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Resilience in Precarity: A Contiguum Approach to Understanding the Non-Linear Lived Trajectories of Afghan and Eritrean Refugee Families

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences and life trajectories of refugees with Eritrean and Afghan migration backgrounds across origin, first-asylum and transit contexts, and everyday life in the current country of settlement, Germany. Drawing on biographic-narrative interviews and interpretation sessions with community experts, it reconstructs displacement as a non-linear process throughout which precarity and resilience are simultaneously produced. The findings show how interlocutors – across all displacement contexts – simultaneously sought protection, generated livelihoods, pursued education and skills, cared for family members, navigated legal uncertainty, and reoriented long-term plans. Refugee trajectories are not simply non-linear; they are contiguums in which structurally produced precarity and recurring practices of resilience are continuously reconfigured across overlapping, not distinct, institutional and biographical domains. The article hence argues for translating the humanitarian-development contiguum perspective to studying the recursive ruptures, overlapping experiences, and parallel needs across refugee trajectories.

1. Introduction

Contemporary forced migration is characterized by enduring conflicts and instances of multiple, so-called chain, displacements. According to latest figures, in 2025 two-thirds of refugees globally lived in so-called protracted situations (UNHCR 2025). Their histories of displacement are additionally impacted by evolving border policies and increasingly temporal and incoherent legal classifications that result in prolonged uncertainty and liminality for refugees (Belabbas et al. 2022). For many refugees, the prolonged instability hence spans multiple contexts: from their countries of origin, through neighboring transit nations, to countries where they subsequently move to and try to settle. This paper relies on biographical and network-centered analyses to examine how refugees experience structurally induced precarity across these different contexts – manifested in fluctuating legal statuses, limited opportunities, and persistent threats to long-term stability – and how they nevertheless cultivate relational, context-specific resilience across phases and places of their migration trajectories.

Ethnographic and qualitative studies have been pivotal in elucidating refugees' everyday practices and perspectives faced with evolving legal frameworks and reception contexts. Amidst contextual constraints and uncertainties, recent scholarship emphasizes processes of future-making, evolving aspirations, and agency across different temporal and spatial contexts (Scharrer et al. 2024). Beyond individualized understandings of agency and resilience, this perspective highlights two interconnected processes: the structural production of precarity, and the socially mediated, networked practices through which refugees seek to stabilize their lives and build longer-term futures in changing contexts (Ilcan et al. 2018; Anholt and Sinatti 2020). Reconceptualization necessitates a systematic, family- and network-centered reconstruction of refugees' routes, capturing ambivalences, support, and pressure, separations, hierarchies, and moments of inclusion/exclusion that precipitate onward movement, pauses, or re-routing.

Research into refugees' trajectories shows how lives, rather than following a unidimensional and unidirectional path, unfold over multiple and overlapping contexts, i.e. non-linear succession (FitzGerald and Arar 2018). Drawing on transnational and mobility literatures, scholars have highlighted how multi-sited lives are shaped through cross-border ties, obligations, and the repeated reconfiguration of plans as conditions evolve (Bailey et al. 2002).

Despite these advancements, empirical studies with refugees, even qualitative and biographical studies, infrequently account for the entire refugee trajectory – that is origin, transit, and settlement countries. Within this study, we investigate the experiences of individuals with Eritrean and Afghan migration backgrounds across origin, transit, and destination contexts, including their everyday life in Germany, to comprehend how refugee families cultivate resilience throughout non-linear life courses characterized by uncertainty. Utilizing biographic-narrative interviews with refugee families, we examine how individuals navigate precarious situations while employing resilience as a relational, situated practice. In doing so, we methodologically address 'the whole trajectory' gap by reconstructing narratives that span experiences before departure, during displacement and transit, and after arrival, while preserving the narrators' own temporal logic and vocabulary (Rosenthal 2022).

This article makes three main contributions to research on forced migration and humanitarian action. First, it demonstrates that precarity and resilience are not confined to particular moments of displacement but are recursively produced and negotiated across entire refugee trajectories. Rather than treating origin, transit, and settlement as analytically separate contexts, we show how structurally produced instability and situated responses accumulate and are continuously reconfigured over time. Second, the article advances resilience research by conceptualizing resilience not as a context-specific outcome or individual characteristic, but as a repertoire of relational practices that reappear across different institutional and geographical settings. Livelihood strategies, care, education, bureaucratic navigation, and future-making emerge as recurring practices through which refugees seek to stabilize their lives despite changing forms of precarity. Third, we introduce the humanitarian concept of the contiguum as an analytical perspective for studying refugee lived trajectories. We argue that displacement is better understood as a constellation of overlapping life domains and simultaneous projects than as a sequence of discrete stages. In doing so, the paper bridges debates on humanitarian action and refugee trajectories and proposes a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing displacement beyond linear continuum models.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we delineate the conceptual framework, defining precarity as structurally induced instability and resilience as a relational, context-specific practice, while introducing a continuum–contiguum distinction that informs our analysis. Second, we detail the research design and methods, with particular emphasis on biographic-narrative interviewing and the reconstruction of comprehensive trajectory accounts. In the third section, we present the empirical findings, tracing non-linear trajectories across origin, transit, and Germany, and analyzing how interlocutors navigate simultaneity and recursive movements while pursuing long-term perspectives. Finally, we discuss the implications for scholarship and for reception and integration approaches, highlighting how non-linear

oriented understandings can more effectively align policy imaginaries with refugees' lived temporalities and family-based strategies.

2. Between Precarity and Resilience: Rethinking Migrant Trajectories through a Continuum Lens

This section develops the analytical framework of the study. It brings together two conceptual perspectives that guide the analysis of migrants' experiences and trajectories. First, it engages with the contested concepts of precarity and resilience, showing how both are useful but also limited when applied uncritically to migrant lives. Second, it introduces a continuum lens to capture the non-linear, overlapping, and shifting nature of migration trajectories. Taken together, these perspectives allow the study to analyze how migrants navigate changing conditions of structural challenges, agency, adaptation, and constraint across different temporal and spatial contexts.

2.1. Precarity and resilience: contested concepts and our analytical adoption

This paper capitalizes on resilient responses of refugee families to various, systemically and contextually coined, precarious circumstances to understand not only the obstacles they face in following their displacement but also their needs and aspirations across their trajectory. We employ the concepts of precarity and resilience to elucidate the mechanisms through which uncertainty is generated and coped with across temporal, spatial, and legal contexts. Precarity, as we use it, encapsulates the multifaceted exposures to political, legal, economic, and social conditions that limit access to rights, services, mobility, and stability (Wyss 2022). The notion of precarity here emphasizes instability that is structurally induced, for example arising from systemic or political factors (Atak et al., 2018; Öcek et al., 2023), rather than attributable to individual shortcomings. Such a structure-focused analytical framework is preferable to an individual-centered lens that looks at precarious circumstances as instances of personal "vulnerability", which may inadvertently attribute fragility to individuals or groups, rather than to the governance conditions that engender unequal exposure to harm (Brownet al. 2017; Atak et al. 2018).

