Urban migrant and refugee solidarity beyond city limits

Harald Bauder
Ryerson University, Canada
Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, Germany

Abstract
Cities known around the world as sanctuary, solidarity or refuge cities are resisting restrictive national migration and refugee policies and are seeking ways to accommodate migrants and refugees who lack support from the nation state. In this paper I examine urban solidarity approaches in Berlin and Freiburg in Germany, and Zurich in Switzerland. Interviews with key informants reveal that urban solidarity in these cities is not limited to including migrants and refugees living within the city’s boundaries. Rather, urban solidarity reaches beyond municipal boundaries to connect different places and scales in the form of inter-urban solidarity networks and initiatives that aim to enable migrants and refugees who are still abroad to arrive in the city. The complex geographies of urban migrant and refugee solidarity reach far beyond city limits.

Keywords
Germany, migrants, refugees, solidarity, solidarity cities, Switzerland

Introduction
Cities are often sites of resistance against restrictive and repressive national and global migration and refugee policies and practices. In the USA, the UK and Canada such cities
are known as sanctuary cities (Bauder, 2017b); in Continental Europe and Latin America they assume labels such as solidarity cities or cities of refuge (Christoph and Kron, 2019; Koellner, 2019). These cities are standing up against their national governments in seeking to include migrants and refugees in the urban community. In this way, they define a distinctly urban approach towards migrant and refugee solidarity.

In this paper I explore the complex geographies of this urban approach. I draw on data from a larger research project that has, for example, unpacked diverse meanings of the concept of urban migrant and refugee solidarity and illustrated the complex and contradictory ways in which various urban actors apply and understand this concept (Bauder, 2020b). In this paper I examine how urban solidarity not only focuses on the inclusion of vulnerable migrants and refugees within the urban territory but how urban solidarity extends beyond municipal boundaries. In particular, I ask the research question: how do urban migrant and refugee solidarities manifest themselves beyond city limits? I suggest that urban solidarity transcends the city’s administrative boundaries and connects to places embedded in national, regional and global scales. The larger empirical study of three cities, two in Germany and one in German-speaking Switzerland, sheds light on this issue.

Understanding the complex geographies of urban migrant and refugee solidarity is important because cities have emerged as key actors in developing practical approaches towards migrant and refugee accommodation whereas national and supranational approaches have disproportionately focused on border protection and migrant and refugee exclusion. The paper thus contributes to a growing scholarly literature on migrant solidarity (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder, 2020a; Rygiel, 2011; Squire, 2018; Stierl, 2019), solidarity and sanctuary cities (Bagelman, 2016; Christoph and Kron, 2019; Darling and Bauder, 2019; Ridgley, 2008) and new municipalism (Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020). In addition, the paper offers insights into activist and municipal strategies that engage restrictive and repressive national and supranational policies towards vulnerable migrants and refugees. It thus connects to a literature on urban resistance against exploitative global capitalism and resurgent racist nationalism (Harvey, 2012; Sharma, 2020).

In the next sections, I first review the literature on the geographies of solidarity and urban solidarity initiatives to set the stage for the empirical study. Then I describe the methods of this study involving key informant interviews in the three cities. Thereafter, I present the study results paying particular attention to how solidarity extends beyond city limits in relation to top-down and grassroots efforts. In the concluding section, I summarise the results and interpret them in light of the literature.

Background

In this section, I first briefly review the complex geographies of solidarity and then focus on how urban migration and refugee solidarity manifests itself within so-called sanctuary, solidarity and refuge cities.

Geographies of solidarity

Solidarity is a transformative practice. It can, for example, create new collective self-awareness that enables actors to pursue their shared political interests. Marx, Engels and their followers theorised in the mid-19th century that solidarity among industrial workers would foster a unifying identity that transforms the proletariat into a powerful political force that would transcend national borders and act internationally (Marx and Engels, 1969). This global geographical
extent of working-class solidarity, however, never materialised. Instead, racialised working-class solidarity was organised predominantly along national-territorial lines (Virdee, 2014). Nevertheless, solidarity practices were never ‘neatly contained’ at the national scale (Featherstone, 2012: 5) but have continued to cross national borders and transcend national identities. Historically, migration and population movements themselves have furthered solidarity and solidarity movements around the world (Kelliher, 2018). Today, too, the very experience of international mobility can foster solidarity among migrants and refugees (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). Furthermore, solidarity among and with migrants and refugees connects people in diverse places and at various scales, ranging from homes and places of worship, schools and campuses, cities and towns, and transnational networks to converge on common political struggles related to free mobility and access to rights and dignity (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2016; Bauder, 2020a; Mezzadra, 2020; Paik et al., 2019; Squire, 2018). This situation resonates with what Doreen Massey called a politics of place ‘beyond place’ (Massey et al., 2009). In other words, solidarity connects places and scales that are typically associated with different geographical and political contexts (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). Solidarity practices often ‘connect different places or geographies and enable relations which go beyond national borders but without having anything to do with nation-states’ own interests’ (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019: 25). Such solidarity practices challenge the nation-state frame; in fact, nation states have created the policies and laws that deny entry and thus have led to the death of thousands of migrants and refugees; those migrants and refugees who manage to arrive are often politically excluded and economically exploited (Bauder, 2017a; Nevins and Nevins, 2002). In this way, nation states and supranational configurations such as the EU have created the conditions to which international migrant and refugee solidarity responds (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019).

