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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Weidinger, T., Spenger, D., & Kordel, S. (2024). Becoming Active Agents Through Practices of Volunteering: Immigrants' Experiences in Rural Germany. *Social Inclusion*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.7677>

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# Becoming Active Agents Through Practices of Volunteering: Immigrants' Experiences in Rural Germany

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2023 **Accepted:** 20 February 2024 **Published:** 25 March 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Migrants’ Inclusion in Rural Communities” edited by Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (University of Iceland), Pamela Innes (University of Wyoming), and Anna Wojtyńska (University of Iceland), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i411>

## Abstract

Volunteering is an important way to include immigrants at a local scale, especially in small towns and municipalities with limited arrival infrastructure. With the recent increase in immigrants, including in rural areas, volunteering practices for this target group have been much discussed, albeit with an emphasis on immigrants as vulnerable beneficiaries. There are few studies that focus on immigrants’ volunteering practices, or their function for the individual and receiving community, while empirical evidence for rural areas is explicitly lacking. In this article, we address immigrants as active agents with recourse to the concept of agency and unravel, firstly, the meanings they attribute to volunteering and reasons for their mobilisation; secondly, their access to volunteering in the German countryside; and thirdly their reflecting, practising, and sharing of agency through volunteering with an impact on themselves and their rural communities. Drawing on a qualitative, biographical-narrative study of 72 immigrants in rural Germany, we show how cultures of volunteering—or how it is practised in different contexts—inform immigrants’ current activities, ranging from leisure practices to neighbourly help and supporting the inclusion of new arrivals. We illustrate the importance of opportunity structures and social networks for accessing volunteering and reveal individual and altruistic reasons for doing it, such as facilitating language acquisition and enhancing one’s participation, showing solidarity with immigrants, or gratitude towards the receiving society, often coinciding with expected outcomes. Volunteering allows immigrants to “perform agency” and fosters both belonging and responsibility taking for the dwelling place.

## Keywords

civic engagement; cultures of volunteering; Germany; migration; rural areas; solidarity

## 1. Introduction

Upon arrival at a new place of residence abroad, immigrants in general and refugees in particular, often receive support from various actors, including administrative professionals, third-sector organisations, and volunteers, who provide assistance with local orientation and negotiating administrative processes. Later, they are key in the acquisition of private housing or employment. Especially in rural areas and small towns that have limited arrival infrastructure (Meeus, 2017), such as counselling or education offers, the engagement of civic volunteers is considered an important way to help immigrants feel included on a local scale. For a long time, however, neither politicians nor the receiving society saw immigrants themselves as potential volunteers. Instead, they were and often still are understood in terms either of their “[performance] in the labour market or in the education system” (Schammann, 2017, p. 741), or else considered as “users” and “receivers of services” (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023). The latter is particularly true for refugees, who may face paternalism and be characterised as passive and vulnerable (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Nyers, 2006). In contrast, though, understanding volunteering as an important route to the social inclusion of immigrants has recently become a part of integration policy-making, as shown by Stein and Fedreheim (2022) in the case of Norway.

So far, few studies have focused on immigrants’ perspectives on volunteering. This is particularly true concerning the functions of volunteering for individuals and their receiving communities. To date, investigations have often been conducted in cities (Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Hans, 2023; Yin Yap et al., 2011) using quantitative surveys (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Greenspan et al., 2018) or by picking out specific areas of engagement or groups of immigrants. There is currently very little empirical evidence on immigrants’ volunteering practices in rural areas and, with a few exceptions, holistic, qualitative studies are explicitly lacking. The exceptions are Schwingel et al. (2016), who focused on the volunteering of a specific group of Latina women in non-metropolitan Illinois, US; Tandberg and Loga (2023), who analysed a specific volunteering project of female immigrants in rural Norway; and Wood et al. (2019), who explored the impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing of refugees in regional Australia.

In contrast to the aforementioned perspective, which understands immigrants as people in need, this article aims to address them as active agents in interaction with the rural societies where they live, using the concept of agency suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and taking into account a biographical-narrative and relational approach. Based on this, we discuss different aspects of immigrants’ volunteering, including civic engagement and unpaid work in the context of rural Germany, where more inhabitants volunteer compared to urban centres (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023) and where a variety of immigration processes have taken place in the last couple of years (Kordel & Weidinger, 2018). The article focuses on how cultures of volunteering (that is, the way volunteering is practised in different socio-spatial contexts) inform immigrants’ current volunteering practices. Drawing on existing knowledge of the impacts of volunteering on the individual, such as greater satisfaction and trust in others, wider social networks, and possession of greater social capital (Wood et al., 2019), we intend to show how immigrants use their agency to volunteer and how volunteering in turn results in agency. In this way, values such as gratitude, solidarity, and responsibility come into play, to help us better understand the motivations for, and impact of, volunteering not just on individual belonging but also on rural communities.

The study tackled three research questions: What meanings do immigrants attribute to volunteering and why do they want to engage in it? How do they gain access to volunteering in the rural places where they live? What sort of voluntary practices can be identified, and how do they affect both immigrants themselves and their rural communities?