From understanding the various precarious contexts that refugees found themselves in across their trajectory, i.e. what enabled and constrained their options and choices, we turn towards the resilient responses that refugees use in response to the systemic precarities. In this context, resilience should be conceptualized as those factors and conditions – individual (Kuo 2014; Sleijpen et al. 2017) or social (Adger et al. 2002; Estêvão et al. 2017) – that influence how people anticipate, cope and recover from adversity and stress (Ager et al. 2015). Recognizing that resilience is sometimes employed in policy discourse as a demand for displaced individuals to "cope" under containment, we importantly do not define resilience as a personal characteristic or individual trait but as a relational, practice-based adaptation within precarious conditions (Anholt and Sinatti 2020).

Instead, we consider resilience to be made up of situated practices and resources including strategies, routines, know-how, and social connections through which individuals achieve workable outcomes despite constraints (Windle 2011; Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012; Sleijpen et al. 2017). These practices or responses, while potentially profane at first glance, e.g. income generation, bureaucratic navigation, care arrangements, are significant in sustaining future prospects and mobility options (Öcek et al. 2023). Additionally, resilience can be entangled with meaning-making and purpose, sustaining the capacity to endure and imagine futures even when structural insecurity persists. With this conceptual framework established, our primary inquiry concerns how precarity and resilience manifest across whole trajectories rather than within a singular moment or location. In our case, this means examining how the social structures inequality in migration – i.e. precarities – and individual agency – i.e. resilience – interact. From the resilient responses of forced migrants across their trajectories, we can learn not only about their lived experiences of the precarities, but also about their hierarchies of meaning.

2.2. Non-linear and overlapping trajectories: Adopting a contiguum lens

An important aspect that can constrain the understanding of refugees' needs and aspirations, hence a life-goal perspective to refugee resilience, is the often-assumed linearity of their displacement trajectory. Such linear depictions of displacement – as a sequence of departure → transit → arrival, followed by, again linear, stages of integration – do not correspond to forced migrants' real-life trajectories (Wyss 2022).

We build on conceptual advancements in migration sociology that move beyond understandings of forced migration as linear progression through discrete stages (FitzGerald and Arar 2018). This includes conceptualizing refugee trajectories as emergent and multi-sited processes shaped by intersecting legal, infrastructural, jurisdictional, and social realities. Accordingly, journeys are not understood as intervals between departure and arrival, but as active sites of decision-making in which migrants negotiate transnational ties, care obligations, livelihood strategies, and possibilities for onward movement (Bailey et al. 2002; Crawley and Jones 2021; Turcatti 2022). Research on migration temporalities further shows how waiting, interruption, acceleration, reversal, and repetition continually reorder migrants' opportunities and aspirations, producing trajectories that are rarely straightforward or predictable (Griffiths et al. 2013). This perspective draws attention to the concurrent and shifting endeavors through which refugees seek protection, secure livelihoods, pursue education, provide care, and imagine futures, as these priorities are continually reconfigured by changing policies, opportunities, and constraints (Ilcan et al. 2018; Wyss 2022).

To elucidate the concept of overlap and non-linearity in our work on refugee resilience in precarity, we borrow from literature on the humanitarian–development nexus and its distinction between continuum and contiguum approaches. Continuum models presuppose sequential phases – relief → recovery → development – often associated with orderly transitions (Ramet 2012; EP-DG EXPO 2016). Much of the work with refugees and forced migrant communities in humanitarian and relief contexts, has built upon

conceptions that treat resilience as something that is achieved through building resilient systems, communities, or institutions (Anholt 2020) in stepwise, sequential processes (Ager et al. 2015).

Conversely, contiguum approaches regard crises as coexisting needs and pressures necessitating parallel responses (Ramet 2012; Gómez and Kawaguchi 2018). We extend this idea beyond humanitarian programming and argue that the concept of contiguum is equally useful for analysing refugee lives. Rather than only describing overlapping events and non-linear temporalities, the contiguum perspective captures the simultaneous coexistence of multiple institutional, social, and biographical logics. Refugees are often expected to navigate humanitarian assistance, asylum procedures, labor markets, educational systems, family obligations, and transnational responsibilities at the same time. These domains are not sequential stages but interdependent spheres whose demands continually intersect and reshape one another. The analytical value of the contiguum therefore lies not simply in recognizing simultaneity, but in understanding how different systems of governance and everyday life overlap within individual biographies. Figure 1 illustrates this overlap by depicting the intersecting domains of humanitarian action, recovery, stabilization, development, and peace-/state-building across a conflict–peace spectrum (EP-DG EXPO 2016). A straightforward example is instructive: following an earthquake, agencies may organize efforts sequentially – initially focusing on life-saving relief, followed by recovery and development once the emergency "phases out". However, affected individuals seldomly adhere to these linear steps. Even while addressing immediate disruptions – such as shelter, food, and safety – many begin planning and acting towards long-term rebuilding, such as enhancing housing to withstand future shocks. In essence, survival, recovery, and futureproofing occur simultaneously in everyday life.

The contiguum perspective holds at least two important implications to studying the lived experiences, needs and aspirations of refugees: First, it challenges reception systems that continue to treat the lives of refugees as primarily organizable through stage-based models: displaced individuals do not experience life "in phases" but rather manage concurrent demands and shifting constraints across time and space (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Zetter 2015, 2020). Today, much research and most policies continue to rely, either explicitly or implicitly, on continuum logics that conceptualize displacement as a sequence of stages such as asylum application → learning the language → finding work → finding housing → applying for family reunification.

Second, it reminds us that limiting our analyses to a single context – whether the context in which crises lead to displacement or a reception context – does not allow for an encompassing assessment of refugees' needs. Although precarity and resilience are increasingly conceptualized as structurally generated and relational, few studies to date reconstruct refugee experiences as comprehensive, interconnected trajectories, that is as "relational, open-ended processes which may be characterized by multiple journeys and experiences of immobility" that should be understood in isolation (Turcatti 2022, p. 704). Consequently, it remains challenging to discern how insecurity accumulates, transforms, and is navigated across multiple precarious contexts (Ilcan et al. 2018; Wyss 2022).

In the following, this study addresses the existing “trajectory-gap” by reconstructing comprehensive accounts of the trajectories of Afghan and Eritrean refugees, from their countries of origin, transit contexts, and daily lives in Germany. We carefully outline how their routes, detours, pauses, restarts, and continued movements unfold (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Gómez and Kawaguchi 2018). The employed framework guides our analysis of displacement trajectories, not simply as non-linear processes, but as contiguums in which structurally produced precarity and recurring practices of resilience are continuously reconfigured across overlapping, not distinct, institutional and biographical domains.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and methodological approach

The following analysis examines experiences of precarity and resilience experienced along the migration trajectories of Eritrean and Afghan refugees currently residing in Germany. Empirically, it is positioned within the broader dynamics of forced migration from the Horn of Africa and Afghanistan, influenced by authoritarian governance, prolonged armed conflict, and intersecting regimes of border control, asylum, and integration in Europe (UN 2026; UNHCR 2026).

