

HOUSING AND INTEGRATING REFUGEES IN HAMBURG

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ARTICLE FOLLOWED BY AN INTERVIEW WITH GUILLAUME CAPELLE,
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High-quality public housing project in Mittlerer Landweg, 2017
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In October 2015, he was appointed head of the Central Coordination Unit for Refugees (ZKF) for the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. The unit is responsible for housing and first integration measures for the tens of thousands of refugees that have come to Hamburg since 2015.

KEYWORDS

- REFUGEES
- MIGRATION
- HOUSING

In 2015, like many European cities, Hamburg faced a peak in refugee arrivals. Since January 2015, 71,000 refugees have arrived in Hamburg and 39,000 are still living in the city. Most refugees came from war-torn Syria, and from the troubled states of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Eritrea. Since last year, Hamburg has also seen a rise in Turks fleeing their country and applying for political asylum in Germany.

At the peak of the crisis at the end of 2015, authorities in Hamburg focused on one objective: preventing homelessness without seriously impacting the life of Hamburg's 1.85 million citizens. As the pressure on housing rose, the municipality developed proactive methods based on legislation to house refugees in decent conditions and the Hamburg Senate created the Central Coordination Unit for Refugees (ZKF) to reduce bureaucracy and enable quick decisions and implementation. The city has shown great resilience in coping with the massive influx of refugees since 2015.

Three main factors of success can be highlighted: (1) the particular socio-cultural background in Germany and Hamburg, (2) the governance mechanisms set up to deal with this unprecedented situation and (3) the involvement of civil society and participation of citizens.

INTRODUCTION

January 2015 started with about 1,500 refugees arriving in the city of Hamburg. Four months later, the number climbed to about 2,000. Then came the "wave" and numbers rocketed: In October, about 10,400 people found their way to the port city. Refugees were exhausted and in poor health after weeks of marching along stretches of the Balkan route which started in Greece. Many were traumatised by war experiences in countries like Iraq and Syria.

Some of them had seen friends and family members drown near them as crammed boats capsized while heading from the Turkish coast to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, or from Libya to Italy.

In the Balkan region, authorities were overwhelmed by the situation; refugees at borders were simply waved to the north while governments all over the European Union were under rising pressure to stop illegal immigration. In early 2016, borders along the Balkan route were shut down.

In March 2016, the European Union and Turkey signed a deal under the terms of which Ankara agreed to stop asylum seekers from crossing by sea to Greek islands in return for €3 billion in aid to deal with millions of Syrian refugees living on Turkish soil.

Subsequently, the number of refugees reaching Hamburg fell dramatically. The situation is now more or less normal, with 713 refugees arriving in Germany in May 2018. A total of 413 were allowed to stay while the rest were distributed to other states in Germany. In line with the so-called "Königsberg quota", Hamburg receives 2.52% of all people applying for asylum in Germany. This distribution quota takes many factors of each of the 16 German states into consideration, such as demographics and economic strength.

1. FACTS AND FIGURES

Some 71,000 refugees came to Hamburg from January 2015 until May 2018 – in a city of about 1.85 million people. After registration, about 39,000 of them were assigned to stay in the city state; the others were sent to other states in Germany.

At the end of April 2018, 3,390 refugees were living in Hamburg's 12 initial shelters (*Erstaufnahme-Einrichtungen*) and 25,113 in 125 public housing sites (*Folge-Unterkünfte*). This is a total of 28,503 refugees living in publicly funded and operated facilities. In addition, some 10,000 refugees found a haven in Hamburg's normal housing market between January 2015 and April 2018.

2. THE THREE STEPS TO HOUSING REFUGEES

Refugees are first assigned to initial shelters, where they await a decision about their asylum application and where they benefit from the first integration measures such as language classes. All children and teenagers are sent to kindergartens or schools. In these shelters, social workers (65 refugees per social worker) and translators support the newcomers. Initial shelters have a canteen for all and shared bathrooms; many are made of Lego-like container units.

