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Elena Vacchelli & Franca Roeschert

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Participation and contested forms of citizenship in the City of Sanctuary

Elena Vacchelli and Franca Roeschert

Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Greenwich, Greenwich, UK

ABSTRACT

The UK-based City of Sanctuary movement claims to create welcoming conditions for those who had to flee their homes. Despite the well-documented efforts to integrate migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at a local level, the movement's practices have been criticised by scholars as reproducing government-prescribed passivity and exclusion of these groups. Through document analysis and participant observation in a Borough of Sanctuary group in London, we examined the City of Sanctuary's self-representation and mobilisation practices and how participation of sanctuary seekers is discussed and enacted by those involved. We found that the movement's institutional collaborations have led to an increased professionalisation of the movement which on the one hand offers greater impact and on the other hand risk excluding the very groups the movement is advocating for. Yet by providing material and institutional spaces to enable participation and citizenship, the movement ensures migrants can assert their rightful presence, achieving greater participation as well as amplifying migrants' voices within and beyond the movement.

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Introduction

In the past couple of years, the authors of this paper have participated as community organisers in a London Borough of Sanctuary group alongside a range of civil society organisations. At a time when the UK is enshrining increasingly controversial anti-migrant measures in national legislation, it is particularly important to understand how social actors at the local level are mobilising to cultivate a welcoming environment for migrant populations. The City of Sanctuary (CoS) movement in the UK was originally founded in 2005 in Sheffield and comprises of a multitude of civil society groups and local authorities committed to creating more welcoming conditions for those who had to flee their homes (City of Sanctuary n.d.-a). Originally used to define a sacred place, today the term 'sanctuary' refers to refuge or safety from pursuit, persecution, or other danger according to the Oxford Dictionary, conveying a sense of being protected and safe thanks to the help of others.

CONTACT Elena Vacchelli  e.vacchelli@greenwich.ac.uk

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Situated in the field of citizenship studies, civil society mobilisation, participation and voice in the public sphere, this paper examines how the City of Sanctuary movement represents itself, its practices and the way participation of sanctuary seekers is discussed and enacted by those involved in City of Sanctuary groups. It specifically asks which spaces are attributed to sanctuary seekers as political subjects within the movement and whether they have decision making power, how they claim and contest citizenship and whether the movement's institutional and semi-institutional interactions make it possible for migrants to actively participate. In asking these questions, the paper assesses whether the City of Sanctuary movement allows for genuine participation and amplification of migrants' voice or some of its practices effectively endorse a top-down understanding of citizenship.

Drawing on our participant observations in a Borough of Sanctuary group in London, on our access to key insider documents produced in the process of becoming a Borough of Sanctuary, and assessment of publicly available communication on Sanctuary, this study offers insights into practices of migrants' in- and exclusion in urban contexts and how far migrants can have a voice within and beyond the movement. As the bulk of academic literature on the City of Sanctuary movement refers back to the years of its inception and early impacts, this paper will contribute to expanding this literature by providing contemporary insights, assessing the movement's most recent changes in approaches and strategies and, most importantly, it will interrogate the extent to which the voice of migrants is captured and amplified. It will do so by firstly discussing the literature on City of Sanctuary to date, highlighting how it presents an ambiguous picture as to whether the UK sanctuary movement can successfully become a platform to foreground migrant people's voice. The methodology explains the stages of our ethnographic approach and document analysis, followed by a section detailing how the sanctuary movement sets up urban governance processes and makes it possible to incorporate and, in some cases, amplify migrant voices. Our findings stemming from ethnographic observations and document analysis in a specific South-East London Borough add to the understanding of the UK sanctuary movement by pointing to key changes in organisational strategies. Here we critically assess how introducing Lived Experience boards at a national and local level provides an opportunity for sanctuary seekers to gain participation and voice while at the same time reproduces problematic dichotomies. The paper argues that the recent push for institutionalisation, despite its limitations, can indeed provide a leverage for inclusion of some groups of migrants who are particularly marginalised, such as those who have no recourse to public funds, thus offering a unique perspective on the movements' discourses and practices.

City of Sanctuary between welcoming and othering

Scholarship on UK City of Sanctuary movements is composed of a range of in-depth explorations of local mobilisations under the umbrella of Sanctuary across different localities and assesses the integrity of these initiatives in creating a culture of welcome for people seeking sanctuary. Civil society groups advocating for solidarity with migrants uphold the vision of cities where non-citizens can access public services and are protected from harmful practices such as detention and deportation. Activists and scholars in the UK look to Sanctuary Cities in the US as a reference point for strategies to create urban

inclusion for migrants without formal citizenship status. In the US context, Sanctuary specifically refers to cities refusing to cooperate with federal authorities or limiting cooperation in migration enforcement matters (Collingwood and O'Brien 2019; Doppler and Peeck-Ho 2022). Since the 1980s, solidarity practices in US Sanctuary Cities have evolved to include humanitarian aid, housing and transportation, health, food, legal support as well as support in migrants' everyday life. Urban sanctuary practices in the US have worked to provide an example for dealing with increasing immigration and politicisation of the migration debate in the UK. Despite some commonalities, such as the focus on local governments opposing national stances towards immigration and sanctuary emerging from a collaboration between local governments and civil society, sanctuary cities play a different role in the US and the UK. Most importantly, the federal political system in the US provides cities with autonomy to introduce legislations that protect migrant residents from immigration enforcement, something that a centralised government, like the UK, does not permit. For this reason, sanctuary cities in the UK are only able to focus on symbolic commitments such as cultural change and ensuring migrants' legal rights are not breached at local level, for example by ensuring migrants' access to healthcare, whereas US sanctuary cities can implement substantive policies preventing federal immigration enforcement (Bazurli and De Graauw 2023). Perhaps as a consequence of this, sanctuary cities have become increasingly politicised in the US, featuring in the 2024 presidential election campaigns yet were missing from the UK's recent electoral debate.