To capture these processes characterized by displacement, uncertainty, and transformation, we adopt a trajectory-based perspective drawing on a qualitative biographic-narrative research design. Such an in-depth approach, expanding on anthropological and sociological conceptions of migration as socially embedded and historically situated, is particularly adept at capturing how individuals experience, narrate, and interpret complex life trajectories. Biographic methods facilitate the reconstruction of lived experiences over time while emphasizing narrators’ own temporal logics, categories, and pivotal moments (Rosenthal and Loch 2002; Rosenthal 2022). Within biographic research literature, an expanding body of scholarship advocates for researchers to set aside preconceived notions and permit participants to articulate their narratives in their own terms (Finlay 2009; Rosenthal 2022), considering self-biographies as contextually situated and re-narratable accounts rather than static records (Valenta 2010). This is pivotal to studying the trajectories of forced migration, where experiences speak to a multitude of changing labels, institutional interactions, or temporal disruptions (Öner and Seerar Westerberg 2025). Furthermore, the narrator’s own sequencing of events – beyond chronological order – can illuminate how meaning is constructed across fragmented settings and times (Rosenthal 2022).

The empirical data is derived from 32 biographic-narrative interviews, 16 with Eritrean and 16 with Afghan refugees. Whenever feasible, interviews were conducted with multiple adult members of the same family to capture intra-family dynamics, shared decision-making processes, and intergenerational perspectives. This was achieved for 5 Eritrean and 5 Afghan families.

3.2. Data collection procedures

The interviews follow the biographic-narrative interview method developed by Rosenthal and colleagues (Rosenthal 1993; 2006; Rosenthal and Loch 2002). Each session commences with an open narrative

prompt, encouraging participants to articulate their life stories in their own terms, without interruption. During this initial phase, interviewers confine their role to attentive listening and note-taking. Follow-up questions are introduced only after the uninterrupted narration, facilitating a deeper exploration of specific events, transitions, and experiences, particularly in relation to family dynamics, mobility decisions, interactions with institutions, and future orientations.

The study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical standards and was registered with and approved by the researchers' institute's ethics committee (procedure coder EK05/2023). Participants were recruited through community-based networks, facilitated by colleagues with long-standing connections to Eritrean and Afghan communities and proficiency in Tigrinya and Dari. These colleagues served as trusted intermediaries, participating in community events such as weddings, baptisms, and social gatherings, which facilitated access while fostering trust. Participation was strictly voluntary; some individuals initially expressed interest but later withdrew, a decision that was fully respected. The network of community contacts ensured recruitment with minimal pressure or coercion.

All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Personal identifiers were removed, and all data were stored in accordance with GDPR-compliant data management procedures. Given the sensitivity of migration biographies, particular attention was paid to emotional safeguarding during interviews and interpretation sessions. Where feasible, anonymized materials have been or will be made available for secondary analysis via the qualitative research data center *Qualiservice*.

3.3. Data analysis

Interview transcripts were subjected to sequential case reconstruction, ensuring the preservation of each narrator's temporal structure and narrative logic (Rosenthal 1993; 2022). Initial coding captured participants' own wording and sequencing, which then progressed to an interpretive analysis of meaning-making concerning precarity, resilience, belonging, and future planning. Subsequently, a cross-case comparison was conducted to discern recurring patterns, ruptures, recursions, and reorientations across trajectories. This dual approach enhanced both the specificity of individual biographies and the identification of shared structural dynamics across cases (Marotta 2020). Coding and thematic analysis were performed using MAXQDA software. Consistent with the methodologies of König (2022) and Finlay (2009), we reflexively challenge our empirical work, moving back and forth between descriptive accounts of respondents' lived experiences, our empirically sorting and developing of categories and cases and our theory-informed interpretation.

In addition to the individual interview work, the study included two expert-based interpretation sessions, one focusing on Eritrean and the other on Afghan contexts, each comprising three participants. These participants were experts and community representatives, including practitioners and scholars, possessing extensive contextual knowledge of their respective countries of origin. The sessions were organized and facilitated by the two principal authors, with assistance from two colleagues affiliated with their institute, who supported the organization and execution of the sessions.

The interpretation sessions were conceived as a reflexive and dialogical analytical tool, not as a means of validating findings, but to critically engage with and deepen the researchers' interpretations, surface emic categories, and identify alternative readings grounded in contextual expertise (König 2019, 2022). Selected, anonymized excerpts from the biographic interviews were shared and collectively analyzed during these sessions. Methodologically, the sessions adhered to a multi-step interpretive procedure (Wimmer et al. 2023). In the initial phase, participants were invited to focus on their spontaneous reactions and thoughts when reading the excerpts, without searching for deep interpretations. This phase prioritized immediate resonances, affective reactions, and salient textual elements, closely attending to interviewees' wording, sequencing, categories, and turning points. This descriptive orientation reflects our methodological approaches that seek to trace how experiences are felt and narrated as lived before engaging in theory-laden interpretation (Finlay 2009; König 2022).

In the next phase, the sessions transitioned towards meaning making and interpretation. Participants collaboratively examined both manifest and latent meanings, including ambivalences, silences, and tensions, and reflected on themes such as belonging, exclusion, familial obligations, and future orientations. This interpretive work emerged from within the text itself, rather than through the imposition of external theoretical frameworks. Following Marotta (2020) and Finlay (2009), the design explicitly recognizes that description and interpretation are complementary yet in tension, and that the reflexive research needs to hold both closely together. Throughout the sessions, participants were encouraged to critically reflect on the researchers' preliminary readings, thereby identifying blind spots and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions.

4. Results: Eritrean and Afghan Refugees' Lived Trajectories as Non-Linear Processes of Precarity and Resilience

Across both our empirical fields, the biographic interviews as well as the interpretation sessions, participants did not narrate displacement as a linear movement from origin, through transit, to arrival in Germany. Rather, they described interconnected life trajectories in which earlier experiences continued to shape later decisions. Protection, work, education, family responsibilities, mobility, waiting, legal status, and future-making appeared as simultaneous and overlapping domains. The Eritrean interpretation session described displacement as a "complex trajectory" in which imminent military service, blocked education, interrupted professional aspirations, family responsibilities, transit violence, and uncertainty in Germany remained closely connected (Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025). The Afghan interpretation session similarly emphasized that the excerpts showed "what lies behind a person, or what the person brought with them from home and has to continue working on here in Germany" (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025). These interpretation sessions support what the interviews show: origin, first asylum, transit, Germany, and future-making are not experienced as separate stages, but as connected parts of one lived trajectory.