Usually, after a maximum of six months, refugees are moved from initial shelters to public housing units where families have their own flat, or six men share a three bedroom flat. Each apartment offers privacy with its own bathroom and kitchen. In public housing, the quota is 80 refugees per social worker.

Refugees at some point move from public housing units into the normal housing market, where they rent their own flat and need no more "intensive care" from social workers. Most adult refugees have by then learnt German, are visiting a university, are in some job training programme or are even already working and paying income taxes.

3. TACKLING THE HOUSING CRISIS

At the peak of the crisis at the end of 2015, authorities in Hamburg focused on one objective: preventing homelessness without seriously impacting the life of Hamburg's 1.85 million citizens. In the shortest time possible, dozens of new refugee housing sites for thousands of people were built, and kindergartens and school capacities expanded.

Housing facilities mushroomed all over the city as authorities rented or bought thousands of special containers, rented buildings or transformed halls of defunct firms into living facilities for refugees. The *Bundeswehr* (army) and the *Technisches Hilfswerk* (Technical Relief Aid), a national organisation, opened barracks, set up provisional tent sites and transformed empty halls into huge dormitories. The pressure was immense for weeks as no one knew when the refugee wave would ebb and stay down.

This crisis also hit Hamburg at a very unfavourable moment: the city was and is still suffering from a shortage of affordable housing because of an economic boom coupled with a high demand for urban flats. This situation became even more intense when tens of thousands of refugees poured into the city. The other German city states, Berlin and Bremen, faced similar hardships. Rural states like Bavaria or Saxony had far fewer problems finding and setting up housing facilities, and their housing markets offered much more affordable rental apartments than city states.

4. TACTICS AND GUIDELINES TO MASTER THE LOGISTICS OF HOUSING TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE

A) Hamburg applied the legal possibility of section 246 of the National Building Code (§ 246 *Baugesetzbuch*), a special regulation that allows temporary refugee accommodation units to be built in industrial and other non-residential areas in times of crisis. Hamburg could therefore start immediately on the construction of the dwellings, even though the development plan for a specific area envisaged a different use.

"A HIGHLIGHT SINCE 2015 HAS BEEN THE CRUCIAL ROLE PLAYED BY CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS AND VOLUNTEERS [...] MORE THAN 110 GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS CAME TOGETHER IN THE "COALITION OF REFUGEE AID INITIATIVES IN HAMBURG."

“THE HAMBURG SENATE SET UP THE CENTRAL COORDINATION UNIT FOR REFUGEES (ZKF) TO REDUCE BUREAUCRACY, AND TO ENABLE QUICK DECISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION.”

B) Unlike the city state of Berlin, the city of Hamburg did not use sport halls of schools for refugee accommodation in order to avoid impacting school children. It bought or rented empty halls of Praktika and Max Bahr, two DIY (Do it Yourself) firms that had gone bankrupt before the refugee crisis. The City of Hamburg also bought and rented thousands of containers for housing refugees in Lego-like modular architecture.

C) Emphasis was put on the city's in-house expertise to avoid, whenever possible, involving the private sector. Two companies owned by the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg carried out numerous crucial tasks, from overseeing construction to operating sites:

- Sprinkenhof AG is the city's asset and project manager for the rental, leasing, construction and renovation of municipal real estate – including housing sites for refugees. It guarantees the professional planning, control and execution of projects in the sole interests of the city.
- fördern & wohnen (f & w) is Hamburg's second asset, responsible for operating almost all refugee housing sites. In order to relieve f & w, the city asked relief aid organisations to operate a small number of refugee housing sites – such as the German Red Cross, Malteser and Johanniter. The Hamburg authorities deliberately opted not to hire private firms to run such sites. Berlin did that and paid a high price, for example by having a number of ready-to-occupy shelters empty for months because firms were suing.

D) In the summer of 2016 a new central “Arrival Centre” opened its doors in the Rahlstedt neighbourhood, where every refugee entering Hamburg has to register. In this facility with the capacity of processing 400 people per day, refugees first undergo a medical check. They then register and write as well as submit their asylum application to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which has a team at the Arrival Centre. After staying there for a few days at a housing section, refugees move to initial shelters or are distributed to other German states, in line with the above mentioned distribution quota.