The article proceeds as follows: In Section 2, we discuss the recent literature on immigrant volunteering, elaborating on reasons to volunteer from a biographical perspective, on immigrants' actual practices of volunteering, and its impact. Then, in Section 3, we present conceptual presuppositions and an overview of the methods used and describe the interview sample used in our empirical research. Afterwards, in Section 4, we present our results focusing on the meanings and mobilisation of volunteering, access to volunteering, and performance of agency through volunteering. This section closes with a reflection on the implications of volunteering for immigrants themselves as well as their receiving communities. We conclude, in Section 5, with a discussion of the immigrants' feelings of belonging and taking responsibility for their place of residence and provide an outlook on volunteering and rural citizenship.

## 2. Recent Literature on Immigrant Volunteering

### 2.1. *Reasons to Volunteer From a Biographical Perspective*

Motivations for volunteering are diverse and overlapping and change over the life course. Experience of volunteering stems from one's socialisation, including role models in the family or cultures of volunteering at home. Especially concerning immigrants, Stein (2023) states that previous experience of volunteering in their country of origin shapes the way immigrants construct and take part in volunteering in their new place of residence. A wide-ranging understanding of what is meant by volunteering also considers what kind of practices are involved—such as helping family or neighbours, being a paying member of, or taking formal positions in, associations (Schwingel et al., 2016; Stein, 2023)—as well as those that are not. Thus, the motivation to volunteer often stems from one's biography, while humanist or religious values are often positive for volunteering (Kahraman & Songur, 2018). Discussing Syrian refugees in their countries of origin, for instance, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen (2018) identifies practices in the realms of sport, youth, religion, or helping refugees in Jordan, while Ragab and Antara (2018) highlight previous political engagement, such as protesting or demonstrating against the governing regimes, for individuals who fled Afghanistan or Syria.

In providing an overview of motivation, we draw on Schührer (2018), who developed a list based on a qualitative study of female immigrants in Germany. Her list includes (a) volunteering for self-fulfilment, such as a change from everyday life or personal fulfilment; (b) volunteering as a form of acknowledgement, to show appreciation or acknowledge success; (c) volunteering as compensation, in the form of pragmatic assistance for community members or as a substitute for absent family or employment; (d) volunteering as a means to develop competencies; (e) altruistic volunteering; and (f) migration-specific volunteering. Migration-specific motives can be further broken down into those that are preserving, such as sharing one's own culture, and those that are self-integrating such as language acquisition, network building, and efforts to belong (Schührer, 2018). Regarding preserving motives, Kahraman and Songur (2018) stress the reciprocity of such practices, that is, increasing the visibility of one's culture while simultaneously entering into a dialogue with the receiving society. In doing so, ethnic-cultural capital gains importance, and

volunteering creates common spaces of action (Linnert & Berg, 2016). Concerning the latter (self-integration), volunteering helps to better structure everyday life in the new place of residence and is considered a meaningful activity (Linnert & Berg, 2016). In a quantitative study of immigrants in Italy, Ambrosini and Artero (2023) point to utilitarianism as part of motivation, since immigrants aim to enhance their employment opportunities or showcase their skills. In a similar vein, Cattacin and Domenig (2013) identify instrumental motivation among immigrants in Switzerland, including volunteering as a means to obtain material advantages or improve their legal situation. In addition to this, especially young immigrants are inclined to volunteer to counteract exclusion and the perception of discrimination (Flarer et al., 2020). Recent literature also highlights the role of gratitude and “informal reciprocity” (Phillimore et al., 2018), that is, giving something back to the community in general, or to a new immigrant in particular, having themselves received support upon arrival (see Schwingel et al., 2016). Recently, regarding the latter, Hans (2023) also points to the concept of solidarity when analysing the volunteering of established immigrants (and their descendants) on behalf of newcomers from various backgrounds in German urban arrival neighbourhoods. Participants referred to their similar situations and the difficulties that fostered connections based on collective migration histories, everyday experiences, and practices, which led to the creation of “infrastructures of solidarity” (Meeus, 2017).

## 2.2. Accessing and Practising Volunteering

From a biographical perspective, immigrants tend to practise civic engagement less in the first months or years after arrival, since their activities focus on language acquisition and employment (Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration, 2020; Tandberg & Loga, 2023). The continuity and commitment often required for civic engagement are frequently not part of the life situation of refugees, which is characterised by general stress (Han-Broich, 2019) and volatile housing biographies (Weidinger & Kordel, 2023). In addition, willingness to volunteer is overridden by concerns about their legal residence status (Han-Broich, 2019; Ragab & Antara, 2018). Frequent reallocations and relocations and a lack of language skills, as well as unpredictability and a lack of continuity in their interactions with other, obligatory activities, such as language courses or employment, reduce opportunities to volunteer. Furthermore, immigrants are often perceived as passive actors who are not expected to engage. As Tietje (2021) has shown in a discussion of refugees in Germany, relationships of dependency and powerlessness can become entrenched: Fear and insecurity, often rooted in limited language skills, are major barriers to interaction in general and volunteering in particular (Han-Broich, 2019; Khvorostianov & Remmnick, 2017). Weak social networks can also result in reduced civic engagement as one may not be asked to volunteer (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Tandberg & Loga, 2023; Uslucan, 2015). Finally, a lack of information about opportunities in general, and about clubs and associations where they live in particular, prevents immigrants from volunteering (Gele & Harsløf, 2012). Transnational experiences, like growing up in authoritarian states where participation is unwanted, also inhibit engagement, especially at the beginning of a stay in a host country (Han-Broich, 2019). Later on, as Tandberg and Loga (2023) report, biographical contexts continue to play a role, since full-time workers or commuters may lack time to volunteer, for instance, while health conditions may prevent older people from participating (see also Wollebaek et al., 2015).

