ICOLMA in the Ruhr region: findings and reflections



Sophie Schramm*

Abstract: Our research on the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the livelihoods, mobilities and accessibility of marginalised groups in the Ruhr region focused on migrants. We found that pandemic impacts were highly variable, with some respondents experiencing sustained hardship since the pandemic, while others improved their situation and yet others kept their livelihood stable. Importantly, increased physical mobility emerged as an important coping strategy to deal with pandemic impacts such as job loss and financial constraints. While most respondents reported that they shifted several activities online, virtual access only helped some to improve their livelihoods, while others experienced limits in this regard, for example due to language barriers.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way people move, including how they access opportunities related to livelihood, work, education, leisure, and essential services of urban life. In Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), particularly Heinsberg and parts of the Ruhr region, were among the first and hardest-hit regions. This prompted the rapid implementation of containment strategies, such as quarantine measures and travel restrictions, in February. By mid-March, NRW followed the nationwide shutdown of schools, non-essential businesses, and public life.

The pandemic had direct impacts on NRW's urban economies. The partial or full shutdowns disrupted entire sectors in the Ruhr Area. Between December 2019 and December 2020, unemployment increased from 5.6% to 6.6%. The crisis also reshaped mobility. In Dortmund, mobility declined drastically in April 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, while across the Ruhr region, public transport ridership dropped by 80% in March 2020 relative to pre-pandemic levels (RVR). These shifts were a reflection of the broader change in work, education, and social routines as a result of mobility restrictions and fear of infection.

NRW began easing restrictions in coordination with federal policies by May 2020 as the situation stabilised. It reopened schools, retail stores, and religious

* TU Dortmund

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36942/dialogossocioambientais.v8i24.1451

Keywords: Mobility; accessibility; virtual access;urban marginalization; pandemic.

services. Towards the end of 2020, NRW moved from a "lockdown light" to another hard lockdown with strict mobility restrictions, which extended to the early months of 2021 as infection rates remained high (Landesregierung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, 2021). In this period, closures were reinstated across most of the establishments and institutional facilities, including schools. In 2022, NRW transitioned to a risk-based approach and lifted most of the restrictions following the expiration of the national emergency status in March. As public life in NRW gradually normalised, the lasting impacts of the broader pandemic response and its restrictions on mobility, livelihoods, and urban resilience remain critical areas for further investigation (Schnittfinke et al. 2024).

MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN THE RUHR REGION: A FOCUS ON MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

The focus of the ICOLMA project was on how mobility restrictions, lockdowns, and the shift towards virtual access altered and influenced the everyday lives of people facing barriers related to low income, gender, age, disability, or access to transportation, otherwise referred to as marginalised groups. In each case study metropolitan region, the project focused on a specific set of marginalised groups. The Ruhr region case study placed a focus on migrants as a group that regularly experiences marginalisation. Germany has long been one of the world's largest immigration countries, and the Ruhr region, with its industrial past in particular, has long been shaped by international migration (McAuliffe; Oucho, 2024, p. 25). Migrants to the Ruhr region come from over 150 countries. They contributed significantly to the post-second world war reconstruction of this region. In industrial centres within the Ruhr region, such as Dortmund, more than 600,000 refugees and displaced persons sought employment in mining, steel, and textile industries after 1949 (Badunenko; Popova, 2024, p. 564). To this day, Dortmund's Nordstadt is a typical arrival neighbourhood, with a foreigner share of 58.8% in 2024. The most common countries of migrants' origin in the Nordstadt are Turkey, Syria, and Morocco (Neßler et al., 2024, p. 4). Dortmund is actively engaged in supporting migration and integration through a variety of programs. The pandemic arguably has exacerbated some of the pressures many migrants in the Ruhr region experience. For example, services shifting online meant an increased language barrier. Additionally, migrants often worked in occupations that could not be transitioned online, and in some cases, they lacked the means to provide devices for their children's online schooling.

Amidst highly variegated efforts within German administrations and educational facilities to shift services and education online in the pandemic moment shaped by physical immobility and social distancing, as well as scientific evidence that the pandemic has ushered in a new era of distance work enabled through digital infrastructures, ICOLMA focused specifically on marginalised groups. Thus, ICOLMA sheds new light on the ways in which virtual access opened up new possibilities for these groups to balance pandemic restrictions, as well as on the barriers they faced when trying to shift work, education, or other daily activities online.

VARIEGATED PANDEMIC EXPERINCES: FROM SETBACK TO SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT

Our research in the Ruhr region showed that pandemic experiences of marginalized groups in terms of physical mobility, financial situation and possibilities to move activities online were far

from uniform. While some experienced financial problems due to loss of income or similar constraints, others were able to sustain or even improve their situation. These different experiences correlated with differences in mobilities: especially those who experienced financial problems travelled more - thus physical mobility became a way to cope with loss of income, for example when owners of shops or restaurants had to close down their businesses and seek work elsewhere. Conversely, those who were better off or whose conditions stayed the same during and after the pandemic marginally travelled less than before the pandemic. This increased travel activity of those more severely impacted by the pandemic made us question the role of digital or virtual accessibility in this dynamic. To make sense of the interconnectedness and relationships between the different dimensions of accessibility, including virtual access to broader wellbeing and livelihoods, we selected some cases shedding more light on these relationships.

