated to Amman together with his parents and siblings in 1990, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Interestingly, Nadeem compares the Covid-19 crisis with the crisis faced by his family in the 1990s. He says that in both situations their lives took a 180 degree turn, and both times the family had to re-organize or re-establish itself. In the first situation this was because of the unplanned and abrupt move to a new country, and in the second situation it was because of the financial crisis which threatened to plunge the entire extended family into serious difficulties.

Two of his five brothers, who all live in Jordan, have been hit the hardest by the Covid-19 crisis, because they have no regular employment and have had no work since the lockdown began in March 2020. Nadeem says that although his two brothers applied several times for government relief, they have received nothing, or only from their relatives. By contrast, Nadeem is in a fairly secure financial position, because he is employed in one of the Jordanian ministries, and he owns a small café-shop. However, his income no longer covers his expenditure, so that in the lockdown period Nadeem had to set new priorities. The fact that his salary was reduced by more than 50 JOD in the context of measures taken by the government added to Nadeem’s dissatisfaction and insecurity. On 16th April, Prime Minister Omar ar-Razzaz declared that under Defence Order No. 6 issued on 8th April 2020 the monthly wages of government officials could be reduced by up to 30% in May and June 2020.¹³

Nadeem’s reactions to the Covid-19 crisis can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, Nadeem thought there was no real danger of being infected with the coronavirus, not least because only one case had been identified in Jordan. He says that people around him thought the risk was exaggerated, and some of them even believed that the whole thing was a perfidious conspiracy and should not be taken seriously. With reference to this phase, he says:

“In the beginning I believed what people in the street were saying. They said it’s not dangerous. It’s just a kind of flu. There was a coronavirus a few years ago and it wasn’t so bad. Just a virus like any other virus. But this coronavirus is different from the old one. And its genetic strain is unknown.”

To explain why he changed his mind, Nadeem (like Masoud and other people we interviewed in Jordan) says that after a wedding in the city of Irbid on 20th March 2020, around 85 attendees had developed Covid-19.¹⁴ This event, which became known as “the Irbid wedding”,

¹¹ For an analysis of another family from Iraq in such a precarious legal situation, see Becker, J./ Hinrichsen, H. (in print): Milieuspezifische Flucht migrationsverläufe und die Etablierung in neuen räumlichen Kontexten: Das Beispiel irakischer Flüchtlinge in Amman. Will be published in: Bahl, E./ Becker, J. (Hrsg.). Global processes of flight and migration: The explanatory power of case studies. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

¹² The interview took place on 15.5.2020 via Skype. Johannes Becker had already conducted a biographical-narrative interview with Nadeem in January 2019.

¹³ Al-Ghad, 31.5.2020, online: <https://tinyurl.com/ycdly3yt>

¹⁴ Yusef, Dawood et al. (2020): Large Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease among Wedding Attendees, Jordan. In: Emerging Infectious Diseases 26(9). Online: https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/9/20-1469_article.

led to a heated debate in the media.¹⁵ Among other things, reference was made to a study which apparently blamed this wedding for the spread of the coronavirus in Jordan.¹⁶ The publication of the number of infections was a turning point for Nadeem; it made him see that the coronavirus was a risk to be taken seriously. This second phase can thus be characterized by his “rational reaction” and his new insight regarding the risk of becoming infected with the coronavirus. An important role was played here by institutionalized awareness campaigns and media reports – including social media. The third phase consists of developing everyday strategies for coping with the crisis. Nadeem tried to get used to new habits, such as wearing a mask, which was a new experience for him. He also had to get used to reducing his social contacts and restricting his mobility. In the interview we conducted with him on 15th May 2020, he said that he now disagrees with people who play down the coronavirus crisis. To illustrate this, he describes a situation that makes his position clear.

“But after a while we had no more bread and I had to go out to buy bread and other things we needed. Directly after the morning prayer, I went to the baker’s and waited in a queue for three hours, from 6 o’clock to 10 o’clock (i.e. four hours), before I was served. Everyone was moving about on foot. The baker’s shop is two kilometres away from where I live. I had to go out shopping several times, because I had to go on foot and I couldn’t carry everything at once. I can’t send my children because they are too small and anyway they are the most vulnerable group. A bit later we were allowed to use the car. That was a help. People ignored the rule that we should keep 1.5 metres apart from each other. They said: the coronavirus doesn’t exist, it’s all a conspiracy. There are lines marked on the ground to show where we should stand when queuing. I kept the right distance from the person in front of me in the queue but the person behind me came closer and closer. I said to him: You’re not worried about yourself, but I’m worried about myself and about my family, and I don’t want to infect them.” (Nadeem, May 2020)

Like many segments of the Palestinian population in Jordan, Nadeem is basically distrustful of, or opposed to, the Jordanian monarchy or the Jordanian government. However, the government’s rigid strategy in this crisis has led him to take a positive view of it; thus, the government has succeeded, at least in the short term, in gaining the support of various groupings within the population. Despite his general critique of the government, and despite the financial problems that have recently affected his family, Nadeem believes that the measures to contain the pandemic taken by the government are right and necessary: “Although I have plenty of criticisms against the government, I can testify that it acted wisely in respect of the coronavirus.” Thus, in the interview situation his arguments are insightful and “rational”; this is characteristic not only of the interview with Nadeem, but also of the other interviews we conducted. Almost all our interviewees mentioned similar exchanges with people within their own milieu who tended to play down the severity of the crisis. The interviewees distanced themselves from those who believed that the Covid-19 crisis was a conspiracy and that it posed no real threat. They said they complied with the rules set by the government or by health institutions, even in situations where there was no one to enforce this.

This “rational” presentation could be due to the context of the interview. All the interviewees were told beforehand that the interviews were being conducted for the Center of Methods at

¹⁵ BBC Arabic, 22.3.2020, online: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-51997909>

¹⁶ Yusef, Dawood et al. (2020): Large Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease among Wedding Attendees, Jordan. In: *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 26(9). Online: https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/9/20-1469_article.

the University of Göttingen. Perhaps they ascribed certain qualities to the German interviewers – such as “rational thinking” – and therefore tended to describe or represent themselves, their family, and even their country, as rational. They also saw themselves as representatives of their community or their country. As mentioned above, the interviews were conducted partly by Ahmed Albaba from Germany and partly by our field assistants in Amman. The follow-up interviews with Nadeem and Masoud were organized for Ahmed Albaba by our field assistant Sameera Qatooni (a Palestinian woman whose family fled to Jordan in 1948). Ahmed Albaba’s Palestinian origins were well known to Sameera. Nevertheless, in the interview situation with Nadeem, Ahmed Albaba, who has lived in Germany for many years, was above all regarded as a member of a German university or German research team.