Using a multitude of theoretical perspectives, in the UK context scholarly work seeks to understand the conditions that make the movement successful and its limitations in creating sanctuary for migrants with various immigration statuses. Although most authors recognise the importance of these mobilisations (Squire 2011; Squire and Bagelman 2012), a range of critiques have been articulated with regard to the movement's ability to challenge hostile national policies affecting refugees, asylum seekers and racialised UK citizens (see also Humphris 2023). For the purpose of this paper, we are particularly interested in critiques that address the construction of sanctuary seekers in the movement as either passive victims, or as rights bearing individuals that can claim citizenship within the movement. Early City of Sanctuary practices are described as effective in opposing nationally driven migration policies particularly in a relational sense, as the dynamic nature of activities enables interaction between residents with diverse immigration statuses leading to positive integration outcomes (Wilcock 2019). These everyday encounters disrupt social hierarchies and make legal status seem insignificant (Squire 2011). Squire and Bagelman (2012) describe how a sanctuary café run by migrants meant that the static hospitality narrative of accommodating migrants was reversed, and migrants could exercise their citizenship through the act of hosting. Several scholarly accounts articulate a vision where the City of Sanctuary movement can function as a catalyst, able to open up imaginaries of inclusion whilst at the same time challenging hostile narratives, policies and practices at national level (see Bauder 2017). In this context, the political subjectivity of migrants is fully recognised and can be enacted by participating in activities that enable migrants to be visible and have agency, something that Squire and Bagelman (2012) call 'mobile enclaves of sanctuary' (155). The early literature assessing Sanctuary movement practices is largely positive in considering their potential to oppose national level policies.

The transformative possibilities of City of Sanctuary are, however, only sporadically realised as most scholars recognise. The main critique is that sanctuary practices fall into the trap of reproducing problematic dichotomies which see receiving communities as heroes, hosts (Wilcock 2019), or ‘sanctuary-builders’ (Paul 2023, 4), whilst migrants are portrayed as victims, guests (Wilcock 2019), or sanctuary-seekers. Mosselson (2021) describes how this happens in practice at a night shelter where migrants were denied active and relevant roles in the shelter which were instead given to the (mostly white) volunteers. He argues that in doing so, City of Sanctuary reproduces problematic narratives which are also perpetuated in the media where refugees are depicted as disempowered, helpless ‘victims’ (Crawley 2022, 355), and othered as apolitical subjects whilst portraying receiving community as rescuers. The observation of City of Sanctuary inadvertently reproducing the so-called Hostile Environment,¹ especially when the movement ‘share[s] the figure of the vulnerable refugee as the worthy object of care, and the implications this has on people who do not fit this mould’ have found ample resonance in recent scholarly work (Paul 2023, 5). The problematic construction of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants is visible in the legal distinctions between refugee, asylum seeker and irregular migrants and the legitimacy that is ascribed to their stay in the UK. In this sense, City of Sanctuary has been criticised for reproducing ‘deservingness’ narratives (see Bagelman 2013; Wilcock 2019). Wilcock argues that City of Sanctuary’s external communications highlight personal tragedy and moral purity (Wilcock 2019) by focusing on stories pointing to migrants’ victimhood and innocence, for example, by featuring stories of sexual abuse and torture rather than recognising that at times migrating requires crossing borders in ways that are not always ‘legal’. In ignoring the evident tension between moral purity and the need to cross national borders in informal and often unsafe ways, this argument fails to acknowledge that the lack of legal routes to safety does not make the choice of migrating, and migrants’ presence in receiving countries’ communities, any less rightful. Bagelman (2013) also argues that migrants are rendered apolitical through City of Sanctuary practices, for example when asylum seekers are invited to activities that serve the purpose of distraction from the asylum application’s waiting time. According to this scholarship, these activities only serve to mitigate the injustice of prolonged waiting times, in this way leaving the applicants in a state of limbo. Our study based on how the movement represents itself in the public domain, our own participation in a Borough of Sanctuary group and on insider documents aligns with this strand of scholarly work. This paper contributes to the existing literature by adding contemporary insights based on recent institutional changes in the movement, highlighting its need to find a common terrain of action with local authorities. It also offers further analysis on the strategies used to embed sanctuary seekers’ voice in the movement’s decision making.

As Wilcock (2019) suggests, it can be counterproductive to criticise City of Sanctuary’s inability to affirm itself as a more radical movement. She describes City of Sanctuary as the ‘most institutionalised form of resistance’ (143) against the national immigration regime, particularly because of the movement’s ongoing work with local government. Bazurli (2019) observes a similar mobilising effect in Barcelona, where both social movement and local authority mutually benefitted by increasing each other’s legitimacy. He explains how here, the movement was able to mobilise more people through their working with the local authority which, he argues, contributed to the largest protest ever

held in solidarity with migrants. Even Bagelman (2018), who initially was critical of City of Sanctuary's ability to challenge increasingly restrictive central government's policies and produce systemic change, is now crediting the movement for its potential to promote social change. This is evident not only from the movement's impacts on migrant integration at a local level, but also from the movement's approach to creating solidarity spaces through everyday encounters and its ability to extend solidarity practices to other marginalised groups, such as the homeless (Bagelman 2018). This effort extends to tackling global challenges, in particular climate change (see Bagelman 2013 in comparison to Bagelman 2018). Paul (2023) points to how geographical factors, and especially whether an initiative is situated in an urban or rural context, can make a difference in terms of how migrants are given a voice. We are interested in how the movement presents itself nationally and how participation and collaboration is practiced in one City of Sanctuary initiative in a South-East London borough. We believe this will contribute to highlight the importance of cities and civil society groups working together in urban contexts to shape solidarity and inclusion of migrant populations at local level.