This poses a conceptual challenge for presenting the results. Our analysis is organized across countries of origin, first asylum, transit, and current settlement, not because we understand refugee trajectories as

sequential or clearly bounded stages, but because this structure allows us to reconstruct recursive patterns of simultaneous precarious situations and resilient responses. We trace these comparable overlapping experiences across the different settings through which refugees move while trying to build longer-term perspectives. With this in mind, studying migration through the contiguum lens highlights interconnected and evolving processes of closely linked experiences across places and periods. Organizing the results across origin, first asylum, transit, and settlement therefore is not meant to presuppose a linear path, but to carve out the continuities, overlaps, and recursive reorientations that characterize refugee trajectories.

4.1. Country of origin: Hopes, interrupted futures, and the beginning of displacement

Across both Eritrean and Afghan interviews, the country of origin was not narrated only as a place of danger or departure. Participants also spoke about childhood, family, schooling, work, professional ambition, political participation, and hope. Displacement began when these already existing life projects were blocked, made unsafe, or became impossible to continue (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025).

Among Eritrean participants, future-making was often closely connected to education and service to society. One Eritrean father, born in 1991 and later trained in electrical work in Germany, described how strongly his early life was shaped by education and family expectations:

Family was very important to me, and my father's commitment to education shaped the way I saw life. From a young age, I had a strong educational foundation and clear dreams for the future. I wanted to graduate, to continue my studies, to perhaps pursue a master's degree, and to serve both my people and my country. Until around Grade 10, I had never really imagined leaving Eritrea. At that time, my future was still something I imagined inside the country.

His account shows that departure was not the starting point of his trajectory. Before migration, there was already a future imagined inside Eritrea. What changed was the political and economic environment in which that future had to be pursued. He linked this change to militarization, the long "no war, no peace" situation and military confrontation along Eritrean and Ethiopian borders, and the absence of prospects even for educated youth:

Everything was overshadowed by military priorities. The economy suffered, and education suffered too. You could see that even people who had studied hard and graduated before us did not have a clear future. They remained blocked.

When he explained why he left, he did not describe migration as an easy or desired choice. Rather, departure emerged when the path toward education and contribution became increasingly closed.

A similar pattern appears in the biography of a 40-year-old Eritrean mother of three who had trained and worked as a nurse. Her life in Eritrea was marked by education, professional commitment, and a strong wish to serve society. She studied nursing, worked in the operating theatre, continued further study in Public Health Administration, and later worked at the Ministry of Health. Her account shows that exile interrupted an already established professional life. She had not imagined exile as her future. However, economic hardship, single motherhood, national service pressure, and the impossibility of living peacefully with her children gradually changed her situation:

My life had become completely fragmented ... disordered ... exhausting. Even weekends were no longer times when one could sit peacefully with one's children. I had never really imagined exile. Everything I had studied, all my strength, all my dreams ... I wanted to use them to serve my people… But life changed… I then received the notice for national service. That was the moment when… thoughts of disappearing from my country began to return again and again. I thought about it for a very long time. For around eleven months, I barely slept.

The Afghan interviews show a similar pattern, although shaped by different political conditions. Depending on the social background of the interviewees, Afghanistan appeared as a place of education, work, public participation, or family life before renewed insecurity surrounding the NATO forces' withdrawal and the violent transition that saw the Taliban return to power in 2021 devastated the livelihoods of vast parts of the population. A highly educated, at the time of the interview 38-years-old[1], Afghan family father from Mazar-i-Sharif, described the period between the Taliban reigns (2001–2021) as a time of possibility and public engagement:

So new life started. A new government came; international community came… I was selected to be student of journalism and mass communications… I contributed to writing to newspapers. And I worked for the public TV in Afghanistan, and I participated in youth association, in sport association and photography… And I also started to teach children English.

His life in Afghanistan was marked by education, working, and public activity. However, when the Taliban returned, his professional visibility became dangerous. When he was in Germany on a professional trip, his family advised him against returning to Afghanistan:

My father… said don't ever come back. The Taliban have taken over everywhere nearby… Especially you, who is a journalist, you who was a university professor. Everyone in Mazar-i-Sharif knows who you are. When the Taliban return, you will be in trouble… What will happen to your children?… Then the Taliban did finally return… So, we ended up staying.

Across the Eritrean and Afghan interviews, the trajectories did not start with movement itself but with the overlapping restructuring of life projects under increasing precarity. The interruption of education, professional aspirations, and family responsibilities already marked the coexistence of protection needs and livelihood concerns of future-making before departure. The country of origin was therefore not simply the place people left behind. It remained part of later trajectories because education, professional

identity, family responsibility, and interrupted hopes would continue to shape decisions in transit and Germany. Viewed through a contiguum lens, these accounts show that displacement did not even begin with physical mobility.

4.2. First-asylum countries and lived trajectories

The interviews show that first-asylum countries were not experienced as short pauses before onward movement to Europe. Rather, they were lived contexts in which refugees tried to find work, continue their professional trajectories, cared for children, negotiated legal restrictions, and reassessed their future possibilities. Across both Afghan and Eritrean cases, first asylum was marked by precarious living conditions, limited rights, and restricted access to work, education, and secure residence (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025). At the same time, interlocutors did not describe themselves as simply waiting. They tried to stabilize everyday life through informal work, small businesses, remittances, family support, camp networks, and careful planning for possible onward movement (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025).

For Afghan participants, Iran was a central first-asylum context. It was described as a place of legal and economic exclusion, but also as a place where refugees tried to create stability. A 30-year-old Afghan man described how Afghan families were restricted in schooling, ownership, communication, and work in Iran:

We weren't actually allowed to attend the normal state school, but we went to a private school instead… You couldn't just have something for yourself, a store, an apartment, or a car. You had to do all these things through an Iranian person. If you wanted to buy a SIM card, you had to find an Iranian person.

Despite these restrictions, his family worked and tried to create a livelihood. They rented an industrial hall, produced shoes, and sold them. This livelihood, however, remained fragile because it could be stopped by the authorities at any time:

After a few years, the Iranian government said, 'You are not allowed to work here or have a shop or a hall.' You are not allowed to be self-employed in Iran. We sold the hall with the machines and everything else.

After losing this source of income, the family relocated to Tehran and attempted anew in the large city with support from Iranian acquaintances. Quickly, however, this second attempt also became impossible when work, schooling, and self-employment were blocked:

With the shop and being self-employed in Tehran, it was over. We could no longer work there. We could no longer stay there. There was no school… So we said it would be better to go from Iran to Europe.

The Afghan interpretation session highlighted this combination of exclusion and repeated effort – making plans, following them through, and being shut down often happening at the same time. One

expert described the excerpt as showing “a lot of work” and “work where you don’t know whether it has a future” [Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025].