Ironically, the term solidarity is often used in the context of calls for European nation states to share the burden of accepting these refugees and migrants (Greenhill, 2016; Ventrella, 2015). This perspective of solidarity embracing the nation-state framework differs fundamentally from urban and grassroots perspectives that challenge this framework. Agustín and Jørgensen (2016: 12–14) call solidarity associated with national communities ‘misplaced solidarity’. In the case of the EU, misplaced solidarity extends beyond national boundaries but applies to a community of states contained within the territorial boundaries of the Schengen Area. Conversely, urban and grassroots perspectives of solidarity tend to reject such territorial political configurations that seek to control migration and refugee mobility (Schwiertz and Schwenken, 2020).

There is another important difference. While nation-state-centric models of solidarity embrace a unifying identity as a nation or supranational configuration such as the EU, urban and grassroots solidarity with and among migrants and refugees does not aim to create a unified political identity (Kelz, 2015). Rather, it involves a multitude of actors and captures diverse subjects in pursuit of common struggles (Squire, 2018). Instead of fostering a unified and closed subject identity, solidarity is an open and unfinished practice that creates new and unfixed relations between places and across transnational space (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Featherstone, 2012).

**Urban migrant and refugee solidarities**

Cities that try to accommodate vulnerable migrants and refugees are a contemporary
manifestation of migrant and refugee solidarity. A growing literature has examined such cities around the globe, including in the USA, Canada, the UK, Continental Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, where they have adopted labels such as sanctuary city, solidarity city or city of refuge (Bauder, 2017b; Bauder and Gonzalez, 2018; Christoph and Kron, 2019; Collingwood and O’Brien, 2019; Delgado, 2018; Kassa, 2019; Missbach et al., 2018; Ridgley, 2008). The policies and practices of inclusion that such cities pursue vary widely, depending on factors such as regional geopolitical situations, national legal frameworks and institutional competencies, the prominence and activities of local civil society actors, historical urban identities, and national and local political interests (Ataç et al., 2020; Delvino and Spencer, 2019; Hoekstra, 2018; Mayer, 2018; Spencer, 2018). A common characteristic among these cities, however, is that they reject exclusionary national migration and refugee laws and policies, and advocate for migrant and refugee inclusion at the urban scale.

Another commonality is that these cities extend solidarity based on a ‘politics of urban presence’ (Darling, 2017: 191) linking to a wider body of scholarly work on urban citizenship (Bauböck, 2003; Kassa, 2019; Krenn and Morawek, 2017) and the right to the city (Purcell, 2002, 2014). By focusing on ‘presence’, these cities apply the domicile principle, granting membership in the urban community based on being an inhabitant of the city (Bauder, 2017a; Varsanyi, 2010). Migrants and refugees are considered de facto members of the urban community even if the nation state has not granted them national citizenship or legal status. Solidarity, in this case, involves migrants, refugees and non-migrants sharing urban space, claiming equal rights, and participating ‘in the everyday enactment of the city through its routines, practices and rhythms’ (Darling and Squire, 2013: 210). In this context, city administrations that extend solidarity to migrants and refugees are sometimes restricted to their jurisdiction, which ends at their administrative city boundary. The sanctuary cities in the USA exemplify this limitation of administrative space when they enact policies and practices to protect non-status migrants within their particular jurisdiction that do not apply beyond their cities’ boundaries.

The geographies of urban migrant and refugee solidarity, however, are more complex; they often do not end at municipal borders. Urban citizenship, the right to the city and the politics of presence are not neatly contained within administrative boundaries (Darling, 2017; Purcell, 2002). Rather, these concepts recognise that the everyday life of people who can make urban claims transcend these administrative boundaries, for example, when they work, sleep, shop or play in adjacent municipalities.