In the German Survey on Volunteering, people are regularly asked about their willingness to volunteer. Among individuals from a migration background, like people born abroad or whose parents were born abroad, the aspiration to volunteer is higher than among natives (13.6% compared to 10.8%). However, the

proportion of individuals who can translate their willingness into action is comparatively lower among this group, a pattern that persists over time (Simonson et al., 2022). Similarly, the “integration barometer” of the German Expert Council on Integration and Migration shows that about one-quarter of immigrant respondents (26.8% compared to 55.5% among natives) are members of an association, while one in five is informally engaged (19.6% compared to 39.6%; Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration, 2020). In general, demographic characteristics point towards young adults and middle-aged immigrants (Khvorostianov & Remmennick, 2017), while individuals with high levels of education and financial resources predominate (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023; Han-Broich, 2019).

Preconditions for volunteering are, first and foremost, opportunity-driven, which can be limited by the absence of meeting places or prejudice, lack of interest, and negative attitudes towards immigrants (Tandberg & Loga, 2023; Wernesjö, 2015). One rural peculiarity that prevents encounters and inhibits volunteering stems from mobility constraints, for example, due to high costs or long travelling times (Mehl et al., 2023). In terms of the evolution of migrant-led organisations, Gluns et al. (2021) confirm low population density as a further obstacle. Besides, existing organisations and associations may be characterised by static, hierarchical structures and conservative attitudes among officials and thus fail to reflect a diverse society. Despite their relevance in rural societies, organisations and associations often do not anticipate immigration, according to Ohliger and Veyhl (2019), which can result in a lack of openness, for example as a result of stereotyping (Ragab & Antara, 2018) or non-acceptance of women wearing headscarves (Munsch & Kewes, 2019). Thus, constellations of local communities affect access to voluntary participation (Tandberg & Loga, 2023) and structural preconditions that facilitate civic engagement vary according to organisation and place of residence. In places where voluntary work is very formalised and follows a membership model, such as in associations in Germany, or in Nordic countries (Henriksen et al., 2019), there are greater obstacles to volunteering, due to things like the cost of membership.

### **2.3. Impact of Volunteering on Immigrants and Communities**

Civic engagement can initiate reflection on one’s own acquired strengths and weaknesses, while the deployment and transmission of knowledge and competences can strengthen awareness of one’s human and social capital and increase agency (Flarer et al., 2020; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sveen et al., 2023; Yin Yap et al., 2011). Based on the engagement of refugees from African countries, the study of Wood et al. (2019) showed that volunteering promotes the establishment of new social contacts, has a positive effect on physical and mental health, and supports a sense of belonging. The identity-forming function of engagement has also been highlighted in a study by Müller et al. (2014), which pointed out that volunteering has positive effects on life satisfaction and self-image. This is particularly important for immigrants who are in an ongoing trans-local negotiation process and can be affected by feelings of loneliness (Flarer et al., 2020). Apart from an impact on well-being and social networks, volunteering can also enhance immigrants’ access to employment (Röder, 2020).

Finally, for Germany, Uslucan (2015) considers the engagement of immigrants as unrecognised potential for social participation and emphasises its democracy-building and democracy-promoting function. More recently, immigrants’ voluntary activities have been considered important by Norwegian politics (Stein & Fedreheim, 2022) and are, finally, seen as a prerequisite for (Yin Yap et al., 2011), or a form of, active citizenship (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023). In terms of the latter, volunteering results in a more positive attitude,

increased trust, and better social inclusion in the local community (Tandberg & Loga, 2023). Sveen et al. (2023) contend that it also helps develop meaningfulness, belonging, and capacity-building in the new community. Apart from the above-mentioned creation of “arrival infrastructures” or “infrastructures of solidarity” (Meeus, 2017), the impact of immigrants’ volunteering on communities remains uninvestigated.

#### **2.4. Conceptual Presuppositions for Data Analysis**

In order to discuss immigrants’ volunteering practices as a means of becoming active agents in rural societies, we deployed a subject-centred perspective, recognising immigrants as experts in their own life-worlds. The aim was to understand from an emic perspective what meanings individuals ascribe to certain situations, events, or places concerning volunteering. Such social constructions of reality are determined by individuals’ selective experiences and interpretations of reality. As guiding concepts, we rely explicitly on a relational perspective and agency.

