

TRAFIG

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

Resolving the ‘mobility paradox’: Lessons from southern Europe

Protracted displacement exists in the European Union. TRAFIG research shows that many forced migrants in Italy and Greece live on the margins of society without hope for or the prospect of change. Their only way out is to go on the move. Mobility is their strategy to connect to social networks and find livelihood opportunities elsewhere. The problem is that their mobility is often on the fringes of or entirely outside the law. It leads to what we call the ‘mobility paradox’ that, if left unresolved, limits migrants’ survival strategies from serving as resources and solutions to protracted displacement.

Protracted displacement in southern Europe

In both countries, governance regimes at EU- and national levels produce immobilising effects on vast numbers of forced migrants. *Immobilisation* may be broadly observed at:

- *The intra-EU level:* Movement to other EU member states is prohibited for *asylum applicants* (due to the Dublin Regulation, the Hotspot Approach, restrictions regarding family reunification, etc.) but is neither a significant option for *protection beneficiaries* (who are only allowed to travel up to three months).
- *The intra-national level:* Especially in Greece, *asylum applicants* face increasing limitations to mobility (containment in Eastern Aegean islands’ Hotspots, restricted movement when in reception centres, punitive measures if found absent), while lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic imposed additional burdens on migrants’ mobility.

“... mobility appears to be both a means and a resource, helping displaced people not only to move through physical space but also move socially by generating means of subsistence and social support.”

Immobilisation in these cases cuts forced migrants off from employment and socio-economic activities, leading to their *marginalisation*. In the absence of integration policies, marginalisation of asylum seekers, protection beneficiaries or other categories of migrants is structurally reproduced. Yet, receiving international protection status or other types of regular stay alone is not enough to end their marginalisation.

Mobility as a resource

Rather, displaced people use a variety of strategies to meet their basic needs, reconnect with their families and friends, secure their livelihood, or continue their migration projects. These practices are largely defined by mobility. Mobility becomes a form of agency migrants proactively use to regain control over their lives. It is a crucial resource, which allows displaced people to counter:

Intra-EU immobilisation, e.g. by...

- skipping asylum procedures to cross borders irregularly and seek asylum in another member state without being fingerprinted e.g., in Greece;
- attempting to submit an asylum claim in another EU country, usually where their family networks are settled, despite having received refugee status in Greece;
- moving for employment to another EU country while having received protection status in Italy, even though they then need to periodically return to have their Italian residence permit renewed (every five or two years, depending on the form of protection granted).

Intra-national immobilisation, e.g. by...

in Greece

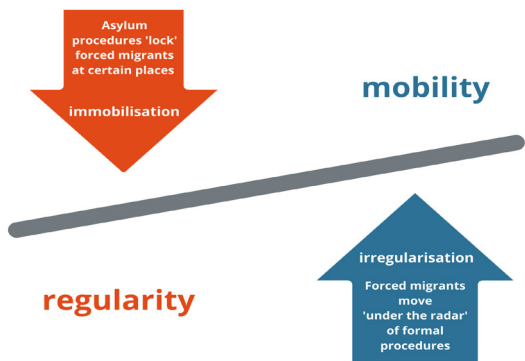
- moving “forward” in the reception system to be placed in better accommodation;
- moving without authorisation while staying in a reception facility, e.g. for undeclared seasonal work or to be close to family;
- moving backwards to Hotspots or camps to deal with homelessness after receiving protection status (albeit without being entitled to reception provisions).

in Italy

- moving without authorisation while staying in a reception facility, e.g., for undeclared seasonal work;
- engaging in strategies of hyper-mobility, sometimes of a circular character, seeking seasonal employment opportunities to make ends meet.

In these and other ways, mobility appears to be both a means and a resource, helping displaced people not only to move through physical space but also socially upward by generating a means of subsistence and social support.

The mobility paradox



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A mobility paradox?

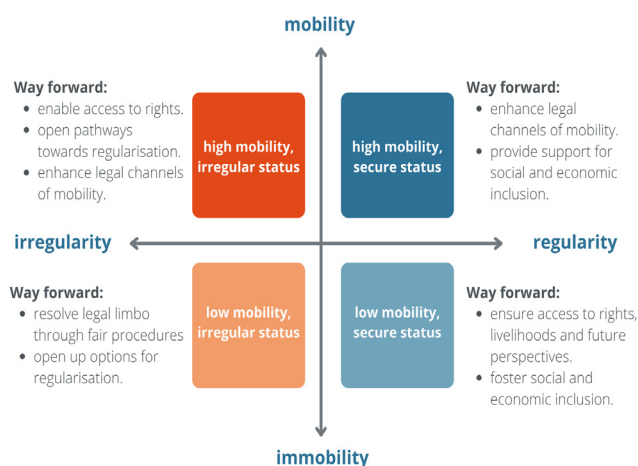
For many, the mobility practices above may work to end their marginalisation and protracted displacement. For some, however, desperate moves lead to new forms of instability and marginalisation: exploitative conditions related to illegal conduct and criminal networks, punitive legal consequences, or an irregular status. In these cases, mobility turns into a ‘trap’ that further endangers migrants’ lives and freedom, reproducing and protracting their displacement.

A *mobility paradox* thus emerges. On the one hand, ‘regularity’ (i.e., going through asylum procedures, conforming with reception regulations while waiting for a decision, adhering to constraints on secondary movement after a decision, etc.) restricts mobility, increases dependence and can lead to marginalisation, at least in the short run. On the other, ‘irregularity’ (i.e., bypassing or transcending asylum procedures and related restrictions) allows (for) mobility and provides opportunities to overcome marginalisation, albeit very risky. In other words, increased mobility can lead to decreased regularity and vice versa.

Ways forward?

A first step to resolve this paradox is to recognise protracted displacement as a reality reproduced on EU soil by the complex apparatus of migration controls and asylum governance. It is not enough for practitioners to denounce the policies that immobilise and marginalise forced migrants. They must also acknowledge that displaced people *do move*, despite—and against—multiple constraints and precarities. Understanding *why they move* can also help when searching for alternative means of support. Informal mobilities can barely be seen as a solution to protracted displacement, but rather as a proactive integration strategy in a transnational context; a strategy put forward by the migrants themselves. Practitioners could bolster migrants’ own efforts to integrate by supporting these efforts—in other words, helping forced migrants secure a livelihood via legal pathways and rekindle social connections. Moving beyond protection and towards integration support is the most promising way to strengthen self-reliance and resolve the mobility paradox.

Resolving the mobility paradox



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Contact

Dr Benjamin Etzold
BICC
Pfarrer-Byns-Str. 1, 53121 Bonn • phone +49 (0)228 911 96-24
contact@trafig.eu • www.trafig.eu • Twitter @TRAFIG_EU

Authors: Panos Hatzipropkiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), Elvan Isikozlu (BICC), Eva Papatzani (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), Ferruccio Pastore (FIERI)

Copyediting / Layout: Heike Webb, Gizem Güzelant

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