In other cases, urban migrant and refugee solidarity is not even restricted to the urban region. For example, the ‘refuge city’ Barcelona has not only supported migrants and refugees locally but has also established a national Refugee Cities network and has played a major role in the Eurocities’ Solidarity Cities initiative in support of local migrant and refugee accommodation throughout Europe. The network abides by the principles of solidarity stated in a 2016 open letter by Eurocities: ‘the guiding principles of solidarity, humanity and dignity upon which the EU is founded should define our approach to the reception and integration of refugees’ (EUROCITIES, 2016). The four ‘pillars’ of the network involve information and knowledge exchange, advocacy for direct funding for cities accommodating refugees, capacity building, sharing technological and financial assistance, and pledges to receive relocated asylum seekers. In this way, urban solidarity policies and practices
go ‘beyond municipality and connect diverse spaces (regional, national, and international)’ (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019: 113). Similarly, in Latin America, the 2004 Mexico Plan of Action established the Ciudades Solidarias (‘Cities of Solidarity’) network of more than 50 cities, which promotes municipal migrant and refugee integration throughout the region through formal and informal agreements with UNHCR (Koellner, 2019; Varoli, 2010). Oomen et al. (2018: 1) observe a ‘remarkable proliferation’ of such transnational city networks dealing with migration- and refugee-related matters and identify 27 such networks around the world. In addition, the ‘infrastructure of solidarity’ (Schilliger, 2020) not only connects cities but also permeates local, national and transnational scales in complex ways (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019).

An interesting feature of sanctuary cities, solidarity cities and cities of refuge is that top-down approaches to governance converge with local grassroots efforts (Bauder and Gonzalez, 2018). Although grassroots activists are often sceptical of local governments and are mindful of ‘reformist drift’ (Jeffries and Ridgley, 2020: 4), they strategically arrange collaborations with municipal councils and administrations (Walia, 2013). Agustín and Jørgensen (2018) call this arrangement ‘institutional solidarity’, which ‘is not limited to the institutional realm as such but expanded to civic groups and activists. Solidarity cities are forged in cooperation with civil society (without implying that there is a lack of tensions)’ (p. 98, parentheses in original). Correspondingly, city councils tend to approve local solidarity policies and collaborate with grassroots organisations and activists on mobilising local resources to accommodate vulnerable migrants and refugees, rescript migration and refugee discourses, and foster a sense of urban community that includes migrants and refugees (Bauder, 2017b).

However, municipal administrators, civil society actors and activists may have different perspectives of solidarity. Municipal administrations and councils tend to have primary responsibility for the inhabitants who live within city boundaries. Civic society organisations, faith-based institutions and charities may not have such locally confined mandates, or they have different boundaries of authority. Radical activists often have transnational and global perspectives of solidarity based on both personal and strategic political relationships (Schilliger, 2020) although their perspectives may be side-lined in institutionalised urban-solidarity arrangements (Lambert and Swerts, 2019). In the remainder of the paper, I empirically explore the complex geographies of urban migrant and refugee solidarities and how top-down and grassroots approaches shape these geographies.

Methods

The empirical research focuses on three cities in two countries: Berlin and Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany, and Zurich in Switzerland (Kößler, 2013; Schwenken, 2008). These cities were chosen for several reasons. First, while each city has solidarity initiatives that aim to accommodate illegalised and other vulnerable migrants and refugees, there is also a degree of diversity in terms of city size, the local histories of solidarity initiatives, etc. Freiburg is a mid-size city with a relatively long activist tradition in support of vulnerable migrants and racialised minorities. In Berlin, Germany’s largest city and national capital, solidarity initiatives have been energised when a progressive (red-green-red) government assumed power at the end of 2016. In Zurich, which is Switzerland’s largest city but not the
national capital, solidarity initiatives gained momentum after an arts project served as a catalytic event in 2015 (Freiburger Forum aktiv gegen Ausgrenzung, 2016; Morawek, 2019; Neumann, 2019). Second, local solidarity initiatives differ from each other because the three cities are situated in different national and regional legal, political, geopolitical, historical, economic and social circumstances. Cities in Switzerland and Germany have different roles and competencies vis-à-vis the national and regional (Land and Kanton) levels of government. Within Germany, Berlin is a city-state that possesses different capacities to implement local policies than Freiburg, which is a city within the region (Land) of Baden-Württemberg. These national and regional contexts influence how urban solidarity initiatives locally unfold and may shape the way urban solidarity transcends city limits. Third, there were logistical reasons for the choice of cities: I chose cities in which German is the dominant language, which allowed me to conduct the interviews in that language without requiring translation services. In addition, Berlin, Freiburg and Zurich were reasonably accessible permitting me to visit the cities multiple times for data collection. Because of the non-random selection of the three cities, the results of this study may be biased and are not generalisable. Nevertheless, the diversity among the three cities provides important insights into the variable spatial dimensions of urban migrant and refugee solidarity.

