Geoforum 140 (2023) 103700

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Refugee economic self-reliance practices: How institutional intermediations negotiate opportunities for refugee employment and entrepreneurship

Aurélie Toivonen

Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, 33100 Tampere, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Refugee workforce integration
Labor market scaffoldings
Institutional intermediaries
Refugee self-reliance

ABSTRACT

This research explores how institutional intermediations negotiate local institutional frameworks that constrain refugee (self-)employment. Drawing on the case of a Finnish non-profit organization, the findings show the construction of a labor market scaffolding, which is an analytical space wherein refugees' institutional disadvantages are negotiated through three intermediation mechanisms: mobilizing network support, bridging the employability gap, and buffering regulatory constraints. This research contributes to scholarship on refugee workforce integration by elaborating on a comprehensive process that targets the individual, networks, and regulations to address the systemic and multilevel challenges of refugee employment. The paper also contributes to refugee governance mechanisms by suggesting that labor market scaffoldings can be productive tools for devising refugees' self-reliance practices that are relational, temporally sensitive, and contextually relevant.

1. Introduction

The idea of refugees' economic self-reliance has recently attracted a renewed interest in various policy platforms for refugee management (Bhagat, 2022; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Self-reliance, which is broadly defined as the ability of refugees to meet their own social and economic needs in a sustainable way (UNHCR, 2005), seeks to sever refugees' dependence on humanitarian aid in order to advocate for their economic capacities as useful labor and as entrepreneurs (Bhagat, 2022; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; UNHCR, 2005). Economistic rationales for refugee integration in their host countries position refugees as agents of innovation and economic change due to the human capital, skills and new perspectives that they potentially bring as they transition to new societies, which make them capable of generating novel ideas and causing positive economic impacts (Betts et al., 2017; Jacobsen, 2002).

Accordingly, the key role of refugee assistance has been oriented towards providing them with the agency to become self-reliant laborers or entrepreneurs through programs that aim at "unleashing entrepreneurship" (UNDP, 2004) and that provide vocational education and opportunities for employment (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). However, recent scholarship questions this discursive construction of refugees as self-reliant individuals responsible for their economic autonomy, for such a view undermines the social reality of refugees who often live in extreme vulnerability due to the lack of employment opportunities, access to capital, and other basic resources (Bhagat, 2022; Bhattacharyya, 2018; Iazzolino, 2020; Soederberg, 2019).

Research that explores the politics and practices of refugee economic self-reliance suggests that it has not yet proven to be attainable, given the institutional context of host societies that typically constrains refugees' rights and entitlement and that reduces their legal pathways to employment (Bhagat, 2022; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). This suggests that self-reliance policies may exacerbate refugees' vulnerability by pushing them to the fringe of the labor market where they are forced to engage in insecure and informal work (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Darling, 2017; Iazzolino, 2020).

Similarly, organizational scholarship has raised important questions regarding the challenge of refugee employment and integration in the workforce (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Loon & Vitale, 2021; Szkudlarek et al., 2021b). This work highlights the deeply relational and nested effects of multiple institutional, organizational and individual barriers that prevent refugee workplace integration (Bloch, 2008; Lee et al., 2020; Loon & Vitale, 2021). For every receiving society often has a complex institutional language of rules, norms and conventions regarding the employment of refugees (Campion, 2018; Knappert et al., 2018; Szkudlarek et al., 2021b). This implies that the socially constructed category of the refugee, as opposed to the citizens or locals, is likely to determine the boundaries for labor market participation. Thus, the dynamics of the local institutional framework determine access to political, social and economic opportunities by defining who is eligible

E-mail address: aurelie.toivonen@tuni.fi.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103700
Received 31 May 2022; Received in revised form 21 January 2023; Accepted 13 February 2023
Available online 22 February 2023
0016-7185/© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

to partake in market-based activities (Mair et al., 2012). As such, institutions "do the thinking" by shaping the boundaries between groups (Douglas, 1986), and define patterns or behavior and interactions, as well as evaluative devices that order reality (Mair et al., 2012, 2016).

This suggests that rather than de-emphasizing the crucial role of the institutional environment in providing crucial resources for attaining economic self-reliance, there may be a need for institutional intermediation to bridge the gaps between refugees' fringe position and the host society when advocating for self-reliance. An institutional intermediation approach opens possibilities for negotiating the systemic and multilevel barriers that constrain opportunities for refugee employment and entrepreneurship. Relatedly, there have been recent calls to investigate models, forms of brokerage and collaborative effort that tackle the Grand challenge of refugee employment (Ferraro et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2020) and to assess specific interventions that may mitigate country-level constraints affecting the international adjustment of refugees in their host countries (Szkudlarek et al., 2021b). The current paper responds to these calls by shedding some light on the negotiations and collaborative efforts that aim to tackle the constraints of institutional environments and establish activities and processes that enable refugees to integrate the labor market and engage in entrepreneurship or self-employment. To that end, this research asks: How are institutional constraints negotiated in collaborative efforts to promote refugees' employment and entrepreneurship?

I use an ethnographic approach to explore the case of a Finnish non-profit organization seeking to integrate refugees in the Finnish labor market. The analysis identifies labor market scaffolding as an analytical space for negotiating the local institutional framework to facilitate access to employment and self-employment. I specify three intermediation mechanisms that enable this process. First, *mobilizing network support*, which consists in galvanizing stakeholders and unlocking local resources. Second, *bridging the employability gap,* which involves efforts to contextualize refugee professional experience to align with local standards. And third, *buffering regulatory constraints*, which involves efforts to mitigate the demands of formal regulation. These three interrelated mechanisms show activities seeking to establish new patterns of behavior and practice that encourage and facilitate refugee employment.

By introducing the concept of labor market scaffolding, this paper enriches our understanding of refugee employment in two ways: It highlights intermediation mechanisms that act at the individual, network, and regulation levels to tackle barriers to refugee employment. Moreover, it elaborates on intermediation competency, which is necessary to reconcile between immediate employment and long-term employment goals of refugees.

Finally, this paper suggests that a labor market scaffolding, can be a productive tool for making the imperative of refugee self-reliance a reality. It shifts the focus from the refugee to highlight the crucial role of institutional intermediation in devising self-reliant practices that are relational, temporally sensitive, and contextually relevant.

2. Background literature

2.1. The complexity of refugee employment

Assistance programs that advocate for refugees' economic self-reliance have been continuously implemented since the 1920s, despite their considerable poor success in fostering refugee self-reliance (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). The philosophy of refugee self-reliance suggests that rather than mainly providing humanitarian aid, assistance should lead refugees towards income generation (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Although self-reliance strategies also include social and legal components, their most common practices emphasize the economic component through the promotion of refugee's education and employment (Bhagat, 2022; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). However, the reality of refugee international adjustment suggests that, as they transition into new countries, they navigate a host of institutional constraints that restrict their interactions with the local community, thus constraining their employment and overall integration (Campion, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Szkudlarek et al., 2021b; Wehrle et al., 2018).

The case of refugee employment is particularly challenging because refugee typically leave their country for humanitarian reasons, have experienced traumatic events, often do not have any certificates or document evidence of their qualifications as they leave their home unexpectedly, and lack social networks necessary for employment (Campion, 2018; Chun Guo et al., 2020). In situations where refugees have country specific skills, they often do not have a work permit and face discrimination (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006). These constraints contribute to a reduced social, economic and cultural capital, which lead to a lack of occupational status (Campion, 2018; Colic-Peisker & Fozdar, 2006; Wehrle et al., 2018), that is, locally relevant work experience and transferable work qualifications (Shiferaw & Hagos, 2002).

Indeed, country-specific processes, rules, and norms determine eligibility for work, as well as the appropriateness of skills, competencies, credentials and other document evidence necessary for employment (Cheng et al., 2021; Suleman & Whiteford, 2013). Accordingly, Lee and colleagues (2020) have introduced the phenomenon of canvas ceiling to highlight the multilevel, systemic, and structural challenges that preclude refugees from finding employment in the mainstream workforce. At the institutional level, formal institutions shape refugee employment through immigration laws and regulations that structure the duration of the asylum process, and determine the valuation and utilization of refugees' prior qualifications, education and experience (Colic-Peisker & Fozdar, 2006; Lee et al., 2020). Similarly, informal institutions, through socio-cultural values and political climates, promulgate negative perceptions of refugees, as well as other cultural stereotypes that contribute to systemic discrimination and occupational marginalization (Campion, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006).