A relational perspective helps to incorporate spatial and temporal dynamics. It is helpful, firstly, to know how civic engagement is practised in the previous countries of residence. This is often related to the negotiation of roles between the state and civil society. While in some countries—such as Japan—the government has not seen the need for civic engagement for a long time, or else—as in the former Soviet Union—abused it for political purposes, in others, civic engagement is considered an important pillar of local provision or livelihood, as in various African States or Cuba (Anheier & Salamon, 1999). In Germany, civic engagement traditionally complements public services (Anheier & Salamon, 1999), and is simultaneously a manifestation of a democratic society. But it is also vital to incorporate a local as well as transnational perspective into the discussion. Based on the assumption that configurations of individual engagement are strongly determined by local conditions and structures, a deeper understanding is necessary (for example of locally specific challenges for immigrant volunteering and the attitudes and actions of local stakeholders). Finally, by means of addressing immigrants’ biographies and taking a retrospective viewpoint, we consider a temporal relational perspective.

Individuals’ embeddedness in social constellations and local structures results in specific enablers and limitations of agency, which is used here as a second conceptual realm (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency is defined as:

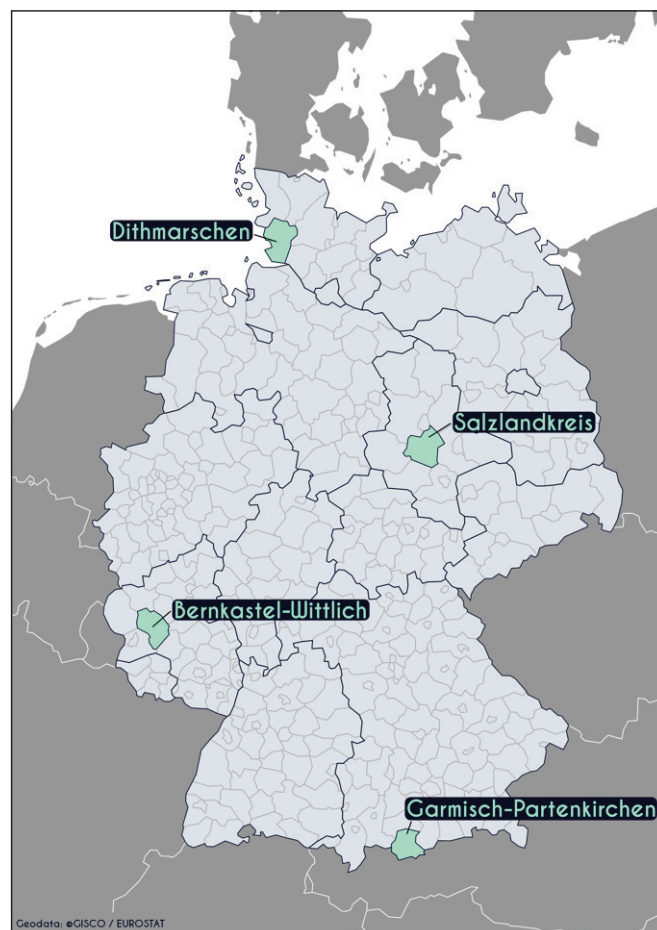
The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970)

The accumulation of agency over time and in particular places is determined by, for instance, language acquisition and the appropriation of local knowledge, but can also be constrained in the face of certain experiences of exclusion. The question of (re)acquiring agency requires an analytical approach that understands immigrants as active actors who are able to (co)create their own living environment. During the presentation of empirical data, we intend to capture the characteristics of agency in three dimensions as operationalized by Spenger and Kordel (2023) especially, taking into consideration immigrant experiences of (a) becoming aware of one’s agency and reflecting on it, (b) implementing and realising agency in practices of volunteering, and (c) passing on to other people local knowledge and the local shaping of practices.



### 3. Setting the Scene

Empirical data were gathered in four rural districts in four German federal states for two reasons. First, we wanted to cover a variety of composition of migrant groups in German rural areas: While (seasonal) labour migrants, former contract workers, or (late) repatriates from former Soviet countries predominate in some rural districts, others are characterised by intra-EU migrants, international students, and refugees who have arrived since 2014. Thus, countries of origin and therefore immigrants' biographies and experiences of volunteering abroad may be different. Secondly, we aimed to address variation between rural areas in terms of their socio-economic situations, which may have an influence, e.g., on structural funding in volunteering. The study regions Bernkastel-Wittlich (BKW), Dithmarschen (DIT), Garmisch-Partenkirchen (GAP), and Salzlandkreis (SLK) cover two very rural and two fairly rural districts (Küpper, 2016; see also Figure 1)—three rural districts with a worse socio-economic situation and one with a good one. The districts are home to between 90,000 (GAP) and 190,000 inhabitants (SLK), of which between 5.6% (SLK) and 16.0% are foreigners (GAP).



**Figure 1.** Location of the study regions in Germany. Source: Schorner (2021).

When conducting qualitative interviews with immigrant volunteers, a biographical-narrative research approach enabled a time-related classification of engagement from initial activity, including former places of residence, to the development and (possible) termination of activity. In conversations with immigrant



volunteers, the following themes were addressed: (a) experiences and cultures of volunteering in the contexts of origin, (b) beginning to get involved in their new rural area (motivations and practices), (c) skills and abilities brought in and acquired, (d) activities over time, difficult situations, and how to deal with them, (e) specificities of volunteering in rural areas, and (f) possible future engagement. In addition, interviewees were asked to estimate the amount of time they currently spend volunteering. Information about their social characteristics and length of stay in Germany were also collected.