I conducted 30 key-informant interviews – ten in each city – with local activists, NGO staff, members of the municipal governance body, and municipal officials and administrators. The interview data were supplemented by an analysis of mostly internet-based local documents. The interviews took place between autumn 2018 and spring 2019. The semi-structured interviews in the three cities generally followed the same interview guide; probing questions permitted me to shape the interviews based on locally particular circumstances. The interview guide included a set of questions that address the concept of solidarity and solidarity practices. The results below stem from the answers to this set of questions. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using priority coding with the initial codes developed based on the academic and grey literature, and axial coding linking the data from the different codes and cities. I conducted the interviews in German; the quotes presented in the following sections are my translation.

Administrative city limits

Urban solidarity policies and practices in the three cities generally seek to address issues of exclusion faced by vulnerable migrants and refugees who inhabit the administrative space of the city. Such initiatives include, for example, the attempt to develop a municipal ID available to *sans papiers* in Zurich, access to healthcare for uninsured persons in Berlin, and a housing project in Freiburg that implements the non-discriminatory ‘cohabitation in the city’ (Rasthaus, 2017) regardless of status. By focusing on solidarity with the city’s inhabitants, these policies and practices reflect the domicile principle of membership and entitlements. However, the interview participants also emphasised that this focus on administrative space is problematic. In fact, many participants explicitly critiqued this inward perspective on the urban community. A Freiburg-based activist remarked:

I find it a bit scary to imagine that ... there are sanctuary cities and the hostile surrounding area. And also, it’s quite funny, when we talked about our logo – you know our logo, this circle with the houses around it – we adopted it, but we understood it from the beginning as very restrictive and didn’t think
it was such a nice idea to be in a circle fenced in (ummauert) by surrounding houses. (F 3)

Another activist and volunteer at a migrant and refugee support institution in Freiburg shared this critique. At this institution …

it doesn’t matter if someone lives in Freiburg or not. They can come from anywhere, they get advice, they get medical support. [However] as soon as you are a solidarity city, it’s clear from the beginning that the anonymous health insurance for illegalised people, that they can go to the doctor more easily, suddenly has this exclusion criterion included … to be residents of the city. Are they staying here or are they not staying here? And here I would rather say that if the city administration is involved, the whole thing becomes even tighter … municipal regulations promote the welfare of the city’s inhabitants. Actually, I’m not incredibly happy about it. (F 2)

This activist refers to ‘solidarity city’ as a general grassroots approach to urban migrant and refugee accommodation (that includes solidarity-city.eu) rather than to the top-down Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network. In this context, urban solidarity is imagined as extending beyond the municipality’s administrative boundaries. This same participant elaborated on this viewpoint later in the interview: ‘I think a solidarity city should have something to do with a solidarity world. And then what you can offer here should also be available for those who are in need elsewhere’. This participant sees urban migrant and refugee solidarity as part of a wider global solidarity system: ‘There are solidarity structures everywhere in the world, and in the cities as well’ (F 2).

A Berlin-based participant acknowledges the practical value of urban solidarity in assisting local migrants and refugees but interprets the focus on municipal administrative space as a political weakness:

I believe that solidarity city and most of the municipalist movements ... are actually working for the people in the city. And that is, after all, a retreat by left-wing forces because nothing has been achieved at European and federal levels for years. There have been huge protests for three years and nothing has been achieved. ... No, I think, in the end it is a weakness of the internationalist Left to say we go into the city and help the people who are there. (B 4)

These views suggest that urban solidarity is not confined to the administrative boundaries of the city. Rather, urban solidarity activities transcend these city limits.