At the organizational level, human resource management scholarship recognizes the discriminative practices faced by refugees during recruitment and selection, and emphasizes how the lack of adequate workplace training and development impede career development (Bloch, 2008; Loon & Vitale, 2021). Finally, individual level factors restrain refugees' ability to successfully obtain meaningful employment in a variety of ways. For instance, their psychological state may impact their propensity towards positive attributes such as hope, resilience and self-efficacy (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Moreover, the lack of social capital or adequate positive links with the local community decrease the chances of integrating into the workforce (Gericke et al., 2018). Thus, previous work recognizes the complex role of institutional, organizational and individual level challenges in constraining timely and adequate solutions for refugee employment (Campion, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Loon & Vitale, 2021; Wehrle et al., 2018).

This suggests that self-reliance approaches that conceptualize refugees as responsible economic actors with an entrepreneurial and hard-working spirit are more likely to exacerbate inequalities (Bhagat, 2022; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018), that is confining them to the margin of society (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Darling, 2017; Iazzolino, 2020). Furthermore, critical debates on integration have questioned discourses and activities that put the burden of integration on refugees, who are identified as "the other" in need to be managed and transformed in order to fit in the European society (Schinkel, 2019). There have thus been calls for new solutions that negotiate between micro and macro level challenges (Lee et al., 2020). One possibility is to advocate for collaborative efforts that mediate the institutional divide between the refugees and their host country. Intermediation mechanisms, that negotiate between individuals, networks and systems (Sutter et al., 2017) are perceived to be crucial for impacting social change in contexts where different institutional frameworks are at odds with each other (Mair et al., 2012, 2016) and are constraining economic exchanges

(Mair & Marti, 2009).

2.2. Institutional intermediation and scaffoldings for change

Research on institutional change suggests that institutional intermediaries are a specific type of institutional actors that promote change spanning institutional boundaries (Mair et al., 2012, 2016; Sutter et al., 2017). Individuals and organizations get involved in these efforts when encountering challenges necessitating radical outcomes (Dorado, 2013). At the core of institutional intermediation is the belief that social action is not typically an individual bounded-behavior, it cannot be reduced to an individual or private matter but rather it is incumbent upon social individuals within groups and communities who are motivated and inspired to take collective action (Dorado, 2013). Scholarship on institutional intermediation suggest a variety of tactics used by institutional intermediaries, such as non-profit, non-governmental organizations, and other social enterprises, to harness important institutional resources and network links that are necessary in matters related to the employment of marginalized groups (Mair et al., 2012; Steimel, 2017), as well as activities that disrupt the status quo and instigate change within constraining institutional contexts (Liu, 2020; Mair et al., 2016; Sutter et al., 2017).

For instance, scholars have shown efforts to create and legitimize new visions by exposing shortcomings and failures of pre-existing institutional contexts, as well as motivating the establishment of novel agendas and proposing alternative solutions (Battilana et al., 2009; Greenwood et al., 2002). Similarly, Mair and colleagues (2016) describe a process of transformation of local systems of inequality through the construction of an institutional scaffolding by an Indian NGO. In their study, the institutional scaffolding constituted a social space wherein activities that mobilized institutional, social, organizational and economic resources could be undertaken so that new patterns of behavior and interaction that bridged the social divide across different caste groups could be constructed (Mair et al., 2016).

Similarly, Sutter and colleagues describe a process of transitioning informal entrepreneurs in rural Nicaragua to the formal market. They elaborate on an institutional scaffolding process by which an NGO attempted a series of interrelated tactics consisting in training at the individual level, establishing new relationships to facilitate network level change, as well as introducing new rules and resources to support change at the system level (Sutter et al., 2017). However, scholarship on intermediation also distinguishes between negotiable and non-negotiable features of institutional constraints, thus suggesting the need for a better awareness of the interplay among the different constraints. To facilitate transition or integration in environments, wherein laws and other formal regulations cannot be negotiated, institutional intermediaries often resort to a bridging role through the provision of information and knowledge that enable the foreign actor to conform to the formal demands (Liu, 2020).

Additionally, institutional intermediaries can adopt a buffering role to insulate these actors from the adversarial environment, thus enabling them to circumvent regulatory threats, shielding them from regulatory scrutiny, and highlighting their favorable features while hiding unfavorable ones (Liu, 2020). This implies that institutional intermediation can play an important role in mediating the institutional disadvantages faced by refugees. Intermediation is crucial because formal and informal resources that are likely to influence refugee self-reliance are typically embedded in various spaces across local institutional structures. However, refugees are typically unable to access these resources, which are conducive to market access and economic participation (UNHCR, 2017). Consequently, a central approach in stimulating self-reliance could be the construction of scaffoldings, or analytical spaces which can mobilize various actors, propose aspirational visions, and stimulate collective action for societal transformation. This is likely to open opportunities for concrete practices that are consequential for collective learning, and which can facilitate the drawing and repurposing of resources, as well as, the reinterpretation of the meaning of current institutions (Casasnovas & Ferraro, 2022). An institutional intermediation lens explores the potential of self-reliance as a collaborative effort to provide a supporting environment and the necessary resources for refugees to seek employment or engage in self-employment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

Finland's refugees 'assistance is in many ways emblematic of the perspectives of most Europeans nations that rely on self-reliance, that is providing refugees with the agency to become self-sustaining. However, the likelihood of receiving this assistance hinges on the type of entry to the country (.i.e. resettlement through quota, EU relocation programs, and people looking for asylum on their own accord) (Sacramento et al., 2019). Through the refugee quota, individuals that are considered refugees by UNHCR are admitted into Finland following specific resettlement needs, this facilitating a relatively secure integration process. Whereas refugees coming through EU relocation or who apply for asylum on their own, do not qualify for such resettlement programs (Finnish Immigration Service, 2020). Since 2016, there has been a serious receding in refugees policies and humanitarian protection after Finland experienced a ten-fold increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015 (Wahlbeck, 2019). This translated in an exponential increase in decisions regarding deportations among other efforts to curtail humanitarian aid (Sacramento et al., 2019).

Finland is generally considered to possess a strong labor market policy which is provided through a universalist (Nordic) welfare system (Silvasti, 2015). This implies that welfare services are uniformly delivered to all for the purpose of equality, but there are however many tensions in the practice of universalism, for it does not factor in increasing societal diversity (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022; Silvasti, 2015). Despite its strong labor market integration infrastructure, Finland encounters challenges when it comes to the labor market integration of its immigrant population (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). People who do not permanently reside in the country such as asylum seekers are not necessarily eligible for labor market integration services. The 2015′s increase in asylum seekers particularly highlighted many shortcomings of the official services, which have been described as insufficient, too limited in time and in target groups, and too inflexible in addressing individual needs (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022).

The consequence of these shortcomings was the rise of many actors and organizations seeking to fill the gaps necessary for the labor market integration of migrants (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019, 2022). One of such organizations is Worklife.

Worklife (a pseudonym) is a Finnish NGO established in 2015 and operating in 17 cities throughout Finland to help refugees and asylum seekers find employment or start a business of their own. Its management team consists of twelve staff members, but it operates a network of about 500 members from the public sector (e.g., the city of Helsinki), private sector (e.g., businesses and adult education providers), other NGOs, and about 170 volunteers. There are currently 3700 refugees registered as job seekers in Worklife's database, according to a 2019 report. Most of these refugees are from Iraq (approximately 50 %), followed by Afghanistan (approximately 15 %), and Somalia (approximately 8 %).

The NGO and its network organize a variety of activities expected to facilitate refugees' employment and entrepreneurial initiatives. The NGO reportedly has provided 820 employment opportunities, training and education to over 5000 people, and has supported 120 entrepreneurial initiatives since its creation in 2015. Consequently, the activities of this organization are significant for understanding the labor market access and participation of refugees in Finland. As such, Worklife is a telling analytical case (Pettigrew, 1990; Yin, 2011) for exploring the experimental nature of local solutions and configurations tackling

systemic barriers to refugee employment.