A 41-years-old Afghan man accounts how work, family responsibility, and education were intertwined in Iran. He was forced to work from a young age and became responsible for supporting his family, but he still tried to continue night classes:

When we went to Iran, there was absolutely no support. I was forced to work, despite my young age… responsibility for the family was entirely on my shoulders… but due to my enthusiasm and love for learning, I couldn’t just give up on my night classes.

His decision to move onward was closely linked to him becoming a family father and concern about his children’s future. He feared that if they remained in Iran, they would face the same blocked educational opportunities experienced by other Afghans:

I didn’t want… if we stayed in Iran my children would end up like me. Missing out on school… Many of our relatives who live in Iran… studied for 12 years… But because he was Afghan, they wouldn’t let him attend university… I realised that if my son were to come and study here in Iran tomorrow, he would end up just like my cousin’s son.

A similar pattern appears in the Eritrean interviews. First-asylum contexts were marked by legal restrictions, inadequate assistance, and limited prospects. At the same time, Eritrean interlocutors tried to stabilize everyday life through informal work, small businesses, remittances, family networks, and planning for the next step [Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025].

A telling example comes from a 39-year-old Eritrean mother of two children. She left Eritrea, arrived in Ethiopia in 2009, later crossed Sudan, Libya, and the Mediterranean to arrive in Germany in 2016:

When we first arrived in Ethiopia, we were placed in a refugee camp and lived on the monthly rations, basic items that were never enough for a family. Just 15 kilograms cereals and other few items. We waited for distribution days, stretched what we received, and still had to make difficult choices. There was no permission to work and no real long-term perspective inside the camp. With support from my husband’s relatives, we found a way forward. They sent some money so we could start a small business. Because refugees couldn’t legally register a shop in our own names […] we arranged with one of my distant relatives who had an Ethiopian passport to open the shop under his name.

Her account shows that livelihood-making began in Ethiopia, before receiving any stable legal status or basic security. Camp life was marked by insufficiency, but she did not describe herself as simply waiting – precarity and stabilisation existed side by side. Refugees could not legally register a shop in their own names, and camp rations were insufficient. Yet family support and informal arrangements made it possible to create a livelihood. The participant continued:

That extra income made the difference, without it, the food and supplies from the camp would not have been enough. Later, my husband migrated to Israel to work. From there, he sent money regularly. His support stabilized us and helped cover living costs and shop expenses. We kept going like this, camp rations, the shop in Sheraro, and remittances from my husband until 2015, when he arranged and paid for our journey onward from Ethiopia to Sudan and then toward Libya.

Her trajectory also shows that everyday stabilization in the country of first asylum was already transnational and future oriented. The camp, the shop in Sheraro, relatives in Ethiopia, the husband's work in Israel, and the later journey toward Sudan and Libya formed one connected field of action. Similarly, Afghan interlocutors' experiences in Iran show that first asylum was not simply a period of waiting before continuing to Europe or potentially returning to Afghanistan.

Across both Eritrean and Afghan cases, the contiguum perspective reveals that first-asylum countries cannot be understood merely as transitional spaces. They functioned simultaneously as places of protection, livelihood creation, family organisation, legal exclusion, and preparation for possible onward movement. These projects unfolded in parallel rather than sequentially, illustrating how refugees continuously navigated intersecting institutional environments.

4.3. Transit countries: Movement, immobilization, work, and networked survival

Across the various countries and precarious contexts our interlocutors experienced, transit as a place lived contention rather than mere traversing, a site of simultaneous mobility and immobilization. Interlocutors described being stuck at borders, threatened by authorities, dependent on smugglers, exposed to hunger and danger, and forced to make decisions under great uncertainty. At the same time, transit was also a space of collective action, temporary work, accumulating knowledge on routes or languages, and networked survival.

Transit from Iran to Turkey shows clearly how mobility and immobilization were intertwined. A 41-years-old Afghan husband and father describes being trapped with his and other families at the border:

When we entered Turkey, we were completely stuck at the border. Turkey wouldn't allow us through, and Iran wouldn't allow us to return. Both of them said they would shoot us if we tried… They wouldn't even let us go and get bread or water… Many of our friends there fell ill. It got to the point that all of us went and surrendered ourselves to the Turkish police. We said, 'Sir, do what you will, either send us back to Afghanistan or allow us to cross the border into your country.

In this moment of acute precarity – hunger, illness, threat, and forced immobility – the families acted collectively. By surrendering to the Turkish police, they tried to transform an impossible situation into one in which a decision had to be made. After temporary release, they contacted relatives and organized the next stage of the journey:

After 15 days we were able to contact our families and let them know we were alive… He [the police officer] gave us a deportation letter stating that we could stay in the country for about a month… Then we came to Istanbul, and after that, we found someone who brought us to Greece.

His wife emphasized the role of other refugees' language skills and networks. When the boat from Turkey stopped in the sea, another family's Turkish-language knowledge, which they acquired during their stay in the transit-country Turkey, helped everyone:

They put us in a boat, around 50 people altogether. Halfway across, the engine died. Everyone started to cry and yell. There was one family who had been living in Turkey and they spoke Turkish. They rang someone who came to fix the boat… and then the engine was working again. Then we continued on.

The Eritrean interviews show similar dynamics of danger, informal support, and renewed movement. A 41-year-old Eritrean mother of three, who travelled through Sudan, Dubai, Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland before reaching Germany, explained that transit could involve working, saving money, assessing one's circumstances, and repeatedly reorienting one's plans. In Sudan, she relied on personal networks, smugglers, and route knowledge to avoid soldiers:

I had to rely on personal networks ... people I knew, and people connected to other people, who could help me move from one place to another without drawing attention… We had to depend not only on the smuggler but also on the guidance of people who knew the area… to avoid the places where soldiers were present.

In Dubai, she worked as a housemaid. This was not settlement, but it was also not merely waiting. It was a period of survival, saving, and planning:

In Dubai, I worked as a housemaid… I accepted it because I needed to survive and because I was trying to stand on my own feet… Little by little, I was able to save some money from that work. That saving became very important, because it later allowed me to make another move… I was working, yes, but I could not see a long-term future for myself.

Across both groups, transit was a lived space in which great challenges and forced immobility closely co-existed with agency and renewed movement. Transit was not simply the movement between places but an arena in which humanitarian need, labour, care, mobility, and future planning became interwoven even tighter. In this sense, transit was marked by acute precarity, but also by situated forms of resilience through which interlocutors continued to protect family members, gather resources, and pursue future possibilities.