**Solidarity beyond city limits**

In this section, I explore how urban solidarity extends beyond municipal boundaries. First, I discuss the prominent Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network, an initiative between European municipal administrations. This top-down network differs from the grassroots ‘solidarity city’ (solidarity-city.eu) often mentioned by participants in the preceding section and the colloquial use of the concept ‘solidarity city’ by activists when they refer to a general grassroots urban approach to migrant and refugee accommodation. Second, I examine the urban initiative Sea Bridge (Seebrücke) and the idea of safe harbours (sichere Häfen), which focus on providing pathways to vulnerable migrants and refugees abroad to arrive in the city.

**Solidarity city networks**

Both Berlin and Zurich belong to the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network where they are represented by Berlin’s Mayor Michael Müller and Zurich’s City President Corine Mauch. The Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network extends solidarity not only
to vulnerable migrants and refugees inside the city but also connects cities to shoulder the burden of urban migrant and refugee reception and integration.

The Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network illustrates how urban migrant and refugee solidarity transcends municipal boundaries. For example, the network has provided a platform for the Berlin Senate to discuss collaborating with other cities such as Barcelona and Naples on protecting refugees and vulnerable migrants (Christoph and Kron, 2019). In addition, collectively, the network’s member cities aim to transform how national governments and EU institutions engage with migration and refugee issues. When I asked if urban networks at the European level provide opportunities to influence European discourses and politics related to migration and refugees, a Berlin-based activist said:

I think that’s the idea behind this Eurocities [‘Solidarity Cities’] network and the way in which this informal but relatively official association of Eurocities is used. That’s why Barcelona is a driving force behind it, ... they want to circumvent the limitations of the nation state in order to make direct demands on the European institutions. That it’s about providing funding for cities, but also to have a platform for cities to be able to push forward their own migration policy. (B 6)

Participants in Zurich use their city’s participation in the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network to hold their municipal government accountable for supporting local initiatives that protect vulnerable migrants and refugees. A staff person at an institution serving sans papiers said that Zurich’s City President, Corine Mauch, ‘is strongly involved in this group of cities. And we must force her, and convince her, that the City Card can also play a role in this movement’ (Z 6). In this case, the network influences local- rather than European-level policies.

Freiburg is not a member of the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network. Nevertheless, networks to other cities are also important to this city. In the context of solidarity-city initiatives, a city official who is supportive of the solidarity-city idea remarked: ‘I have personal contacts in Berlin, also in political circles in Berlin. ... Of course, contacts are being made at the city association (Städtetag) meetings, such as the regional Baden-Württemberg meeting or the national meeting’ (F 4).

Many activists are critical of municipal governance structures and formal solidarity networks between major cities. Antje Dietrich critiques the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network and its top-down approach for focusing on strengthening city administrations rather than supporting the livelihoods of migrants and refugees in precarious situations; she also notes that the network follows a neoliberal logic that reproduces existing relations of power, and that it has appropriated the term ‘solidarity city’ from grassroots activism (Dietrich 2019: 64–67). However, activists also stress that there is collaboration between grassroots and top-down urban solidarity initiatives. For example, when 2000 people protested in Barcelona for the release of the rescue ship Proactiva Open Arms, the Berlin Senator Katina Schubert organised a support visit to Barcelona for a delegation of parliamentarians from Berlin and Hamburg and visited another rescue ship, the Sea Watch (Voß, 2019). An activist pointed out that members of the grassroots initiative ‘solidarity city’ (solidarity-city.eu) in Berlin were generally critical of the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network, but there is an important point of convergence:

If you look at the program of these European ‘Solidarity Cities’ [network], it was essentially about refugee management. So ultimately it was about regulating refugee movements. It
was about sharing experiences about resources and ‘how do you do it?’ and so on. Then there was just this one small point that we liked, which was: ‘We want direct European relocation [from European port and border cities to Berlin].’ (B 3)

Another Berlin-based activist affirmed:

Eurocities’ [‘Solidarity Cities’ network has] an organic connection with sea rescue. When Salvini became Minister of the Interior in Italy, it escalated a bit. The first boat was the Aquarius, and while it was happening we were announcing in our networks, it will happen again soon. ... And we actually thought ... that there is an alternative European solution. ... And we went to a woman from the Left Party (‘Linkspartei’ referring to Die Linke) and said: ‘We want the mayor to act!’ Together with Sea Watch we went to them and put the idea on the table. And then it happened – also because at that time the SPD [the party of the Mayor] tried to make a name for themselves against [federal Minister of the Interior] Seehofer. We got them in contact with [Barcelona’s Mayor] Ada Colau; legend has it that in the end a call from Ada to Michael Müller was the deciding factor (laughs). ... In the end, this Eurocities discussion also had a positive outcome. (B 8)

Simultaneously, concrete policy proposals have been developed for municipality-driven relocation programmes that would tap into EU funding to enable German cities to directly admit asylum seekers and refugees from abroad (Bendel et al., 2019; Schwan, 2018). The idea that landlocked Central-European cities accept migrants and refugees directly from Mediterranean harbour cities and rescue missions illustrates that urban solidarity is not confined to migrants and refugees who already live in the city. Rather, solidarity is offered to migrants and refugees located elsewhere and who are invited into the urban community. This aspect is also an important focus of grassroots urban migrant and refugee solidarity, which will be the focus of the next section.