By contrast, in the interview with **Masoud**¹⁷ (who was born in 1990), it seems that the interviewer’s Palestinian origins, or, more exactly, the Arab and Muslim belonging ascribed to him, could be the reason for the wariness and caution displayed by Masoud when he was asked if he would agree to an interview, and in the interview itself. His situation in Jordan is legally and financially precarious: he does not have refugee status but lives in Amman with an expired visa and no work permit. During our fieldwork in 2018, Johannes Becker conducted a biographical-narrative interview with Masoud, who subsequently worked for us as a field assistant. Despite this earlier cooperation, he clearly had doubts when asked if he would agree to being interviewed by Ahmed Albaba. He wanted to know the purpose of the interview, exactly what the team would do with the information collected, whether it would be possible to identify the interviewees if it was published, and whether the German government or the German secret service would have access to it. Masoud explained that he wanted to leave Jordan and travel to somewhere like Germany, and he was afraid this might not be possible if things that he said should get into the wrong hands. Since he had formerly cooperated with us on a basis of trust, we conclude that his doubts were related specifically to Ahmed Albaba. Although we assured him that we would make it impossible to identify him or his family, he refused to allow the interview to be recorded on tape. The following quotations from the interview are therefore based on the notes made by Ahmed Albaba. Our hypothesis is that while Masoud and the interviewer had plenty in common in cultural and religious terms, which made communication easier – they are both Muslims and they talked to each other in Arabic – this also made Masoud more cautious. This was probably due to his biographical experiences, for instance with armed Arab-Muslim groupings in Iraq, or with Palestinians in Amman.

Masoud, who comes from a well established family in Mosul, is the son of an Arab father and a Kurdish mother. In the context of the advance of the so-called Islamic State in 2012, he had fled to Iraqi Kurdistan together with his family, after his father had several times been threatened or blackmailed. In 2016 the family migrated to Jordan. After one year, his family returned to relatives in Iraqi Kurdistan, while he remained in Jordan. Besides two interviews with Masoud himself, there are two interviews that Masoud conducted from Amman with his parents and his sister in Iraq during the pandemic.

The approach to the pandemic revealed in the interviews with Masoud and members of his family is characterized strongly by a family focus on hygiene and a state discourse of modernity. His precarious legal (and financial) status in Jordan, and the fact that he was living alone in the city, meant that even before the pandemic Masoud behaved cautiously, or even warily,

¹⁷ The interview took place on 7.4.2020 via Skype.

in public spaces. For several years now Masoud has seen no future for himself in Jordan, but he has not found any opportunity to migrate to another country – if possible, to Germany. He puts it this way: “Your future is uncertain and all the time you think about emigrating. Life is impossible here in this country... I want a different future.”

In the context of the pandemic, this difficult situation and his perception that he is stuck in Jordan, is reinforced by his fear of the consequences of an infection. Like Nadeem, he compares the experience of the pandemic with collective experiences of war and violent conflicts:

“We saw many things in Iraq in 2003, murder, unrest, fighting on the streets, and we experienced many difficult situations. The situation with the coronavirus is just as difficult as the situation in Iraq in 2003.”

Masoud’s fears have led to a greater avoidance of public spaces, increased media consumption, and complaints about people who do not keep to the rules. It is very clear that Masoud’s “daily life in the pandemic” is influenced by the family dialogue on hygiene. What he says in this respect is very similar to what his family members say. Hygiene was important for Masoud even before the pandemic, and now even more so. He describes how every time he comes back home he washes himself thoroughly and changes his clothes. His mother, in the interview with her, describes similar behaviour, and puts this down to the “modern” orientation of her Iraqi family. This is what the mother says in the interview conducted by her son Masoud:¹⁸

“...cleanliness and prevention are most important. We were taught this when we were young. I wash my hands, and if I go to the hospital and come back from there, I wash my hands and change my clothes. I never sit at home in clothes I have worn outside. We are a self-confident people. You don’t have to be *muthaqaf* [educated/intellectual], but if you are *wā’y* [self-confident] and if you have experience, you will be able to protect yourself. We learned this from our parents.”

This family dialogue is reflected in Masoud’s remarks, mixed with disdain for people who do not observe the basic rules of hygiene:

“My mother taught us the importance of cleanliness when we were children. But now she pays even more attention to it. She calls me and asks whether I have washed the dishes, cleaned, tidied up, or not. She told me I should stay at home and not hang out with my friends. Hygiene is nice. I have clothes that I only wear at home. When I come from outside, I change my clothes, wash my hands and feet. I’ve bought a mask, gloves and disinfectant. I disinfect everything and wash my food thoroughly. I try not to go out. But in the poor districts people don’t follow the rules properly. They stand too close to each other when queuing at the baker’s or in the supermarket. People eat, drink and smoke out of doors, as usual. They are more afraid of food shortages than of the virus. They don’t take the virus seriously. They don’t go to the hospital when they develop symptoms. The situation here is really hard. People meet each other as usual and talk and hang around together.”

The negative view of others in his neighbourhood expressed by Masoud in this quotation is related in the first place to their failure to observe the hygiene rules. But beyond this, it also suggests that Masoud sees a difference between himself and the other people in the “poor

¹⁸ The interview took place on 15.4.2020 via Skype.

district” of Amman where he now lives, because their status does not correspond to the former status of his family in Mosul. While this distinction has existed all the time that Masoud has lived alone in Jordan, it has become clearer, or been reinforced, by the pandemic.

These two cases of refugees known to us from our field research in Jordan show that the way people experience the pandemic is closely bound up with past experiences of crises. Masoud and Nadeem both refer to earlier crises in their lives (experiences of war and flight) when describing their present situation. At the same time they have both found strategies for coping with this situation that are associated respectively with trust in the Jordanian government and with a family dialogue on hygiene. This shows clearly how analysing people’s biographies can help to understand their reactions to the pandemic.

Ahmed Albaba & Johannes Becker
Würzburg / Berlin, Germany, July 2020

3. Interviews with refugees in Brazil

In Brazil, the polarization of the political situation has intensified since the coronavirus outbreak. Right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro has trivialized the virus as a “*gripezinha*” (a little flu) and refused to take decisive measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19. While the number of deaths due to Covid-19 in Brazil has risen to become the second highest in the world (after the USA) as of July 2020, the political discourse of Bolsonaro, his devotees, and many other Brazilian politicians, is the primacy of the economy. Consequently, there has never been a country-wide lockdown and many stores have re-opened in spite of the rising number of infections. The groupings in society that are affected the most – directly by suffering from the disease and indirectly because of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic – are the ones that were marginalized and vulnerable before the outbreak: for example, indigenous people, Afro-Brazilians, people who live in the over-populated communities (“*favelas*”¹⁹), and migrants.

Furthermore, people who rely on the informal labor market are especially affected. More than 40% of Brazilians work in the informal sector, i.e., with no access to social protection in case of unemployment.²⁰ The initial prohibition of commercial activities in the streets during the coronavirus outbreak in Rio de Janeiro (approximately March 24–June 27), São Paulo (approximately March 20–June 10), Salvador (since March 21), and Southern Brazil (approximately March 20–May 20)²¹ exposed the vulnerability of this part of the Brazilian population, among them many migrants from Senegal and Syria who relied on the money from their jobs to pay for rent, energy, and food, for example, but also to send remittances to their families in their countries of origin. Especially migrants from Haiti and Senegal used to send money monthly to their relatives. In face of the catastrophic management of the coronavirus outbreak in Brazil

¹⁹ In Brazil, the informal and marginalized settlements, which are often located in the urban periphery and whose population has few economic resources, are called *comunidade* or (pejoratively) *favela*. However, it should be pointed out that these settlements in Brazilian cities also have streets, houses with solid building fabric and other – albeit precarious – infrastructure.

