

Serra Mingot, Ester; González Zepeda, Carlos Alberto

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Transnational social protection infrastructures: African migrants in Mexico

Ester Serra Mingot¹  | Carlos Alberto González Zepeda^{2,3}

¹Sociology of Transnationalization, Faculty of Sociology, Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD), Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany

²Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Cuajimalpa (UAM-C), Mexico City, Mexico

³Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS), Guadalajara, Mexico

Correspondence

Ester Serra Mingot, Sociology of Transnationalization, Faculty of Sociology, Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD), Bielefeld University, Vaalser Strasse 119, 52074 Aachen, Germany.
Email: ester.s.mingot@gmail.com

Funding information

Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS)

Abstract

In the past years, increasingly restrictive migration policies have pushed many migrants to seek new and more risky migration routes. Many studies have investigated aspects of social protection for migrants from the Global South in industrialized countries of the Global North, with powerful welfare states. Yet, such focus has failed to understand the complexities *during* the migration process, where people often spend uncertain periods of time in transit countries and the state is frequently absent. In these contexts, social protection is predominantly provided by the third sector (TS) and informal networks both nationally and transnationally. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with African migrants and TS organizations in Mexico, this paper explores the different and often semi-formal relationships between the TS, the state, and the migrants that result in complex transnational social protection infrastructures to cover the migrants' basic social protection needs.

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility across national borders has led to increasing academic and policy attention to the transnational dimensions of social protection in the migration process (Faist et al., 2014; Levitt et al., 2017), which go beyond the state provisions to include resources provided by the market, the third sector (TS) and informal social networks. To date, however, most of these studies have focused on the role of formal or state-provided benefits through various governmental institutions and/or the informal mechanisms of support, such as family and social networks, across

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origin and *destination* countries (Speroni & Parella, 2018). Yet, in recent years, increasingly restrictive migration policies at a global level are pushing more and more people to seek new migration routes, where many migrants are forced to spend more or less long periods of time in transit (Schapendonk et al., 2018). In these contexts, often marked by insecurities and discontinuities, social protection becomes volatile and occurs in conditions of high informality.

Two aspects have remained largely unexplored in the literature on transnational social protection (TSP). First, the role of the TS, in particular the role of civil society organizations (CSOs), has been barely explored (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021). Second, very few studies have addressed the social protection mechanisms “in transit” or *during* the migration trajectory, which often takes place in contexts characterized by state absenteeism (Salazar & Voorend, 2019). This is an important gap because migration is rarely a direct move from A to B. What happens *in between* may shape migrants' trajectories and social protection strategies. Moreover, many transit countries, such as Mexico, see transit migrants as temporary people, whereby state provisions for this group are almost non-existent and the responsibility to protect falls mainly on the TS (Candiz & Bélanger, 2018).

In this article, we use “transit” (country/migrant/migration) to refer to the stop-overs that migrants make to reach their desired destination (Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou, 2008). Yet, we urge to use this concept with caution. On the one hand, transit migration seems to describe a sort of linear migration by adding in-between stops (Schapendonk et al., 2018). Yet, the idea of this inevitable temporary sojourn in one or more in-between countries towards the desired destination has been questioned, in that such sojourns might become much longer than expected or even permanent, what some authors have described as “forced immobility” (Stock, 2013). On the other hand, transit is often seen as a void period of time where migrants simply wait for their opportunity to move on. Some scholars, however, have shown that even when they are temporarily immobile, migrants become emplaced in numerous ways, for example, by engaging with dynamics of humanitarian assistance, daily consumption, employment, seeking information about visas, or receiving funds from relatives abroad (Drotbohm & Winters, 2021). Rather than seeing transit as a period of waiting and uncertainty, we look at transit as an enmeshment of activities with different people and organizations within and beyond the national borders (Winters & Reiffen, 2019), which shape what we call “transnational social protection infrastructures,” that is, the range of formal, informal and semi-formal interactions that take place between the different social protection providers locally and transnationally.

