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Article

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WZB-Mitteilungen: Quartalsheft für Sozialforschung

Provided in Cooperation with:

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Van den Berg, Clara (2023) : Growing together: Civil society engagement for refugees also strengthens the host society, WZB-Mitteilungen: Quartalsheft für Sozialforschung, ISSN 2943-6613, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin, Iss. 182 (4/23), Online-Supplement,
<https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/artikel/2023/f-25916.pdf>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/327881>

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Growing together

Civil society engagement for refugees also strengthens the host society

Clara van den Berg

Much has been said about deepening social divisions in the face of current economic and political conflicts. Immigration seems to pose a particular threat to social cohesion. But the outcomes are not always negative, as Clara van den Berg can show.

Immigration to Germany reached a peak in 2015. More than one million people entered the country, mainly seeking protection from the civil war in Syria. The term “refugee crisis” was coined – we call it the “long summer of migration.” Society was on its feet: Countless people got involved for and with refugees. Germany experienced a surge of civic mobilization unprecedented in the post-war period. Around six percent of the population, that is, around five million people, volunteered to help refugees at the local level. Similar developments were observed beginning in 2020, when Ukrainian refugees headed west.

In the research project “The Activated Civil Society,” my colleagues and I performed a qualitative comparison between four medium-sized German cities. Our focus was on the networks between civil society organizations and groups involved in refugee aid during the long summer of migration around 2015, but our observation period extended into 2021. We interviewed over 80 volunteers, activists and full-time staff from initiatives, sports clubs, church congregations, migrant associations, charities, and numerous other local civil society actors. Conducted between 2020 and 2022, the interviews had a retrospective focus on key moments such as the mobilization phase around 2015, the decline in engagement in 2017 and the start of the pandemic in 2020. Interviewees provided insights into the interactions between them at the time and how these interactions evolved over the years. To understand the connections and collaborations between the organizations, we conducted organization-centered network analyses based on our interviews. Through these analyses, we captured the network connections among all interviewed associations and initiatives and how they evolved.

For our study, we selected four German cities, which for ethical reasons were given fictitious names to meet the requests for anonymity voiced by many interviewees. We refer to these cities as Lauda (in the south), Loburg (in the east), Altenau (in the north) and Neheim (in the west). The data for all four cities show that the various civil society organizations increasingly networked with each other during the long summer of migration. These networks were formed to coordinate emergency aid, to provide mutual support, and to resolve conflicts. They also joined forces when addressing the public to assuage the fears of the local population, for example through citizens’ meetings, which were often organized in cooperation with local administrators. The ad hoc mobilization of volunteers thus led to the creation of new initiatives and more intensive interaction and networking between various civil society actors.

To fully capture the surge in mobilization, we also interviewed associations and initiatives from smaller neighboring towns and villages surrounding our case cities, as numerous volunteers were involved in asylum shelters there as well. This led to the formation of informal groups that coordinated support services such as German language classes, clothing donations, childcare and bureaucratic support. Moreover, numerous support groups and welcome initiatives were established. The range of actors involved in helping refugees included not only individuals but also numerous existing clubs in the fields of sport, education and youth work, as well as associations, refugee councils and action alliances.

Over time, however, the four cities saw diverging developments. Whereas the level of engagement and increased interaction with each other declined again after 2016 in Altenau and Neheim, it continued in Loburg and Lauda, that is, in the east and south of Germany. These cities witnessed the formation of sustainable communities of volunteers, activists, associations and groups, which have been more closely connected than before since the first wave of mobilization in 2015/16.

The resulting civil society communities in these two cities are characterized by the emergence and consolidation of intensive networks between the organizations and groups that were involved in flight and migration issues around 2015 and 2016, as well as subsequent years. Their shared experiences in helping refugees strengthened their ties. Closer connections mean that these actors interact with each other more regularly and report their interactions with other organizations to be closer than before 2015.

These closer connections are manifested in various interaction formats that regularly bring civil society communities in both cities together. These events include activities related to the core work of local refugee aid but also to political lobbying on asylum and migration issues, as well as activities on related topics such as anti-racism and the fight against regional right-wing extremism.

The core work in refugee aid includes activities such as informal meetings, language courses, parties in neighborhood cafés, summer parties and celebrations in the asylum shelters. During this time, friendships and contacts were formed between volunteers and refugees that have lasted for years. These forms of interaction help to consolidate the core groups of volunteers working directly with refugees on a daily basis; they also promote exchanges between these volunteers.

Political lobbying on asylum and migration issues includes interaction formats such as political events (e.g., so-called asylum summits), expert groups on integration, or meetings of “migration councils”. The aim here is to exert influence at a political level and to advocate for the interests of refugees and their supporters.

Rather than limit themselves to providing refugee aid, these civil society communities extend their activities to include new integration concepts, the fight against racism and the situation of refugees in the Mediterranean. The interaction formats in this category aim to bring together those involved in the field of migration with volunteers and activists from other policy areas. The preferred format here is demonstrations and rallies – activities that belong the protest repertoire of civil society.

We often encounter concerns that migration leads to social divisions in the host societies. Our research findings show that this is not necessarily the case. On the contrary, local civil societies can play a key role in ensuring social cohesion. Individual groups not only grow closer together, they also act as mediators in conflicts. The groups that emerged between 2015 and 2021 often face hostility from the right and have to justify themselves. Advocating for immigration is not easy in times of critical public sentiment. But precisely because of the great potential for conflict, our research has important implications for policymaking.

Especially in times when social cohesion is eroding and democratic societies are in danger, it is essential to strengthen civil society, especially at the local level. This can be achieved through public funding for projects, the provision of physical spaces for engagement (especially in times of rising rents), and active support from local administrators. In the cities of Loburg and Lauda, where civil society communities flourished between 2015 and 2021, politicians and dedicated individuals in the administrations played a decisive role.

The alliance between administrators and civil society was a key step and remains crucial for the future of an active civil society. Civil society, in turn, plays a central role in dealing with migration. Our research underlines the need to support civil society groups as indispensable actors for social cohesion. Providing such support at various levels is an investment in a democratic and inclusive society in which diversity is considered a strength.

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27.12.2023

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