3.2. Data collection

This research follows an ethnographic approach to investigate the on-the-ground dynamics of refugee employment and self-employment. An ethnographic approach was significant to spend time in the field to hear and see what happens (Maanen Van, 2011). The data consisted of observation notes, audio recordings and interviews. I joined the organization as a volunteer in August 2019. A volunteer role was significant for a participant observation approach and immersion in the daily activities. My role as a researcher/volunteer was explained to the participants, who consented to the study. I focused on the activities of Worklife in the Helsinki unit.

The fieldwork lasted six months. I participated in six Work Clinics, which are monthly events during which refugees' professional profiles are created in the database of the NGO. I also participated in two specialized Work Clinics targeting women. Moreover, I took part in a business pitch training event. As a volunteer, I supported potential entrepreneurs in preparing their presentations or business pitches. I also recorded three work preparation events. Additionally, I wrote observation notes when possible in the field, and when not possible, did it immediately after leaving the field (Emerson et al., 2001; Van Maanen, 1988).

I collected data from 28 structured professional interviews with refugees during the Work Clinics. These interviews which lasted about 45 min to two hours each were designed by Worklife to gather skills and information on the refugees for their professional profile. (See Appendix one: Profiles of interviewees from Work Clinics). Additionally, I conducted 23 semi- structured interviews with staff members, collaborators, volunteers of Worklife, as well as potential entrepreneurs. (See Appendix two: List of interviewees).

Finally, I collected documents and organizational reports. This secondary data provided important background information on the activities of the NGO. These different data sources were necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the activities of Worklife and their significance for refugee (self-)employment.

3.3. Data analysis

This study examines the process through which an NGO facilitates refugee employment. Given the complexity and multifaceted challenge of refugee workforce integration, as well as the vulnerable status of refugees, the data analysis sought to be exploratory to capture distinctive activities and processes. Thus, the analysis acknowledged extant theory while considering how the studied phenomenon played out in this context. This occurred through two main stages that enabled a back and forth between the data and the emerging theoretical insights (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

First, I engaged in open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) by grouping the instances involved in the construction of specific arrangements that enabled the transition of refugees into the labor market. This first step of the analysis sought to generate an understanding of "what is going on" (Wolcott, 1994:16), and required drawing from empirical observation to start building sound theoretical claims (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). I started by reading the observation notes, the transcribed interviews, and secondary data to understand the process of workforce integration in this context. I developed a narrative account of the findings, which enabled an initial ordering of the raw data. I used quotes from interviews and excerpts from fieldnotes, transcribed audio recordings, and documents to construct a narrative, which enabled a preliminary exploration of the significance and interdependence of activities.

I proceeded by generating codes and producing categories (Maanen Van, 2011) that provided labels describing the various activities and processes that either sought to transform individual refugees or contribute to the construction of the network that provided resources to support such a transformation. This enabled the emergence of descriptive labels such as: *galvanizing stakeholders, unlocking resources, profiling the potential worker, developing professionalism, redirecting, platforming and niching*. I reviewed the generated codes in light of extant theory and proceeded to break them down and recombine some to produce new categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I thus engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where I evaluated the first order codes and sought to clarify themes in order to identify more abstract and theory-rich constructs.

This inductive and recursive process required going back and forth between the data and the literature on refugee employment and institutional intermediation in order to assess the significance of the emerging theoretical concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The aggregated data reveal three categories with their supporting data. A first category aggregated together data and codes supporting the configuration of the network, leading to the creation a construct called: *mobilizing network support*. A second category, which aggregated together data and codes supporting the reconstruction of refugees' professional identity to fit local standards, resulted in the construct: *bridging the employability gap*. A final category aggregated data and codes showing efforts to insulate refugees from the demands of regulations and limitations the labor market, leading to a final construct termed: *buffering regulatory constraints*. Finally, I theorized the interrelations and significance of the developed constructs by re-examining the relevant literature. I inferred that mobilizing network support, bridging the employability gap, and buffering regulatory constraints constitute intermediation mechanisms that build the *labor market scaffolding* for refugee employment.

4. Findings

The analysis identifies labor market scaffolding as an analytical space for negotiating the local institutional framework to facilitate access to employment. Three intermediation mechanisms enable this process: Mobilizing network support, bridging the employability gap, and buffering regulatory constraints. These three inter-related mechanisms show effort to establish new patterns of behavior and practice that encourage and facilitate refugees' (self-) employment.

4.1. Mobilizing network support

Mobilizing support consists in galvanizing stakeholders and unlocking local resources to establish linkages between refugees and the local labor market. It is a significant intermediation process that engages relevant actors and brings them to endorse the cause of refugee employment and to provide tangible support.

Galvanizing stakeholders. The analysis reveals that the lack of labor market infrastructure necessary for refugee employment triggered the emergence of the NGO. Indeed, Worklife was established in 2015 through what can be viewed as an exogenous shock, when 32 000 refugees suddenly arrived in Finland (in 2014, there were approximately 6000 refugees). This situation undermined the status quo in the local institutional environment and thereby opened a cognitive space for local actors to conceive alternative arrangements (Clemens & Cook, 1999). The sudden influx created a heated public debate regarding the untenable socioeconomic and political challenge for receiving these refugees. A refugee, who is currently a manager at Worklife recalls how the NGO emerged amid these events in these words:

> So, two Finnish entertainers who traveled around the world with their show […] were interested in the controversy that this situation created in the public debate. Some were saying in the media that the refugees were sitting around abusing the social service system, others said there were stealing the jobs and the women. These two guys came with their cameras to our reception center, to see, to understand who we are […] They met different types of people from different background who were just sitting around. So as part of their

> TV show they asked these people "what do you want to do in Finland", all of us said "I want to work", "I want to start my own business", they were like ok, this is what you want?" […]. Next day, they started a media campaign, they said everyone who wants to offer something concrete for the employment and entrepreneurship of asylum seekers, should join a network. […] Only after two weeks of the TV show being aired and the campaign announced, 250 companies had signed up. […] They hired one coordinator, which is now our executive director, she got hired, but she didn't know what to do. There were 32 thousand asylum seekers on one side and there were 250 companies on the other side. (Staff member, interview).

Worklife emerged organically through an effort to find local solutions to the refugee crisis by energizing bottom-up mobilization. For such a purpose, an important initial step was to engage a variety of supporters. Worklife sought to establish a network to enable the creation and maintenance of new relationships necessary for exploring the employment possibilities for refugees in the Finnish labor market.

Unlocking local resources. The generated network was important for galvanizing the support of various resource holders. For instance, adult educational institutions offered to train and provide basic certifications, such as safety cards for work in the construction industry, and hygiene and alcohol passports necessary for restaurant work. Such certifications provided the understanding of standard rules required to operate effectively in these industries (e.g., the hygiene passport testifies that a worker can handle unpacked or perishable food properly, it is obtained after a short training and a test). Other network members provided entrepreneurial training for refugees by educating them on business models, pitching and other skills needed to start a business. The network also included other NGOs. For instance, a women's shelter who advocated for women empowerment provided specialized help to mothers. However, the bulk of the support came from companies who provided employment for the refugees and administrative support for Worklife.

Consequently, Worklife mobilized relevant allies in order to unlock resources that were not initially at the disposal of refugees, and more importantly, it harnessed new ways for aligning interests and orchestrating linkages between the refugees and the local labor market. As such, mobilizing network support is a crucial process for conceiving the infrastructure for an analytical space wherein established entrepreneurs shared their knowledge and experience by mentoring refugees interested in entrepreneurship. A space, wherein private organizations offer organizational support to Worklife (e.g., free meeting rooms, and building IT systems free of charge, etc.). A space wherein volunteers helped the staff of the NGO in explaining the requirements of the formal institutions (immigration service, work permit etc.) to refugees among other activities. These diverse groups of actors contributed time and resources so that bridges between refugees and the institutional environment could be activated, and new employment opportunities imagined within the Finnish labor market.