E) The Hamburg senate, or government, set off a housing boom by approving in 2017 the construction of 13,411 apartments. The year

before, the number was 12,471. It was 9,560 in 2015. Authorities expect the city's housing shortage to start easing by end 2019.

F) In cooperation with the HafenCity University in Hamburg, in 2016 the authorities organised “Finding Places”, a three-month participation project for citizens from the city's seven districts. In workshops, they used an interactive technology, a so-called “city scope” co-developed with the MIT in the USA, to suggest areas for housing refugees. As a result, three areas for 624 refugees were realised and five areas for 688 refugees were kept in reserve.

5. “WILLKOMMENSKULTUR” (WELCOMING CULTURE) AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A highlight since 2015 has been the crucial role played by civil society groups and thousands of volunteers from all walks of life. They were right from the beginning on the ground, helping with managing and distributing food and clothing donations. They comforted refugees with traumatic experiences during warfare in their home countries and while fleeing to Europe. Volunteers later accompanied refugees visiting government institutions, helped them learn German and gave valuable advice when searching for a flat in the normal housing market.

More than 110 groups and institutions came together in the “Coalition of Refugee Aid Initiatives in Hamburg” (BHFI) to help refugees integrate society. Churches and mosques opened their doors and, at the peak of the crisis, even provided sleeping facilities for refugees for a few days until authorities could transfer them to professionally-operated sites. Foundations like the Lawaetz Stiftung, Körber Stiftung and Bürger Stiftung funded integration and support activities with refugees. Indeed, the response to the crisis was society-wide, and officials are grateful for the massive support that was “Willkommenskultur” at its best.

Authorities meet regularly with BHFI representatives to solve problems, sometimes even to find solutions for individuals. The BHFI argued for setting up the office of an ombudsperson, where refugees and volunteers can voice their grievances. In July 2017, Mrs Annegrethe Stoltenberg took the position of an independent ombudswoman, supported by two staff. Her neutral institution is fully independent and treats complaints about the accommodation and integration of refugees with absolute discretion.

There is a historic trauma behind the ongoing large-scale work of volunteers to support refugees: the state of Germany in May 1945 after the defeat of the Nazi regime and the subsequent massive population shifts in post-World War II Europe. Some 10 million Germans alone fled to West Germany – from eastern German territories like Prussia that became Polish and Russian, and from countries where Germans were in a minority such as Czechoslovakia and Romania.

For years, millions of Germans lived in dramatic conditions in farm barns, bombed-out houses, cellars and the infamous “Nissen barracks” that were designed by Canadian engineer Peter Nissen for the military during World War I. Almost every German family today can recount stories of grandparents who had to run for their lives in 1945.

6. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND CONSENSUS-BUILDING

When many refugees were arriving in Hamburg every day at the end of 2015, authorities set up a number of huge facilities to house them. At one site, the Schnackenburgallee initial shelter, more than 2,000 refugees were living there for a while. Dozens of other facilities harboured between 500 and 1,500 refugees.

During the height of the crisis, citizen participation was minimal because there was simply no time to organise lengthy participation processes. Authorities just managed to invite citizens in neighbourhoods to inform them that in a few days hundreds of refugees would be their neighbours. Most people were welcoming, but some voiced concerns related to security and to the ability of their community to absorb and integrate so many newcomers.

Authorities during that period also started a programme of building high-quality public housing in different locations, one for up to 2,500 refugees. These plans and the lack of time for lengthy citizen participation processes led to the forming of a coalition of 14 local neighbourhood initiatives under the umbrella of the newly-formed “Hamburg für Gute Integration”, or “Hamburg for better Integration” (HGI).

HGI mobilised tens of thousands of citizens, who signed petitions against large housing projects for refugees. They argued that this would lead to ghettos, preventing proper integration of refugees. Then they went a step further and launched a campaign to have a referendum on these housing projects. The Hamburg constitution allowed for such a democratic move.