²⁰<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/empreendedorsocial/2020/06/a-vulnerabilidade-dos-informais-um-desafio-anterior-a-covid-19.shtml>

²¹ See Municipal Decrees (Decreto) 47.282, 47.488 (Rio de Janeiro); 59.298, 59.473 (São Paulo); 32.272, 32.326 (Salvador); 20.506, 20.583 (Porto Alegre).

by the federal government, and the loss of trust in the capacity of the Brazilian government to handle an economic crisis, the currency (Brazilian real) has become strongly devalued in comparison to the US dollar.²²

Many of our interviewees (n=21) in 2019, who were from West Africa (mainly Senegal), South America, Syria, and Haiti, worked as street vendors. While Syrians mostly sold “Arabic” street food, the Senegalese mostly sold technological products (such as loudspeakers or smartphone accessories), and/or sunglasses. Most of our Senegalese and Haitian interviewees shared apartments with others due to the high living costs and rents in Brazil; some lived in more marginalized communities in Rio de Janeiro.

The legal situation differs for different groupings and individuals.²³ While people from Syria have had access to a humanitarian visa since 2013,²⁴ this is mostly not granted to people from West African countries. For Senegalese citizens who had applied for refugee status in Brazil,²⁵ the Brazilian government issued an ordinance²⁶ in December 2019 which gave them the right to apply for residence and thereby regularize their status. In general, government interventions in the sense of controls, but also of support services for refugees or migrants, are much less pronounced in Brazil compared, for instance, to Germany. The effects of a new immigration law in Brazil (2017), which is intended to give migrants and refugees legal equality with Brazilian citizens, are still unclear. There are currently only a few state-organized initiatives and programs for targeted welfare support. Religious institutions are most likely to provide support for migrants. The living conditions of migrants and refugees thus depend to a very small extent on the state, and to a correspondingly greater extent on their own positioning in the informal sector.

Since the coronavirus outbreak we have conducted online follow-up interviews with nine people we interviewed in Brazil in 2019. Further interviews are in progress. The coronavirus outbreak and the restrictions associated with it have directly affected their activities and their income. Many have not been able to continue selling their merchandise and being active in the informal economy. Those working in restaurants or on construction sites have also lost their jobs. They have all lost their sources of income. Since then, they have been living on their savings (if they have been in Brazil long enough to have any), or relying on food donated for

²² As of July 2020, 1.00 US dollar equals around 5.30 Brazilian reais.

²³ See: Cé Sangalli, Lucas/Dos Santos Gonçalves, Maria do Carmo (forthcoming): Migrants and Refugees from Ghana and Haiti in Southern Brazil. Familial Constellations and Processes of Escape. In: Bahl, Eva/Becker, Johannes (eds.): Global Processes of Flight and Migration. The Explanatory Power of Case Studies / Globale Flucht- und Migrationsprozesse. Die Erklärungskraft von Fallstudien. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press. Online: <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2020-1315> <15.07.2020>.

²⁴ <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/2013/09/24/sirios-terao-visto-humanitario-para-entrar-no-brasil/>

²⁵ According to the news site Globo, in 17 years only 15 asylum applications (out of a total of 8,000) by Senegalese migrants have been approved by the Brazilian state: <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2019/12/06/senegaleses-que-pediram-refugio-no-brasil-terao-novo-procedimento-para-obter-autorizacao-de-residencia.ghtml>

²⁶ www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/portaria-interministerial-n-10-de-5-de-dezembro-de-2019-231852423

those in need and governmental emergency relief amounting to R\$ 600 (around 100 €/110 US \$) per month,²⁷ access to which has proved difficult for many migrants.

Besides these online follow-up interviews, and in the face of restrictions to our fieldwork due to closure of the borders for foreigners,²⁸ we asked some of our interviewees to conduct interviews with people who live with them in the same apartment or building and who are in similar situations. At the time of writing, two of our interviewees (Julius from Sierra Leone and Bassam from Senegal) have conducted such interviews for our project. Both found themselves in precarious living and work situations in the city of Rio de Janeiro. They will keep working for us, and we also hope that online interviews with the interviewees' families in their home countries will be possible. However, there are hindering factors, especially (1) the available technological infrastructure, and (2) the role of our interviewees in their families. Thus, the success or failure of interviews with family members at home will help to give us insights into these two components, which are of great significance for them and their families.

Re 1.: For example, our interviewee and field assistant Julius from Sierra Leone told us that he has problems talking to his father and his son and the son's mother, because they do not have internet or internet-compatible phones, and he has to buy credit to call them. This is definitely a hindering factor with regard to interviewing them – but also quite generally with regard to keeping in contact with his family (and it is psychologically very burdening for him). By contrast, Bassam is in direct contact with his mother and his wife, who live in Pikine, Senegal. This is an indication of a more established situation in the region of origin in contrast to Julius' family.

Re 2.: Most of our interviewees from Senegal and Sierra Leone have an important role as breadwinners in their families. They feel a huge responsibility to send money to their families on a regular basis and present this as their main reason for living and working in Brazil. The phrase "I haven't sent money for two months" was recurrent in our interviews, and points to the burden that is felt when one has to spend money without being able to earn any. This might be another hindering factor with regard to interviewing family members.

Below, we quote from an interview that Julius conducted with a Senegalese man who arrived in Brazil shortly before the pandemic broke out (in January 2020). He talks about his situation and the situation of his community:

"We can barely pay for the room. We eat a little bit of everything, just to feed ourselves (juste pour nourrir). Sometimes the neighbors in our (4-story) building give us something. They see that everybody cooks except us. Sometimes they give us something. We are very worried that we will be evicted if we don't pay the rent. We are very tired." (Moussa from Senegal, interviewed by Julius from Sierra Leone in July 2020. The interview was conducted in French and translated by Eva Bahl).

²⁷ "The R\$ 600.00 benefit is payable for three months, for up to two people in the same family. For families where the woman is solely responsible for all household expenses, the monthly amount payable is R\$ 1,200.00." Source: Caixa Econômica Federal, Brasil 2020 (<https://auxilio.caixa.gov.br/#/inicio>).

²⁸<https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/07/01/coronavirus-governo-prorroga-ate-o-fim-de-julho-a-restricao-da-entrada-de-estrangeiros-no-brasil.ghtml>

Whole families in the home countries of migrants, which normally are supported by them, have been put in a very precarious situation by the present situation in Brazil. This interviewee says:

“I told you, I left Senegal to have a better life. That's where the family is. You are leaving all of them and there is great hope that you can help them a little bit. But if you can't even help yourself, how will you help the others? We haven't been going out for three months and last week we started trying to go back out and sell something. But the situation hasn't changed much. But we are tired of just sitting in the room and not having money to pay the rent or buy something to eat. That's why we started going out. But nothing has changed much. We're still in the same situation.” (Moussa from Senegal, interviewed by Julius from Sierra Leone in July 2020. The interview was conducted in French and translated by Eva Bahl).