Due to its historical tradition and geographical location, Mexico has traditionally been a transit country towards the United States for migrants from different countries in Central and South America. However, in recent years, new flows have been added to the existing ones. In 2016, over 17,000 Haitian and almost 4000 African migrants arrived in Mexican border cities such as Tapachula, Chiapas, with the purpose of requesting asylum in the United States (COLEF, CNDH, 2018: 26–27). Yet, the legal difficulties in arriving and requesting asylum in the United States push many migrants to stay in Mexico under uncertain legal and socio-economic conditions (Salvadore, 2019). Compared to Central American migration, African migration through Latin America is small, whereby most Latin American countries do not prioritize Africans in their migration management policies, which are often limited to facilitating transit towards the United States (Yates & Bolter, 2021). In other words, African migrants are seen as a transit population, whereby Latin American countries have very little interest to guarantee their access to rights—by issuing humanitarian protection or other legal statuses—while in transit or even upon settling (*ibid.*).

Based on findings from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with African migrants in Tijuana, and staff of TS organizations, this article explores the different and often improvised relationships between migrants, the TS, international agencies, and the state to articulate actions that give shape to transnational social protection infrastructures. This article makes a conceptual and empirical contribution to the existing literature on TSP, by analysing the role and different forms of the TS in a transit context, and questioning the impact of transnational activities in which they engage to support the migrants' well-being.

This article is organized as follows. We start by discussing current theoretical approaches to TSP, pointing out gaps in the literature, and also highlighting the role of the TS in Mexico. We then set the context in which African migration through Mexico takes place. After presenting the methodology, we analyse the findings, highlighting the crucial role

of the TS in the social protection infrastructures of the transit context. The last section concludes and provides policy recommendations.

FROM THE WELFARE STATE TO TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION—THE ROLE OF THE TS¹

Most studies on TSP have addressed the role of the welfare state as the main provider of social protection for migrants. This is probably due to the fact that most research has focused on populations from the Global South in Europe, where many countries have relatively strong welfare states (Gray & Levitt, 2020). By the end of the twentieth century, however, it became more and more clear for policymakers that they were dealing with a global economy and highly mobile populations, whose basic needs could not be met by the traditionally designed welfare states (*ibid.*). Policy discourse then moved away from territorialized social citizenship towards a more flexible and comprehensive notion of social protection, defined in terms of public, private, and informal initiatives (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). This has given way to a growing body of literature addressing different aspects of TSP, or the combination of resources provided by the state, the market, the TS, and informal social networks to cover the migrants' needs in the receiving country and those of their families back home (Levitt et al., 2017). Looking at TSP from this perspective has led to the problematization of which providers are formal (e.g., state, market, and TS) and which are informal (social networks), highlighting the intertwinness between the formal and the informal, in what has been referred to as “semi-formal” social protection schemes (Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2017). In this regard, TS organizations can be understood as a bridge between formal and informal social protection in that they often engage in activities that lay in a blurry area to cover for people's basic needs (Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2018).

To date, there is not a universally accepted conceptualisation of the TS and what types of entities co-exist under this term (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, we draw on Salamon and Sokolowski's approach, whereby the TS includes organizations a variety of individual activities with different degrees of formality (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2014: 21). On the one hand, TS organizations are (1) entities with a certain degree of institutionalization; (2) independent from the government; (3) autonomous and capable of controlling their own activities; and (4) they function on a voluntary basis, without making a profit from their activities (*ibid.*). TS organizations often include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CSOs, church groups, and labour unions that often provide low-cost health care, training, housing, or education to a defined group (Salazar & Voorend, 2019).

On the other hand, individual activities within the scope of the TS: (1) produce benefits for others and not just for the person performing them; (2) are recurrent; (3) are unpaid and carried out on a voluntary basis; and (4) do not perform activities aimed at benefiting members of one's family (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2014).

In the Global North economies, the TS involvement in social policy has been widely documented (Skleparis, 2015). Already in the 1980s Geiger and Wolch (1986) coined the concept of “shadow state,” to refer to the effects of the increasing importance of the TS to the operation of the welfare state to provide for programs traditionally assigned to the state-funded social welfare (Geiger & Wolch, 1986). At the same time, however, the state places specific rules, requirements, and restrictions on TS organizations to monitor their performance, enforce eligibility requirements, and implement sanctions. This is paradoxical, particularly for the CSOs, in that a common defining aspect is that they stand in opposition to the state (Hearn, 2001).

Whereas the TS can produce more efficient use of public resources and services, the main advantages are mostly linked with the sector's own nature and the social functions it serves (Rossel, 2016). The TS may add values to social policy, like a higher level of flexibility, adaptability, solidarity, and capacity to cater to underprivileged sectors (Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2018). The TS could improve the provision of public services because it has a better capacity to reach groups that are often marginalized in social policy (e.g., migrant population) that neither the market—because of their low profitability—nor the state—because of its inflexibility—can reach (Rossel, 2016).