The Hamburg ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Greens immediately started negotiations with HGI and signed in July 2016 a deal to prevent the planned referendum. Officials did not want an emotional campaign that could degenerate into an ugly debate for and against refugees.

The main points of the deal with HGI, known as the *Bürgerverträge* (Citizen Agreements), are:

- In some of the high-quality public housing projects, the number of refugees will be reduced to a maximum of 300 refugees per project by the end of 2019.
- Every new public housing site is built for a maximum of 300 refugees.
- A maximum of 300 housing sites for refugees are spread all over Hamburg.

This deal would become obsolete if Hamburg was to face another massive influx of refugees. But this so called “3 times 300 formula” is being implemented. Authorities in Hamburg’s seven districts and state authorities like the Central Coordination Unit for Refugees (ZKF) regularly meet HGI representatives and monitor the implementation of the deal.

In 2017, ZKF and HGI went a step further and agreed on a system to distribute refugees as fairly as possible among the city’s seven districts, known as the “orientation and distribution key for refugee accommodation”. Currently, refugee housing density is higher in medium and low income neighbourhoods, but authorities are now constructing more public housing in medium and high income areas.

Despite the deal with HGI, a number of neighbours adjacent to planned refugee housing sites filed in 2015-2016 lawsuits to prevent their construction. The city of Hamburg did not lose any lawsuit, but these legal battles delayed the construction of many housing projects for numerous months.

7. PREPARING FOR THE NEXT WAVE

The city of Hamburg expects that, in 2018, about 3,600 additional refugees will need to be housed in publically funded sites in Hamburg. Refugees would be allowed to bring in about 1,500 close family members from abroad – in line with a government-sponsored family reunification programme.

In addition, the ZKF will have, by the end of 2018, 2,500 beds in reserve. The reason is that the refugee deal with Turkey is shaky, and the political situation in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa is tense. Add to it the migration pressure from sub-Saharan Africa northwards.

Since mid-2018, the housing situation of refugees has started to ease as more and more were transferred from crowded initial shelters to public housing sites. The focus of authorities has shifted from providing quality housing to integration measures.

8. THE CHALLENGE: INTEGRATING TENS OF THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES

Hamburg’s Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Family and Integration in September 2017 published the city’s updated “Integration Concept”. It is the product of a long process involving many official players like the ZKF and representatives of the seven districts as well as civil society groups and independent experts.

The concept relies on the fact that successful integration is only possible when all key actors interact in the field: refugees, migrant organisations, civil society groups and volunteers as well as public institutions on local, regional and national levels. Note that 33% of Hamburg citizens have a migration background. And about 50% of the under-18s have a migration background.

The concept has two strategic lines:

1- **The intercultural opening of all state institutions**, meaning the reduction of structural discrimination in all walks of life. This would enable everyone to participate equally in central areas of society. Integration is therefore seen

as an opportunity-oriented and measurable participation of people with a migration background in central areas of social life. The intercultural opening of Hamburg's public sector started in 2006 with a campaign called "We are Hamburg! Are you with us?" Staff since then have undergone intercultural training.

The quota of trainees with migration backgrounds in the public sector went up from 5.2% in 2006 to 18.1% in 2015. And the number of employees with migration backgrounds shot up from 8.9% in 2008 to 13% in 2016. The city is therefore moving steadily in the right direction to show that the public sector increasingly reflects society's cultural diversity.

2- Refugees and migrants have to show willingness to integrate. The highest priority is to learn German as fast as possible. They need to accept Germany's legal and social order, which is written in the constitution. Non-negotiable are key points like the rule of law, state neutrality in religious affairs, gender equality and child rights. In addition, refugees are expected to enter schools or training programmes so that, at some point, they can stand on their own two feet economically.

