



“Refugees welcome” – Refugee integration policies in Berlin Neukölln

This report examines the refugee integration policies of Berlin’s district Neukölln. It analyses Neukölln’s policies to create a welcoming environment for refugees in the policy areas of education, housing, language and communication, employment, as well as culture and leisure. The report should serve as an inspiration for local policy makers to develop and enhance their city’s refugee integration policies.

Its purpose is to support the efforts of cities participating in the Council of Europe Intercultural cities programme to adopt effective refugee inclusion policies, based on the principles of Intercultural integration (www.coe.int/interculturalcities).

Background

According to UNHCR, more than 4 Million refugees have left Syria since the beginning of the civil war in 2011¹. In August, Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel stated that Germany is prepared to take more than 800.000 refugees in 2015. Today, the number is expected to increase to one Million refugees until the end of 2015.

From January to August 2015, Germany processed 152.777 asylum applications, out of which 59.195 ended with a positive decision. Compared to the year 2014, this represents an increase of 94.2 percent in terms of the total number of asylum applications. More than 250.000 asylum procedures are still open. Most refugees arriving in Germany come from Syria, followed by asylum seekers from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. When it comes to the success rates of asylum applications, there are significant differences depending on the country. Whereas 89% of asylum application of people from Iraq and 88.5% of applications from refugees of Syrian origin are accepted, the acceptance rates for citizens from Kosovo (0.3%), Albania (0.2%), and Serbia (0.1%) are comparably low².

How the asylum seekers are distributed among Germany’s 16 federal states decides the so-called “Königsteiner Schlüssel”, which provides for certain quotas that are based on tax revenue and population of the federal state. According to the quota, the state of Berlin takes a bit more than 5%³ of refugees arriving to Germany. This means that Berlin receives more than 40.000 refugees in 2015⁴. In October, about 1000 refugees arrived in Berlin every day, constituting considerable challenges for Berlin’s districts in terms of providing appropriate housing, education, employment and social opportunities for refugees. In addition to the distribution according to the “Königsteiner Schlüssel”, refugees sometimes come to Berlin after they have been registered somewhere else. Many of these people live in Neukölln because they have their points of contact in the district, even if they are officially

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

² <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlingskrise-die-aktuelle-asyl-statistik-a-1053575.html>

³ <http://www.bamf.de/DE/Migration/AsylFluechtlinge/Asylverfahren/Verteilung/verteilung-node.html>

⁴ <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/berlin/mindestens-40-000-asylbewerber-2015-zahl-der-fluechtlinge-in-berlin-verdoppelt-sich---druck-auf-senat-waechst,10809148,31515486.html>

assigned to a different city. Neukölln hosts more than 20% of reported persons living in Berlin from Arab countries and is therefore a major attraction for newcomers.

Coordination of policies and civil society engagement

One of the main challenges for Berlin Neukölln is to organise the massive civil society engagement and the work of different municipal departments in the field of refugee integration in an efficient way. In order to address this challenge, in June 2015 the district of Berlin Neukölln created a coordination office for refugees to acquire a comprehensive overview of the work of volunteers, start-ups and civil society organisations, and support their work better. The refugee coordinator is responsible for identifying, overseeing and interconnecting the different organisations working with refugees, and for the development of communication channels among all parties involved.

It is not only important for the district of Neukölln to have an overview of all voluntary work and engagement, but also for civil society organisations to have one contact person at district level who knows about policies and processes related refugee integration. In this context, the district of Neukölln emphasises the importance of already existing neighborhood structures and infrastructure of charity associations. Particularly the support of Arab associations is crucial in order to facilitate the refugee's settling down in the district.

- Recommendations for policy makers
 - ✓ Install a coordination office for refugee integration in your city in order to better be able to channel civil society organisations and to offer a centralised contact person for all matters related to refugee policies
 - ✓ Have the refugee coordinator reach out actively and regularly to civil society and charity organisations in order to improve the flow of information and coordinate the efforts of all organisations and the city departments through regular meetings, and by creating tool such as online databases and apps.
 - ✓ Develop an online and offline network for volunteers and civil society organisations to create synergies, and to facilitate knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices
 - ✓ Make use of the expertise and creativity of the grass-roots whenever possible

Language and Communication

Language skills are a key component of integration. In German community colleges, asylum seekers and refugees may participate in up to 400 hours of language courses for free, covering the levels A1-B1. Once the newly arrived have mastered the B1 level and their legal status is cleared, they are invited to continue their language education at the job center which provides B2-C1 courses, adapted to the refugee's job preferences. The teachers do not only teach German language, but also provide orientation in terms of German culture and society. The language classes are highly demanded by the newly arrived asylum seekers. Therefore, community colleges have started to train qualified volunteers to give German classes and to support the refugees during the asylum procedure.