In the specific area of migration, in the face of growing restrictions on the provision of public services to migrants in transit or with irregular status, the role of the TS is gaining more relevance as alternative provider of health services, language courses, temporary basic accommodation, and other forms of support (Faist, 2018). Despite its importance, scarce academic attention has been paid to the role of the TS, which provides for various migrants' needs, and the consequences, when they operate without the support of the state (ibid.). Only recently, in the light of the so-called migration or refugee crisis, scholars have used the term hybrid “shadow state” to refer to the decreasing or absent state financial support to migrant and refugee-serving TS, and the simultaneous increasing conformity of the latter to taking on various social welfare services for vulnerable populations, when the state is unable (or unwilling) to provide them (Skleparis, 2015).

The role of the TS in Mexico

In a context of little formal social protection, such as Mexico, social protection strategies for migrants (especially those in transit) are particularly complex, depending almost exclusively on the TS (Rossel, 2016). Due to the relatively weak and highly stratified welfare policies, the TS in Mexico has gained enough relevance, guarantying access to certain basic rights to populations often excluded from existing social protection instruments (ibid.).

In Mexico, the TS remains relatively small (Layton, 2009). According to some authors, this is due to a combination of reasons (Gaberman, 2003; Layton, 2009). First, historically the Mexican government has shown a longstanding hostility towards civil society. Second, there is a lack of institutionalized civic or philanthropic culture. Third, there is an inadequate inventory of organizations formally instituted. Fourth, there is a lack of professionalization among organizations, whereby the lack of knowledge to raise funds or manage the organization prevents them from thriving. Fifth, the Mexican legal framework imposes unnecessary burdens and limitations on the legal incorporation of organizations. Finally, the accountability system in Mexico is restricted to vertical forms of reporting between individual organizations and government regulators and donors, which has failed to induce confidence in the government officials, the media, many donors, as well as the larger public (ibid.).

Despite the relevance of the TS—in terms of resources provided, population served and influence on public policy—little academic attention has been placed to the implications of their processes in the region, especially within a migration context. In countries, such as Mexico, where “transit” migrants do not stay in the country long enough to be able to mobilize and claim rights, it is often the civil society that assumes the responsibility for voicing migrants' aspirations into citizenship rights claims, which are believed to be in the best interests of the migrants (Basok & Candiz, 2020). Despite their transformative role in advocating for the rights of one of the most vulnerable strata of society, the ambivalence of their goals—protecting migrants' rights to move towards the United States, on the one hand, and the right to stay and settle in Mexico, on the other—has been recently questioned by some scholars (ibid.).

Since the 1990s, the Mexican TS, in particular CSOs, has played a crucial role in voicing the extreme violence transit migrants experienced in Mexico by state and non-state actors. These solidarity movements resulted in legal and policy improvements, such as sanctions against abusive National Immigration Institute (INM) officials, improved conditions in the detention centres, or the 2011 Immigration law that granted migrants basic human rights such as access to medical care, education, the justice system, and the right to file human rights complaints (Basok & Candiz, 2020). Besides advocating for migrants' rights, Mexican CSOs also provide direct aid (e.g., accommodation, food, clothing, medical care, psychological counselling, and/or legal advice) along the main migratory routes towards the United States (Basok & Candiz, 2020).

SETTING THE CONTEXT: AFRICANS NAVIGATING THE LATIN AMERICAN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Back in 2012, Latin American countries had no policies to manage extra-regional migration, whereby any responses were ad-hoc, reactive, and uncoordinated. It was only since 2014, that some countries, including Mexico, developed formal policies to address extra-continental migration, including migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (Yates & Bolter, 2021). Yet, many of these countries lack the capacity to fully enforce the laws to provide protection or more permanent legal statuses, and to integrate migrants into society, should they decide to stay (*ibid.*).

Before 2019, African migrants would arrive at Mexico's southern border and frequently be apprehended by authorities. There, they would often experience a short period of detention before being issued exit permits (*oficios de salida*), which granted them 20–30 days to exit the country. However, under pressure from the United States, in an attempt to prevent them from moving northwards, in summer 2019, Mexico changed its policy and stopped issuing exit permits, resulting in hundreds of migrants being unable to leave southern Mexico. It was in Tapachula where migrant protests against this policy started. To put an end to the protests, Mexico started again to issue exit permits but only allowed migrants to leave the country through the southern border and return to Guatemala. While many refused to go to Guatemala, others decided to apply for asylum in Mexico's refugee agency (COMAR), some voluntarily and others without fully knowing the implications of what they were applying for, as we could observe in many of our interviews. As a result, some ended up in an irregular situation, which made it difficult to access basic social rights such as work, income, food, housing, and free medical care (González Zepeda & Serra Mingot, 2021).