Hamburg's integration concept not only lists all kinds of educational and training measures, it also includes **target indicators**. Here are three examples:

1- Language	2014	2015	2016	Goal 2018
Percentage of people with migration background who pass the B1 language test	56.9%	60.5%	58.5%	> 60%
2- High School	2014	2015	2016	Goal 2018
Percentage of high school graduates with a migration background	39.7%	41.1%	45.8%	46%
<i>Comparison: 59.5 % of German nationals with no migration background got a high school degree in 2016.</i>				
3- Work	2014	2015	2016	Goal 2018
Employment rate of people with a migrant background	64.7%	65.1%	63.0%	> 65%

“IN 2015, ABOUT 890,000 REFUGEES CAME TO GERMANY; IN 2016 THE NUMBER DROPPED TO ABOUT 280,000; IN 2017 IT WAS ABOUT 187,000. THEREFORE, A TOTAL OF 1.357 MILLION REFUGEES ARRIVED IN 2015-2017.”

9. CONCLUSION: RESILIENT HAMBURG

The city has shown great resilience in coping with the massive influx of refugees since 2015. The main reasons are the following:

SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND IN GERMANY AND HAMBURG

- Germany has become a multi-cultural, tolerant and open society.
- The country learnt from the past migration waves. Germany from the mid-1950s till early 1970s attracted about 2.6 million migrants from Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. In the early 1990s, about a million people from war-torn Yugoslavia, from Romania and from Turkey applied for asylum. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of all communist regimes in Eastern Europe, 600,000 East Germans moved to western Germany – together with hundreds of thousands of people with German roots from Eastern Europe.

GOVERNANCE

- Good governance is the rule in Hamburg. The city's main administrative and political leaders meet twice a month and take consensual decisions. They ensure that important projects cannot be challenged by environmental protection, by not-in-my-backyard attitudes or by local economic interests. Good governance also means transparency and public information, evaluation of our work and accountability.
- The Hamburg Senate set up the Central Coordination Unit for Refugees (ZKF) to reduce bureaucracy, and to enable quick decisions and implementation. Previously, competencies were split between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Family and Integration. The unit focuses, among other things, on forecasting planning and city-wide coordination of refugee accommodation needs. It supports first integration measures such as childcare and kindergartens and helps guide refugees towards education, training and jobs. It is also involved in citizen participation processes and in mediation and conflict resolution measures.
- The economic boom: Hamburg has been funding the housing and integration of refugees from budget surplus – and not with loans or budget cuts impacting citizens negatively.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

- As mentioned above, civil society groups and tens of thousands of volunteers helped authorities cope with the high number of refugees.
- Authorities started in 2015 with ad hoc events focusing on just informing neighbours about new refugee housing sites. In 2016, citizen participation became more refined, culminating in a lengthy process that involved seven workshops in Hamburg's seven districts, where citizens commented on Hamburg's integration policies.

Members from civil society, migrant organisations, faith representatives and experts gave valuable input that found its way into the city's updated integration concept, published by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Family and Integration in September 2017.

In the meantime, almost every fourth refugee who has come to Germany since 2015 now has a job. If employment growth continues in this way, half of them will have a job after five years, according to a study by the Institute for Labour Market and Job Research (IAB). By the end of 2018, between 8,500 and 10,000 more refugees in Germany would then find a job every month.

In 2015, about 890,000 refugees came to Germany; in 2016 the number dropped to about 280,000; in 2017 it was about 187,000. Therefore, a total of 1.357 million refugees arrived in 2015-2017.

Integration measures are going ahead at full speed and bearing their first tangible results. But there are still important challenges ahead in integrating all newcomers in society and in daily life, and in enabling refugees to move as soon as possible from an initial shelter or public housing into normal, private dwellings. German authorities are aware that housing is a key part of the integration process because it provides stability in a private space.

With the help of civil society and volunteers, the city of Hamburg is, in parallel, promoting daily interaction between refugees and residents. This helps to practice German language skills, to understand the values of a democratic and open society where the rule of law prevails, and it promotes sharing cultural experiences. Here again, volunteers play an invaluable role in making refugees feel that Germany is their new home, and where their loved ones have a safe and promising future.



Citizen participation on Hamburg's integration concept, district of Nord, January 2017, ©ZKF

MORE INFORMATION

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