

The Role of German Non-Governmental Organisations in Refugee Resettlement

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Abstract. In the case of the European refugee crisis of 2015-2016, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are in Germany to help the government effectively manage and assist refugees. A decade after the refugee crisis (2015-2016), the effects of the German refugee crisis in 2015-2016 on German society remain and are reflected in permanent alterations of the German policy concerning refugees, with a significant shift in the philosophy of the policy turning out to be more strict than lenient. These changes also impact NGOs' participation, but it collaborates with the German government and NGOs still, and this cooperation continues to offer valuable insights for addressing related issues in the future. This paper explores the origins of this method and how this method helps Germany to overcome this crisis shock in German society and discusses the living conditions of refugees under this model. These events in Germany demonstrate that when governments can maintain effective cooperation with NGOs, the state and society can effectively address challenges to their domestic communities arising from external environments. In this way, Germany could have more methods to address issues like the 2015-2016 European refugee crisis in the future. Also, this method could give an example for other countries that need to control or master the refugee issue.

Keywords: Refugee crisis, NGOs and government, Germany, European Union.

1. Introduction

Between 2015 and 2016, over one million asylum seekers hoped they could get help from the European Union (EU), and this became known as the "European refugee crisis". As to Germany, from the summer of 2015, whilst most European nations have closed their doors to refugees, German society continues to embrace a liberal refugee policy and welcoming culture, with approximately two-thirds of Germans supporting their government's decision. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "Wir schaffen das." Only in 2015 did Germany accept over 1.1 million refugees, primarily from Islamic countries and regions, with both the number of arrivals and the pace of acceptance surpassing previous records. At the outset of the refugee influx, the majority of Germans continued to harbor widespread sympathy for the most struggling refugees, driven by moral considerations. During August and September 2015, religious and human rights organizations and groups, including those representing citizens across Germany, rallied to assist refugees. NGOs such as Pro Asyl and the German Red Cross play a crucial role in providing accommodation,

medical care, and integration support. The government has temporarily suspended the Dublin Regulation [1]. Refugees shall be permitted to apply for asylum in Germany rather than being returned to the EU Member State of first entry [2].

However, such an overwhelming influx of refugees, coupled with increasingly strained psychological expectations, has left local authorities struggling to cope, while simultaneously pushing refugee resettlement capacity is gradually wearing thin, and public security issues related to refugees are becoming increasingly apparent. On New Year's Eve, 31 December 2015, incidents involving theft, robbery, and sexual assault involving thousands of participants occurred in Cologne and several other major cities. Most of these cases were ultimately proven to be linked to migrants, causing profound shock throughout German society. Amid rising public concern, Germany has reduced arrivals via the Mediterranean route through the EU-Turkey agreement. Concurrently, stricter asylum screening procedures and restrictions on family reunification have been introduced. NGOs have begun criticizing these changes, arguing they undermine refugee rights, yet remain actively involved in integration programs such as language courses and employment training.

After 2016, the participation of NGOs in refugee resettlement and management has undergone phased adjustments and tightening. These acts are from the German government, although they caused some problems for NGOs in Germany, this also implies that the government has not entirely disengaged from refugee affairs; instead, it has continually adjusted its response strategy throughout the refugee crisis to address the various situations that have arisen. Overall, the role of NGOs has shifted from the openness of 2015 towards the 'security first' approach of 2025. These measures aim to reduce the influx of irregular migrants into Germany.

This paper aims to discuss the NGOs' actions on the European crisis. The following sections, the Policy Framework for Refugee Resettlement in Germany and the Basis for NGO Participation, Role of NGOs in the Entire Refugee Resettlement Process. The pivotal role of NGOs throughout the entire refugee resettlement process. The core challenges remain. At the end of this paper will discuss how to make this method more efficient and give a conclusion on this paper.

2. The policy framework for refugee resettlement in Germany and the basis for NGO participation

2.1. Core legal basis

Germany's legal framework for refugee resettlement is grounded in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, wherein Article 16a establishes the right to political asylum as the core constitutional basis for German refugee policy. This constitutional provision forms the cornerstone of Germany's refugee policy. Building upon this foundation, Germany has enacted the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act and the Immigration Act, which governs entry, residence, and economic activity for foreigners, providing a detailed legal framework for refugee resettlement.

The primary legal basis at the EU level comprises the Dublin Regulation, which establishes the fundamental principle that 'the country issuing the visa bears responsibility, and the country of first entry for refugees assumes responsibility' [1,3]. However, Germany's temporary suspension of this regulation during the peak of the crisis in 2015 was a significant policy decision that directly increased its intake of refugees. This has significantly influenced Germany's management of refugees. Concurrently, Germany adheres to the international refugee protection principles enshrined in the Geneva Convention, defining a refugee as 'a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group,

or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' [4].