However, thousands of migrants refused to apply for asylum because Mexico was not their intended destination. Mexico chose to stop recognizing the citizenship of many African migrants and began granting them, regularization for humanitarian reasons or recognition of stateless² status (Yates & Bolter, 2021). As our data shows, the lack of interpretation services by the Mexican government meant that few migrants understood that they had been declared stateless or what this condition meant. In fact, as stateless people, if these migrants arrive in the United States, they may face more difficulties when applying for asylum, because they have to prove that Mexico is not a safe place to live.

African migrants also face considerable obstacles to accessing their basic social protection rights during transit and to long-term integration. Theoretically, the issuance of resident statuses (including those recognized as stateless) to many African migrants in Mexico, allows them to access social services. Yet, in practice, there is wide-ranging direct and structural racism in detention centers, police violence, employment discrimination, and a lack of access to Mexico's education system. Another challenge is the lack of translation services for non-Spanish speakers, which makes it difficult to find jobs, access education for children, receive health care, and find housing (Yates & Bolter, 2021).

Under this panorama, International Organizations—such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—play an important role in the field of migration management in Mexico. Yet, their role is mostly institutional. As we observed during fieldwork, several CSOs had received UNHCR funds to build or develop their premises and sometimes to implement some specific programmes. The UNHCR also supported the COMAR in the registration of refugee cases, and also provided a card with some 2500\$MX per month to certain asylum applicants to allow them to buy food and other essential items. Yet, only two of our respondents had benefitted from this card. Moreover, recent research has shown that these organizations could do more to support the situation of these migrants, such as providing funds for language access and anti-racism efforts or improving the tracking of missing migrants, especially in the Darien gap (Yates & Bolter, 2021).

METHODS

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in July 2021 in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. We triangulated data obtained through in-depth interviews, digital interactions (e.g., WhatsApp follow-up messages, exchange of photographs, etc.), participant observations, and ethnographic notes. The project had a strong inductive character and was framed *along the way* based on specific insights from the field. The high mobility of this migrant group together with the changing situation of COVID-19 and unexpected outbreaks of violence in border cities, such as Reynosa or Matamoros, in Tamaulipas, made it almost impossible pre-select a research location in advance. Moreover, in many of the shelters or *casas del migrante*, there was a generalized confusion between African and Haitian migrants.

Once the northeast border was discarded, as a result of the high levels of violence registered in June, we decided to select Tijuana as the main research location. Firstly because it is one of the most important migration corridors in the world and secondly because we had information about the possible presence of these migrants in the city, particularly in “El Chaparral,” a well-known camp for migrants located at the border with the United States. Fieldwork took place in locations of high criminality, where both migrants and the researchers themselves faced vulnerabilities. At the same time, the precarious situation in which many migrants lived in Tijuana led to high and sudden mobility whenever there was a rumour that crossing the border was easier through another point or when a job opportunity emerged somewhere else.

We conducted 11 interviews with African migrants (10 men and 1 woman), 2 of whom were undocumented, while the others had some sort of permanent residence, mostly stateless. Their countries of origin were Cameroon (5), Guinea (2), Burkina Faso (1), Togo (1), Senegal (1), and Mauritania (1). Before conducting the interview, all participants were given a brochure of the project—in Spanish, English, or French—with information about the objectives of the project, the risks involved, the promise of confidentiality/anonymity, the possibility to withdraw, and the contact information of both researchers.

In the ethnographic interviews, we asked our respondents about different aspects of their migration trajectories from Africa to America, focusing on the support received by different actors, such as the state, social networks, and the TS. We also conducted interviews with three staff members of two CSOs in Tijuana and two officials from the IOM and UNHCR in Guadalajara (in person), Tijuana (in person), and Tapachula (via Zoom). In Tijuana, we visited the so-called “Filter Hotel” installed by IOM, where we also talked to some medical and managerial staff. These interviews dealt more specifically with the precise role of each organization, the services they provided, and the challenges they encountered. We also asked them about the main challenges faced by the African community, according to their own experiences.