Safe harbours and Sea Bridge

In 2018, the grassroots organisation AlarmPhone remarked that ‘nobody should have to risk their lives to travel somewhere’ and therefore called for ‘safe and open harbours’ that connect ‘physical docklands on the coast’ with ‘inland communities offering refuge’ (AlarmPhone, 2018). The idea was that landlocked cities in Central Europe accept migrants and refugees directly and voluntarily, and ‘foster intra-municipal and trans-national solidarity’, especially with cities in Southern Europe that lack support from the European Union (EU). This call for safe harbours rejects the EU’s and national governments’ denial of entry to migrants and refugees, and instead seeks to uphold human rights and the right to mobility. ‘A Safe Harbour is a place where neither migrants nor those who stand in solidarity with them are criminalised’ (AlarmPhone, 2018). While safe harbours cannot entirely bypass nation states, which possess authority over migrant and refugee policies, the call for safe harbours seeks to increase pressure on national and EU policy makers.

A related initiative is Seebrücke, or Sea Bridge (Seebrücke, 2018). This grassroots organisation was founded in 2018 in reaction to restrictive European border politics and the resulting deaths at the EU’s external borders. It was inspired by cities, such as Osnabrück, whose Council declared in 2016 its willingness to accept ‘50 [refugees] from Indomeni’ (Heuser, 2017). Seebrücke mobilises urban communities throughout Germany willing to accept refugees directly and, in this way, become safe harbours. Given the federal government’s ongoing
refusal to allow municipalities to directly accept refugees, the initiative has so far been largely symbolic (Schwiertz and Keß, 2019). Nevertheless, co-founder Liza Pflaum remarks: ‘We want a network to be formed throughout Europe, so that cities and regions can say we are safe harbours … It is about showing that there are places of solidarity’ (Hecht 2018, my translation). A participant from Freiburg pointed out that ‘Seebrücke may have a nationwide network … but Seebrücke are local groups that do their own thing, and in principle they proceed relatively autonomous in every city’ (F 10).

At the time of writing, Swiss cities have not been participating in Seebrücke. An activist in Zurich acknowledges that their efforts are focused on solidarity with sans papiers who are already present in the city, but ‘the Solidarity City in Germany, also includes the reception of refugees from the boats’ (Z 6). According to participants, this particular grassroots focus on administrative space was inspired by US sanctuary cities such as New York and New Haven (Z 4, Z 7), and represents a strategic choice based on the need of local sans papiers, existing opportunities to forge strategic partnerships between local advocates and the municipality, and limited resources to engage in activities beyond Zurich.

Both Berlin and Freiburg, however, signed on to the Seebrücke initiative in 2018. A Berlin-based activist explained the approach: ‘It’s really about how people arrive. … Our approach is precisely how can we strengthen the local, the community level so that people can arrive in the communities, so that more decentralised arrivals are possible’ (B 9). An activist involved with Seebrücke in Freiburg described how accepting migrants and refugees is connected to local accommodation:

[To be a safe harbour] does not only mean taking people in, but that you have to see what you do with them. And I also believe that it would be really exciting for a city like [Freiburg] to accept people, to consciously decide to accept 40 people, because then you have to think about how the people will live here. I believe that the process alone, if it came to that, would initiate … a discussion in the city. (F 10)

This participant continued to explain that ‘the starting point of Seebrücke is about sea rescue and the second discussion … is about people who live here in the safe harbour … so it connects to concepts like solidarity city or sanctuary cities’ (F 10).

Participants in Berlin concur that the support for city inhabitants with no or only precarious status and sea rescue go hand-in-hand. An activist remarked:

In our international discussion [we focus on] the question of illegalised people or people with a precarious residence status. … I think it links to the point that you try to bring people who are not yet here or who are trying to get here, that there is common ground. … In the current climate, I would say that they belong together to some extent, rescue at sea, the question of social rights for those who aren’t here yet. (B8)

Another Berlin-based activist noted that they are both important: ‘There are connections between Seebrücke Berlin and [Solidarity City Coalitions], but I think they follow a different approach. Totally value-free: I don’t think one is more important than the other’ (B4).