Methodology

This study was informed by a qualitative-driven epistemology based on a combination of desk-based secondary research and overt participant observation in meetings and events in a London Borough. In conducting this work, we were particularly interested in exploring how migrants' citizenship is enacted within the City of Sanctuary movement and how this is changing to respond to the anti-migration agenda enshrined in the current migration legislation and national rhetoric. We endeavour to understand the ways in which City of Sanctuary represents itself in the context of the City of Sanctuary's website, in person meetings, meeting recordings available online, and strategy documents. More specifically, we analysed (i) City of Sanctuary's impact reports from 2013 to 2022, (ii) the Experts by Experience page on their website, (iii) a recording of the Local Authority Network launch meeting held in December 2020 and available on YouTube, (iv) the Borough's application to become an awarded Borough of Sanctuary submitted in May 2023 and accepted with conditions in July 2023 and the (v) appraisal form which was filled by the local civil society group together with City of Sanctuary's Local Authority Coordinator during a scrutiny meeting for their application in May 2023. In addition to thematically analysing the secondary data sources listed above, we also conducted participant observation in monthly meetings of a Borough of Sanctuary group, with a particular focus on who participates and how they participate.

It is important to note that we are not only researching City of Sanctuary but are also active organisers in one Borough of Sanctuary group. This means we have intertwined roles in Borough of Sanctuary meetings, on the one hand observing the relational dynamics, and on the other hand contributing to the group with our skills and knowledge. For this paper, we drew on participant observation data from Borough of Sanctuary meetings that took place from November 2022 to May 2023.

In order to analyse this range of data consisting in primary research from our ethnographic fieldwork in Borough of Sanctuary meetings and secondary data sources listed above, we used an adaptation to Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. We coded data sources and identified key themes, and we regularly met to

discuss these developing themes, in order to review and refine them. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, our iterative approach involved an early reflection on possible themes prior to coding which was based on observations made as researchers and organisers in the City of Sanctuary movement. During this initial phase, we discussed three potential themes. When we subsequently coded the data using NVivo, the initial themes were brought into question given the deductive nature of the analytic process facilitated by software such as N-Vivo. Engaging more inductively with the material by reflecting on the meanings of the text in these documents and our observation notes led to changes in the focus of the themes and creation of separate themes. In this sense, the approach we used to analyse our primary and secondary data sources was both deductive and inductive. We looked to identify key shifts in strategic direction of the movement and how these shifts are reflected in the practices of the local group. We believe the approach we used provides an understanding of how different forms of citizenship are contested in the movement.

Particularly because we discuss contestations of citizenship, it is important to reflect on our own positionality as researchers and Borough of Sanctuary organisers. Whilst we consider ourselves ‘migrants’ in the UK as we were born and raised in different European countries and neither of us is currently holding British nationality, our everyday experiences are different from those who have to struggle for their right to belong to the place where they live. Despite our European accents when speaking English and having to negotiate this layer of difference in the anglophone academe, we both fall into the category of people who ‘might be foreign born, and a non-citizen in law, but still not imagined as a “migrant” in public debate’ (Anderson 2019, 2). It is crucial to note that this has to do with us being white and holding EU nationalities from a central and a southern European country.

Governance and contested forms of citizenship in the City of Sanctuary

During the mid-2010s to mid-2020s period the organisational frameworks, discourses and practices of the City of Sanctuary movement have changed to respond to the latest manifestation of the Tory government’s anti-immigration agenda. This change is evident from the launch of a Local Authority network in 2020 with the explicit aim of strengthening collaborations between local authorities, civil society groups and other sanctuary institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, museums, libraries and various other sanctuary establishments. City of Sanctuary initiatives are usually articulated at the urban scale. This means that there are Cities, Districts, Towns, and Boroughs of Sanctuary according to the scale of the local authority involved in the movement (e.g. county council, district, borough or city councils). In this sense, the term ‘city’ in City of Sanctuary only partially stands for a focus on cities as geographically situated systems and more as administrative units governed by local authorities. This is visible, for example, in the fact that there is not one London City of Sanctuary but rather a range Borough of Sanctuary initiatives.

The urban community is central to current attempts to administer the public good. Bauder (2017) describes cities as socio-political units where migrants are ‘able to move about [...] and participate in the everyday rhythms of the city, [where] they can present themselves as members of the urban community’ (181). Indeed, the ‘local turn’ in multi-

level governance sees cities empowered to take policy positions deviating from the central government (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017, 1). Cities, therefore, do not only exist on a vertical governance scale where local governments are in a relation with the state but also as political spaces with ‘a wide range of state and non-state actors in vertical and horizontal relationships’ (Humphris 2023, 4). Hence, cities are spaces where multi-scalar levels of governance meet, and where horizontal governance processes are played out.