In Tijuana, as well as in other Mexican cities, the number and type of TS organizations have changed a lot in the past years. According to a recent report, up till March 2020, there were 90 shelters on the Mexican Northern Border of Mexico, 31 of which were in Tijuana. The 93% of the migrants in these shelters were Central Americans (COLEF, 2020). Yet, during our fieldwork in Tijuana, we were only able to successfully contact five of them, two of which did not accept to talk to us.

TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION INFRASTRUCTURES

The limits to the state's capacity to address the needs of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Mexico can be seen as a trigger of different initiatives of the TS (both at the individual and organization levels), which benefit from a series of transnational practices that emerge through actions of people. Yet, whereas TS organizations may play a crucial role in providing basic welfare services, the state can actually hinder the development of their activities, be it by blatantly limiting their work or by fully detaching from the central planning and coordination of activities (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021).

As our data shows, the detachment of the state can create more inequalities among the vulnerable groups and even provoke serious conflicts between them. Against this background, the following cases show how many TS organizations and individual actions must resort to transnational resources and even go against the law to help people (e.g., facilitating abortions or bringing medicine from abroad). Although this situation puts them at risk at different levels, it also triggers the development of a transnational infrastructure of social protection for mobile populations.

“Esperanza Migrante”³ and “caring people”

In our fieldwork in Tijuana, we observed the crucial role that some CSOs played in the provision of basic services for migrants. “Esperanza Migrante” was one of them. Besides acting as a shelter for families and women, this organization also provided free legal advice and Spanish language classes. They also had migrants themselves working with them as community leaders. We had the chance to meet their African and Haitian community assistants, all of them women, whose job was to support African and Haitian migrants overcome difficulties, such as finding a job or accommodation.

Whereas the involvement of the Mexican state was virtually absent in their activities, “Esperanza Migrante” (as well as “Caring People”) counted on the cooperation of international agencies such as IOM, or the UN. As we talked to Janine, the African community assistant, she told us that she had gotten to know “Esperanza Migrante” through the IOM’s “Filter Hotel” in Tijuana, whose main objective was to channel COVID-free migrants to a specific shelter. Besides having been hosted at the “Filter Hotel,” Janine had also supported them in the provision of medical services, since she was a trained nurse back home. Interestingly, Janine was our only respondent who had been hosted at the IOM’s “Filter Hotel” in Tijuana. Although they were aware of the arrival of some 50 Nigerians and Cameroonians in the city, these migrants rarely sought accommodation in shelters. Instead, they gathered in small groups in cheap hotels downtown. According to the IOM staff, this was partly due because often the shelters were not prepared to fulfil some of their cultural practices (e.g., not eating pork). Yet, according to Janine, who had lived in several shelters, discrimination and attacks from other majority migrant groups were the main reasons why Africans preferred to live in their own micro-communities:

Many of them don't like... I don't want to judge, but many of the African don't like to live in the shelters, because when they arrive another Central Americans make like a difference. I live here [in Esperanza Migrante] for 7 months and don't have a problem, but then is arrived people that make problem with me. Not the people from the centre, the people we receive in the centre. Many of them have a bad attitude, have a bad heart. That's why the African and Haiti and prefer to take a house a big house and live together.

(Janine, Tijuana, July 2021)

Sami (21), a respondent from Guinea Conakry, told us that he had only heard horror stories of shelters being filthy and having people piled up, which was not something he wanted to experience. Out of all our respondents, Janine had also been the only one to be hosted at the premises of “Esperanza Migrante.” Upon his arrival in Tijuana, another Cameroonian male respondent had searched for accommodation there, but he was told they only took women and families. None of the other respondents had ever heard of “Esperanza Migrante” and the services it provided. It was only through Janine that a couple of respondents knew of the possibility to learn Spanish for free and get help to find accommodation. Yet, none of them was familiar with the organization itself.

When it came to more direct daily actions, “Esperanza Migrante” tended to coordinate more with other CSOs in the United States, such as “Black Lives Matter,” “Haitian Bridge Alliance,” or “Al Otro Lado,” organizations that

mostly support the Haitian and African migrant population. They only pointed to some cooperation with other local shelters when they did not have enough capacity to host people.