4.2. Bridging the employability gap

This second intermediation process consisted in profiling the potential worker and developing professionalism. These activities aimed to transform refugees with regards to the demands of the local labor market so that they may be viewed as potential workers, that is, people endowed with attributes and behavioral patterns that are contextually relevant. Thus, it consisted in introducing refugees to local professional norms, values and understandings that were expected to improve their employability.

Profiling the potential worker. This first process diagnosed disadvantages that inhibit refugee employment and determined how refugees would fit in the Finnish labor market. It is the result of self-presentation by the refugee, reinterpretation of self-presentation by the staff or volunteers, imagination of a new future, and establishment of relevant signifiers.

An initial step towards profiling the potential worker was interviewing refugees to find out what work they did before arriving in Finland and then considering how their past experience would be relevant in the Finnish society. Thus, self-presentation was a key step to enable profiling as an able worker for many of these refugees who did not have any degrees or certificates as proof for previous achievement and skills. The trustworthiness of the information resulting from self-presentation was often challenged, especially when specialized skills were considered. A staff member explained the need for careful probing during these interviews in order to collect the right information:

> It is important to clarify their previous work experience, skills and professional motivation […] we can't guarantee that what they tell us about their previous work experience, their skills and education is true…Of course, we try to probe them as much as possible to get as close to the facts, but we have to rely on what they are reporting and there are no ways to verify anything." (Staff member, interview).

A similar interview process was also organized for refugees applying for entrepreneurship training. As explained by a program organizer: "we interview people to actually know what they know, what are their goals and what are their plans and what is the right way to go forward". Consequently, the interviewing process was necessary for gathering the right information about the applicants so that their profile would be created in an online database, which helped match applicants to available positions and tailored training and development programs. The interviews generally covered topics such as background information (nationality, gender, place of residence), immigration status (date of arrival in Finland, residence or work permit, unique identifier used by Finnish immigration services), education level, previous work experience (work certificates), skills (computer, construction, childcare etc.), language proficiency, their aspired career, interest in starting a new business or in education.

A second component that supports profiling is the reinterpretation of self-presentation through the lens of the local framework. Past education, previous work experience and skills needed to be recorded in the database of Worklife, but the volunteers and the staff who undertook this task often found it challenging to identify the national equivalent of refugees' degrees or skills in the database. In particular, the low Finnish or English language skills of refugees often made it hard for refugees to accurately explain their past experience. For instance, during the fieldwork, it occurred that a holder of a bachelor's degree was registered as a high school graduate until a volunteer who also spoke French stumbled on their interview and rectified the situation. This shows the difficulties for these interviews to always capture the essence of refugees' abilities with accuracy.

An interview typically lasted between 45 min and two hours. Even when the refugee's explanations were clear, there was not always a local equivalent for their foreign accomplishment. This meant that the interviewer needed to use their own discretion to classify the refugee according to the options proposed by the database. Typically, classification occurred easily for people without specialized skills and who wished for any available opportunities in industries known to recruiting migrants e.g., cleaning, restaurant and food preparation, or construction.

A third component that supported the profiling is the imagination of new futures within the labor market. After filling in the necessary background information, past education, experience and skills, the database required "a professional title" to be created for the applicant. This title was important because it enabled the sorting out of applicants and matching them with tailored programs. More importantly, it determined whether the applicant would be easily found or buried into the system. The importance of a professional title was explained to the volunteers by staff members as "an important line for introducing the applicant to potential employers" during the volunteer information sessions. Another staff member highlighted this in an interview.

> In the professional title, one should write what one is able to do, the types of work that one would like to do […] When we go through the system and sort out things […] If the title is very specific, one knows where to put an applicant but there is also the risk of too specific a title, where we don't have the type of positions that one is looking for and then one does not get employed. […] (Staff member, interview).

The professional title reflected an interplay between the applicants' skills and what the society has to offer for refugees. Most times, the interviewer and the applicant discussed, negotiated, and agreed on a professional title that would list the type of positions worth pursuing or where the likelihood of employment is higher. Moreover, it was important that these titles be formulated in a way that helped applicants' profile stand out. For instance, an inexperienced applicant would be presented as "a hard-working cleaner / a cleaner that is willing to learn and grow".

However, the creation of a professional title was particularly overwhelming for applicants who sought to hold on to past experiences that did not seem to match the database's options. The fieldnotes' excerpt below explains such instances where volunteers, staff members and the refugee negotiated to find a suitable professional title:

Maria (refugee):	I would like to do something…but I don't know what […] I was a seamstress back home
Sanna (staff)	It is unlikely that you would find a job as a seamstress among our partner companies…Would you consider something else, or do you prefer that your professional title remains "seamstress"?
Maria (refugee):	I don't know [she said hesitantly]. I am good at being a seamstress. I have done that for many years. That is what I want to do. [Sanna, a bit unsure what to do, calls for Anni, another staff member and explained the situation]
Anni (staff)	We don't have anything of that sort for the moment. I can try to look to see if there is a company that can be contacted to ask if they can maybe have you as a trainee for something in that regard. [It was finally concluded that the lady could take part in the entrepreneurship program and considered self-employment as a seamstress through the NGO's cooperative]. (Fieldnotes)

While the refugee in the above illustration had a specific profession that she was determined to continue, thus requiring Worklife to try to find ways to accommodate her wishes, many did not always know what they could do professionally. Conversely, there were many others that were ready to take on any profession because they were either eager to be employed immediately or they deduced that their past experience had no particular value in Finland.

A final element that supported the profiling of the potential worker was the establishment of signifiers, which are symbols that showed the refugee as a legitimate applicant according to the local standards. Once constructed, the profiles enabled the creation of a Finnish CV. Additionally, the NGO would organize tailored certification trainings to support the refugees 'profiles. Such certifications included safety cards for construction workers, hygiene pass for restaurant and catering work, as well as welding or forklifting certificates, which were meaningful artifacts for signaling refugee employability within specific industries. After the construction of profiles, it was common for the staff of Worklife to pull out certain applicants from their database and send their files to potential employers within their networks. Applicants whose profiles were deemed interesting would then be invited for a job interview and/or a demonstration of basic skills needed for the job. In sum, profiling the potential worker was a process that helped to construct the material representation of the refugee as a potential worker, with contextually relevant signifiers.

Developing professionalism. This second process shows efforts to teach refugees how to conduct themselves in Finnish workplaces, and thus constitutes an important bridging mechanism to facilitate behavioral fit. It consists in efforts to transform the behavior and attitude of the refugee to resemble that, what is expected in Finnish organizations. Developing professionalism promoted the development of a Finnish experience that was perceived to provide benefits beyond the refugees' stay in Finland, as explained in the excerpt below:

"Over four years of supporting asylum seekers with employment, we have become convinced that employment is the way to improve the lives of refugees, […] Even if some, or perhaps most, of the asylum seekers end up leaving the country without a residence permit, there are still economic, and even security benefits, to supporting their employment and entrepreneurship. The new skills and experiences gained may also benefit their countries of origin. If people have to return, they do so better equipped than when they left (Worklife report, 2019).

Consequently, the NGO sought to provide skills that were perceived to support a successful work life through two main activities: Communicating expectations and introducing rules and behavioral code. First, communicating expectations occurred primarily during specialized employment events, where companies expressed their expectations to applicants. During the fieldwork, companies that participated in these events highlighted the key characteristics they perceived to show professionalism in roles requiring little experience. For instance, the representative of a confectionery company looking for factory workers insisted on the following:

> There are ten things that do not require previous work experience. Be on time. A good work ethic; always acting according to rules, being responsible. A good effort; doing your best all the time. Your body language. Your energy. Your attitude. Your drive. Your ability and willingness to learn. Hard work. Always being active. (Recruitment event, audio recording).

In these events, refugees were encouraged to develop qualities that compensated for their lack of relevant experience. These qualities were also highlighted in a report from Worklife based on a survey that investigated the expectations of their partners companies. This report showed that while work experience and language skills were important qualifications for the recruiters in these companies, the most significant barriers to employment were behavioral skills, that is, attitude and motivation. In particular, the recruiters valued the portrayal of the so-called "Finnish working culture" or "good work life skills" above other foreign qualifications, as illustrated in this excerpt:

> Most Finns speak English, so speaking Finnish is not that important if one can speak English […] But work experience is a complex issue. It is not really a barrier to employment as such because having experience does not necessarily put an applicant ahead of others, unless that experience is acquired within the Finnish context. In Finland, there are certain requirements to operate in certain fields, so because of cultural and national differences, people's foreign experience might not be appreciated here. […] Having worked in Finland in any kind of field can show that the applicant has a general understanding of Finnish working culture. Good work life skills are important. (HR consultant, interview).