2.2. The change of policy

Germany's state apparatus was placed under pressure like never before, as it had to cope with more than a million asylum seekers, which created absolute chaos in housing, medical care, and paperwork. By the time the first wave arrived, Germany momentarily suspended the Dublin Regulation; however, following the security incidents, such as the Cologne New Year's Eve ones, the general panic among the population skyrocketed, a situation that compelled policymakers to become even more restrictive. These policy changes signal expectations of tightening.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Integrationsgesetz (Integration Act) compelled refugees to enroll in language and citizenship lessons to retain their right to remain in the country. In the meantime, the 2018 reforms in immigration laws prioritized skilled migration of labor and included some extras, which made the asylum laws more rigid, like accelerating returns of immigrants in safe countries of origin. In 2019, the emphasis was transferred further to the aspect of repatriation, and a program named AnKER- Zentren was created to expedite the asylum-seeking process. This change of policy, with its humanitarian overtones and control, reduced the number of irregular arrivals in the EU, although in Germany alone, the number of applications is enormous [5].

During 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic unbalanced the migration flows; however, Germany continued to provide temporary protection to the Ukrainian refugees (more than a million post-2022), without going through the asylum process. It indicated flexibility in policies, but it also increased workload. NGOs also changed to going online to help and deliver vaccines [6].

During 2022-2023, the government introduced the Opportunity Residence Act (Chancen-Aufenthaltsrecht), which enabled long-term residents to regularise their status, which led to immigration numbers recovering. Meanwhile, there are discussions on yearly asylum quotas and offshoring processing (e.g. refugee centers beyond the EU). The NGOs decried such proposals as a form of externalizing responsibilities and pointed to the diminishing civil society space, such as the criminalisation of rescue NGOs.

In 2024, the Return Improvement Act (Rückführungsverbesserungsgesetz) passes to accelerate returns and reinforce border controls. In first half of 2025, the new coalition government (CDU/CSU-led, perhaps under Friedrich Merz) makes its agenda of Humanity and Order hard, introducing land border checks and a two-year moratorium on family reunification of subsidiary protection seekers (since July 2025). In Second half of 2025 (until November), presentation of the European Entry/Exit System (EES), the gradual implementation of which begins on 12 October, constitutes a shift towards digital border management.

2.3. Institutional safeguards for NGOs' participation in refugee resettlement

NGOs to some extent, are implemented partners of the German state, which has established a number of formal cooperation mechanisms. In essence, it is reduced to a public procurement system (öffentliche Auftragsvergabe) in which NGOs are contracted to operate reception centers, offer language courses, or provide counseling.

NGOs involved in refugee work benefit from a diverse funding structure. A significant portion comes from federal and state-level budgetary allocations, often channeled through specific programs. For instance, social welfare organizations like the German Red Cross (GRC) or Caritas receive public funds to manage shelters and provide care. This is supplemented by state-level

matching funds and, importantly, private donations from the public, which saw a significant surge during the initial phase of the crisis in 2015 [2]. This multi-source funding model, while diverse, also creates dependencies and vulnerabilities to political and economic fluctuations.

The way in which municipal authorities interact closely and synergistically characterize the distribution of duties and activities that relate to the accommodation of refugees in the German federal system. On the local scale, collaborative platforms have become tools to improve the coordination process to ensure that the functions of governance are well coordinated among administrative levels.

The paradigm of this approach is the government + civil society consultation model adopted by cities like Leipzig. Such platforms bring together municipal authorities, large welfare NGOs (such as Diakonie), and other minor grassroots initiatives to coordinate their services, exchange information, and solve problems together. By so doing, they offer a practical way out to the multi-stakeholder governance complexities.

3. The core role of NGOs throughout the entire refugee resettlement process

3.1. Initial reception phase

On arrival, non-governmental organizations form one of the crucial factors in satisfying the humanitarian demands that face newcomers. They operate emergency shelters and transitional shelters with an example of the Workers Samaritan Federation Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB) emergency shelter initiatives. They provide rudimentary subsistence aid, such as the issuance of nutritional and clothing sustenance, hygiene items, and medical first aid on-site services are provided by organizations like Malteser Werke. In addition, NGOs often assist refugees in the process of nascent registration and help to navigate the complex bureaucratic environment, playing the role of an indispensable mediator between the newcomers and the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF)).

3.2. Medium-term adaptation phase

As displaced people move away from the temporary shelters into some form of permanent housing, the integration process is given priority by NGOs. These organizations are the main fountain of linguistic education- starting with basic curriculum, through to advanced curriculum, including the graded linguistic training programmes of the Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO), and hold cultural orientation sessions aimed to familiarize refugees with German social conventions [5]. Law counseling is another area of critical necessity, whereby organizations like the “Kontaktstelle Fluechtlinge und Migrantinnen -Kontakt und Beratungsstelle, Legal Counseling Services” (KuB) provide expert advice on asylum, residency, and appeal cases and thus reduce the jurisprudential ambiguities that characteristically define the resettlement process. Also, NGOs provide psychosocial assistance to overcome trauma and enhance social unity. The programmes put in place by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), such as, are programmes that target proper mental well-being and community building, hence creating resilient networks among the refugee communities.