4.4. Germany: Protection, waiting, recognition, and reorientation

After in parts long and perilous journeys, arrival in Germany created new opportunities: language learning, schooling for children, vocational training, work, professional recognition, and legal protection. At the same time, participants faced temporary residence papers, long asylum waiting, housing

difficulties, document requirements, blocked recognition, and family separation (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025).

a 40-year-old Eritrean mother of three, her accounts show how earlier experiences continue to shape how life is experienced and envisioned in Germany. After arriving in 2017, she learned German up to C1 level, in hope to be able to resume her ruptured professional career. However, German authorities and bureaucracy soon put new obstacles in front of that dream:

Since arriving in Germany, I studied the language and reached C1 level. But once I came here, the biggest problem became the recognition of my qualifications… they told me to bring a document proving that I had no criminal record in Eritrea. That, of course, was impossible. Leaving Eritrea irregularly is itself considered a crime there. So how could I possibly obtain such a document? But the German system does not understand such realities.

The recognition process lasted two years and nine months. During this time, she was simultaneously dealing with family reunification, single motherhood, translation of documents, and emotional exhaustion:

During that time, on one side I had the family reunification issue regarding my daughter; on another side I was a single mother; on another side I was studying German; on yet another side I was buried under paperwork. There were nights when I sat alone in a closed room and cried.

Her account shows that Germany was not experienced as a sequence of separate steps: first language, then recognition, then work, then family. These processes and the underlying institutional logics overlapped, often overloading her, while at other moments dragging on in seemingly endless fashion. After recognition, she completed the required adjustment process and returned to nursing. This marked a reinvigoration not only in work, but also in confidence and self-positioning:

I submitted work applications, kept pushing, and refused to give up ... and in the end, after my documents were finally recognized and the adjustment phase was completed, I returned to nursing and I am now working. That was a very important turning point in my life. It changed not only my work situation, but also my confidence.

After so many years of uncertainty, of translating papers, of waiting, of crying in closed rooms, and of doubting whether I would ever stand again in my own profession ... I finally returned to nursing… I could now focus not only on surviving, but on rebuilding. My profession became my strength again. It reminded me who I was before exile, and who I still am.

However, the return to work did not end the family struggle. It merely altered the ways she could continue. Since formal family reunification remained blocked, she used her income and resources to support her husband’s movement from Uganda to Turkey and then to Greece:

I paid money to help him travel from Uganda to Turkey by plane. That was not an easy decision. It was a very heavy one ... financially, emotionally, and morally. But I felt I had no other choice. I was trying to create another path, another opening, another possibility for our family… So even now, the struggle has not ended. It has only changed shape.

Her phrase "the struggle has not ended. It has only changed shape" is central. It shows that arrival in Germany did not close the trajectory. Instead, unresolved struggles were reorganized, while remaining struggles.

The Afghan interviews show similar patterns of waiting and simultaneous responsibilities. A 36-years-old single Afghan mother of four, described living in Germany for eight years before receiving a residence permit. During this period, she was raising children, seeking a German course, thinking about vocational training, and trying to stabilize family life:

I have been in Germany for eight years. And after eight years, I think my residence permit has now arrived… For seven or eight years I was really very sad. My daughter works, my children went to school… My family is a good family! So why did we not receive a residence decision?

The Afghan interpretation session carved out that waiting for documents has life-course consequences. One expert emphasized that years of waiting cannot be treated as empty time: "If you are 20, you will be 24. If you are 26, you are 30. That means it is a lifetime; you can do your bachelor's in that time" (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025).

A 24-years-old man and husband from Afghanistan described housing, documents, and educational recognition as intersecting barriers in Germany. He connected the difficulty of finding an apartment with problems in processing documents and recognizing the abilities of highly qualified Afghan migrants:

The biggest issue in Germany is the search for an apartment… Secondly, there is an issue with handling the documents of Afghan immigrants without regular status; they are not processed correctly. Also, those who are highly qualified and attend school or university… they are not moved to a higher level. They give them reasons, send them back to school, or tell them to do apprenticeships… I found a room… after waiting for the 176th appointment to receive the apartment.

Across both Eritrean and Afghan interviews, Germany was narrated as a place where safety and precarity existed together. It offered protection, schools, work possibilities, and legal pathways. Yet participants also faced waiting, temporary papers, recognition barriers, housing problems, and family separation. At the same time, arriving in Germany does not mark the end of displacement, the interlocutors' lives in Germany were not simply "after migration." They were part of the continuing trajectory of displacement, an effort to rebuild a future in the image of past aspirations and dreams (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025). From a contiguum perspective, settlement therefore appears less as the endpoint of displacement than as another configuration of overlapping institutional demands and biographical projects.

4.5. Future-making under instability: Staying, remigrating, and rebuilding everyday life

We understand that refugees' future-making does not begin with receiving a secure residence status, work, or private housing. Participants continued to plan while their legal, economic, professional, and family situations remained uncertain. Their future orientations were practical and interconnected: children's education, language learning, citizenship, work, professional recognition, family unity, and, in some cases, possible onward movement (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025).

Among Eritrean participants, future-making in Germany was not always identical with permanent settlement. A 37-year-old Eritrean father of one explained that Eritrean refugees leave Germany because restrictions concerning documentation, travel, marriage, and family reunification continue to constrain their long-term prospects:

And if you do not have the right documents, you cannot travel. Even if you do have papers, and you want to go somewhere in Africa to marry and then bring your spouse, you still do not know when reunification will actually happen. Because of that, many people leave Germany and go elsewhere… Many others have gone to the UK or the United States…

This account shows that mobility can reopen even after arrival in Germany. An Eritrean mother and wife pursues another path. Her husband had moved on to Canada and prepared documents so that the children could join him. Yet, by that time she and the children had already begun building stability in Germany:

From Canada, my husband told me he had found a more stable situation… By then I had completed B2 German, completed my three-year Ausbildung [apprenticeship], and the children were settled in their schools. We had finally found a rhythm: teachers who knew their names, a family doctor, neighbors who said hello in the stairwell. Starting again in a third country felt like tearing up roots we had just planted. [...] It was not a rejection of my husband; it was a choice for continuity and stability after years of movement…

She decided to stay in Germany with the children. While her family life henceforth became transnational, she described this as another form of unity:

Family reunification didn't happen the way we imagined in 2016, but we created another kind of unity: two parents in different countries, both working so the children can grow up in safety, education, and hope, connected by calls, visits when possible, and shared decisions.

Our Afghan interlocutors describe future-making as a transcending process, interconnected with past ambition and current possibilities. A 38-years-old husband and father of three described this process as encompassing among other his children's education, work, health, further study, citizenship, and possible visits to Afghanistan:

I can't really draw a picture of the future for myself because everything is interconnected here. So, the most important thing is that when I see the future, I see the future of my children… I wish to have a good job in the future… I always think about doing my Ph.D… And of course, taking citizenship. This is also a matter of the future.

For many, future-making also included the possibility of moving again if Germany did not offer a viable future, as a 30-years-old family father articulates:

If you can't stay in your home country, then you have to move somewhere else. Like Iran. If I don't see my future here in Germany, then of course I'll try to go somewhere else. I didn't see my future in Iran either, that's why I'm here in Germany. If I don't see myself in Germany, then France; if not France, then Canada or America.