The expectations communicated by recruiters were important goals tackled by the NGO when training refugees during their work preparation events. A key concern of the NGO was the ability of the refugees to present themselves as professionals. This meant that the refugees needed to exhibit the basic qualities required from employees beyond skills necessary for the specific position. The job interview trainings often started by highlighting the importance of being on time to any professional setting. Being late to the work preparation' events was often a sign for the organizers that the concept of time held by the participant did not align with the Finnish working culture. The following excerpt from an informal discussion between the researcher and a coordinator stressed out how tardiness is linked to irresponsibility.

Coordinator	They have to be on time. They have to show that they can be responsible. Coming late to these events is not a good sign! I have been calling them for the past two days to remind them […] Now I see only 9 …

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Coordinator	They have to be on time. They have to show that they can be responsible. Coming late to these events is not a good sign! I have been calling them for the past two days to remind them […] Now I see only 9 …
Researcher	How many did you expect today?
Coordinator	About 20, some are probably late. [She answered]. (Fieldnotes)

Following our discussion, the coordinator proceeded to call a number of people to inquire about their absence. As it turned out, one participant could not make it because they had just lost their right to work. Another person had canceled their job interview and did not think participation in the training was necessary, while others came late because of various reasons. The training finally started about half an hour late with 16 participants. This specific training session was organized for the recruitment of restaurant workers and cleaners. Being on time for the job interview was discussed at length and the job applicants were asked to go to the interview location a day before to make sure they would easily find the address. Other issues tackled in preparation for the job interviews were the importance of a positive attitude, the need to listen carefully: "Ask the interviewer to repeat questions if you don't understand", said one of the trainers. Also, it was necessary to remain professional during the interview: "Don't speak about things that are irrelevant to your work". When I further probed this trainer about the nature of these irrelevant questions during a follow-up informal discussion, they explained: "Some people often start talking about their kids and family, how they were sick last week or what they had cooked the day before, I don't know, anything!". Thus, being professional in this setting meant avoiding irrelevant personal issues in order to make a good impression during the job interview.

Another important theme during the work preparation events were general rules regarding employment. This included topics such as salary and its relatedness to experience, shift work, and holidays. For an external observer, this training suggested that the refugees lacked the basic understanding of what it means to be employed. For instance, taxation was explained as follows: "Some tax is taken from your salary, don't be surprised and worried that your money is taken away. It is normal".

Finally, the prospective job applicants were also informed about expected behaviors and attitudes during employment in Finnish organizations. These series of instructions often started with phrases such as: *In Finland you have to do this*. For instance: "In Finland you have to be professional and social with everyone" or "In Finland men and women are equal, you have to be social and respect everyone". As the majority of the applicants tended to be Muslim, it was also highlighted that religion was not part of a normal professional life, as explained in the excerpt below:

> "Religion is not a big deal here, if you need time to pray during working hours, you have to discuss beforehand with your supervisor. It is not automatic here. It is not part of the normal working time. You have to ask beforehand and let them give you a place to pray. You cannot just go and pray without asking for permission, it is not allowed here in Finland." (Work preparation event, audio recording).

The introduction of rules and a code of behavior aimed to help the refugee understand basic rules regarding employment and shape their conduct to be in line with traits considered acceptable in the Finnish work environment. As such, it is a process that sought to liken the refugee to the locals while mitigating characteristics that seem to be particularly predominant in the refugees' country of origin e.g., praying at work.

Consequently, developing professionalism is a practice aimed to guarantee that the applicant has a greater chance at labor-market integration by adopting perceived key norms of the dominant culture. More importantly, the refugee is made aware of the undesirability of certain aspects of their own culture that would inhibit their workplace integration.

4.3. Buffering regulatory constraints

This last process shows activities seeking to insulate the NGO's partners and refugees from the adversity of formal regulations and labor market conditions by creating a steppingstone or a safe space from which workforce integration can be better approached. As such, it is an intermediation mechanism that does not directly tackle employment structures to create breaches for the refugees, but rather it provides conditions for upgrading and transformation before desired linkages can be envisioned. It consists of activities seeking to circumvent any adverse demands from regulations that prevented refugees from integrating in the labor-market. This was significant because regulatory constraints such as work permit, certification and business registration rules lower the likelihood of a refugee becoming employed. Circumventing some of these constraints occurs through three sets of activities.

Redirecting. This first process seeks to redirect the refugees who did not fit the legal requirements regarding employment or starting a business. Redirecting means advising them to temporarily pursue a different goal until they fulfilled formal requirements. The Finnish law grants work permit to asylum seekers based on how long they have been in the Finnish territory and whether they migrated with a valid identification card. Without an identity, refugees would have to wait for at least six months before pursuing any type of employment, whereas with an identification they can start working after three months. During the fieldwork, people who did not fit this basic requirement were often told, to their great disappointment, that they could not apply for work. As explained by a staff member:

> It is the law. There is nothing we can do about it. We can register you in our system now, but we can't do much in terms of work. […] It makes sense to come back later, so many things can change by then. We could have different types of opportunities for you in three months. Come back later, ok? (Work Clinic, fieldnotes).

However, while they waited to reach the legal requirements for a work permit, these people were often directed towards other events where they could explore different options, such as short training and certifications. Redirecting was necessary to keep refugees motivated in the midst of what may appear like a rejection, as explained by a staff member below.

> They need so much information and motivation so that they start to feel that "yes, I am also important" I can also do something. So, I try to encourage them, give them the information. What options there are. You know you don't need to just sit in the refugee center and do nothing. You can do so much. You can study something. Later you can think of the possibility of a part-time work while you are studying. You can do some internship, volunteer work. There are many options. (Staff member, interview).

Consequently, the process of redirecting sought to open the perspectives of the refugee to consider other options beside immediate employment, especially when they did not fulfill the legal requirement for it. Redirecting is thus an effort by the NGO to suggest alternatives such as education, specialized training or certifications, participation in information sessions etc.

Platforming. This consists of activities that provide a steppingstone for refugees with entrepreneurial ideas, but who do not meet the legal requirements for starting a business. This process allowed these prospective entrepreneurs to operate within the framework of a cooperative established by the NGO, to circumvent the demands of the law and to

start developing their entrepreneurial identities and business ideas. One of the flagship programs of the NGO is their entrepreneurship program, which promises financial autonomy and integration in the Finnish society through entrepreneurship. In reality, the registration of a business venture by asylum seekers is only possible if they partner with a citizen for the Finnish legislation does not allow non-residents to register a company. Consequently, refugees that have created new businesses have done so through Worklife's cooperative. The NGO believes that this process provides a safety net for refugees to practice being an entrepreneur and test their ideas with low risk, while waiting for the opportunity to autonomously integrate the market. A manager explained the value of this process as follows:

> For us entrepreneurship doesn't only mean setting up and registering a business. It also means becoming self-employed or a freelancer or a part-time entrepreneur to get additional income. So, anything that contributes to the financial independence, basically. We are about training and skills development and testing. Testing the business idea and the product… All activities that may help people gain knowledge and understanding to develop skills related to entrepreneurship and especially entrepreneurship in Finland. (Staff member, interview).

The business ideas were typically modest; barber shops, cleaning and catering services, restaurants, and shops selling ethnic art and clothing etc. The cooperative allowed these prospective entrepreneurs to operate in a semi-formal space wherein the NGO handles all the regulatory demands and connects the refugees to local business owners who serve as mentors. Additionally, the volunteers assist them in selling and marketing activities in fairs and other events that enabled the testing of services and products in a process that the NGO refers to as "market validation". This, as explained below is crucial before the creation of an autonomous business.