Healthcare has become extremely precarious for migrants, as state hospitals (to which they have access) are overburdened with Covid-19 patients. Migrants who have health problems do not dare to go there because of the risk of infection. Generally, the follow-up interviews are focused on the current, crisis-ridden situation of our interviewees – which, as we show, is not necessarily related only to the Covid-19 outbreak, but also to “natural” disasters (in reality man-made), especially in Southern Brazil. This made it difficult for our interviewees to embark on the process of storytelling about their life before their flight, or their family constellations, and to have a stable horizon for thinking about the future – a phenomenon Arne Worm has described as a “condensed present perspective”.²⁹ This means that a person's current situation is insecure and changing to such a great extent that looking back to the past or into the future – as well as making biographical plans – is blocked (ibid.).

Below, we present some cases in more detail.

Mohamed, a 27-year-old Syrian Alawite from the region of Tartus, left Syria in the context of the Syrian conflict and mandatory army conscription. When Lucas Cé Sangalli, a Brazilian researcher working at a German university, interviewed him in Portuguese in October 2019, he was running a small store in a market in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Alongside other reasons (high rental costs, low sale, no support by his family), the coronavirus outbreak and restrictions enforced in the market led him to close his store. For a while, he considered going back to the streets to work with an “Arab” food cart again – something he had proudly said he would not do anymore after he had opened his own store. As of June 2020³⁰, he had managed to find a job as an employee in the store of a more established Lebanese migrant in the context of the re-opening of commercial activities in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Many of the Senegalese street vendors we have been in touch with seem to feel more threatened by the economic situation than by the risk of infection itself. In the interviews conducted

²⁹ Worm, Arne (2017) Civil War and the Figurations of Illegalized Migration. Biographies of Syrian migrants to the European Union. In: Gabriele Rosenthal und Artur Bogner (eds.), *Biographies in the Global South*. Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus.; Worm, Arne (2019) *Fluchtmigration. Eine biographietheoretische und figurationssoziologische Studie zu lebensgeschichtlichen Verläufen von Geflüchteten aus Syrien*. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press. Online: <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1228> <15.07.2020>.

³⁰ The follow-up interview took place via WhatsApp audio messages in Portuguese, conducted by Lucas Cé Sangalli.

at the end of June/beginning of July 2020, they expressed the hope that – as the strict lockdown in Rio de Janeiro and other cities was coming to an end³¹ – they might also be able to go back to their economic activities. Rising death tolls and exponentially rising infection rates did not play a role in their reasoning. As of July 2020, some had already gone back to selling in Copacabana, when the beach re-opened. This time, though, with far less tourists than before.

Bassam, who is now our field assistant, is a 24-year-old Senegalese from Pikine. He left his young son and his wife in Senegal to earn money in Rio de Janeiro to build a house for his family in Senegal, as he explained in the interview conducted with him in October 2019 by Lucas Cé Sangalli and Gabriele Rosenthal³². When Lucas Cé Sangalli re-interviewed him in July 2020, Bassam said he had planned to go back to Senegal to see his family right after the carnival, a period when he expected to make more money. Due to flight restrictions and the unstable situation created by the coronavirus outbreak, he postponed his plans. From day to day, he was becoming more and more worried about his family in Senegal:

“the Corona is very difficult in Senegal is very=very=very difficult they have ... a lot of fear well they don't work. It's really hard. But well it's going to end the good Lord will help. We prefer to stay calm, ah then we will work but it is really difficult ... Ebola was not a lot in Senegal, we didn't have it a lot – but it was the first time I see a disease like that. The first time. Honestly. Really.” (Bassam, July 2020. Translation from French to English by Lucas Cé Sangalli).

Amadou and **Bayo**, two Senegalese men in their thirties were hit hard by the pandemic. Maria do Carmo Santos Gonçalves, a Brazilian specialist in migration studies, who knew them from her work at a Migrant Reception Center in Southern Brazil, Lucas Cé Sangalli and Eva Bahl, a German researcher, had interviewed and met them on several occasions in Rio de Janeiro in October/November 2019. The interviews were conducted in French and Portuguese, sometimes with translation from Wolof to French. They have both been in Brazil since 2013/2014, and for several years now have shared an apartment with two other Senegalese men. All of them used to work as street vendors at the beach in Copacabana and Ipanema. They frequently sent money to their families who depended on these remittances. In a follow-up interview conducted by Eva Bahl in July 2020³³, they told us that they had been staying in their small apartment for more than two months. What seemed to worry them the most was that they were spending the savings they had planned to use to travel to Senegal to visit their families, and that they had not been able to send any money to their families.

Like the group of young Senegalese men we interviewed in Rio de Janeiro, **Alioune**, a 27-year-old Senegalese, lost his customers at the beach in Praia da Barra and Farol da Barra in Salvador da Bahia, Northeastern Brazil. For this reason, he moved back to Southern Brazil around May 2020. In July 2020, when Lucas Cé Sangalli conducted a follow-up interview with him in Portuguese (his mother tongue is Wolof and he does not speak French), he was living in a rural area

³¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200611-sao-paulo-re-opens-after-lockdown-despite-brazil-s-surging-covid-19-death-toll>

³² The interview was conducted partly in Portuguese, but mainly in French, a language Bassam learned at school in Senegal. His mother tongue is Wolof.

³³ The first interview was only with Bayo (in Portuguese), the second interview was with both of them together (Portuguese and French), as they live together and are friends.

of Paraná. He had found a job as a construction worker and mentioned more work opportunities in the region, since many companies (such as slaughterhouses) had not stopped their activities during the coronavirus outbreak. Due to the public discourse of “the economy cannot wait”, many of these companies became the center of outbreaks of coronavirus infections in the region.³⁴ In the Southern region of Brazil, people who worked in slaughterhouses constituted 25% of all people infected by the coronavirus as of June 2020.³⁵ These workers (and their families) were in a more vulnerable situation during the coronavirus outbreak than others.

The case of **Fary**, a 40-year-old man from Dakar, Senegal, his wife from the Dominican Republic, and their two children born in Brazil, illustrates well how the effects of the pandemic intersect with other factors – for example the difficulties associated with precarious living conditions during the winter in Southern Brazil. In July 2020, a period when there are heavy rains in the region, Lucas Cé Sangalli conducted a follow-up interview with him, in which Fary apologized for talking in Portuguese, saying he had forgotten most of his French; he presented Wolof as his mother tongue. Just when Fary would have been allowed to resume his activities as a street vendor after the lockdown, the intense rains made it impossible. The floods have directly affected marginalized neighborhoods close to the river, an area where many migrants from Haiti and the Dominican Republic live with their families.

On top of this, the devaluation of the Brazilian currency directly impacted his remittances to his family in Senegal:

“It’s very cold here. That’s why coronavirus is still present. It’s difficult for everyone now. Everything is hard. You know, we foreigners work here and send the money to other countries. Here, the dollar is too expensive. If we transfer to Senegal, it costs six reais to do the transfer. That’s why it’s hard for us here. Coronavirus is still here. And there’s the rain. Since Sunday, it’s raining here. There are many houses under water [...]. It’s also difficult in Senegal. Our family there depends on us” (Fary, July 2020. Translation from Portuguese to English by Lucas Cé Sangalli).