In this vein, the Afghan interpretation session identified hope, resistance, and coping as central mechanisms across the narratives. One expert summarized: "All the stories had one thing in common: they were all very brave, they had not lost their hope. They kept going, even though they already had many obstacles" (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025).

Across both groups, future-making appeared as a continuous process. A process that does not wait until displacement will be "over". People made futures while waiting for documents, raising children, working under restrictions, seeking recognition, being separated from family members, and considering whether to stay or move again. For some, Germany remained a place of precarious uncertainty because long-term prospects were blocked, in many ways circling back to experiences and lived realities that resembled the situations in Iran or Ethiopia (Interpretation session with three Afghan experts, 03.11.2025; Interpretation session with three Eritrean experts, 12.11.2025). For some, Germany became a place where roots began to grow and new opportunities of imagining a life formed.

5. Discussion

The findings show that refugee migration is best understood as a set of complex trajectories rather than as a linear pathway from asylum to reception and integration. Across countries of origin, first asylum, transit, and reception, participants described their lives as shaped by overlapping pursuits, constraints, and aspirations. Tracing instances of precarity and resilience as the main units of analysis through our interviews, illuminated how problems and responses are not simply opposites but multi-layered and entangled dimensions of refugee lives. Precarity, the structurally produced instability, emerged through militarization and blocked futures in Eritrea, political danger in Afghanistan, legal exclusion in Iran and Ethiopia, violent bordering and immobilization in transit, or bureaucratic waiting, legal limbo, housing difficulties, family separation or limited long-term prospects in Germany. These forms of precarity were not confined to one phase or overcome at some point. They reappeared, reshaped and accumulated across the contexts. At the same time, participants demonstrated resilience through social networks, livelihood strategies, language and skill-building, hope, and future-oriented planning. This is what we refer to as resilience as situated practices (see also Turda et al. 2026).

In other words, the domains of precarity and resilience were experienced as contiguous and interwoven streams. As illustrated in Fig. 2, they formed a **contiguum**: adjacent and overlapping life domains that continuously shape one another across time and place. Hope and long-term perspectives cut across the whole trajectory, including periods of onward mobility or remigration. Conceptualising resilience and precarity through a contiguum lens is the better, even if more complex, way to capturing how refugee lives unfold across layered statuses, infrastructures, and jurisdictions, and how people move back and forth across domains of risk, aspiration, capability, and uncertainty.

The figure synthesises Afghan and Eritrean participants' visual mappings. It shows how protection, legal status, livelihood, language learning, housing, family relations, health, hope, and future-making are experienced as overlapping and recursively connected domains.

These findings inform three strands of scholarship. They broaden trajectory research by shifting attention from movement between places to the simultaneous organisation of life projects across places. They advance resilience research by demonstrating that resilience consists of recurring relational practices rather than context-bound coping strategies. Finally, they translate the humanitarian notion of contiguum from a framework for organising interventions into an analytical perspective for understanding refugee biographies.

Migration and refugee governance still largely rests on assumptions of linearity – from one country to another or through sequential steps in the integration system (Aydar and Plöger 2023; Spencer and Charsley 2021). Similarly, most integration policies assume a linear progression through amongst other asylum procedure, housing, language learning, labour-market participation, perhaps family reunification. These models do not coincide with refugees' lived experiences. Our interlocutors did not experience protection-seeking, livelihood-making, education, care, family responsibility, legal status, and future-making as separate phases. They pursued these projects simultaneously while repeatedly reorienting or revisiting their plans across origin, first-asylum and transit contexts, and everyday life in Germany.

This finding resonates with and at the same time extends scholarship that takes umbrage with refugee studies that analyze singular moments along a hypothetical migration route (see FitzGerald and Arar 2018). Della Puppa and Sanò (2021) argue that refugees and asylum seekers are involved in "multiple and plural" forms of mobility, including international, internal, legal, professional, and social. Their works support our argument that migration does not end with a border crossing, asylum recognition, or entry into a reception system. Instead, it continues through everyday struggles over documents, housing, work, care, recognition, belonging, and future-making.

Our results also speak to studies that emphasize uncertainty, networks, and situated decision-making during displacement (Belabbas et al. 2022). Afghan interlocutors relied on co-travellers, language skills, relatives, and intermediaries during movement from Iran to Turkey and Greece. Eritrean interlocutors relied on family payments, remittances, informal work, route knowledge, smugglers, and community networks across Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Dubai, Turkey, Israel, Switzerland, and Germany. These practices

are not isolated acts of survival. They were situated strategies that build on previous experiences and resilient strategies to tackle the multiple precarities in refugees' lives.

The biographic-narrative approach was crucial for making these connections visible, revealing how past exclusions, present struggles, and future aspirations continually shaped one another. This supports Aghdam and Hitzeroth's (2026) argument that migration decisions are not discrete events but evolving biographical processes through which accumulated constraints and aspirations are continually renegotiated. Our findings similarly resonate with Tefera and Gamlen's (2025) notion of "experiential time": earlier experiences of disruption, waiting, acceleration, and uncertainty continue to shape settlement, recognition, belonging, and future-making long after arrival. Kerwin and colleagues' (2025) argument to study migration through the right to stay, migrate, and return, covering the broader continuum of uprooting, movement, temporary stay, settlement, and possible return further helps situating our depiction of refugees' trajectories as open-ended, also after arrival in a European country. In this sense, settlement, rather than marking a final stage of displacement, becomes a context from which refugees continue to reassess opportunities, responsibilities, and the possibility of remaining, moving onward, or rebuilding their lives.

6. Conclusion

The contribution of this study is both empirical and conceptual. Empirically, it shows how Eritrean and Afghan refugees' lives unfold through connected experiences across origin, first-asylum countries, transit contexts, and everyday life in Germany. Conceptually, it argues for a contiguum rather than a continuum perspective when studying or governing forced migration. Continuum models, as used in humanitarian–development debates, assume sequential movement from one phase to another, for example from relief to recovery to development, or in refugee governance from arrival to asylum, language learning, integration, and labour-market participation. Such models mis-represent displacement as an orderly progression. Our findings show that the lived experience of refugees is coined by great simultaneity, i.e. the need to cope with the overlapping institutional logics and necessities behind pursuing protection, income, skills, care, family unity, or mobility – often under conditions of legal uncertainty and institutional precarity. For this reason, we adapt the contiguum approach to humanitarian action to capture how needs, pressures, and aspirations coexist and require parallel responses rather than sequential interventions. If stability, in the humanitarian jargon, is to build resilient systems and communities, then the lived experience of stability and resilience for forced migrants means achieving a congruence of the overlapping systemic challenges and the abilities to simultaneously work towards a long-term perspective.