> These are different activities to test the business idea, the product and services with real customers. It can be pop up stores, popup cafés, popup restaurants. It can be taking part in Christmas fairs, and market collaborations […] We built and created a framework, a platform where the business teams can join in and have their own table […] We provide the setting, but they are responsible for their own activity. Worklife organizes the general framework and marketing. Taking part in the market validation events requires participants to first take part in few workshops that prepare them for the event so that they would get the most out of it, so that they would learn things that are needed to succeed. (Staff member, interview).

Platforming provides a steppingstone for refugees to participate in the labor market by practicing activities related to running a small business. It enables refugees to engage in conversations and exchanges with customers, and potential partners, as they test the merits of their services and products. Platforming also confers a certain legitimacy to these refugees and can potentially be symbolic for their autonomy and emancipation through entrepreneurship. Indeed, one entrepreneur reported to have received "a good offer to cater an event" (refugee entrepreneur, catering services) during a fair. Another explained how it was "so exciting to receive my first contract, it helped launch the business" (refugee entrepreneur, cleaning services). However, such contracts tended to be limited to an event or a season.

Niching. This consists in activities that aim to create a specialized segment in the labor market for refugee employment. First, niching entails that Worklife takes responsibility of the employment relationship between its partner companies and the refugees. They ensure that all the documents that the refugees need for employment are in order, by checking the length of their work permit and changes in immigration status during employment for example. They also make sure that the refugees did not enter abusive contractual agreements, where they, for instance would not receive a fair wage for their work. Moreover, through their intermediary role, Worklife provides a space where companies and volunteers working in solidarity with refugees operate specialized labor-market schemes that offer employment possibilities for refugees who do not receive any employment support from official employment services. Thus, the NGO plays a crucial role in creating a niche market, or socio-economic arrangements that open the Finnish labor market to refugees. The lack of support from formal institutions was emphasized in an interview with one of the managers:

> Even if they have work permits, they receive no support in findings jobs, or in starting their own businesses for self-employment […] they are alienated from the society, they are not given a chance to earn a living. All, they do is spend time at the reception centers where they wait for the decision to be granted the refugee status. This can last up to 4 years […] There is a lack of employees in many industries where refugees can be employed…They are very motivated to work, it gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, a chance to meet people and be part of the society […] This initial enthusiasm tends to diminish over the years however, that is what happens when people are marginalized and viewed as leeching off the system, not contributing. This is humiliating. (Staff member, interview).

The logic of the niche labor market is that refugees can become productive members of society if given the opportunities to work in industries lacking employees. The results of a research study by Worklife show that drivers, salespersons, restaurant workers and cleaners were in 2018 considered to be among the top professions where companies found it hard to recruit employees. Next were construction and industry workers who were reportedly in high demand, especially outside the capital region. Accordingly, these industries accounted for approximately 75 % of Worklife job offers. Since 2018, the NGO is reported to have facilitated the employment of about 800 people, the majority of which are employed in cleaning, construction, catering, and restaurant work. Consequently, through such a distribution of labor, there seems to be a clear labor market niche that is being constructed in the Finnish society for the refugee laborer. The refugees are allowed to work in this space through specialized labor-market schemes between the NGO and their partners, which enable the refugees to be employed in short-term specialized jobs while they may face deportation at any point, or while they await the validation of their educational degrees, which might take several years. As one staff member highlighted: "*The skills that one would get from an Iraqi education system might not qualify them for a position here[..] It is hard to have one's degree accepted in Finland.*" Consequently, niching provides a specialized labor market, which despite being at the margin of the mainstream labor market, still serves as a significant steppingstone towards labor market participation in this context.

5. Discussion

This study explores local solutions for negotiating the local institutional framework that restricts refugee employment. The findings highlight the significance of *labor market scaffoldings* in providing an analytical space within which refugee employment and self-employment are negotiated through three intermediation mechanisms: *mobilizing network support*, *bridging the employability gap*, and *buffering regulatory constraints*. These mechanisms that target individual, organizational, and regulatory barriers shed light on the possibilities of a more comprehensive view of refugee employment that considers institutional disadvantages faced by refugees in new environments. International refugee assistance policies (UNDP, 2004; UNHCR, 2005, 2017) have been advocating for economic self-reliance programs that put the burden of integration on refugees (Bhagat, 2022; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020) while neglecting the dynamics of the local institutional framework. The present study proposes that institutional intermediation may play a key role in negotiating new forms of brokerage and intersectional engagements that open possibilities for a more sustainable process towards economic self-reliance. An institutional intermediation lens enables to explore the reality of self-

reliance policies through employment and entrepreneurship in several ways.

First, the present research expands previous work that has emphasized the multifaced and systemic nature of barriers to refugee employment (Campion, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Loon & Vitale, 2021), as well as research suggesting that tackling this "grand challenge" require the involvement of multiple stakeholders for little is known regarding the types of models and forms of brokerage that may actually facilitate optimal employment outcomes for refugees (Ferraro et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2020). The present research examines how this grand challenge manifests in a specific institutional framework and inheres in patterns of rules and norms that govern access and participation in the local labor market. I propose the concept of labor market scaffolding as an analytical space within heterogenous actors unlock institutional resources and stimulate an enabling environment necessary for refugees to engage in potentially self-reliant projects such as employment and self-employment.

I show that mobilizing network support is a significant first process that renegotiates normative structures, by constructing novel understanding of the refugees, and influencing stakeholders' engagement and shared commitment. Thus, it is an intermediation mechanism that shapes social meaning by initiating a collective undertaking with public and private actors who jointly leverage local resources. Current refugee assistance programs have been criticized because "refugees' self-reliance is largely viewed as an individual or private matter, which leads to a reduced emphasis on the communal attainment of self-reliance and even risks exacerbating inequalities among refugees" (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018:1469). Additionally, previous work has raised concerns over the promotion of individual empowerment and other individual self-organizing efforts that tend to exacerbate refugees' vulnerability (Dykstra-DeVette & Canary, 2019; Steimel, 2017; Fernández-Kranz & Rodríguez-Planas, 2011; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Luimpöck, 2019). Similarly, critiques of integration have questioned mainstream policies that single out the individual, presenting the migrant as a project to be transformed in order to secure fit in the society (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Schinkel, 2019).

In line with this previous work, I present *bridging employability gap* as a process seeking to introduce local norms and values to refugees, and to stimulate behavioral patterns perceived to be necessary for labor market access and participation. Indeed, the activities of Worklife on *profiling the potential worker* and *developing professionalism* highlight blatant attempts to construct the refugee as a contributing member of the society and produce material elements to signal their acceptability. However, the analysis also shows that this process, which centers on refugee transformation is insufficient to guarantee (self-)employment. Rather, attempts at individual transformation need to interrelate with negotiations at the network and regulation levels.

I propose buffering regulatory constraints as an additional process necessary to insulate refugees from non-negotiable features of the regulatory framework. This final process transition refugees to a niche labor market, thus allowing them to avoid costly regulatory demands that would restrict any labor market access. This intermediation mechanism is necessary for responding to fixed features of the local institutional framework, which cannot be negotiated by intermediaries. Indeed, previous work suggests that although Finnish NGOs and other supporting organizations help fill the gaps for the insufficient support from government services, their labor market integration activities are still considerably limited in scope (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019, 2022). Similar conclusions have been found by several studies in Germany and Denmark (Greer et al., 2017), the UK (Calo et al., 2021), Greece and the Czech Republic (Numerato et al., 2019) where various support organizations that have stepped in to compensate for the lack of effective government services have only been able to provide limited skill development services to refugees and very few opportunities for formal employment. This suggests that civil society organizations cannot assume the sole responsibility for refugee labor market integration if more effective and sustainable employment outcomes are expected to be realized (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2022).