Julius, a 40-year-old man from Sierra Leone who was interviewed by Maria do Carmo Santos Gonçalves and Eva Bahl in October 2019, is probably the interviewee in the most vulnerable situation at the moment. After having migrated back and forth between Sierra Leone and Nigeria most of his life (fleeing the civil war and an Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, and Boko Haram in Nigeria), he decided to migrate to Trinidad in December 2018. His entry to the country was rejected and while being deported back, he was able to apply for asylum in Brazil. There, without networks, he lived in very precarious situations and mostly depended on church and welfare organizations. Shortly before the coronavirus outbreak, his situation had started to improve, and he was working at a restaurant as a cook. With the beginning of the pandemic he lost his job and the support of his church community, which had consisted mostly of expats who left the country when the number of infections started to rise. Now, he lives on food donations from welfare organizations and is fearing homelessness because he has not paid his rent for two months. The situation is worsened by his health condition. He needs to

³⁴ <https://revistagloborural.globo.com/Noticias/Economia/noticia/2020/03/cooperativas-do-agro-empregam-cada-vez-mais-imigrantes-no-parana.html>

³⁵ <https://www.correiodopovo.com.br/not%C3%ADcias/geral/cerca-de-25-dos-infetados-pela-covid-no-rs-trabalham-em-frigor%C3%ADficos-revela-mpt-1.440356>

undergo surgery for a hernia that is causing him a lot of pain, but many public hospitals are not accepting patients who are not infected with Covid-19. In one of two follow-up interviews that Eva Bahl conducted with him during the coronavirus outbreak, he said that he had experienced Ebola in Sierra Leone.

“It’s almost the same. Everything closed down. A lot of people I know died. We can’t travel [...] No movements on the streets. But I’m working and I have money to eat. And I’m in my country. Here it’s not my country, I don’t have family, I don’t have money, I don’t even have my own house, it’s a rented house.” (Julius, April 2020. The interview was conducted in English.)

He said that he was very afraid of catching “the disease” because in Brazil, he fears, “no one will care about me.”

As we have tried to show in this short report, all our interviewees are in very difficult situations because of (or worsened by) the pandemic. The consequences are multilayered. Those who are better off (for example some of the Senegalese vendors who have been in Brazil for several years and have been able to save money) are worried because they are not able to visit their families³⁶ or send money to them. Others fear homelessness and hunger because they cannot pay their rent and cannot afford to buy food.

One thing is clear in respect of the migrants in Brazil we have been able to interview: already existing precarities have been intensified; the coronavirus outbreak has acted like a “burning glass” on social inequalities that already existed.

Eva Bahl & Lucas Cé Sangalli
Munich/Berlin, Germany, July 2020

4. Interviews with refugees in Western Europe

4.1. Interviews with refugees in Germany

4.1.1. General findings

At the end of February and the beginning of March 2020 the German government implemented a bundle of measures in reaction to the increase in the number of Covid-19 infections in Germany, the global dimension of the spread of the disease, and its massive consequences in other countries (such as Italy). From mid-March 2020, extensive restrictions were imposed in all areas of life. These measures (including the closure of public educational institutions and of cultural facilities, the introduction of short-time work and "working from home") were primarily aimed at reducing contact frequency in order to slow down the spread of the virus and to counteract the threat of a breakdown of the healthcare system ("flatten the curve"). Unlike in other countries, this did not mean a complete "lockdown": public and private infrastructure which was necessary for basic livelihood security continued to be accessible under certain conditions. Meetings in groups were forbidden, but moving in public spaces alone (e.g. taking walks or jogging) was still permitted. The implementation of these comprehensive measures

³⁶ Airports are closed and anyhow they cannot afford the flight tickets as they have been living on their savings for the past few months.

was closely linked to the development of infection rates, and many of them were gradually revoked as the rates dropped.

The official reaction in Germany was, and still is, deeply embedded in the federal structure of the country's political system. The debate on the design and implementation of measures took place primarily between the government and federal ministries, the governments and ministries of the federal states, and the responsible regional and local authorities (especially health authorities). Within this federal structure, there were political disputes between the various groups of actors about the most "appropriate" way of reacting. On the other hand, the strong federal administrative structure proved capable of dealing with the pandemic: procedures and measures (e.g. the recording of "Covid-19 cases") have – after initial coordination difficulties – become increasingly institutionalized and locally established, and are mediated locally. Legally, the possibility of restricting fundamental rights and public life in the event of a pandemic is based on a nationwide "Infection Protection Act".

From the very beginning, government measures and the public discourse in Germany about "Covid-19" was strongly shaped by the voices of experts in the healthcare system. Daily assessments of the development of infection figures and possible measures (e.g. in podcasts, TV news) by representatives of the Robert Koch Institute (a federal authority for infection control) or virologists have had considerable visibility and strong weight in the public discourse.

In recent weeks, various groups of actors in Germany have been increasingly pushing for a relaxation of measures. They have shown concern about the economic consequences of a continuing "lockdown", and the overburdening of people involved in nursing and care work. Also, (far) right political movements and actors are increasingly trying to benefit politically from the situation by framing the government measures as an indicator of growing totalitarianism and rule against the "will of the people".³⁷ In contrast to the current tendency to accelerate the end of restrictions, the possibility of a "second wave of infection" in the autumn is also being discussed in public discourses.

Despite the relatively successful political measures taken so far to contain the pandemic in Germany, it should not be forgotten that – as in other countries – the coronavirus crisis is embedded in existing social inequalities. Some dimensions of these inequalities (e.g. precarious housing conditions; precarious employment in caring professions, slaughterhouses and agriculture; the situation of single parents) have become more visible in media discourses than they were before the crisis, even if only briefly and in a particular way. The topic of refugees and their housing conditions (e.g. in refugee camps), on the other hand, has hardly been mentioned in the public debate.

Our last period of intensive field research in Berlin³⁸ took place immediately before the pandemic became the dominant topic in Germany, affecting all areas of life. As a result, we were

³⁷ Polls on the level of public acceptance of the measures taken by the government show that the very high level of agreement in March (over 90%) has decreased over the course of the last few weeks. See: (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/coronavirus-corona-krise-einschraenkungen-lockerungen-umfragen-1.4921963>; 10.07.2020).

³⁸ Field work for the project "Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany" from 21.02. to 29.02.2020. The team consisted of Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu, Margherita Cusmano, Gabriele Rosenthal, Tim Sievert, Tom Weiss and Arne Worm.

directly concerned about how the situation of our interviewees* would change. We are currently in regular contact with a total of nine refugees living in Germany with whom we had previously conducted interviews.