Patricia, the manager of the “Esperanza Migrante,” told us that in Tijuana, although the Municipal Directorate for Migrant Support was created in 2016, the Directorate had very few resources and its main function was to help deported nationals. In this regard, our UNHCR respondent confirmed the lack of information among public servants when in 2016 a significant number of Haitian migrants arrived at the northern border, which generated situations in which officials from the Ministry of Public Education, for example, requested documents that proved their regular stay in Mexico as a pre-requisite to enrol their children in the educational system, when this is not actually needed.

This situation also happened when it came to accessing healthcare services. According to Patricia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, officials of the Ministry of Health went to the shelters a couple of times to check their situation and to activate the protocols of confinement and social distancing. However, after those sporadic visits, the shelters were left to face the pandemic alone, with little information, whereby they had to design their own strategies and security measures to contain the spread of the virus. Besides the failure to provide adequate support for migrants and staff members to protect themselves against COVID-19, the lack of involvement of the state with these TS organizations put in danger their staff members in other ways:

...we stopped going [to *El Chaparral*] for our own safety, because in *El Chaparral* there's also organised crime, there are coyotes [...]. Some organisations, we used to go to provide information, but it was like an ant operation, because we were organisations giving information, but then coyotes told them a different thing. The problem is that there is no official information from the authorities, and that it crucial.

(Patricia, Tijuana, July 2021)

In Tijuana, we also visited another CSO supporting migrants and refugees, “Caring People.” This organization, made up of 4 medical staff, played a remarkable role in providing (emergency) healthcare services to over 500 active patients of multiple nationalities. On one of our visits to the centre, we talked to Daniela, the director, and accompanied her on one of her medical trips to a hospital. On the way, Daniela explained to us the origins of her organization back in 2016, when she used to work as a full-time doctor:

...there were many mothers here, many pregnant women, others with their babies, and waiting for hours and hours [...] and no one took responsibility, not the government of Mexico, not the government of the United States, they were just waiting, and no one provided any kind of support, help [...]. So we began to organize, my friend Patricia, who is now the founder of “Esperanza Migrante,” started by bringing *pozole* here to the border, I began to bring water, clothes, food, whatever we could, and especially for the little babies [...].

(Daniela, Tijuana, July 2021)

As Daniela told us, they witnessed how the lack of documentation and translation services resulted in many migrants being refused to receive basic medical attention in hospitals without understanding what was actually happening. Daniela made a particular emphasis on the cases of pregnant women:

We have many abortions as well, although this is not legal in the state, the reality is that many women suffer sexual assault during the trip, and even when they go to report it, few people are going to report, but even those who actually do it, they go to the forensic doctor, and they only make an assessment and that is it, they do not give them preventive treatment [...], there is no

capacity to avoid pregnancies, so when they arrive with us, because sometimes it is too late because it has already been confirmed that there is pregnancy, [...] so we have a support line to monitor the terminations by phone, and by WhatsApp we do everything to support, everything, although in the state it is not legal.

(Daniela, Tijuana, July 2021)

In supporting these women, “Caring People” was playing a crucial role in the social protection infrastructure tending to mobile populations in Tijuana, even though their activities were against the legal regulations in that particular state:

Exactly that is what they [the authorities] told me: ‘Don’t get in trouble, if someone is dying out there or they are giving birth on the sidewalk, don’t touch them, because you are the legal person responsible’. And what I told this inspector is that I made a Hippocratic oath, when you have the skills and knowledge to save a life and you don’t do it, that should take you to jail, because you know how to save a life and you are denying it [...].

(Daniela, Tijuana, July 2021)

The transnational links of this CSO seemed to play a crucial role in the orchestration of the social protection infrastructures to support mobile populations. As Daniela explained, they obtained financing through various funding campaigns on the Internet, as well as through individual donations and different activities that include the sale of T-shirts, chocolates, and requesting donations through GoFundMe. In addition to this, most of their volunteers (be they medical staff or not) came from the United States and other countries. Sometimes they also obtained funding through grants, most of them from the United States. Some USA organizations would also provide them with drugs:

It is illegal, one cannot go out there because [the drugs] are not Mexican, and we should not be giving US medicine. [...]. We make a circus to get the medicines, they can’t imagine, and then to cross them, we cross them in black garbage bags, behind the seat, yes, and always praying that they do not catch us because we enter Mexico with a lot of antibiotics.

(Daniela, Tijuana 2021)

Our interview with Daniela evidenced her awareness of the fact that they were providing services that they state should but cannot (or do not want to) provide. Yet, whereas she would like to have the acknowledgement of the state, she was not interested in receiving state funding.