The present research shows that buffering mechanisms like *niching* are useful in providing initial employment. However, the creation of such pseudo labor markets may reinforce otherness (Dykstra-DeVette & Canary, 2019), restrict refugees 'career expectations to lower status positions (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Luimpöck, 2019; Nardon et al., 2021; Steimel, 2017), and craft refugees' professional identities within an "underclass" group of menial workers (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, 14). This paper conceptualizes the construction of a scaffolding as an initial step to fill the void of the lack of infrastructure necessary to support refugee employment. This scaffolding serves as a trial space for on-the-ground activities that test alternatives to the lacking, insufficient, or inflexible government' employment services.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the significance of intermediation competency in simultaneously creating arrangements supporting immediate employment while building the steppingstones for long-term employment outcomes. Thus, intermediation competency describes the ability to organize a process of refugee employment that is dynamic, flexible, and contextual. On the one hand, bridging employability gap and buffering regulatory constraints are mechanisms that secure immediate employment for refugees. According to the NGO and its collaborators, the benefits of immediate (even if unsustainable) employment are crucial: Employment "gives a sense of purpose" to refugees who "were just sitting around" at the reception centers. Immediate employment is relevant even with impending threats of repatriation. Such findings echo previous work that emphasize the role of employment at any stages of refugee integration processes (Puma et al., 2018; Strang & Ager, 2010; Szkudlarek et al., 2021a). On the other hand, mobilizing network support is crucial for creating an enabling environment and for drawing necessary formal and informal resources. Such an intermediation mechanism can potentially provide the building blocks necessary for change. As such, this study contends that intermediation mechanisms that inspire and motivate large groups of heterogenous actors to engage can constitute fertile grounds for establishing more comprehensive and potentially sustainable outcomes.

Overall, these findings argue for refugee economic self-reliance practices that consider the continuum between immediate and long-term goals. A temporal perspective that delineates between the pre-arrival, immediate, intermediate, and long-term integration stages is significant for practices that are relevant for each stage (Szkudlarek et al., 2021a). Similarly, ambidextrous organizational practices that tackle immediate employment of refugees, albeit in peripheral or lower status positions within organizations, while simultaneously pursuing development-oriented goals aiming at refugees' long-term suitability for sustainable employment (Loon & Vitale, 2021; Szkudlarek et al., 2021a) are likely to reveal long-term dynamics that eventually orchestrate economic self-reliance.

6. Conclusion

A view gaining momentum in refugee assistance policies is that refugees should be provided the agency to become self-reliant laborers and entrepreneurs, responsible for their economic autonomy in receiving societies (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Unfortunately, most receiving societies remain unprepared and tend to provide inadequate support to mitigate the challenges that refugees face in finding employment (Ataç et al., 2016; Puma et al., 2018). This study explores the efforts by an NGO to facilitate refugee (self-)employment and draws attention to the potential role of targeted interventions in mitigating systemic and multilevel barriers to refugee employment. It proposes that labor market scaffoldings can be productive tools for devising economic self-reliance practices that are relational, temporally sensitive, and contextually relevant.

An important limitation of this study is its focus on a single case organization in Finland. Further empirical investigations would enable

deeper insights into the extent to which the scope of labor scaffoldings can be broadened in practice. Future studies could also focus on other theoretical underpinnings that would offer different perspectives and criteria to capture the field of collaborations, as well as the significance of the active agency of various actors. Another limitation of this study is the relatively short period of investigation, future research could explore the long-term role of labor market scaffoldings and the boundary conditions under which they emerge in other contexts, are maintained, are expanded, or disintegrate overtime.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgement

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix A. Profile of interviews from Work Clinics

Refugees	*Gender*	*Country of origin*	*Age*	*Profession*
ID-01	female	Pakistan	25	teacher
ID-02	female	Pakistan	23	seamstress
ID-03	male	Somalia	25	cleaner
ID-04	male	Somalia	21	child care
ID-05	male	Iran	33	cleaner
ID-06	female	Afghanistan	23	child care
ID-07	female	Afghanistan	24	child care
ID-08	male	Iran	43	gardner
ID-09	male	Iran	42	construction worker
ID-10	female	Iran	52	seamstress
ID-11	male	Syria	23	cleaner
ID-12	female	Syria	28	teacher
ID-13	male	Iran	23	construction worker
ID-14	male	Iran	22	construction worker
ID-15	female	Morocco	31	office worker
ID-16	female	Afghanistan	39	cleaner
ID-17	female	Iran	41	shild care
ID-18	male	Syria	19	cleaner
ID-19	male	Afghanistan	38	cook
ID-20	male	Iran	43	baker
ID-21	male	Iran	19	construction worker
ID-22	male	Iran	23	cleaner
ID-23	male	Somalia	45	car mechanic
ID-24	male	Iran	28	painter
ID-25	male	Pakistan	32	office worker
ID-26	male	Nigeria	28	waiter
ID-27	male	Iran	25	restaurant worker
ID-28	male	Nigeria	33	cleaner

Appendix B. List of interviews

Worklife' staff	*Number of interviewees*
head of business program	1
head of program development	1
business program manager	1
community coordinator	2
Program assistant	1
Worklife 's collaborators	
human resource consultant and recruiter	5
event coordinator	3
Volunteers	5
Potential entrepreneurs	4
Total	**23**

References

Ataç, I., Rygiel, K., Stierl, M., 2016. Introduction: The contentious politics of refugee and migrant protest and solidarity movements: Remaking citizenship from the margins. Citizenship studies 20 (5), 527–544.

Battilana, J., Leca, B., Boxenbaum, E., 2009. How actors change institutions: Towards a theory of institutional Entrepreneurship. Acad. Manag. Ann. 3 (1), 65–107.

Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J.D., Omata, N., 2017. Refugee economies: Forced displacement and development. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bhagat, A., 2022. Governing refugees in raced markets: Displacement and disposability from Europe's frontier to the streets of Paris. Rev. Int. Polit. Econ. 29 (3), 955–978.

Bhattacharyya, G., 2018. Rethinking racial capitalism: Questions of reproduction and Survival. Rowman & Littlefield, London.

Bloch, A., 2008. Refugees in the UK labour market: The conflict between economic integration and policy-led labour market restriction. J. Soc. Policy 37 (1), 21–36.

Bontenbal, I., & Lillie, N., 2019. The role of the third sector in the labour market integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Finland. SIRIUS WP4 national research report.

Bontenbal, I., Lillie, N., 2022. Minding the Gaps: The role of Finnish civil society organizations in the labour market integration of migrants. Int. J. Voluntary Nonprofit Organ. 33 (5), 862–871.

Calo, F., Montgomery, T., Baglioni, S., 2021. Marginal players? The Third sector and employability services for migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 1–14.

Campion, E.D., 2018. The career adaptive refugee: Exploring the structural and personal barriers to refugee resettlement. J. Vocat. Behav. 105, 6–16.

Casasnovas, G., Ferraro, F., 2022. Speciation in nascent markets: Collective learning through cultural and material scaffolding. Organ. Stud. 43 (6), 829–860.

Cheng, Z., Wang, B.Z., Taksa, L., 2021. Labour force participation and employment of humanitarian migrants: Evidence from the building a new life in Australia longitudinal data. J. Bus. Ethics 168 (4), 697–720.

Chun Guo, G., Al Ariss, A., Brewster, C., 2020. Understanding the global refugee crisis: Managerial consequences and policy implications. Acad. Manag. Perspect. 34 (4), 531–545.

Clemens, E.S., Cook, J.M., 1999. Politics and institutionalism: Explaining durability and change. Annu. Rev. Sociol. 25 (1), 441–466.

Colic-Peisker, V., Fozdar, F., 2006. Employment niches for recent refugees: Segmented labour market in twenty-first century Australia. J. Refug. Stud. 19 (2), 203–229.

Corbin, J.M., Strauss, A., 1990. Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. Qual. Sociol. 13 (1), 3–21.

Darling, J., 2017. Forced migration and the city: Irregularity, informality, and the politics of presence. Prog. Hum. Geogr. 41 (2), 178–198.

Dorado, S., 2013. Small groups as context for institutional entrepreneurship: An exploration of the emergence of commercial microfinance in Bolivia. Organ. Stud. 34 (4), 533–557.

Douglas, M., 1986. How Institutions Think. Syracuse University Press, New York.

Dykstra-DeVette, T.A., Canary, H.E., 2019. Crystalline empowerment: Negotiating tensions in refugee resettlement. Organ. Stud. 40 (3), 323–342.

Easton-Calabria, E., Omata, N., 2018. Panacea for the refugee crisis? Rethinking the promotion of 'self-reliance' for refugees. Third World Q. 39 (8), 1458–1474.