Comparing the situations of our interviewees in Brazil and western Europe, including Germany, under the conditions of the pandemic allowed us as a project team to reflect on the differing importance of informal economies, the relevance of diverging state contexts, and the meaning of family networks. In Brazil, the collapse of opportunities to work in the informal economic sector had serious consequences for our migrant interviewees. One of the central aspects of this was that they were now unable to fulfil the expectations of the family network in their country of origin that they would send money. By contrast, our interviewees in Germany, whose migration projects are much more strongly focused on realizing or expanding "individual" chances of participation, reflected that the governmental requirements during the coronavirus crisis should be seen as a kind of latency period to be accepted. We were surprised at the high level of acceptance that the contact restrictions imposed by the government met with among our interviewees. This was comparable with the Jordanian context described above. This was surprising to us because our previous findings had revealed a conflictual relationship between refugees and the state authorities.

However, we found that refugees' perceptions of the crisis situation in Germany depended to a large extent on the dynamics of the "arrival" phase, being allowed to stay and participate, and the different framings of the refugees' migration projects. The following case examples show the differences, and that the issues that we continue to pursue in the project are clearly reflected in the follow-up-interviews we conducted during the Covid-19 crisis. In concrete terms, differences are evident with regard to the question of...

- a) ...to what extent and due to which favourable factors the refugee's migration project has moved in the direction of "individual" establishment in Germany
- b) ...how strongly his or her migration project is interwoven with family figurations and expectations
- c) ...how the issue of residence status is experienced and dealt with.

For example, a follow-up interview on the Covid-19 situation with **Sunny** (born about 1992), a refugee from the Senegambia region (in Senegal), made it clear that he is in a relatively stable position in Berlin in terms of opportunities for participation and with relatively good prospects. Here, our interim findings on the components that brought about this achievement of a more established position were that besides a relatively secure residence status and a secure apprenticeship with a public company, *Sunny was above all not under much pressure to support his family in Senegal*. The follow-up interview (26.05.2020; conducted by Arne Worm in German) made it clear that Sunny considered his current situation to be part of a collective position that was acceptable, which is why – according to him – he adhered closely to the official rules in his everyday practice (including avoiding contact with others). Sunny said that he closely followed the discourse in the public media. At the same time, in the follow-up discussion we also talked about his previous family and personal experiences with diseases and epidemics. In his case, this was experience of cholera in a family context (a grandmother had contracted cholera and was taken to hospital with support from a relative living abroad).

Another case that similarly represents a process of gradual 'individual' stabilization of life in Germany is that of **Maruf** (follow-up interview: 27.03.2020; 09.04.2020). Maruf (born in the early 1990s) has a Kurdish background and fled from the Kobane region in Syria to Germany,

where he has now been living for five years. We have been in contact with him for many years now. In the follow-up interviews on Covid-19, he spoke mainly about his *concern that a preparatory course for university studies had been postponed*. In contrast to the case of Sunny, however, Maruf's establishment project is more ambivalently entangled with family ties. The significance of his uncertainty as to whether the university course will take place only becomes apparent if we consider his case history: working towards a university degree (in Germany) represents a considerable constant and a form of biographical work during the course of his flight from a very precarious situation in Syria. In the face of the decision to flee from Syria – and to improve his "individual" future perspective – Maruf has struggled repeatedly to this day with the question of loyalty to his family and his Kurdish "we" group, and whether he should have stayed in Syria. Correspondingly, the postponement of his preparatory course due to the Covid-19 crisis endangers a component that gives meaning to his entire escape project. It also joins a whole series of situations during his flight in which Maruf has had to "wait for something" and has experienced himself as passive. In this context, it should be mentioned that he said he was appreciative of the fact that we had been interested in his situation for many years, and especially so now that he was in a very difficult situation because of having to avoid contact with others.

This dynamic of a gradual process of (re-)establishing life in Germany being interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic can also be seen in the case of **Miran** from Syria. Tim Sievert, who works as a student assistant in our project, contacted the young man he had interviewed together with Ahmed Albaba for a follow-up interview on the Covid-19 crisis (03.04.2020; follow-up interview in German). He describes Miran's situation as follows:

"Miran was born in 1995 into a Syrian-Kurdish-Arab family and comes from the north of Syria. I talked to him mainly about his worries that he will not be able to complete the training he started at a large company. The associated vocational school has postponed all training courses indefinitely, which makes Miran fear that he will not be able to successfully complete the required exams next year. This experience is reinforced by his desire to distance himself from his own family and especially from his own father, who repeatedly intervened against his flight to Germany. This means that the legitimacy of his flight is increasingly being questioned by the family as well." (Tim Sievert, 08.07.2020)³⁹

The cases mentioned above and the migration projects of these refugees in Germany have been seriously affected by the current measures to contain the pandemic, and further research will show the long-term consequences of this. At the same time, however, these cases are good examples of relatively successful "individual" attempts to become established in Germany.

The following case of Hamid from Guinea (4.1.2), presented by our student assistant Tom Weiss, shows how significant the perception of the pandemic is for a refugee who, on the one hand, is in a vulnerable situation with regard to his residence status, and, on the other hand, has to negotiate the expectation of his family that he will send remittances, i.e. money sent to the family in the country of origin.

The report by our colleague Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu concerns the situation of Kurdish women who have fled to Germany (4.1.3). She shows that negotiations in respect of residence status

³⁹ This case study is a part of Tim Sievert's master's thesis on Syrian refugees in Germany, which he is writing under the supervision of G. Rosenthal and will submit at the University of Göttingen in August 2020.

in Germany have become more intense during the "Covid-19 period" and that the biographical planning of these women is considerably hindered by these negotiations.

Arne Worm
Göttingen, Germany, July 2020

4.1.2 Experiencing "Covid-19" in Germany with an extremely precarious residence status

Hamid's perspective on the coronavirus situation interprets the government measures to contain the virus and their effects on everyday life as a significant threat to his migration and establishment project.⁴⁰ As part of the project "Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany", my colleague Margherita Cusmano and I conducted a biographical-narrative interview with Hamid in February 2020. Within two months, we conducted three more follow-up interviews and remained in contact with him. The framing of the interviews was initially strongly influenced by Hamid's assumption that Margherita, and especially I, as a German and local expert, could help him with his asylum proceedings and upgrade his status in Germany. His behaviour towards us was initially influenced by the question of how he could improve his participation opportunities and become more established.

During the coronavirus crisis, Margherita Cusmano and I were in telephone contact with Hamid and were able to learn more about his current situation and his perspective. In addition, Hamid and I met in person for a follow-up interview while maintaining social distancing and hygiene measures.

In 2020 – according to him – Hamid is 18 years old and originally comes from Guinea. He says that in Germany he was first treated as an unaccompanied minor. However, at the beginning of 2018, in the context of his asylum proceedings, medical officers declared he was 18, in contradiction of his own claim that he was 16. As a result, he was no longer treated as a minor. Here, I follow the information he gave me about his age. He told me that his parents died in a local conflict when he was 11. Due to family disputes with his stepmothers and his increasing lack of rights within the family constellation, which arose in connection with his inheritance claim in respect of his father's property, Hamid decided to leave the family. His difficult migration course, which was associated with traumatizing experiences of violence, led him to Germany in 2017.

His application for asylum was turned down, and now he lives in a very precarious situation and is in constant danger of being deported. However, he attends a middle school (*Hauptschule*) and is about to take his final exams.