I don’t know if we are interested them [the state] giving us a budget, because that would make us a branch of them, and then our information... we would stop our autonomy, and I think that is something very nice about this work [...], this freedom that we have, when we do not have a commitment to the state, we can have our own [...] resources, regulations and everything, and we do not depend on them, and they will not use our work to make it look like theirs.

(Daniella, Tijuana, 12th July 2021)

Angie and the “Afriken”

The absence of the state as coordinator and provider of social protection needs for vulnerable populations has led to the emergence of a transnational social protection infrastructure made up of a myriad of relationships and

actions among different actors. Indeed, the actions of ordinary citizens from “el otro lado” might be seen as a response to the limits of the national government. We aim to illustrate this with the following case.

We met “L’Afriken” quite by chance through the Haitian community living in *El Chaparral*, where hundreds of asylum seekers of different nationalities waited for months in inhumane conditions for a chance to request refuge in the United States. Although we could only find one African in the camp, a Haitian boy put us on the phone with “L’Afriken” (this was the name saved on his phone), an African man who from time to time “came to help us,” a Haitian woman in the camp said.

“L’Afriken” had arrived in Mexico over 10 years ago and had slowly made it his home. Although he worked in a factory, “L’Afriken” invested part of his free time in helping the black community in Tijuana, including Africans and Haitians. One day during our fieldwork in Tijuana, “L’Afriken” offered to help us and meet more African people downtown. He arrived with a two-hour delay to the appointment and seemed agitated talking with someone on the phone in a mixture of French, English, and some Spanish. We followed him along the streets as he continued talking. When he hanged up he told us what was going on. Apparently, there was a woman in the United States, Angie, who regularly sent money to support the Haitian community in Tijuana. On this occasion, she had sent “L’Afriken” some 250\$US to be split among those dwelling in *El Chaparral*. “L’Afriken” had made calculations based on an informal list of the people living there, but once he started to distribute the money, there were more people than expected, so the amount per head was less. People then started to get nervous and started to throw accusations against him. Angie’s goodwill to help the Haitian community in an informal manner, that is, through “L’Afriken,” put the latter in a very delicate and potentially dangerous position. Yet, as “L’Afriken” explained:

[...] The help only comes from the other side. All the help that I know comes from the United States, the people from there come, they call me and tell me ‘I want to help the Africans, go and look for them’, and I go looking for all the Africans to distribute the aid.

(Afriken, Tijuana, July 2021)

Despair, uncertainty, and the dire conditions in the informal settlement of *El Chaparral* have triggered violent encounters between migrants from different nationalities. In mid-2020, Haitian migrants were the majority in *El Chaparral*, but as thousands of other migrants arrived and took shelter in the camp, many Haitian abandoned the informal settlement. Yet, as rumours about the United States opening the borders continued to circulate, many of them returned, and the fights to be the “first ones” to enter the United States started. Haitians claimed to be discriminated against, not only by other migrants but also from Mexican organizations working in the camp. In this regard, some of the Haitians we talked to were convinced that the organization “Al Otro Lado” supported more African than Haitian migrants to cross to the other side. This was confirmed by Patricia:

I have seen [...] that the institutions try to put them against each other or the population itself: an example is that for this study that we did, we had a focus group with Africans and many of them told us ‘at the INM they treat us badly because the Haitians arrived a few years before and arrived in a disordered way and broke the rules; so they cross us off as Haitians, but in reality it’s the Haitians’ and vice versa as well. [...] in the discourse of the authorities they handle it this way too in order to create divisions among them.

(Patricia, Tijuana, July 2021)

As opposed to the lack of knowledge that most of our respondents had about “Esperanza Migrante,” most of them knew “L’Afriken” and had received direct support from him. As we witnessed on one occasion at the entrance of the Hotel, whenever he received financial or in-kind help (e.g., food donations), “L’Afriken” was able to mobilize a large part of the African community in Tijuana to come and receive part of the support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Migrants around the world face risks and uncertainties in their quest to gain access to basic services to achieve the minimum level of well-being. This is especially true for those with an irregular migratory status or in transit since formal social protection systems are not designed to guarantee their access to basic social rights. In the context of Mexico, the lack of involvement of the state, the migrants' lack of financial resources to access market-provided services, the small size of the African community, and the mistrust of other migrant groups (partly induced by the government), leave individual migrants dependent almost solely on the TS and their transnational social networks. In this article, we have specifically focused on how the relations between states, the TS, and the migrants shape the mechanisms to provide and access social protection. The cases we presented show that state absenteeism in contexts of extreme vulnerability puts TS organizations and individuals in a difficult (if not dangerous) position. While studies on TSP have celebrated the role of the TS to fill in some of the gaps that the geographically fixed welfare state is not ready to provide, this article has shown some of the limitations of the role of this sector, which can lead to additional problems and inequalities for the migrants themselves but also for the TS staff.