From our research, it is evident that seeking a close collaboration between the movement and local authorities by embedding some of its practices in the work of municipalities to make them accountable, presents both advantages and disadvantages. Formalised collaborations are undeniably useful in shaping practices, gaining consensus and ensuring sustainability of the approach; however, due to its relative novelty, there is limited research exploring the impact of the new organisational strategy aiming to embed City of Sanctuary initiatives within local authorities. In this paper we outline the risks of this strategy as well as instances where migrants have been offered a genuine platform for participation within the movement.

Internationally, in a similar context it has been observed how radical activists were sidelined by professionals, including those from municipalities, resulting in ineffective action and little more than a verbal commitment to becoming a ‘Welcoming City’. For instance, in Liège, Belgium, Lambert and Swerts (2019) argue that the collaboration ultimately watered down the sanctuary demands of organisers in favour of the local government’s working style of compromise. In the UK, Humphris (2023) and Paul (2023) explored the collaboration of the City of Sanctuary movement with local government. Their work warns against the potential co-optation of Sanctuary initiatives by local political agendas, suggesting that local governments’ agendas change according to the ideological orientation of political parties leading local councils, in this way often jeopardising the City of Sanctuary movement’s attempts to embed their practices. This is visible in local authorities deflecting from their own responsibilities and instead blaming national government policies, when this suits their political interests. By leaving their own practices unchallenged, local authorities are missing the opportunity to achieve more immediate change (Paul 2023).

Local authorities’ reliance on government funding moreover complicates the game of political allegiances and determines to what extent local authorities can effectively take a stand against national policies (see Humphris 2023). The interplay of shifting political alliances within individual local authorities and the relationship between local authorities and central government is a stark reminder of how the urban governance of migration and austerity politics are interwoven. Even without turns in political allegiance, local authorities are in a paradoxical position where on the one hand, they are dependent on – albeit scarce and restricted – central government funding, whilst on the other hand, they are also opposing policies imposed by that same government, for example policies that restrict funding to nationality-specific settlement schemes rather than providing support for all migrants living within the local authority’s remit.

Despite these potential pitfalls, there is evidence of migrants successfully driving political change through their active participation in the City of Sanctuary movement as documented by Paul (2023) in the London Borough of Lewisham where local families affected by the NRPF (No Recourse to Public Funds) policy used the council’s formal

commitment to sanctuary to leverage their campaign and achieved significant change. By highlighting the importance for migrants to lead the campaign and use the sanctuary framework as a leverage to hold the council accountable, this example provides clear evidence of the potential for City of Sanctuary to become a platform for social change driven by migrant groups and demonstrates how citizenship can be claimed by challenging and disrupting the status quo (Isin 2009). City of Sanctuary disrupts the national discourse which scapegoats undocumented migrants as the movement establishes alternative narratives framing migration as beneficial. Politically, it requires local governments to include migrants in their network of support, including those with NRPf status in this way openly colliding with central government's guidelines.

Building on previous scholars' work, we understand citizenship as the use of one's agency to claim rights, belonging and participation in a particular political context/to a particular polity (see Swerts 2017). Recognising specific circumstances of some migrant groups, as it happened in Lewisham, allows for transformative outcomes whereby migrants can contribute to shape urban governance processes by actively participating in local City of Sanctuary groups. Urban governance processes inscribed in the collaboration with local governments should be carefully analysed in order to fully understand the conditions under which the City of Sanctuary movement can achieve its potential.

Analysis and findings: Sanctuary movement's governance as a catalyst for enabling (and hindering) citizenship claims

Citizenship is a useful lens to examine social processes in the City of Sanctuary movement as it refers to a form of belonging to a city rather than a nation. In its original meaning, 'free citizens' found refuge from servitude to the state in the city and their status used to be defined by political participation and through education, economic and social wellbeing (Castles 2000). In this sense, the right to the city can be claimed by those who contribute to its daily production and social reproduction and are therefore empowered by it (Vacchelli and Kofman 2018). Along with Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti (2011) we understand normative citizenship as a value-based concept grounded in attributes and character shaping a person's right to belong and politically participate in society. Legal citizenship on the other hand refers to legally defined boundaries of what it means to be a citizen. Claiming citizenship is therefore an act of rightful presence (Squire and Darling 2013) and a way to assert one's normative right to belong to a community by participating in its everyday practices. The work of Engin Isin (2017) moreover highlights the performative aspect of citizenship in that 'Acts of Citizenship' refers to a struggle for rights, representation, belonging and participation (Erel and Acik 2020). In this way, those who possess citizenship can enact it whilst those who are formally denied citizenship, namely migrants, can claim it through their acts (Isin 2017).

The thematic analysis presented here following the strategy articulated in the methodology section captures four key themes across our ethnographic observations notes made possible through our participation in a Borough of Sanctuary group in London and by accessing secondary sources publicly available on the organisation's website. The first three themes provide a critical analysis to the governance structure of the Sanctuary movement (e.g. 'Institutional Turn', 'Critical Friend, but a Friend Nonetheless' and 'Commitment to Increase the Lived Experience Cohort') while the last theme analyses

the performative act of citizenship claiming from the position of not having formal citizenship rights (e.g. 'Claiming Citizenship in the City of Sanctuary'). The themes were identified through a combination of deductive approaches using NVivo where themes were decided a-priori and inductive approaches by engaging directly with textual secondary data through a process of critical reflection on the sources.