Between March 2022 and July 2023, we conducted 69 interviews with 72 individuals, lasting between 22 and 102 minutes (average length 52 minutes). The average age of participants was 44, ranging from 20 to 77 years, most of whom were men (42 of 72 individuals). Two-thirds of the interviewees were married, and four out of five also had children. The interviewees were quite well qualified, with nearly two-thirds having at least secondary education, the equivalent to the German (Fach)Abitur. At the time of investigation, most were self-employed, employed, or in vocational training, predominantly in education, handicraft, industry, transport and logistics, the hospitality industry, and the health sector. Those who were not economically active comprised retired individuals or housewives, students, and job-seekers, as well as one participant banned from working. The participants originated from 29 different countries (of which the top three were Syria, Ukraine, and Turkey) and had lived in Germany for a length of time ranging from one up to 71 years at the time of investigation (median 17 years). In the rural district and current place of residence, they had lived for between less than a year and 45 years (median 11 years). Of all the interviewees, 26 were now also German citizens.

Regarding the treatment of data, interviews were transcribed verbatim, based on simple transcription rules. Afterwards, the material was coded using the programme ATLAS.ti and using a deductive-inductive approach with both descriptive and analytical codes. A thematic analysis was carried out as part of a narrative analysis, as suggested by Riessman (2008). The quotes presented in Section 4 were translated into English by the authors. To protect the personal data of our participants, only vital data are displayed here. For reasons of transparency, however, all the quotes cited are tagged with a token that includes the rural district and interview number.

## 4. Empirical Findings

In this section, we draw on our empirical findings in response to the research questions set out in Section 1. Simultaneously, to allow for a relational reflection on time and space, we consider participants' biographies.

### 4.1. *Meanings of and Mobilisation for Volunteering in Rural Germany*

When immigrants reflected on their understanding of voluntary work, they compared the situation relationally in time and space. In particular, those interviewees who left their country of origin when they were older showed a higher reflective capacity and contrasted their experience of volunteering in Germany with the socio-political conditions of volunteering in their previous countries of residence, religious-cultural influences, and individual biographical constellations. During the interviews, the participants mentioned three, interconnected aspects that they felt were characteristic of volunteering, which are exemplified by the next quotes. First, it is done voluntarily; second, it means providing time and resources to help others or to contribute to a better society. Finally, it is not directly compensated:

For me, volunteering means that one does not get remunerated for the time you spend doing it. And then, it is not a hobby at all, it is something you really want to do for other people. (DIT24, female, 50–60 years old)

For me, volunteering means that despite the fact that I am not remunerated, I still provide assistance. (BKW25, female, 40–50 years old)

The culture of volunteering as practised in Germany, which participants associated with a certain degree of organisation in independent associations and clubs serving as places of encounter, characterised by structural government support, was either not known by immigrants from their context of origin or was organised in a different way there. Regarding the latter, interviewees from former communist countries, for instance, referred to a politically determined “duty” to help and a ban on any non-governmental form of bottom-up organisation, so that they only became acquainted with “voluntary” engagement upon arrival in Germany. Others reported that in rural regions of origin, formalised volunteering was non-existent, while mutual help predominated. According to the participants, parents mostly set their children an example of helpfulness, while engagement in their countries of origin had often focused on their own social network and vicinity, including family, friends and classmates, neighbours and religious communities, and less on strangers, as happened in Germany:

We also helped each other, but everyone helped, for example, within one’s family or among one’s acquaintances. Helping people one does not know...is a bit new to me. Like it is here, it is new, yes. (BKW22, female, 30–40 years old)

There is help on a religious basis. There is help on a family basis, on a neighbourhood basis or something like that. It always takes place, even without having any term for it. (SLK24, female, 40–50 years old)

However, volunteering for strangers took forms like donating or collecting donations for the poor, orphans, or disabled people, as well as participating in disaster relief either independently or as part of national and international NGOs, which is related to the reception of refugees or disruptions in the supply situation due to civil unrest or war. Thus, altruistic motives, in particular, can be confirmed (Schührer, 2018). The targets of volunteering comprised far more than the people commonly mentioned, such as those outside one’s core family, since concepts of core family differ between contexts (Lück & Castrén, 2018).

While at least 35 of the 72 participants had already engaged in volunteering in their previous countries of residence in some way in the past, there are many reasons why immigrants initially get involved in volunteering in their rural place of residence in Germany, and these confirm the current state of research (e.g., Schührer, 2018). Following the thematic analysis, they can be grouped into five realms, ranging from individual to altruistic: Firstly, volunteering is a means for interviewees to improve the well-being and inclusion of themselves and their family members in rural areas. This comprises consent, i.e., having disposable time and getting something for oneself, maintaining and promoting physical and mental health, especially through sports activities, enhancing German language skills, preventing isolation, finding friends, or improving their access to local housing or the labour market. Secondly, for participants, volunteering is a way to show gratitude for the support of the receiving German society in general, and the rural communities in particular. For one young Syrian, who arrived in Germany in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic provided a good opportunity to return the favour:

Germany has helped us and we must, must give something back to this country, to these people. Do you know what I mean? Because when we were new in the rural municipality, we met nice people and many people also helped us. And we also have to give something back. (DIT21, male, 20–30 years old)