Safe harbours and the Seebrücke initiative connect local grassroots solidarity efforts with formal municipal government and administration. A Berlin-based activist remarked in the context of local government efforts to receive vulnerable migrants and refugees who are still abroad that ‘there is
much more solidarity at the local [than the national] level. In fact, in the local governments there is more solidarity and more willingness to rethink migration policy’ (B 9). Indeed, the Seebrücke initiatives call on municipal leaders and governance bodies to formally support Seebrücke’s demands. According to Seebrücke, ‘local authorities can implement more and more aspects of a safe harbour over time. As Seebrücke we are accompanying the process’ (Seebrücke, 2019, my translation). By the summer of 2020, more than 150 municipalities in Germany had signed on to the initiative.

At the same time, Seebrücke is a highly politicised initiative that vocally rejects restrictive and repressive national migration policies. A Berlin-based activist explained:

Berlin is indeed showing solidarity with people on the run or people rescued from distress at sea. What we are trying to say at the moment is that it is still possible for civil sea rescue to take place. ... [We] say that the willingness of the communities to accept migrants and refugees is largely connected with the deaths in the Mediterranean. ... ‘Safe harbour’ means communities being ready to receive, being prepared to take in more refugees than the [national government allocates to these cities] and beginning to actively mobilise against the national government. (B 9)

Similarly, a staff person at a political foundation who is also active at Seebrücke in Berlin remarked:

We are forming an antipole to a European nation-state policy that is increasingly committed to sealing off and militarizing its borders. This is the impetus that leads me to say that this is not only about the people [in our city]; no, we have a responsibility as cities of solidarity [i.e. the grassroots initiative], namely not only to stop at the borders of our cities, but also to offer and invite those to our cities who need our help. (B 6)

Urban solidarity extends beyond municipal boundaries and transcends national borders in order to engage restrictive and repressive EU and national migration and refugee policies.

A Berlin-based activist explained in the context of safe harbours and Seebrücke that urban solidarity cannot be manufactured by national governments:

And it shouldn’t. But the city should say: ‘We are in solidarity with the people who cross the Mediterranean or those who ... are currently stuck in Italy.’ ... So solidarity between cities and people ... that is something I can still imagine. But otherwise solidarity is a bottom-up process. It is not a process between nations. (B 3)

In this way, migrant and refugee solidarity is a ‘relation’ (Featherstone, 2012: 5) between people and urban communities. This same activist continued to outline the complex geographies of urban migrant solidarity relations:

Solidarity, yes, with cities and also, yes, with German homeless people and with the lower classes. Today, most of the homeless people [in Berlin] are Eastern Europeans, which also involves migration processes within Europe, and nobody who lives in the city now should perish. Nobody should be turned away and there must be an openness for new people who arrive. This openness, of course, refers to the Mediterranean. But it also refers to intra-European migration. How can we create corridors through Europe and then a network of cities with solidarity? ... But, of course, I wouldn’t call for solidarity on a national level anyway, but on a city level and on the level of transnational global relations. (B 3)

This transnational urban solidarity frames a political strategy to engage various aspects of global migrant and refugee injustice. Urban governments and formal city networks play important roles in pursuit of this strategy. A
member of Berlin’s House of Representatives (Abgeordnetenhaus) explained:

For us … ‘solidarity city’ Berlin … includes the extra-parliamentary initiative, and furthermore there is an official city network … the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ [network], where several European cities are united to exchange aspects and examples of integration and refugee reception and also to try to be a voice for solidarity cities, cities of refuge within the Eurocities’ [‘Solidarity Cities’] network. … This is, of course, aimed above all at those who enter the country illegally, in quotation marks, who were rescued at sea or came by land, and then the question is whether or not we can admit them. That is … the motivation for solidarity city in Berlin … [It] is an alliance of many groups in different fields. … We understand our solidarity city approach more broadly than only an official network of cities, but we want to weave the idea of a solidarity city through all fields of politics. (B 1)

This participant illustrates that the complex ways in which urban solidarity towards migrants and refugees extends beyond city limits is a result of coordinated top-down and grassroots efforts.