The institutional turn

The first theme emerging from the data reflects a persistent emphasis on cross-institutional collaborations. City of Sanctuary's current strategy consists of movement building through establishing alliances with a range of institutions, as opposed to the way the movement was representing itself during the initial phase. Early literature of the City of Sanctuary movement in the UK emphasises that the movement aimed to enable migrants to meet with citizens and other activities considered positive for migrants such as for instance providing individual support to charities (see Darling, Barnett, and Eldridge 2010) whilst the formal involvement of councils was desirable but not always possible (Humphris 2020). From our observations and analysis, it is evident that the movement now places an increased emphasis and succeeds in building institutional coalitions. These include coalitions with local authorities but also with schools, universities, libraries, arts organisations and civil society groups. The prominence that the size of the network is given in the Annual Reports in 2021 and 2022 as the 'Overall Impact' is an illustrative example of that (see Figure 1).

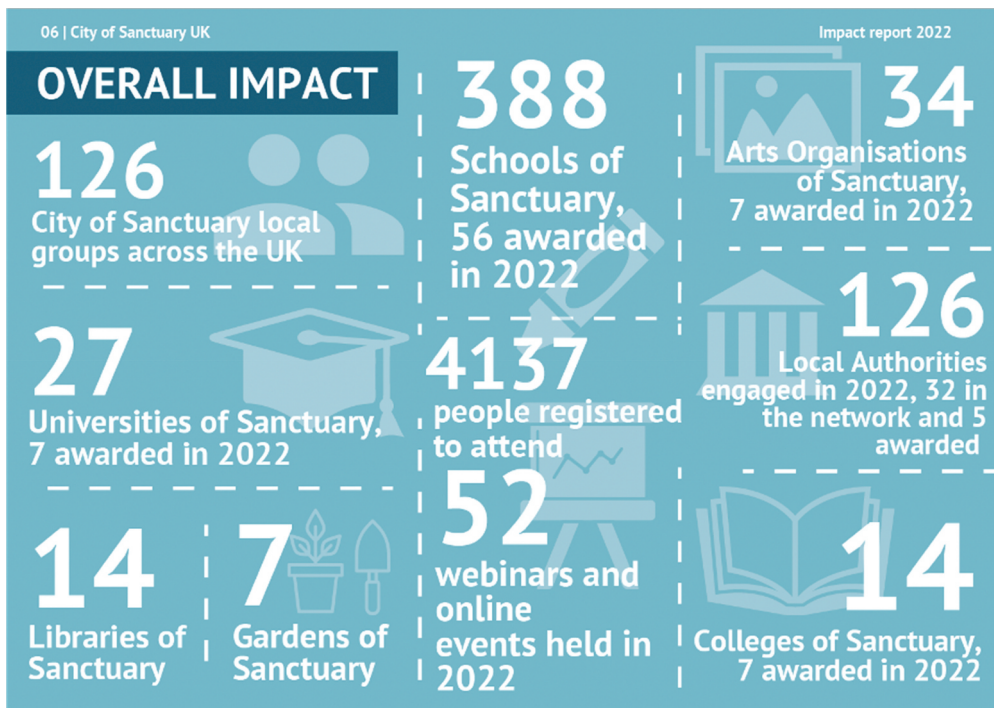


Figure 1. Impact report 2022, City of Sanctuary website.



Figure 2. Theory of change, City of Sanctuary website.

As visually explained in the movement's Theory of Change (see Figure 2), sanctuary is achieved through simultaneously mobilising at micro and macro level and is explained as a dual focus on individual 'social contact' and a broader and more structural framework for 'movement building' on City of Sanctuary's webpage as illustrated in the image below.

By engaging with a range of scholarly work on the UK iteration of the City of Sanctuary movement, one of the key arguments of this paper is that the extent to which 'social contact' at micro level and 'movement building' at a macro-level are emphasised has shifted over time. Initially, around the 2010s, the City of Sanctuary movement in the UK consisted of civil society groups seeking the support of local authorities and in some cases succeeding in formalising their collaboration. More recently, through the formalisation of the sanctuary awarding process, the emphasis on councils pledging to become a City of Sanctuary through the support of, and collaboration with civil society organisations has become more common practice and movement building has been increasingly evident now that efforts to build institutional collaborations have become more formalised. Not only has City of Sanctuary become a registered national charity in 2019, but in 2020 they have also launched a Local Authority Network which sees local authorities come together to have a unified voice on national matters affecting communities and local authorities (City of Sanctuary 2020). The new Local Authority Network is a connecting a web of municipalities, libraries, museums, universities, colleges, schools as places of sanctuary, working alongside local authorities with the common aim to provide sanctuary to migrant populations.

Furthermore, the network aims to introduce a streamlined awarding process that local authorities have to undergo to become an awarded City/Borough of Sanctuary. One of the key concerns of the newly formalised network is to strengthen the position of local governments to oppose centralised power on immigration as this excerpt from a Local Authority Network meeting exemplifies:

[the aim of the Local Authority Network is] to speak with one voice on national matters which affect local communities and local authorities. (City of Sanctuary 2021)

Since its inception in 2020 the network has significantly grown. During the first year, two local authorities were awarded City of Sanctuary status (City of Sanctuary n.d.-b). By the end of 2022 there were five awarded councils of sanctuary, and 44 councils passed

a motion for the awarding process (City of Sanctuary n.d.-b). In 2023, this number rose to 56 councils passing the motion and 12 awarded Local Authorities (City of Sanctuary n.d.-c). Having a more formalised platform where migrants' voices can be heard contributes to amplify their claims to citizenship and has tangible effects on local policy.