- Recommendations for policy makers

- ✓ As language and communication skills are perceived the main ingredient for successful refugee integration, offer free language classes for the newly arrived
- ✓ Train volunteers to give language classes (“survival training”) and to provide cultural and administrative orientation for refugees
- ✓ Address civil society and charity organisations in your city to employ their knowledge and skills

Employment

The German labour market is particularly rigid for refugees. During the first three months after arrival, there is a general proscription to engage in paid work. After three months, refugees may work in certain positions, but only after having verified that there is no German unemployed person who is eligible for the job. After 15 months, the labour market is entirely open for refugees. Needless to say, not being able to work for 15 months creates a high level of frustration among the refugees, and holds risks of de-qualification, isolation and disaffection which hamper successful labour market integration.

Therefore, the German authorities are strengthening their efforts to make the labour market more flexible for refugees. In Berlin Neukölln, there are several programmes which facilitate the integration of refugees into the labour market. Following the motto “everyone has potential”, Germany’s employment agency has developed the programme “**Early Intervention**” to identify qualified refugees in the process of acquiring a legal status to help them find a quick way into the labour market. The identification of participants is guided by a set of strict rules:

Firstly, only refugees are eligible who are in the *process* of seeking asylum. Refugees who have been granted asylum do not qualify for the programme, as they are entitled to German unemployment benefits. Moreover, only refugees from selected countries with high chances for a positive asylum decision, e.g. Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, are allowed to participate. In total, there have been about 2000 applicants in 2015 in Berlin and 144 refugees have been accepted as participants. Besides the legal status and the country of origin, the selection is based on criteria such as motivation, education, and language skills. The range of educational backgrounds of selected participations is highly diverse, ranging from trained lawyers, doctors and engineers to builders or craftsmen. 79% of participants have a degree of higher education which is, however, usually not recognized in Germany. 86% of selected refugees are men, 14% are women and their average age is 29. The Early Intervention programme is embedded in a network of trade unions, chambers of commerce, and enterprises. The programme provides German language classes, supports the recognition of qualifications, offers help to stabilise the personal situation, e.g. regarding housing or in traumata cases, and provides information and orientation in the job application phase. Particularly big corporations address the job agency frequently with requests for qualified refugees.

Not only German authorities try to facilitate refugee’s entry in the labour market, but also civil society organisations have developed creative strategies to make the job market more easily accessible for refugees. The bakery, café and association **Bantabaa e.V.** trains asylum seekers, who are not allowed to work because they are still in the process of the asylum application. The asylum seekers help with

baking and cooking and receive in return German language courses and a small allowance for their help. The social start-up **MyGrade.net** has built a network of refugees and employers, offering consultation on career opportunities, internships, and work placements in companies. MyGrade.net has helped five refugees to find employment and supported 15 refugees in finding internships.

- Recommendations for policy makers
 - ✓ Open the labour market for refugees as early as possible, ideally upon their arrival, including through traineeships and other schemes to connect refugees with employers
 - ✓ Facilitate the recognition of refugee's qualifications, including by creating a specialised office at the city which liaises with the national recognition authority and speeds up the process.
 - ✓ Create a network of companies, trade unions and chambers of commerce to offer employment opportunities for refugees
 - ✓ Provide language classes and offer support in stabilising the refugee's personal situation
 - ✓ Provide information and orientation in the job application phase, for example by organising application workshops
 - ✓ Address local employers directly and connect them to refugees searching for a job

Education

In Berlin Neukölln, there is an obligation for children to go to school, including the newly arrived. In order to integrate the high number of young refugees as soon as possible into the German school system, the schools of Neukölln have established special classes in primary schools. These so called **"welcome classes"** offer opportunities for children to learn the German language, emphasizing a quick acquisition of German in order to make sure that the children can be integrated as soon as possible into the regular school system. Depending on their educational background and capacities, the children stay for six months to one year in the welcome classes. In parallel, they join the other children in the school's regular classes, starting with subjects in which German language is not the main focus, such as sports, math, music and arts. Once the children are accustomed to the school system, German knowledge and the way of teaching, they enter regular classes. The district of Neukölln also offers intensive German classes for young children during school holidays. In a playful manner, children aged from 6 to 12 are mentored to improve their German skills while singing together and playing games.

- Recommendations for policy makers
 - ✓ Offer intensive language classes for newly arrived children during regular school time, as well as summer classes for those arriving during the summer holiday period.
 - ✓ Integrate refugees as soon as possible into the regular school system and bring them together with children from different backgrounds
 - ✓ During school holidays, offer a playful programme for children to improve the refugee's language skills

Housing

In times of increasing pressure on the housing market, the district of Berlin Neukölln is confronted with difficulties in finding appropriate accommodation for the newly arrived. Due to a lack of accommodation, refugees in Neukölln have been temporarily accommodated in the Jahn Sporthalle, a gym in which approximately 150 refugees live for up to five weeks.