In the follow-up interviews, Hamid expressed his approval of the government measures. However, he was concerned about the state's interference in his life and, above all, his school career, which is now at risk. Both fears are closely linked to his insecure residence status and the constant fear of deportation. When the schools were closed just as Hamid was about to take his final exams, he could not study for them, unlike his classmates, as he does not have a computer. This endangers his chances of staying in Germany on a more permanent basis and experiencing participation. He sees gaining a school leaving certificate as the only way to avoid

⁴⁰ This case study is a part of Tom Weiss' master's thesis on the experiences of refugees from West Africa in Germany, which he is writing at the University of Kassel under the supervision of Prof. Dr. M. Bereswill and the co-supervision of Dr. A. Worm.

being deported. This stressful situation is complicated by the fact that his family expects him to send them money. He can only fulfil this expectation if he is able to find employment, and for this a school leaving certificate is required. His current precarious situation is further aggravated by the memory of traumatic experiences which, as a result of (self-)isolation, cannot currently be counteracted by social contacts. At the same time, Hamid interprets the situation "during the Corona-19 crisis" in Germany as being better than in Guinea. He explains this when we talk about Ebola. He argues that "Covid-19 is worse than Ebola" because the Covid-19 virus has global effects. Hamid also describes the consequences of the Covid-19 virus in Africa as being more dangerous than in Europe. In Guinea, for example, according to Hamid, basic services are threatened by closed markets and shops, and increased military and police presence; renewed violent conflicts are exacerbating local social tensions.⁴¹ The government has also imposed a night curfew, banned assemblies, ordered the wearing of face coverings, and closed Guinea's borders. According to Hamid, the people in Guinea do not adhere to government regulations to the same extent as in Germany.

Tom Weiss
Göttingen, Germany, July 2020

4. 1.3. Kurdish migrants and refugees in Germany

In the context of a project entitled "*Biographies of migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany – Processes of inclusion and participation in the context of so-called irregular migration*", I am conducting a study on Kurdish migrants in Germany, mostly women, who fled from Turkey to avoid political prosecution because of their political activities around the Kurdish rights movement. My political background is worth mentioning here, because it helps me gain access to the field. I had to flee Turkey as a scholar-at-risk to avoid the political persecution and prospective prosecution inflicted by the Turkish government on a group of scholars commonly known as "Academics for Peace" who signed a petition in 2016 criticizing the government's policies against Kurds in Turkey. Thanks to my status as one of those academics, I have been able to establish contact with possible interviewees through common acquaintances in Germany, and to gain their trust, even though I do not belong to the Kurdish ethnic grouping. Furthermore, they have shown their appreciation by telling me that it is very courageous for a non-Kurd to be interested in and work on the Kurdish cause. As one of them put it: "We are born into this conflict, you chose to be involved." I have conducted four biographical narrative interviews, as well as participant observations, among Kurds in Germany since 2019, up to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and three follow-up interviews since the outbreak.

The Turkish government has downplayed the threat and the implications of the Covid-19 outbreak since March 2020. Already facing an economic crisis, the measures it has taken in respect of the pandemic have mostly been based on economic concerns and, therefore, inconsistent and superficial. What has been especially striking is the continuation of the government's repression of Kurdish politicians and municipalities in Kurdish cities. At the same time, the persecution and prosecution of Kurdish and other oppositional activists has continued unabated. Calls for the release of detained political activists who are in high-risk groups have fallen on deaf ears.

⁴¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/guinea-protectors-killed-clashes-police-200513071249521.html>

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, I have tried to keep in touch with my interviewees, and I have conducted follow-up interviews with them, mostly via WhatsApp and recently also in person. Based on three follow-up interviews (in Turkish) with the Kurdish women and monitoring of their social media accounts, my first insights regarding Kurdish migrants in Germany during the coronavirus crisis point to an emerging dilemma and changing priorities. A possible suspension of compulsory residence in refugee centres due to the pandemic has made the asylum process in Germany more appealing. It is striking that the two Kurdish women whom I will introduce in more detail below are considering applying for political asylum more seriously due to their current situation. So far, with the student visas they had, they were able to avoid applying for asylum in order not to completely relinquish the possibility of visiting Turkey⁴² and to avoid having to stay in refugee centres for extended periods.⁴³ With the increased risk of losing family members and a possible suspension of the obligation to stay in camps for new refugees, the dilemma is bigger than ever.

One of these women is **Eda**, who was born in 1988, and arrived in Germany in 2017. She escaped from political persecution in Turkey after she was accused of supporting and being the girlfriend of an alleged terrorist in 2017. She is now a student at a university in Germany and is in the process of writing her M.A. thesis. She used to be a photojournalist and is working as a freelancer in Germany. She was about to start a new job as a journalist in Cologne when I interviewed her before the Covid-19 outbreak, but she has now lost that opportunity due to the contact restrictions. She has an approaching deadline to finish her M.A. thesis, but it seems very unlikely that she will meet it, as she had no motivation even before the pandemic started. In this case, she will have to apply for asylum, which will probably be granted, given the lawsuits filed against her. She is currently living with her boyfriend and not too stressed about getting infected; she is more concerned about being confined at home.

The other Kurdish woman, **Hale**, with whom I conducted a face-to-face follow-up interview at the beginning of July 2020, is in a very precarious situation both because of the pandemic and because of the many lawsuits against her in Turkey. She has been doing a PhD in social sciences in Hamburg since she arrived in Germany in 2019. She spent most of the lockdown in bed in her dormitory and was very depressed. Yet, what happened very recently has put her in a more difficult situation. She went to a Turkish consulate at the beginning of July to get a power of attorney to let a lawyer follow her trials in Turkey, but her passport was confiscated by the officials working at the consulate due to an arrest warrant in her name. It was a kind of trap, because they asked for her passport for identification, which could easily be done via her national ID, without telling her about the warrant of arrest. She spent six hours at the consulate but could not get her passport back. Her student visa in Germany is due to expire in a month, and without a passport she cannot apply for an extension. Her lawyer suggested she should apply for asylum, because, as the lawyer told her, due to the Covid-19 contact restrictions, she would not have to stay in a refugee centre after submitting her application. She does not want

⁴² Refugee and asylum policies and procedures in Germany are very complicated and contingent on many factors; thus, the following information is meant to give only a general idea of the current situation of our interviewees. After being granted asylum in Germany, asylees are not allowed to visit the countries they come from as this implies that they do not need the protection of the German government. They can only visit their country after obtaining German citizenship and thus a German passport, a process which takes at least five years.

⁴³ Compulsory residence in a refugee processing centre in Germany can last up to 18 months, if not more, until the result of the application for asylum arrives. The duration of stay varies from state to state in the Federal Republic and depends also on the status of the country of the origin, i.e. whether it is accepted as a safe country or not by Germany.

to apply even though it would now be “easier” for her to obtain asylum, because, very optimistically, she wants to be able to go to Turkey if and when she wins all the lawsuits against her, or in case her parents' health worsens. This has a lot to do with her family's vulnerable situation in respect of the Covid-19 crisis. Both of her parents are at high risk as cancer patients. She was planning to go to Turkey in October before the confiscation of her passport, but she would have been arrested at the Turkish airport if she had tried to do so.