For scholars, this provides a lens to more effectively understand and capture simultaneity and recursion in forced migration research. For political actors in refugee response, the implication is that support systems should not wait until a legal status is fully settled before enabling language learning, qualification pathways, livelihood opportunities, family support, and community-based resources.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and the drafting and revision of the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data used in this study is published in and available through the qualitative research data center Qualiservice. DOI: 10.26092/elib/3797 .

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Footnotes

1. References to interviewees' age refers to the age at the time of the interview, unless stated otherwise.

Figures

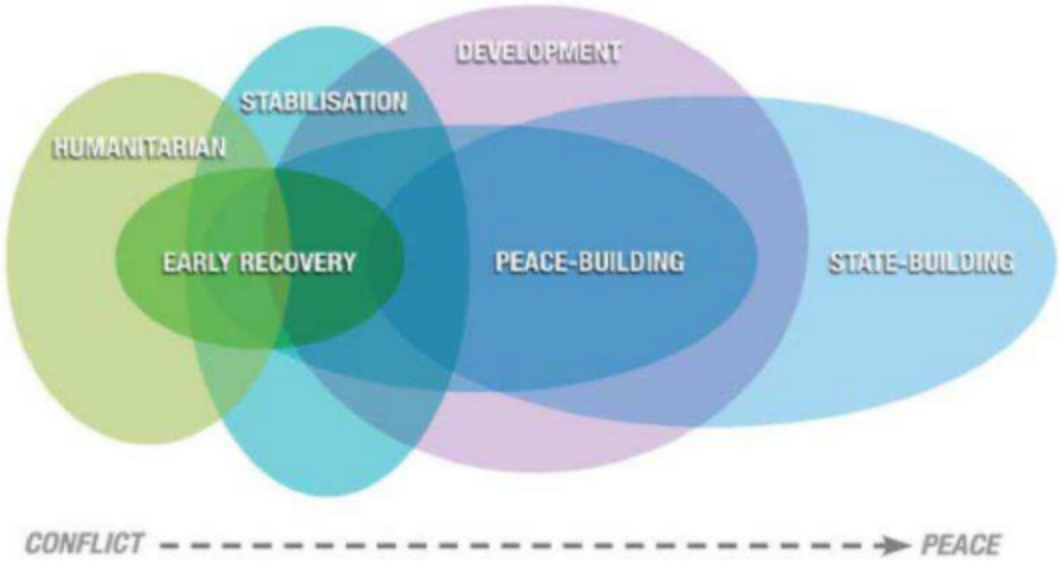


Figure 1

The contiguum framework showing overlapping humanitarian, recovery, and development interventions across a conflict–peace spectrum. Source: Burnay et al. (2016).

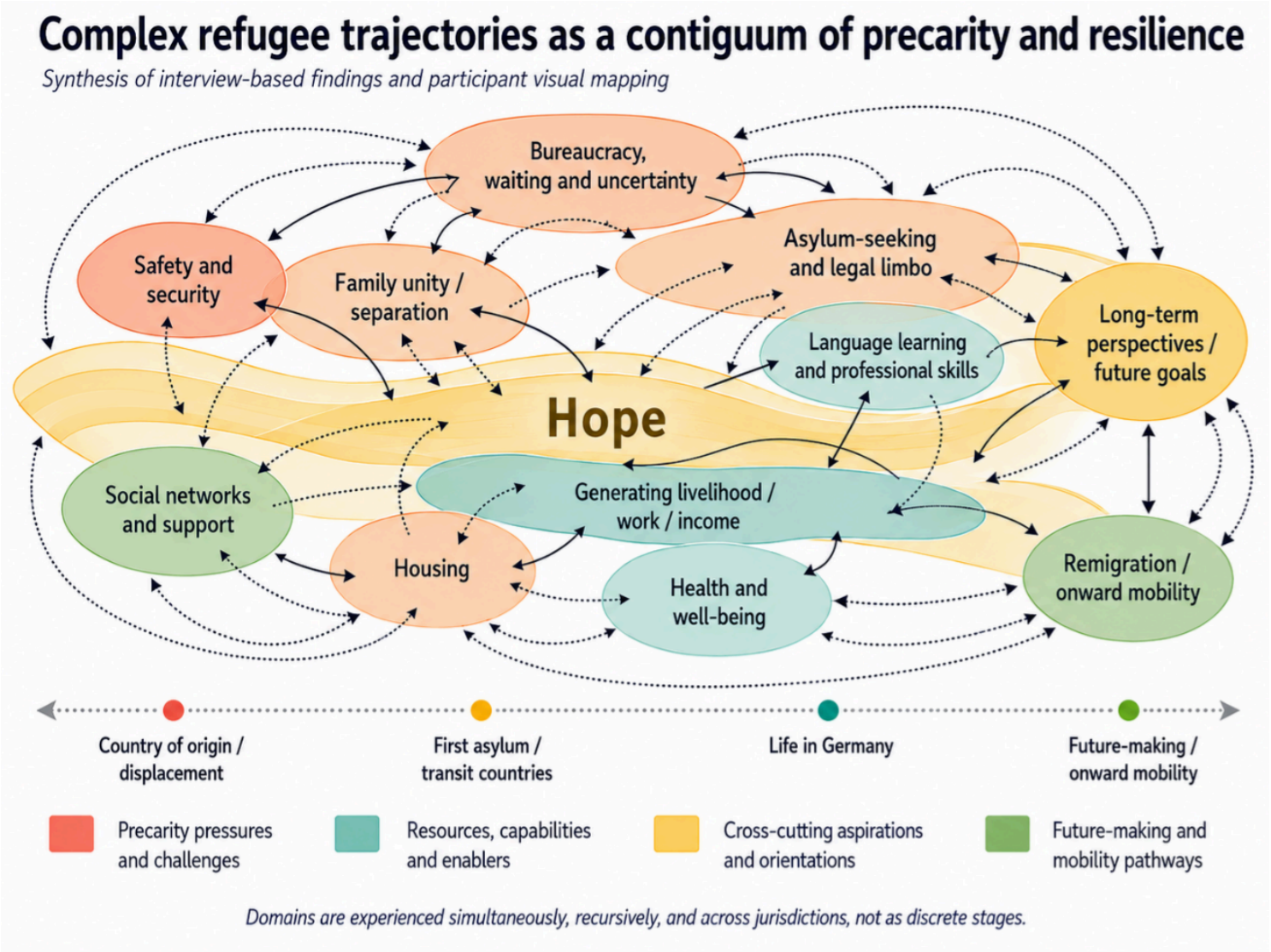


Figure 2

Complex refugee trajectories as a contiguum of precarity and resilience

The figure synthesises Afghan and Eritrean participants' visual mappings. It shows how protection, legal status, livelihood, language learning, housing, family relations, health, hope, and future-making are experienced as overlapping and recursively connected domains.