For example, we talked with a member of a four-person household including two children, who was self-employed before and during the pandemic. However, due to the pandemic and related lockdown measures he lost his clients and could no longer sustain his business. The household member we talked to explained that he had found a new job in a neighbouring city, thus increasing his travel times. He did engage in online activities, trying to acquire new skills, but however realised that this would not sustain his business and therefore quit learning online skills. The situation of this household remains precarious, shaped by poor infrastructure access reflected in heating and internet issues, economic insecurity and mental stress.

Similarly, another respondent explained that she was gainfully employed in 2019, but lost her employment at the start of the pandemic. Inflation and the general cost of living during this period caught up with this household, worsening their financial situation. The emotional toll of the pandemic was also very evident as this household reported losing family members to the virus, coupled with their temporary status as migrants, which made long-term or permanent plans difficult. However, children in the household utilised the availability of the internet in learning digital skills. Thus, we find that even among those households who experienced the pandemic as a very difficult moment, and where virtual access did not work to substantially improve the situation, some household members did use the internet to improve their digital skills.

Other households we talked to were able to maintain academic progress as well as virtual education during the pandemic and to improve their financial situation as compared to pre-pandemic times. Nevertheless, despite having improved their financial situation after the pandemic, some households we talked to explained that they experienced emotional and financial strains during the pandemic, which was coupled with health fears. One of our interlocutors explained that the language barrier was exacerbated when services and support were moved online, as compared to direct physical conversations. Still, they were able to navigate these challenges. Another person we talked to, who also experienced a raise in salary and increased

financial stability after the pandemic, also expressed being plagued by constant fears and anxiety. With a stable internet connection at home, the respondent maintained a connection with the community and loved ones.

A third group of households are those, whose situation remained unchanged. One household representing this stability in terms of household finances explained that they could easily shift their work online. Nevertheless, similar to those experiencing problems during and after the pandemic as well as those experiencing financial stability and improvements, also this household faced emotional and social challenges resulting from the inability to meet family and friends. They described the isolation experience explicitly as "horrible" and the most challenging part of the lockdown. Virtual access for the interlocutor was made easier through the assistance of and reliance on another household member. The interlocutor was able to use digital platforms to purchase daily needs and connect with her faith community.

Overall, losses of income generating activities, limited access to (digital) infrastructure and health issues negatively affected some households. Many of these increased their travel distances to cope with these challenges, especially when moving activities online was not an option. Others experienced improvement in finances or adapted to virtual engagements, while still regularly experiencing the pandemic as emotionally stressful. This highlights the complexity of post-pandemic recovery and the necessity of both virtual and physical access for the wellbeing and resilience of households.

Acknowledgments: This research is the output of a project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as part of the call "Transatlantic Platform: Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post Pandemic World" (Funding code: 01UG2212).

REFERENCES

BADUNENKO, Oleg; POPOVA, Maria. Does inequality migrate? The development of income inequality across German states. Journal of Regional Science, v. 64, n. 2, p. 555-589, 2024.

NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA STATE GOVERNMENT [LANDESREGIERUNG NORDRHEIN-WESTFALEN]. Neue Coronaschutzverordnung: Land setzt vereinbarte Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung des Corona-Virus konsequent um. Land.NRW, 30 Nov. 2020. Available from: https://www.land.nrw/pressemitteilung/neue-coronaschutzverordnung-land-setzt-vereinbarte-massnahmen-zur-bekaempfung-des. Access in: 14 July 2025.

NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA STATE GOVERNMENT [LANDESREGIERUNG NORDRHEIN-WESTFALEN]. Coronaschutzverordnung angepasst - Nordrhein-Westfalen verlängert Lockdown bis 31. Januar 2021. Land.NRW, 8 Jan. 2021. Available from: https://www.land.nrw/pressemitteilung/coronaschutzverordnung-angepasst-nordrhein-westfalen-verlaengert-lockdown-bis-31.Access in: 14 July 2025.

McAULIFFE, Marie; OUCHO, Linda A. (Eds.). World Migration Report 2024. Geneva: International Organisation for Migration, 2024. Available from: https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024. Access in: 8 July 2025.

NEßLER, Miriam; TIPPEL, Cornelia; SCHNEIDER, Jochen. Politiken des Ankommens in Dortmund.

In: GESEMANN, Frank; FILSINGER, Dieter; MÜNCH, Sybille (Eds.). Handbuch Lokale Integrationspolitik. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2024. p. 1-17.

SCHNITTFINKE, T. et al. Criticality assessment and cascading effects: impacts of COVID-19 disruptions in public transport on marginalized groups in Dortmund, Germany, São Paulo, Brazil, and Cape Town, South Africa. Journal of Surveillance, Security and Safety, v. 5, n. 3, p. 140-159, 2024. DOI: https://doi.org/10.20517/jsss.2024.11. Available from: https://jsssjournal.com/article/view/5876. Access in: 14 July 2025.