Innovative civil society housing projects such as **Refugio** relieve local authorities. Refugio is a house shared by refugees and residents of Neukölln on five floors. The refugee's rent is covered by the German government. Refugio does not only offer accommodation for refugees, but also a coaching programme to support the acquisition of German and to bring the skills and talents of each resident to good use in the neighborhood. The housemates cook together, share stories and experiences, and live in a creative community in which singing, art and theater are important. The residents organise arts events, operate together a café in the foyer of the house and an urban garden on a rooftop terrace. Refugio is a joint project of the Share House and the Berlin City Mission.

The social start-up **Refugees Welcome** has been named the “Airbnb” for refugees by international media. The online platform matches refugees looking for accommodation with flat shares or people with an empty room in their apartment. The procedure is simple: Residents of Neukölln sign up on the platform and provide information on the kind of accommodation they would like to offer to a refugee. Through a refugee organisation, the organisers connect the residents with a person who fled to Neukölln. Refugees Welcome helps the resident of the apartment to finance the rent for the refugee. After the administrative formalities, the refugee moves in. The platform is active all over Germany and is expanding to France, Spain and Portugal. 60 volunteers have so far matched 150 refugees with flat shares.

- Recommendations for policy makers
 - ✓ In times of housing shortage, initiate a brainstorming workshop and establish a network of civil society organisations and start-ups to create housing opportunities refugees
 - ✓ Support innovative housing projects from the grassroots financially
 - ✓ Create a platform for residents of your city to offer accommodation for refugees

Social Life and Public Space

Many refugees have been through traumatic situations in their home countries and on their way to Europe. As a trust-building measure, the **Police of Berlin Neukölln** has therefore created a special unit to support the integration of refugees and migrants. 14 police officers, some of them with a migrant background, actively address migrants and refugees in the public space and in refugee shelters in Neukölln, and the one neighbouring district Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, and offer their support, in order to prevent radicalisation and intolerance.

The **German-Arab Centre** in Neukölln offers consultation, education and leisure opportunities for refugees. It also provides the newly arrived with advice in the fields of health, language, social, psychological and legal. As part of its consultation, the Centre conveys German values, facilitating the refugee's orientation in the new cultural environment. For this purpose, the Centre also offers a ‘compass for orientation’ in Arab, English and Serbo-Kroatian.

Give something back to Berlin (GSBTB) is a volunteering platform and network to facilitate social engagement for Berlin's migrant community. The aim of the platform is to gather German residents and the migrant community, including refugees, in social projects which are published on the platform. The network also organises events for refugees to meet residents in their neighborhoods and to establish a basis for civic participation. More than 600 volunteers have signed up on the platform and successfully implemented 50 social projects.

The online platform **Start with a friend** offers a mentoring programme for refugees and has matched more than 100 refugee/supporter tandems. The contact is personal, simple and on an equal footing. The aim is to mutually learn from each other, develop a long-term commitment and ideally a new friendship. Residents of Berlin help the refugees with signing up for language courses, searching for employment and training opportunities, and responding to formal letters regarding the refugee's asylum application procedure.

- Recommendations for policy makers
 - ✓ Initiate trust-building measures with local actors who are close to the refugee community
 - ✓ Develop a platform for mentoring programmes in which residents help refugees on an individual basis
 - ✓ Invite refugees to participate in social projects in the city in order to increase their feeling of belonging
 - ✓ Connect arriving refugees to existing migrant communities to facilitate the orientation in a new cultural environment

Conclusion

Although the district of Berlin Neukölln has made considerable efforts to facilitate the integration of refugees, significant challenges remain in all policy areas. Many of these challenges cannot be solved on a district level, as they are embedded in legal provisions on the state or federal level. Therefore, it is crucial that city and state authorities collaborate closely with the federal government and administration in order to facilitate the integration of refugees and to exhaust the enormous opportunities for the state's economy and cultural life which refugees bring. In this respect, it is most important to integrate refugees as quickly as possible into the labour market. Research has shown that welcoming refugees very often has a positive impact on the host country's economy.⁵ On the other hand, studies have also proven that a lack of refugee integration policies and short-term thinking of policy makers, denying the skills and talents refugees bring to the host community, are in the long run more costly for the tax payer than proper integration policies. As such, "many countries are creating their own refugee crises."⁶

⁵ <http://www.economics.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/files/events/peri%20paper.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/09/10/the-big-myth-about-refugees/>