Thirdly, through volunteering, participants also aimed to show solidarity with recently arrived immigrants or other groups, like women. Many interviewees stressed that they could empathise with the feelings of newcomers and women as they reminded them of the difficulties they had experienced on arrival in the countryside, or that they still have. Some, like a middle-aged woman from Turkey who was raised in the nearest city and moved to the countryside with her kids, also highlighted a lack of support (infra)structures in rural areas in the past, which the interviewees aimed to fill with their engagement:

I grew up in a big city, where there were simply so many opportunities, even back then, and even more so today, for migrants, who have to somehow manage outside their own country. Also, this effort to ensure that certain structures are put in place in the countryside. (DIT4, 40–50 years old)

Fourthly, but connected to the previous theme, immigrants feel they have a responsibility or duty towards people or places, which manifests itself in volunteering. This may be derived from professional ethics as a doctor, from an attachment to the country of origin or to the current place of residence, or from a perceived “obligation” to integrate as a rural newcomer:

If I had been in Turkey, I would never have been able to work like this with voluntary work. Why should I take care of mosque matters, when there are experts...? Why should I make any kind of integrative effort when I am in Turkey, where there is no desire for it? That’s why the situation here on the ground actually required us to become what we have become, because we have a duty to contribute. (BKW19, male, 50–60 years old)

Finally, volunteering was considered “a matter of course” (DIT26), “a matter of the heart” (DIT21), or “a service to god” (DIT29) among many participants, referring to an embodied, intrinsic helpfulness based on humanitarian or religious principles.

#### **4.2. Access to Volunteering in Rural Germany**

Overall, it should be noted that immigrants’ volunteering is often triggered by global and local events, such as the genocide of the Yazidi or the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, the local arrival of refugees and other immigrants respectively, the 100-year flood, or the planned construction of a coal-fired power plant or cell tower. Interviewees also referred to situations and coincidental encounters that led to involvement later on; for example, the absence of an interpreter and resulting communication problems, a presentation on local associations at their language class, or an exhibition by a drumming group in the market square during a local festival, which appealed to a music lover. In their explanations, participants reported different ways in which they actually accessed voluntary engagement and turned their aspirations to volunteer into practice, ranging from self-initiative to being approached by others. One important route was by means of a self-initiated search, whether via the internet, mail enquiries, phone calls, or personal approaches, or by responding to calls for participation in the local newspaper. Due to a lack of feedback from established clubs or a feeling of alienation in existing ones as well as the unmet needs of immigrants, participants had also founded their own associations.

Existing (passive) participation as a visitor to the youth centre or as a soccer player in the local sports club had also led, in some cases, to an expansion of activities and tasks, for instance when interviewees like the father of a young family from Slovakia was approached by board members: “And at some point, I was suggested to join the board. Since we are a small club anyway, I could not say ‘no’” (BKW26). Friends and acquaintances played another important role in placing immigrant volunteers, for instance by inviting them to volunteering activities and accompanying them there. Others, in turn, got involved because of other family members, confirming the important role of social networks in accessing volunteering:

So, I guess [it was] in the late 90s and it only started with my wife. We lived at that time in a rural municipality, where they had an active AWO [Workers’ Welfare Association]. And she helped there and found it, it interested her. It also gave her a certain good feeling to help there. And later she integrated all of us as family members. (BKW20)

### ***4.3. Reflecting, Practising, and Sharing Agency Through Volunteering and Impact on Oneself and Rural Communities***

This section discusses the third research question and, following the three-step model of agency proposed in Sub-Section 2.4 (reflecting agency, practising agency, sharing agency), presents our findings on the various skills and abilities people bring in, on manifold practices of engagement, and on the sharing of their acquired knowledge by means of volunteering. The section also introduces the effect of volunteering on participants as well as rural communities.

During the interviews, our participants reflected on their personal skills and abilities that were and are helpful for volunteering, referring to characteristics like empathy, openness, curiosity, and patience as well as things like being an expert on knowing people or a good listener. In addition, they emphasised skills like professionalism and confidentiality, leadership, organisation, and time management as well as skills in (intercultural) communication, particularly concerning mediating interreligious or intercultural differences and being able to understand, speak, and write various languages. Concerning the latter, a young man, who volunteers at a local chapter of a blue light organisation, offered a good example:

In terms of [German] grammar, I am not as good at active speaking....But if I pull myself together, I can do pretty well, which is why I can write pretty good texts and, yes, send them and ultimately upload them to the website. (BKW14)

Participants also emphasised the usefulness of professional knowledge in IT, marketing, trading, project and event management, medicine and pharmacy, pedagogy and pastoral care, law, and bureaucracy and administrative procedures. The words of a Ukrainian father who supports refugees who have fled from his country of origin are a good example of this: “Well, of course, as a project engineer, or also from my private life, I am familiar with all the bureaucracy here in Germany” (SLK28, 30–40 years old). Ultimately, participants saw their practical abilities in things like sports, music, cooking, or handicrafts, as particularly useful for volunteering, not least the possession of a driving license and having their car to get around in rural areas.