Easton-Calabria, E., Wood, J., 2021. Bridging, bonding, and linking? Syrian refugee-led organizations and integration in Berlin. J. Ethn. Migr. Stud. 47 (19), 4308–4326.

Emerson, R., Fretz, R., Shaw, L., 2001. Participant observation and fieldnotes. In: Handbook of Ethnography (Paul Atkinson. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, pp. 352–368.

Fernández-Kranz, D., Rodríguez-Planas, N., 2011. The part-time pay penalty in a segmented labor market. Labour Econ. 18 (5), 591–606.

Fernando, D., Patriotta, G., 2020. "Us versus them": Sensemaking and identity processes in skilled migrants' experiences of occupational downgrading. J. World Bus. 55 (4), 101109.

Ferraro, F., Etzion, D., Gehman, J., 2015. Tackling Grand Challenges pragmatically: Robust action revisited. Organ. Stud. 36 (3), 363–390.

Finnish Immigration Service, 2020. Asylum in Finland | Maahanmuuttovirasto (migri.fi). accessed, 05June 2020.

Fraser, N., Honneth, A., 2003. Redistribution or recognition?: A Political-philosophical exchange. Verso, London and New York.

Gericke, D., Burmeister, A., Löwe, J., Deller, J., Pundt, L., 2018. How do refugees use their social capital for successful labor market integration? An exploratory analysis in Germany. J. Vocat. Behav. 105, 46–61.

Glaser, B.G., Strauss, A.L., 2009. The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, NJ.

Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R., Hinings, C.R., 2002. Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. Acad. Manag. J. 45 (1), 58–80.

Greer, I., Breidahl, K., Knuth, M., Larsen, F., 2017. The Marketization of employment services: The dilemmas of Europe's work-first welfare states. Oxford University Press, New York.

Iazzolino, G., 2020. Power geometries of encampment. The reproduction of domination and marginality among Somali refugees in Kakuma. Geoforum 1 (10), 25–34.

Jacobsen, K., 2002. Can refugees benefit the state? Refugee resources and African statebuilding. J. Mod. Afr. Stud. 40 (4), 577–596.

Ketokivi, M., Mantere, S., 2010. Two strategies for inductive reasoning in organizational research. Acad. Manag. Rev. 35 (2), 315–333.

Knappert, L., Kornau, A., Figengül, M., 2018. Refugees' exclusion at work and the intersection with gender: Insights from the Turkish-Syrian border. J. Vocat. Behav. 105, 62–82.

Lee, E.S., Szkudlarek, B., Nguyen, D.C., Nardon, L., 2020. Unveiling the canvas ceiling: A multidisciplinarylLiterature review of refugee employment and workforce integration. Int. J. Manag. Rev. 22 (2), 193–216.

Liu, N., 2020. Institutional intermediaries and firm choices in response to regulations. Acad. Manag. J. 64 (3), 981–1007.

Loon, M., Vitale, A., 2021. A liminal lens on integrating refugees into the workplace: Conceptualising a theoretical model. Hum. Resour. Manag. J. 31 (4), 1082–1104.

Luimpöck, S., 2019. Social recognition beyond employment. Refugees embedding deskilling and restructuring identity. Identities 26 (3), 305–320.

Luthans, F., Youssef-Morgan, C.M., 2017. Psychological capital: An evidence-based positive approach. Annu. Rev. Organ. Psych. Organ. Behav. 4 (1), 339–366.

Maanen, J.V., 2011. Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography, Second Edition. University of Chicago Press Ltd, London.

Mair, J., Marti, I., 2009. Entrepreneurship in and around institutional voids: A case study from Bangladesh. J. Bus. Ventur. 24 (5), 419–435.

Mair, J., Marti, I., Ventresca, M.J., 2012. Building inclusive markets in rural Bangladesh: How intermediaries work institutional voids. Acad. Manag. J. 55 (4), 819–850.

Mair, J., Wolf, M., Seelos, C., 2016. Scaffolding: A process of transforming patterns of inequality in small-scale societies. Acad. Manag. J. 59 (6), 2021–2044.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., 1994. Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook. SAGE Publications, London.

Nardon, L., Zhang, H., Szkudlarek, B., Gulanowski, D., 2021. Identity work in refugee workforce integration: The role of newcomer support organizations. Hum. Relat. 74 (12), 1994–2020.

Numerato, D., Cada, K., Horeni, K., 2019. Civil society enablers and barriers. SIRIUS WP4 integrated report.

Pettigrew, A.M., 1990. Longitudinal field research on change: Theory and practice. Organ. Sci. 1 (3), 267–292.

Puma, J.E., Lichtenstein, G., Stein, P., 2018. The RISE Survey: Developing and implementing a valid and reliable quantitative measure of refugee integration in the United States. J. Refug. Stud. 31 (4), 605–625.

Sacramento, O., Turtiainen, K., Silva, P.G., 2019. Policies of refugee settlement and integration in Europe: The cases of Portugal and Finland. Eur. J. Migration Law 21 (4), 409–434.

Schinkel, W., 2019. Migration studies: An imposition. Compar. Mig. Stud. 7 (1), 32.

Shiferaw, D., Hagos, H., 2002. Refugees and progression routes to employment. Refugee Council.

Silvasti, T., 2015. Food aid–normalising the abnormal in Finland. Social Policy and Society 14 (3), 471–482.

Skran, C., Easton-Calabria, E., 2020. Old concepts making new history: Refugee self-reliance, livelihoods and the 'refugee entrepreneur'. J. Refug. Stud. 33 (1), 1–21.

Soederberg, S., 2019. Governing global displacement in austerity urbanism: The case of Berlin's refugee housing crisis. Dev. Chang. 50 (4), 923–947.

Steimel, S., 2017. Negotiating refugee empowerment(s) in resettlement organizations. J. Immigr. Refug. Stud. 15 (1), 90–107.

Strang, A., Ager, A., 2010. Refugee integration: Emerging trends and remaining agendas. J. Refug. Stud. 23 (4), 589–607.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J., 1998. Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory, 2nd ed (pp. xiii, 312). Sage Publications, London.

Suleman, A., Whiteford, G.E., 2013. Understanding occupational transitions in forced migration: The importance of life skills in early refugee resettlement. J. Occup. Sci. 20 (2), 201–210.

Sutter, C., Webb, J., Kistruck, G., Ketchen, D.J., Ireland, R.D., 2017. Transitioning entrepreneurs from informal to formal markets. J. Bus. Ventur. 32 (4), 420–442.

Szkudlarek, B., Nardon, L., & Toh, S. M., 2021. A temporal perspective on refugee employment – Advancing HRM theory and practice. Human Resource Management Journal, Nov 9.

Szkudlarek, B., Nardon, L., Osland, J.S., Adler, N.J., Lee, E.S., 2021b. When context matters: What happens to international theory when researchers study refugees. Acad. Manag. Perspect. 35 (3), 461–484.

UNDP, 2004. Unleashing entrepreneurship: making business work for the poor: report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations / Commission on the Private Sector & Development. https://didgitallibrary.un.org/record/520745?In=en.

UNHCR, 2005. Handbook for Self-reliance (First edition). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. https://www.unhcr.org/44bf7b012.pdf.

UNHCR, 2017. A Guide to International Refugee Protection and Building State Asylum Systems. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. https://www.unhcr.org/3d4aba564.pdf.

Van Maanen, J., 1988. Tales of the Field. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, On Writing Ethnography.

Wahlbeck, Ö., 2019. To share or not to share responsibility? Finnish refugee policy and the hesitant support for a common European asylum system. J. Immigr. Refug. Stud. 17 (3), 299–316.

Wauters, B., Lambrecht, J., 2006. Refugee entrepreneurship in Belgium: Potential and practice. Int. Entrep. Manag. J. 2 (4), 509–525.

Wehrle, K., Klehe, U.-C., Kira, M., Zikic, J., 2018. Can I come as I am? Refugees' vocational identity threats, coping, and growth. J. Vocat. Behav. 105, 83–101.

Wolcott, H.F., 1994. Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Yin, R.K., 2011. Applications of Case Study Research. SAGE Publications, London.