Another aspect of the institutional turn is the change in the make-up of City of Sanctuary local groups. In the past, organisers have been described as often being regular residents who, for example, have become motivated to campaign for migrant rights following specific incidents such as the mediatised death of toddler Alan Kurdi in 2015 who drowned in the Mediterranean (see Humphris 2020). There now appears to be a professionalisation in City of Sanctuary organising. The local group we participate in is made up of representatives of various migrant rights and/or support charities working in the borough who use the monthly meetings as a platform to coordinate their efforts and to make strategic decisions about what to prioritise with regard to campaigning and providing sanctuary in the borough, and local residents are rarely present in these meetings.

Building institutional coalitions could be the City of Sanctuary movement's response to initial critiques for not sufficiently focusing on structural change. There appears to be an understanding that interactions between residents and migrants alone does not have the desired bottom-up social change effect and that more strategic alliances are required to affect change. It is however also important to critically assess the demands that are being made, particularly to institutions with legislative and administrative power, such as local authorities.

'A critical friend, but a friend nonetheless'

Accepting the council as a critical friend, as the title of this theme suggests, demonstrates City of Sanctuary's willingness to affirm the importance of institutional change. The increasingly formalised ways of working with institutions, however, undeniably places City of Sanctuary in the field of reformist movements aiming to affect change from within established structures, rather than challenging the existence of these structures. As Wilcock (2019) notes, City of Sanctuary's vantage point and increasingly formalised proximity to local authorities is a unique and potentially powerful position for a migrants' rights movement.

A staff member from the local authority is a permanent member of our Borough of Sanctuary group and one organiser during a meeting described their role as that of '*a critical friend but a friend nonetheless!*' From the perspective of the local authority, their role in local Borough of Sanctuary groups is enshrined in the strategy which proudly states their role as 'an active member of the Borough of Sanctuary partnership' (Borough of Sanctuary strategy 2023).²

This collaboration has contributed to a few City of Sanctuary demands being actioned by the local authority. For example, the name and the remit of the team in the local authority's working groups have been changed to extend to all migrants in the borough. The team's name in the past only replicated specific national resettlement schemes, and is now called 'Refugee, Asylum seeker and Migrant Group' in this way reflecting a more inclusive ethos. This change further demonstrates local authority's willingness to change their practices thanks to successful City of Sanctuary movement's mobilising strategies.

The crux of the ‘friendship’ between City of Sanctuary groups and local authorities is councils’ statutory duty to collaborate with the Home Office in migration-related matters. Councils have an interest in working with Home Office officials to find solutions for local residents. This effectively means that on the one hand Borough of Sanctuary groups have an opportunity to affect Home Office policies and practices from the bottom-up. On the other hand, however, the physical presence of a Home Office official in the council team implies an allegiance with the government responsible for the draconian measures currently antagonising migrants and an implicit endorsement of their policies.

As part of this theme, we identified two examples of ongoing collaboration between the City of Sanctuary movement and the Home Office. Firstly, the local authority in our Borough of Sanctuary group has regular meetings with the Home Office and the sub-contracted housing provider, Clearspring, to understand the situation of asylum seekers housed in migration hotels in the borough. This is seen as an opportunity to address immediate concerns about migrants’ housing conditions, but it does not provide space to challenge the Home Office’s decision to house asylum seekers in hotels. Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally problematic, is the inclusion in the Borough of Sanctuary strategy of a commitment to collaborate with ‘Prevent’. A well-known counter-radicalisation strategy (and prevention programme for those deemed by the programme as radicalised), Prevent used to single out Muslim people due to their perceived fundamentalism and is deeply entrenched with Islamophobic and racist ideology (Ali 2023). Since 2020, however, most referrals to the Prevent programme are for tackling right-wing extremism and hate crime. The new focus of Prevent on right-wing extremism has been used to justify its featuring in the council’s City of Sanctuary strategy, based on the fact it will protect racialised residents from hate crimes. A commitment to Prevent in the council’s City of Sanctuary strategy, however, does not protect racialised minorities, including migrants, in the borough from being referred to Prevent if the political context changes. Independently from the type of extremism Prevent is focusing on, it continues to exceptionalise violence, rather than acknowledging its existence at the centre of society and its perpetuation through everyday acts of racism.

The council’s role as a critical friend does not exclude that there are some considerable risks in local authorities’ involvement with City of Sanctuary organising. Local authorities are caught between a rock and a hard place in that they need to preserve the involvement of Home Office officials in migration-related matters whilst at the same time collaborating with local City of Sanctuary groups. Borough of Sanctuary organisers frequently scrutinise the presence of Home Office officials in local councils, particularly with regard to ensuring immigration status of residents is not shared with the Home Office. In this sense, local authorities are contested spaces that need to act as a buffer between different demands. At the time of writing, it is unlikely that City of Sanctuary will influence central government policy, given the widespread criminalisation of migrants and humanitarian support at national and European level (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Morris and Qureshi 2022). Yet the role of local authorities in enabling migrants’ participation at the urban level is key to promoting a national change in the context of migrants’ rights.

Commitment to ‘increase the lived experience cohort’

The theme ‘Commitment to increase the lived experienced cohort’ discussed in this section considers the participation structures and strategies that are set-up and pursued by the City of Sanctuary movement. Whilst the previous two themes highlight how the City of Sanctuary movement negotiates its role as a governance actor at the urban level, we now turn to contested forms of participation and citizenship within the movement.