Conclusion

The participants in the study highlighted that urban migrant and refugee solidarity does not end at the city’s administrative boundaries. They pointed to several initiatives that illustrate how urban solidarity extends beyond these boundaries. These initiatives do not challenge the domicile principle that all inhabitants of the city should be considered members of the urban community with similar rights, entitlements and obligations regardless of their national status or citizenship. Rather, participants in Berlin and Freiburg made clear that the inclusion of illegalised inhabitants complements sea rescue missions and other solidarity efforts to bring vulnerable migrants and refugees to the city. The two approaches go hand-in-hand. By expanding the reach of urban solidarity beyond municipal boundaries to places in different geographical and political situations – in this case from land-locked cities in Germany to port and border cities in southern Europe and sea-rescue missions in the Mediterranean – urban solidarity initiatives practice a politics of place ‘beyond place’ (Massey et al., 2009). These politics draw connections not only between particular places where vulnerable migrants and refugees are but also between different scales ranging from individual rescue ships and camps where migrants and refugees are located, cities offering refuge, nation states and the EU where policies are articulated, and networks that operate across these scales. Despite these multi-scalar relations, nation states continue to assert their sovereignty in efforts to limit the influence of urban solidarity initiatives, for example by refusing to permit cities to accept refugees directly.

Participants in Zurich did not focus on bringing vulnerable migrants and refugees from other countries to the city. As a result, the voices of participants from Zurich were under-represented in the above discussion of safe harbours and sea bridges. Their efforts instead concentrated on including sans papiers living within and participating in the daily life of the urban community. This different focus should not be interpreted as opposition or failure to pursuing a politics of place beyond place. In fact, the City of Zurich plays a prominent role in the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network and activists in Zurich are well networked nationally and transnationally (Schilliger, 2020). Rather, this focus reflects a strategic choice that responds to factors such as limited resources, the political climate in the city and region (Kanton), and geopolitical circumstances.
The findings from the study suggest that urban migrant and refugee solidarities are strategically local and transnational in scope to engage both restrictive national and EU policies and global ‘fortress capitalism’ that controls cross-border human ‘mobility and immobility [as] a technique of power’ (Georgi, 2019: 567). In this way, urban migrant and refugee solidarities avoid the ‘local trap’ and refrain from assuming that the local scale is inherently more democratic and more inclusive that other scales (Purcell, 2006). In fact, it has not been lost on participants that cities are also major sites where exclusionary boundaries are created, reproduced and enforced (Genova, 2015). One participant also saw the retreat to the urban scale as a reflection of the failure to successfully engage political and economic oppression at national and European scales. In this way, the municipal scale can serve ‘as a strategic entry point for developing broader practices and theories of transformative social change’ (Russell, 2019: 991). Urban migrant and refugee solidarities exemplify such a strategy.

Furthermore, the study affirms a strategic convergence between top-down and grassroots efforts in the context of urban migrant and refugee solidarities (Bauder and Gonzalez, 2018). The urban solidarity initiatives that transcend municipal boundaries include networks that connect municipal administrations pursuing similar migrant and refugee solidarity policies for the purpose of information and knowledge sharing, advocacy, capacity building, and influencing supranational migration and refugee policies; they also include grassroots efforts to relocate vulnerable migrants and refugees from the perimeter of Europe and offer them refuge within the city. On the one hand, grassroots organisation and activists may not share the same overarching goals as the municipal political leadership and administrations. For example, many activists reject the neoliberal logic entrenched in municipal governance and corresponding networks such as the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network. On the other hand, grassroots initiatives such as Seebrücke also collaborate with municipal administrations to oppose restrictive and repressive national and supranational policies. While these alliances at the urban scale are strategic responses to prevailing political and geopolitical circumstances, they shape the complex geographies of urban migrant and refugee solidarity and the way solidarity extends beyond city limits in important ways.

Finally, context matters. Berlin and Zurich, which are their countries’ largest cities, are both part of the Eurocities’ ‘Solidarity Cities’ network. Participants in Freiburg suggested that their city is too small and lacking significance in Germany’s urban system to be included in this international network. National context also matters. Only German cities are members of Seebrücke. Since the Swiss city Zurich is not included in this initiative, it does not pursue the same safe-harbour politics.

There are important limitations to this study. In particular, it examined urban migrant and refugee solidarities in only three cities in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland. It thus assumed a limited perspective from the core of Europe. Including other case studies, for example, from Europe’s periphery, bordering countries such as Turkey or Libya, or other continents such as South America, would have provided additional insights into the geographical complexity of urban migrant and refugee solidarities.

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ORCID iD
Harald Bauder https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8529-3188

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