Making use of their various skills and abilities, immigrants were transforming their agency into multifarious volunteering practices, targeting different groups within rural communities like newly arrived refugees and

fellow immigrants, neighbours, elderly locals, or like-minded people, such as those equally interested in sports, for example. In doing so, participants were not only building on established volunteering practices known from their contexts of origin but also picking up new practices according to local needs and ways of volunteering. They were helping others orient themselves in their new rural region, referring people to the “right” service, arranging appointments and accompanying them on visits to the authorities, helping with filling in forms and applications, or dealing with their correspondence. In many cases, this took the form of one-to-one mentoring of individual newcomers or families as well as happening in the course of regular café meetings. Immigrant volunteers were also regularly taken on as interpreters for face-to-face interactions as well as for phone calls—for example, in communication with authorities, at kindergartens and schools, at general practitioners and hospitals, or with lawyers, the courts, and the police. Participants were also offering German and other language lessons, including private lessons for schoolchildren, as well as childcare. Drawing on social networks, immigrants were even helping others to search for kindergartens, schools, jobs, and apartments, including moving house. Some interviewees were running legal, medical, and psychological consultations. For neighbours and elderly locals in particular, volunteers could offer lifts, do the shopping, or mow the lawn. Some offered themselves for sporting activities such as soccer coaching:

As a goalkeeping coach, you're there twice a week, for an hour and a half, training the goalkeepers. You also talk to them, so I think it's really important to talk to people, because if someone can't perform, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with an injury. It can also have something to do with the psyche. (DIT32, male, 30–40 years old)

Many also helped out in the background by organising and preparing rooms and local events, or by taking over the cash management or public relations of associations, as shown by the example of the volunteer from Hungary at the beginning of Section 4. A few immigrant volunteers were also helping out with things like food banks, clothing stores, ambulance services, and fire brigades. Others were donating money or blood or collecting donations, both for local organisations and projects like the youth fire brigade or construction of a mosque, and international ones like Save the Children or the 2023 earthquake in Turkey.

Volunteering also has an important impact on immigrants themselves. Apart from enjoyment and fun, as well as improving physical health, it offers fulfilment of the need for things like self-efficacy, self-respect, self-confidence, contentment, and outgoingness. It can also have a direct effect on mental health by acting as a distraction from the stresses of life. One older woman from a former Soviet Republic, who among other things was volunteering at the food bank, told us that it offered a diversion from grieving for a recently deceased relative: “And I felt a real inner happiness that I was needed, that I was doing something good for other people. That's what pulled me out of my state of depression” (DIT18, 60–70 years old).

Participants also reported that they had improved particular skills through volunteering, which had helped them become more aware of their capabilities and limitations, develop more solution-oriented thinking, and gain greater patience and time management. Other positive effects included more confident use of the spoken language, improvement in translation skills and intercultural competencies, and an enhanced understanding of administrative processes. Interviewees also referred to having gained practical skills in event management, first aid, and preparing job applications. Finally, in some cases, women could also emancipate themselves through voluntary engagement, for example by redefining gender roles. Volunteers emphasised that their social network had expanded as a result of their local involvement and that they had

become better acquainted with the culture of volunteering in Germany, while also fostering their attachment to the region:

[When] I came here to Germany, I hardly had any friends. Well, only one friend here in Germany. And then, over time, I got acquaintances through volunteering and through this Welcome Café here in the past and the Youth Centre in the past. There, I met many people, Germans and Arabs and Afghans and several people, yes. (DIT19, male, 20–30 years old)

Everyone here knows me. Everywhere I go, the children greet me immediately. When I go shopping or walk down the street, go for a walk somewhere, you can hear “Miss [surname], Miss [surname]” from afar. They wave to me and when they are nearby, they come and hug me. (BKW23, female, 50–60 years old)

Now, I have settled, so to speak....I have gotten to know how to volunteer. That way, we can learn German. Not the German language, but to get to know people. As a social guide, I learned that it is not that easy. But without it, you cannot integrate yourself. You can only integrate yourself when you start talking to people. It only works through volunteering. (SLK25, male, 50–60 years old)

When they have been in their new rural home for longer, immigrants even take on responsibility for volunteering and sharing their acquired knowledge with others, affecting both their place of residence and the rural community. We found that many had established a variety of new initiatives, action groups, associations, and clubs, which they were often still leading during our study. The foundation of new meeting places and associations provides a solution for the often limited accessibility of, for example, prayer rooms in rural areas, as the following quote underlines:

Whenever someone needed the church, they had to go to Munich. And it was not so easy....First [because of] the traffic, no parking, and then driving 90/100 kilometres and losing a lot of time. Now, here, it is a bit easier. Yes, okay, we have it here, if something happens or we need something, we have it here, you don't have to drive far. And of course, everybody was happy. (GAP15, male, 40–50 years old)

Taking on board membership of local associations might involve a multitude of tasks. For our participant GAP13, who was the chairman of a sports club in the rural district of GAP, for example, the role encompassed the drafting and supervising of building projects, organising donations, and dividing revenues between the association's branches, communicating with club members, recruiting a secretary, and negotiating with the tenant of the club pub. Some participants also successfully stood for election to the parents' council, the works council, the municipal or district integration council, or the local (advisory) council. The use of intercultural competence and mediation roles also strengthens local social cohesion and promotes awareness of different life contexts, for example, in the school environment. A few immigrants were also giving presentations about their countries of origin and sharing knowledge of their own cultures with administrative staff to reduce prejudices, as well as holding guided tours in the mosque and the region to showcase their new *Heimat*. They were also trying to get others interested in volunteering, while reflecting on different cultures of volunteering, and were engaged in placing them within their own as well as other associations:

[In] the countries where they have their roots, there is less of this so-called voluntary commitment in those countries....I think we have to tell them about these ideas and give them ideas about what they can do, low-threshold, to become a part of this society. What they can draw from it, namely to belong and to pave the way for others. (DIT4, female, 50–60 years old)

## 5. Discussion of Results and Concluding Remarks

The answers to the first research question, which asked what meanings immigrants attribute to volunteering and why they do want to become involved in rural Germany, confirmed the findings of existing research, such as that by Schühler (2018). We have illustrated the relational meaning-making of volunteering: Interviewees had experience of volunteering and either engaged in it in their previous countries of residence or received assistance from volunteers at the beginning of their stay in Germany. In the former case, they drew comparisons between volunteering here and there and were motivated to continue, which they justified by referring to its altruism or intrinsic helpfulness. Our participants' own migration experience made them want to show solidarity with recent arrivals, which resulted in them volunteering as so-called "arrival brokers" (Hans, 2023), complementing existing "arrival infrastructures" (Meeus, 2017). Among those who received support, in particular, gratitude could also be seen as a motive. Thus, they exhibited what Phillimore et al. (2018) have termed "informal reciprocity." Immigrants' volunteering practices also emphasise mutual reciprocity and feelings of obligation, or, as Trinka and Trundle (2014) put it, "social contract ideologies."

Access to volunteering in their rural place of residence (second research question) was mostly predetermined by places of encounter as a prerequisite, and particular events or existing social networks as "opportunity structures" (Phillimore, 2021). This could involve family members and other volunteers who serve as role models. A further precondition for volunteering, especially in an institutionalised form, was the availability of material structures on-site, e.g., a room to meet. Thus, the crucial role of "contextual factors" (Greenspan et al., 2018) could be identified. As it has been found, recently, that more people volunteer in rural areas than urban ones, especially under good socio-economic conditions (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023), and that—as Steinführer (2015) suggested—civic engagement in rural areas is embedded in a self-determined responsibility for localities, further research is needed to make use of a place-based approach, as well as comparative research to differentiate between local opportunity structures for volunteering.

Volunteering practices encompass a huge diversity of realms, not only including sports, culture, and religion but also migration-specific activities such as cultural or language mediation. Participants make use of certain pre-existing skills and competencies, from either their (former) professional or private lives. Since a failure to use their skill is commonly seen as a threat to their professional identity (Wehrle et al., 2018), their talents can be brought into use through volunteering. These results have various implications for both individuals and the community (Sveen et al., 2023). In our findings, personal development and the aforementioned processes of acquiring agency and fostering inclusion are highly interrelated with immigrants taking responsibility for themselves, their partners, and families, but most importantly for other newcomers and the rural community in general. In the course of setting up a novel ethics of responsibility, the philosopher Hans Jonas suggests knowledge as a precondition for responsibility (Jonas, 1979). Participants learned to negotiate local (administrative) structures and to orient themselves spatially, as well as learning local needs, and coming to understand routinised practices of volunteering on-site. Immigrant volunteering confirms that individuals gain from acquiring social competencies and skills, while local communities benefit



simultaneously, since volunteering results in social cohesion (Kleiner & Kühn, 2023). “Empowering residents to engage based on their shared space and common issues” (Bischof & Decker, 2023, p. 282) requires a life-world and biographically sensitive approach in the context of migration. Such empowerment can then result in taking responsibility for rural regions (Bischof & Decker, 2023).

Immigrants’ involvement as engaged citizens could also be enhanced by measures that diminish legal barriers and simultaneously acknowledge their activities through culturally adapted forms of gratitude. Like measures of urban citizenship, local administrations in rural regions could also, for instance, issue documents that enable immigrants who do not yet have access to it, to participate or provide incentives for volunteering. In this way, identification with a region and symbolic belonging could be strengthened and immigrants could participate in local development in a more sustained way.

### Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we want to thank all our participants for their time to partake in the study. We are also indebted to both our local contact persons in the four study districts who assisted us with field access and to our former colleague Lukas Schorner who supported us in conducting the interviews. Furthermore, we highly appreciate the always reliable work of Maggie Studholme with regard to language editing. Last but not least, we are thankful for the fruitful suggestions of the reviewers and guest editors. The authors collected empirical data together and jointly developed the idea of the article, the line of argumentation, and the conceptual analytical framework. Tobias Weidinger analysed the data, wrote Sections 3 and 4, and amended all other sections. He was also the corresponding author in the review process. Stefan Kordel wrote Sections 1, 2, and 5, while David Spenger coded and analysed the data and drafted Sub-Section 4.1.

### Funding

The research which led to this publication was supported by funds from the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (grant number 2821FE010), based on a decision of the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany via the Federal Office for Agriculture and Food under the Rural Development and Regional Value Creation programme.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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