As discussed above, the City of Sanctuary’s institutional turn consists of a formalised collaboration between civil society groups and local councils and is effectively a partnership between urban stakeholders that does not necessarily involve migrants themselves. In order to ensure migrants are included, along with other initiatives such as the Sanctuary Ambassador Programme, the movement endeavours to embed migrants’ participation by setting-up a ‘Lived Experience Advisory Board’ at the national level, and at the same time requires councils to confirm the involvement of migrants in the development of their strategy. Local groups also seek to increase the representation of migrants amongst their organisers. Despite the movement’s attempt to increase migrants’ representation, the way in which this vision is implemented in practice is problematic.

Lived Experience Boards are increasingly common in third sector organisations. These boards represent a genuine attempt to take on board the perspective of customers on a service provided, for example a GP running a ‘Patient Participation Group’. In some instances, they can be composed of under-represented but central ‘target groups’ within a given third sector organisation, such as for instance Youth Advisory Boards in youth charities. The stated purpose of these boards is to provide scrutiny to the organisation’s operations and sometimes advise the organisation with regard to its strategic direction. Similarly, City of Sanctuary’s ‘Experts by Experience Advisory Group’ reflect the belief that participation is one of the core values of the movement. The movement’s commitment to increase the lived experience cohort is a recurrent theme in the Local Authority Network recording where it was said that City of Sanctuary works ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ people seeking sanctuary and engages ‘people seeking sanctuary in decision-making at all levels’.

In an attempt to be more inclusive, establishing a Lived Experience Advisory Board however *de facto* strategically establishes two mutually exclusive groups of people within the movement structure: those with professional knowledge who can lead the movement, and those with experience of migration who can advise the leaders of the movement. By distinguishing between the two, there is a risk that rather than improving participation, the recent strategic development in the movement’s governance reproduces the binary of active citizen and passive non-citizen. Moreover, City of Sanctuary seeks to ensure participation of migrants by requiring local authorities to involve them in the development of their sanctuary strategy. This is a core assessment criterion for the sanctuary award, which the local authority confirmed to have done in its application:

{***Name of the LA***} involved those with lived experience in the creation of its BoS [Borough of Sanctuary] Policy and as members of the Partnership those with lived experience inform the work of the council through the **** Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Group.

The strategy mentions sanctuary seekers' participation in the Borough of Sanctuary group, although in practice only a few migrants are active in the meetings – and are not in leadership roles within the local organising group, do not set the agenda, lead on any work strands or indeed always participate in meetings. The lack of representation is lamented by local organisers, with one of them stating they needed to 'increase the lived experience cohort'.

In the Borough of Sanctuary award application, the local authority shows commitment to listening to sanctuary seekers as follows:

The council will therefore listen to the experiences of those seeking sanctuary in (****) and work to understand the 'customer journey' for those who come to live here. (**** Borough of Sanctuary award application)

Speaking of migrants as a 'cohort' or as 'customers' sets a distance between what Paul (2023) calls 'sanctuary-seekers' and 'sanctuary builders' and rather than enabling participation, it discursively situates migrants as passive. We argue that committing to increase the lived experience cohort demonstrates a willingness to include migrants more meaningfully and that City of Sanctuary is striving to become a more progressive movement. However, as researchers and organisers, it is important for us to identify limitations in the movements' practices in order to develop strategies that hand some of the power currently held by organisers who are not migrants over to organisers who are indeed migrants and, as such, allow for meaningful participation and power sharing.

Claiming citizenship in the City of Sanctuary

The theme 'Claiming citizenship in the City of Sanctuary' is concerned with effective instances of participation and citizenship claim-making outside of formal participation structures. Despite our argument that top-down participation structures in the movement are problematic, participation as a way to claim citizenship does take place within the movement. We have identified two examples, one in which a migrant was able to hold the local authority to account with regard to inclusion of people with NRPF in the sanctuary policy and, secondly, an example where a migrant housed in a bridging hotel had the opportunity for their demands to be heard by a local authority staff member. Both examples point towards City of Sanctuary's potential as a platform for migrants who can hold local authorities to account.

With regard to the inclusion of people on NRPF in the movement's strategy, the movement has been criticised in the past for only focusing its sanctuary building efforts on refugees and asylum seekers, rather than on a wider group of people affected by the Hostile Environment who have their citizenship status commonly questioned (see Wilcock 2019). City of Sanctuary was described as reproducing 'racialised hierarchies [as] vulnerable migrants are embraced by established (white) communities as subjects in need of care, whilst other forms of migration and inequality are overlooked' (Mosselson 2021, 1727). In the past few years, some City of Sanctuary initiatives started to broaden their remit to include people with NRPF (see Paul 2023). More recently, City of Sanctuary requires local groups and councils to include people with NRPF, making their inclusion a requirement for the

award. We cannot say what ultimately influenced this strategy change but observed migrants involved in the movement being vocal about the importance of including all migrants in sanctuary efforts. For instance, during one of the Borough of Sanctuary meetings a migrant criticised the initial version of the Borough's sanctuary strategy for focusing on specific nationality resettlement schemes (i.e. Ukrainian resettlement scheme) and asked the local authority staff member to 'make a policy for everybody'.

The inclusion of people with NRPF in the council's sanctuary policies is particularly important in light of the recent Illegal Migration Act. According to this act, all migrants who entered the country from 7 March 2023 without a visa and are not part of a specific resettlement scheme, are deemed to have entered by 'irregular means' and, therefore, are set to be excluded from claiming asylum which also denies them access to public funds. Resettlement schemes, such as the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme only make up for a small proportion of asylum cases (Home Office 2023). In other words, the vast majority of people entering the UK, including those fleeing persecution through 'irregular' means to reach the UK, will now have NRPF.