3.3. Long-term integration and development phase

The integration is not only about the short and medium parts, but the most important part is also long-term integration. This needs labor market, education, and refugees’ social participation.

In the coitional training and job placement, Caritas, Diakonie, Animal Welfare Organization (AWO), and specialized initiatives (“Perspektive für junge Flüchtlinge” by the German Children and Youth Foundation) run qualification programmes, recognition of foreign credentials, and employer-matching schemes.

In the education aspect, the major welfare is about the German learning and orientation courses accumulated. NGOs support school enrolment, homework assistance, and scholarships; organizations such as Start with a Friend or Kercheval networks foster one-to-one mentoring.

For Community participation and anti-discrimination work, local refugee councils (Flüchtlingsräte), Welcome initiatives, and interfaith projects organize cultural events, sports clubs, and neighborhood dialogues to raise cooperation and build social nets. After the crisis, NGOs still participate in compensating for gaps in state provision, particularly in mental health, legal aid for rejected asylum.

4. The core challenges that remain

4.1. Resource constraints

One of the challenges nowadays is the pressure of useful resources for refugees. From the public funding, a potential decline in private donations after the initial crisis phase, and the continuous growth in demand for services create significant strain on NGO operations, affecting the sustainability and quality of their programs. From a human resources perspective, the municipal administration itself was overwhelmed during the crisis peak, with social workers accumulating many overtime hours and experiencing a high level of psychological and physical burden, leading to a significant number of employees on sick leave. From the financial aspect, NGOs reliance on public funding through municipal contracts introduces volatility, particularly after the formalization of public tender offers [7]. Consequently, fluctuations in public funding and the pressure to submit competitive bids directly undermine the resources available for implementing basic services and protection standards. Against a backdrop of persistently rising demand, this jeopardizes project quality and long-term sustainability.

Although the perceived state of emergency at the end of 2015 led to new forms of cooperation, such as the one between the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and 30 NGOs active in refugee accommodation, from 2014 to 2015, the number of asylums applications increased by 155 per cent, also, a 2017 study shows on living conditions in shared accommodation facilities further underlined the lack of binding standards at the local level [7,8]. Such immense pressure has overwhelmed Germany's fragile refugee resettlement system. At the same time, challenges also arise from the competition between organizations to receive the contract to operate an accommodation center. The low-cost offers, the quality could be maintained, but the budgetary concerns pose a potential threat.

From the refugee act point, the refugee illegal act supports the idea that a system under immense pressure might see a degradation of cooperative norms among actors, potentially fostering a competitive environment where cost undercuts quality. These express when citizens receive information about an “immigration threat”, their perception of the conduct expected of a “good citizen” change [9]. This indirect pressure put on the NGOs’ service; NGOs need to be ready for the refugees, at the same time addressing public attitudes.

4.2. Social environment and policy

Despite efforts, societal acceptance is not universal. Portions of the population maintain a low level of acceptance towards refugees, and the rise of populist narratives can negatively impact the social environment, creating additional hurdles for integration and sometimes leading to hostility towards both refugees and the NGOs supporting them [10]. And the entry of refugees into the German labor market has crowded out the employment space of the German population [6]. This makes German people turn to criticize the relevant receive policies.

Besides the social aspect, the changes of policy from the political aspect, the refugee crisis has led to the rise of right-wing forces in Germany, intensified political rivalries, and the spread of anti-refugee sentiment among the populace [7]. From economic pressure, Germany's domestic refugee policy is relatively generous in terms of refugee resettlement, social integration, and welfare benefits during the resettlement process. However, this has in fact placed a significant financial strain on Germany. The cultural clash also pushes policy changes. Germany's excessively open refugee policy has led to social unrest stemming from difficulties in religious and cultural integration. These social environment and policy changes make NGOs not only need to address the refugee problems but also have to serve society and keep good maintain a high degree of sensitivity to changes in relevant policies.

5. Conclusion

After the European refugee crisis 10 years ago, Germany implemented a range of policy measures, with NGOs serving various roles in these efforts. NGOs effectively acted as a vital link, not only providing immediate humanitarian aid but also transferring knowledge from international humanitarian contexts to the national response. Although there are still criticisms and attacks on Germany's refugee policies and NGOs today, the overall discussion remains relatively positive. Germany's experience shows that policy areas are inevitably linked and that successfully integrating large numbers of immigrants in a short time requires careful consideration of these connections. This means that not only the government but also NGOs and society as a whole must participate in these efforts. Germany's response to the European refugee crisis gave the world a lesson on the NGOs and Government cooperation, and inside the NGOs could participate in solving society problems. NGOs' participation also proves how important of policy's impact on cooperation.

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