It is really interesting that for both Eda and Hale asylum has become a more “attractive” option during the Covid-19 crisis. Yet, because of their increasing sense of responsibility towards their families, this is not an easy decision. Being prohibited from visiting Turkey for at least five years seems to be a heavy price to pay in Covid-19 times. The other most common side effect of the contact restrictions on Kurdish migrants is the cancellation of German or integration courses. For many people, these courses are their sole chance to socialize in Germany and provide a sense of purpose, and their lack seems to put an extra burden on them in these hard times.

Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu
Göttingen, Germany, July 2020

4.2. Refugees in Italy

The pandemic hit Italy very hard with a quickly rising number of infections and people dying from the end of February. Italy was the first country in Europe to introduce a country-wide lockdown in March, while the healthcare system was completely overwhelmed by the situation.

After the first outbreak was detected in Codogno, a small town in the north Italian province of Lodi (Lombardy), and later in Vò (Veneto), new infections quickly soared in other towns and municipalities. In Nembro and Alzano Lombardo, two municipalities in the province of Bergamo, also in Lombardy, the number of cases increased exponentially at the end of February. Thriving industrial hubs, these municipalities were not subjected to a lockdown until the infection had spread to the provinces of Bergamo, Cremona, Brescia and Milan, all situated in Lombardy, and hospitals had become hotspots of Covid-19. After an initial delay, the whole region of Lombardy and other north Italian provinces were put under lockdown on the 13th of March. Only two days later, the lockdown measures were enforced country-wide. Schools, theatres and cinemas were closed and public events cancelled. During the following month, movement was rigidly restricted and non-essential businesses were closed. Travel was only permitted for essential reasons, like work or return to one's own residence, which had to be proved by a self-declaration. The police and the army patrolled the streets and set up checkpoints. Non-permitted travel and breaches of the quarantine measures were punishable with fines and prison terms.

In this report, I will discuss the heavy repercussions of the crisis on a refugee, **Amadou** from Mali. I had been in touch with him since our first interview in January 2020 in the context of my research on refugees who had been deported from Germany to Italy⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ This case study will be a part of my master's thesis on African refugees in western Europe, which I am writing under the supervision of G. Rosenthal and will submit at the University of Göttingen.

I contacted Amadou during the Covid-19 outbreak, at first by phone, when the country-wide lockdown was in place, and then met him personally twice in June 2020 in Bergamo, the city where he lives and my home town. He comes from the south-east of Mali and, because of inheritance conflicts after the death of his father, his mother had to leave the household and migrated to Gao with him. When the civil war broke out, he first fled to Algeria, where he lived for three years; he then moved to Libya and reached Italy in 2015. After being expelled from a reception centre in 2015, he became homeless and lived in the cities of Bergamo, Milan and Como. During this period, he experienced health problems related to the respiratory system (coughing up blood). He never went to a doctor.

In Lombardy, undocumented migrants have access to the hospital system, but they are not assigned a family doctor. They have to come to the hospital themselves and then ask for a code called “STP”. Obviously, they have to know about it first and they have to be assertive and demonstrate awareness of their rights with the hospital clerks, who often refuse to issue this code. Francophone migrants also need to master the Italian language, since clerks seldom speak French (English is more frequently spoken). To complicate the situation, different hospitals – even in the same province – often have uncoordinated bureaucratic procedures. As I experienced when I was working as an intern for a medical office providing undocumented immigrants with primary care (02.2018-07.2018), many people also fear being reported to the police. During my internship I met a woman who had been suffering from third-degree burns on her whole body for a couple of days, because she was too scared to go the emergency room. Amadou, being illiterate and barely getting by with the Italian language, had little chance of accessing hospital care. The voluntary association where I did my internship (which is the only one, as far as I know, for the whole province of Bergamo; similar projects exist in Milan and other cities in Lombardy) had to be closed during the Covid-19 outbreak. Some of the patients stayed for the months of March and April 2020 without essential medication (for instance, for diabetes).

The homeless shelter where Amadou is now living had to close its food kitchen, and was only able to provide homeless people in Bergamo with take-away cold food. Other homeless shelters had to close because of lack of volunteers or protective equipment. Parks and many public spaces (like libraries and cafés) were closed, so that the homeless faced difficulties in finding shelter. Around the central station in Bergamo, and in many other cities in Lombardy, many (former) asylum seekers now live in informal settlements. Those who were working in the informal sector saw their livelihoods threatened almost overnight. My impression when strolling around the city centre is that the police presence is greater in these low-income and migrant neighbourhoods.

Amadou was not disturbed by this and said vehemently that he had never experienced racism. This perception (or assertion) could be related to his marginalized position itself and to his reliance on Catholic voluntary organizations (which are right now being investigated for embezzlement and the exploitation of migrant labour), which frame their assistance as benevolence without challenging structural racism. When asked about episodes of racism, he answered with a list of volunteers – in Germany and Italy – who had helped him. Two other interviewees, one from Nigeria and the other from Mali, with whom I conducted ethnographical interviews, told me of specifically health-related racism: they said that in Algeria and in Italy people shouted “hey Ebola!” at them, as if it were their first name.

Amadou is living in a precarious and highly stigmatized situation, in an overcrowded homeless shelter, sleeping in bunk beds with many other people, which makes social distancing impossible. Still, despite his vulnerable situation, the Catholic organization that provided him with shelter also offered him some security. Unlike other homeless shelters, he does not have to apply every night or every week for a place to stay. He is allowed to stay in the inner courtyard during the day, which is not possible in other homeless shelters because they do not have the necessary infrastructure, and he is provided with one meal per day. In general, he is not worried about Covid-19 and he does not keep himself informed about the development of the pandemic, either at the local level or at the national or international levels. Even when some of Bergamo's municipalities had eleven times the average mortality⁴⁵, he did not know if the number of infections was rising or decreasing. He does not have a television, cannot read with ease, and speaks only basic Italian. He asked me repeatedly, during the lockdown and at the peak of the outbreak, if we could meet personally, despite the mandatory shelter-in-place orders.

Our interaction was shaped by our positionalities as interviewer and interviewee. Especially my frantic return to Italy (my home country) from Germany (where I live) was a topic that obviously sparked his interest. Having been deported from Germany – where he lived for some months in 2016 – back to Italy, under the terms of the Dublin system, and having experienced strict residency rules during his first three months in Germany⁴⁶, he suffered from significant restrictions to his freedom of movement. For obvious reasons, he would be unable to return to Mali, where his mother and his sister still live, should they fall ill. In this context, the fact that I was subjected to border controls by the Swiss police astonished and intrigued him, showing how ingrained the perception of white Europeans and their freedom of movement is. This revealed a fundamental asymmetry, because while I was able to cross borders to join my family members who were sick with Covid-19, this is something which was impossible for most refugees and other migrants even before the pandemic.

Margherita Cusmano
Bergamo, Italy, July 2020

⁴⁵ ISTAT, Tavola decessi per 7.270 comuni (18.06.2020) <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/240401>.

⁴⁶ The German asylum law (§ 56) lays down that asylum seekers and “tolerated” refugees must not leave the place of residence assigned to them within the Federal Republic of Germany.