Borough of Sanctuary meetings are in some cases the only opportunity for local authority staff to come in direct contact with people affected by migration policies. This was evident when, in early 2023, asylum seekers housed in a local bridging hotel protested their sudden eviction. At the Borough of Sanctuary group's meeting in March, an asylum seeker described his experience of being housed in the same hotel and forcibly relocated away from where he lived and had established social networks through volunteering. The local authority staff member flagged that this was the first time they had heard directly from someone housed in an immigration hotel, highlighting in this way the importance of strengthening collaboration between civil society organisations and local authorities to achieve social change. Given the political climate in the UK marked by increasing hostility towards migrants, it is important to recognise that City of Sanctuary's emphasis on migrants with NRPF, as well as the movement's public posturing overtly opposing government's policies, points to a shift from its previous characterisation as an apolitical movement. We believe that City of Sanctuary does, in theory, provide a platform for migrants to claim citizenship and have their voice heard. Although there are numerous instances where migrants get to participate and have a voice, paradoxically the very strategies used to include more migrants often have the inevitable effect of excluding them from fully participating in the movement, as we have demonstrated in the analysis section of this paper.

Conclusion

The urban context has become of particular importance as a site where both normative and legal understandings of citizenship are negotiated. We argue that City of Sanctuary is an urban movement whose mobilisation strategies have changed over time as a reaction to increasingly hostile national policies and it now offers a more formalised platform for migrant voices to be heard. The paper has focused on how the movement represents itself and has questioned some of its practices, asking how migrant participation is conceptualised and enacted within the movement. According to several scholars, despite City of Sanctuary being a social justice-oriented movement with migrants' inclusion at its core, it

reproduces problematic dichotomies which are so common in contemporary migration debates: these range from the active vs passive migrant to the host vs guest; the deserving vs underserving migrant; the vulnerable and morally pure as opposed to the bogus and welfare scrounger, in addition to unhelpfully victimising sanctuary seekers with the inevitable effect of disempowering, stereotyping and ultimately misunderstanding their predicament.

Our research has highlighted the co-existence of both inclusive and exclusionary practices within the movement. On the one hand, working with local authorities and having experienced campaigners steering mobilisations means achieving greater impact as evident from a range of examples provided here. On the other hand, however, established working practices within local authorities and the 'language' they need to use have the inevitable effect of excluding people who are unaccustomed to this way of working, paradoxically the very migrants the movement advocates for. In seeking to address this contradiction, the City of Sanctuary movement introduced the 'Expert by Experience' boards and suggested to alternate thematic and strategy meetings as a way to make sure migrants' voices are more consistently represented in the movement. In disrupting traditional forms of governance, setting up Expert by Experience boards could be read as a way of claiming migrants' citizenship from the professional organisers' vantage point. Including migrants in this way however becomes more like a tick-box exercise so that the movement can claim that migrants are indeed involved, rather questioning how they are involved. As it emerged from our thematic analysis, this approach often depoliticises migrants, making them part of a top-down inclusion strategy. In the paper we argue that having 'Expert by Experience' boards inevitably demarcates those that are 'organisers' from those who are 'sanctuary seekers', without allowing for more fluidity between these two hierarchically conceived categories. To an extent, keeping migrants separate from professional organisers in the internal structure of the movement can potentially prevent City of Sanctuary from overcoming some of its paternalistic and exclusionary practices.

Other problematic practices enshrined in the recent collaboration with local authorities include having to accept the presence of a Home Office official who can potentially identify and deport undocumented migrants in the current climate thus jeopardising feelings of safety and trust within sanctuary awarded constituencies, as opposed to more informal and unawarded sanctuary groups. Similarly, the inclusion of Prevent in local authorities' City of Sanctuary strategies can have negative effects on migrants according to the ideological orientation of the awarded municipality. Other structural barriers to migrants' integration within in the City of Sanctuary framework include the fact that local authorities depend on central governments for funding and changes in political leadership of councils can play an important role in defining alliances between local authorities and central government.

Our research suggests that constructing migrants as passive victims is one of the contributing factors for their lack of representation, as migrants are likely to abstain from becoming involved in a movement that denies their agency and fails to provide a space for them to enact their political subjectivity. As the paper demonstrates, acts of citizenship happen when people with migration experience can transcend the label as victimised migrants, take up leadership roles and articulate claims to rights within Sanctuary groups. According to our analysis, the movement would first need to

develop a greater communicative awareness acknowledging the inextricable link between discourse and social practices (Foucault [1970] 1981) and consequently change the way migrants are construed in its communications. Also, allowing more space for migrants to perform acts of citizenship (Isin 2017) within the movement will greatly help to assert their rightful presence (Squire and Darling 2013) within informal settings, in this way combining bottom-up and top-down approaches to migrant participation and contributing to amplify their voice within and beyond the movement.

Notes

1. The Hostile Environment is not easily identifiable with a single policy and is better understood as an ideological matrix orienting the current government's legal frameworks and practices. It manifests as a sprawling web of immigration controls operating far from ports and border controls and in the heart of public services and communities. Its effects reverberate beyond the government's stated target group to affect migrants with regular status, and black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities (Griffiths and Yeo 2021).
2. This document was accessed thanks to our insider role in the movement and is not publicly available.

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