The delicate balance in the provision of social welfare services to vulnerable migrant populations through proxies (e.g., TS) without substantial state financial support and regulation can be quickly destabilized, which can give way to even more severe social problems (Skleparis, 2015). For example, while the job of “Caring people” could be justified from the perspective of basic human rights (e.g., not letting people die in the streets), some of their actions to help people—often semi-formal transnational actions—were actually against the Mexican law, which could eventually put them in trouble with the legal system. In a similar vein, Angie sending money privately from the United States to “L’Afriken,” a person she knows and trusts, to be distributed informally among a very vulnerable and volatile community was actually putting him in a very delicate situation, which could have ended up in physical violence against him. Although the TS might be much more flexible in adapting to upcoming and unexpected challenges, what this article shows is that it is also susceptible to generating additional social problems among vulnerable groups but also for the TS employees.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article introduces the idea of “infrastructures of transnational social protection.” That is, rather than understanding TSP as the different resources that migrants can access nationally and transnationally, we highlight the importance of the interactions between the different social protection providers (e.g., states, markets, TS, and informal networks) in shaping the dynamics in which resources are made available. As the cases have shown, these dynamics are highly semi-formal, which reinforces the fact that in our current globalized world, formal and informal institutions are bound to work together.

Given that this type of migration could continue to increase and new migration flows might emerge, it is essential that transit countries in Latin America, such as Mexico, improve their capacity to address specific challenges at different levels. While states might not have the means, the will or the interest to financially support migrants in transit, we propose some strategies in which states could facilitate the work of the TS and stop the emergence of new inequalities:

First, states should acknowledge the crucial role that the TS plays in accompanying and supporting (especially but not only) invisibilized and small—but slowly growing—migrant populations.

Second, states could invest some resources in training the staff of TS organizations, both in language skills and funding acquisition. This would not only be beneficial for the migrants but also for the social capital of the Mexican population themselves. As we could observe, the strong academic background and transnational ties of the managers and staff members at both CSOs allowed them not only to obtain more funding (mostly from abroad) but also to support migrants in more ways than just providing a very basic space to sleep, as it was the case for other locally run shelters. As the person in charge at the “Filter Hotel” explained to us, the “social capital” of certain CSOs, allows them to have more types of collaborations that they do not have with other shelters.

Third, states should work with the TS and not against it. This could be done in different ways, for instance, by acting as a sort of umbrella organization, coordinating the different (and sometimes overlapping) efforts that many TS organizations are undertaking. This, however, should not translate into the state controlling the resources of the TS or dictating what their activities should be. The independence and flexibility of TS organizations should not be lost. At the same time, the TS, as a first-hand observer of these invisibilized groups, could support the state by identifying the diversity and composition of these groups, informing about the risks and challenges they experience on their journey (including bureaucratic obstacles); or articulating strategies towards a consistent social protection policy that establishes links between TS organizations, state institutions, international agencies, and migrant populations. In this regards, it would be crucial to have clear and updated flows of information between the state and the TS.

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ORCID

Ester Serra Mingot  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5399-0672>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ To date there is no clear distinction between the TS and CSOs. For the purposes of this paper, we use the TS because of two reasons. First, it is the term used in the TSP literature. Second, the TS is a more overarching concept which includes also individual actions, such as the ones presented in this paper. We use the term CSO to refer to formally established organizations.
- ² In Mexico statelessness is determined by the INM through an administrative procedure, when someone in an irregular status and placed under detention. Even if the person can produce a valid passport, the INM has to obtain a confirmation from the corresponding Embassy or Consulate. While this is relatively easy with Central America, most African countries have no diplomatic representation in Mexico. So, if after 60 days the origin country has not provided any answer, the INM starts a process to issue the stateless status.
- ³ Pseudonyms have been used—for people and organizations—to protect their anonymity and guarantee their security.

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