

Country: Germany

CRRF Pillar: Pillar 3, Pillar 4

Actors: Flüchtlingskirche (Refugee's Church), faith-based organizations

CRRF Objectives: Objective 1, Objective 2

Keywords: education, language, social cohesion, diversity

Good practices in supporting the immediate and ongoing needs of displaced people from diverse religious traditions: An example from Germany

Introduction

This case study is part of a collaborative project carried out by Joint Learning Initiative and UNHCR, which aims to generate locally grounded evidence and identify examples of good practices of local faith community-led responses to refugees across 6 countries: Honduras, Mexico, Uganda, Germany, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Thirty-three interviews with a total of 33 participants were conducted for this case study¹.

In recent years, Germany has received massive flows of immigrants from countries that have been ravaged by warfare and poverty in the Middle East and Africa. According to the latest numbers made available by the Federal Office for Statistics (2016)², there are 1.6 million “persons seeking protection” in Germany, accounting for nearly 16% of the overall foreign population³. Throughout the country, local faith communities (LFCs) have played a critical role in responding to the immediate and ongoing needs of displaced populations. Unlike any other institution in Germany, churches have the power to protect migrants from detainment and deportation through church asylum.

In addition to immediate protection, churches may convey a sense of safety and peace for migrants amidst the precarity of their current circumstances. They are also important sites at which refugees can gain access to psychosocial and spiritual support. Many refugees continue to practice Christianity or Islam after arriving in Germany. Others have a more complicated relationship with religion as a result of religious and ethnic persecution in their countries of origin, and therefore, vary in their levels of conviction and desired affiliation with a formal religious institution.

Interviewees emphasized that churches' spiritual capital imparts a sense of trust and credibility and recognized the strong role that churches have played in Germany in advocating for the rights of displaced people. Local faith communities are also well positioned to support refugee populations

¹ Project leads: Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London, and Dr. Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). We gratefully acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the researchers in collecting the primary data and analyzing it: Kat Eghdamian, Leonie Harsch, Molly Middlehurst (analysis and writing), and Heather Wurtz (analysis and writing).

² <https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/CrossSection/Refugees/Refugees.html;jsessionid=FBE753C51756F24E397EC3149C58FB65.InternetLive1>

³ In addition to the large refugee population currently residing in Germany, the general population of Germany is also very ethnically diverse. In 2017, 10.6 million people living in Germany were registered as foreigners.

(<https://www.destatis.de/EN/FactsFigures/SocietyState/Population/MigrationIntegration/MigrationIntegration.html>)

through their ability to draw upon strong volunteer networks and to mobilize people to action despite religious affiliation. As one German informant commented:

I have never seen as strong and continuous commitment from the church as the commitment to supporting refugees. Without the participation of the church, support for refugees would not have been the same in Germany...In a faith community, the feeling of being obliged [to help] is different...Religion can also be the transcendence that connects people. The refugees [who come to Germany] are often religious people. Many of those who are from Muslim majority countries are impressed by people who practice a faith, even if that faith is a different one⁴.

Cross-cutting Solutions

Flüchtlingskirche (Refugee's Church) is an exemplary model of effective and innovative intervention by a faith-based organization. Established in 2015 by the Berlin Protestant State Church in collaboration with Diakonie⁵, a Protestant social welfare association, Flüchtlingskirche is housed in a strategically located community parish in an urban sector in Berlin. However, as informants have emphasized, it's not a strictly religious project, but, rather, one founded primarily on long-term social and economic integration. In addition, there are no limitations to participation based on ethnic, legal, or religious status. On the contrary, a staunch commitment to cultural diversity and social inclusion undergirds the project's holistic approach, which was consistently noted by informants as one of the most important and innovative aspects of the organization's work.

Flüchtlingskirche provides services that fall within four major categories: legal counseling, education, social cohesion, and spiritual (psychosocial) support. They also offer medical and psychological attention, as well as guidance on church asylum for individuals who are denied refugee status. The provision of a diverse range of services under one roof allows volunteers to apply a personalized, integrative approach that responds to the distinct needs of each individual or family unit, from affordable housing, to help filling out welfare forms, to the need for a listening ear. As an informant working at Flüchtlingskirche expressed: "We try our best to transmit the feeling that we see the whole person and not reduce the people to their status...We ask ourselves how [each individual] person actually deals with the whole asylum process."⁶

Informants frequently described the German language courses as one of the most important and heavily utilized areas of assistance offered at Flüchtlingskirche. Difficulty overcoming language barriers is a major challenge for immigrants in Berlin because of the central role it plays in long-term social integration. Language difficulties not only affect one's capacity to secure stable employment, but can also impede access to essential social services, such as scheduling a medical exam or navigating bureaucratic requirements to apply for family reunification. The provision of language courses is a durable solution for the long-term resettlement of refugee populations. It provides a critical avenue towards increasing the self-reliance and empowerment of refugee populations, while also creating opportunities to interact with local residents and to build informal social networks. One refugee remarked: "From the church in particular, learning the language was the best thing, which had a big role, especially when I first arrived to Berlin...It was hard to meet people but here at the church I had the

⁴ GERfBO025

⁵ <https://www.diakonie.de/english/>

⁶ GERfBO004

chance to get to know and meet new people whether refugees from other countries or new Germans, which is a good thing.”⁷

Social Cohesion and Community Resilience

Another critical intervention frequently cited by informants is the emphasis on activities that provide psychosocial support and build social cohesion across cultural difference, such as a weekly international dinner, in which the diverse group of program participants and local residents come together to cook and share a meal. One refugee woman stated: “We all are from different countries, like Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Germany, Syria, Africa. We...sit around one table and eat together. It gives me a moment of peace; not because of eating, if I just want to eat, I can also stay at home. The spirit of the event is really important, that we all are together.” In addition to the international dinner, Flüchtlingskirche offers special workshops in areas such as sewing, theater, and yoga. For many, social events provide an important outlet from the past and present hardships that they have endured and reaffirm human dignity through meaningful human interaction. This humanistic approach contrasts starkly from the stressful and often inhumane conditions of other contexts in which refugees are immersed, such as precarious migrant journeys or overcrowded camps. As one Syrian refugee man expressed: “When you are on a boat and you might die any minute, you feel worthless. But when you come here and see people excited to hear your story, you gain your value back.”⁸

Such interventions are also crucial to reducing xenophobia and creating integrated communities within the German context. Pervasive tensions between local residents⁹ and immigrant communities exist in Germany as a result of limited resources, particularly in terms of affordable housing, as well as a lack of understanding or exposure to Islamic religious practice. Many of the volunteer informants reflected that activities that promote social integration not only benefit displaced populations, but also serve to strengthen host communities. They emphasized practices within the organization that empower refugees to self-organize or to increase their autonomy and decision-making in order to become contributing members of society. They also discussed ways that the organization tries to involve the local host community in organizational events and activities as a means to decrease xenophobia, generate respect for social diversity, and deepen empathy and understanding through inter-religious dialogue. As one representative of Flüchtlingskirche remarked:

*When I get to know you and give you the opportunity to get to know me, it creates trust and awareness, then I reject you less. When you explain yourself to me, or when I have to explain my own faith to you, you develop a stance and reflect. If this works out between you and me, then I don't need the crutch of stereotypes in order to explain your faith myself. All this happens on a market place, a village square, through small interactions, not through a big lecture. This is the opportunity – to create familiarity, better understanding, and the ability to let be.*¹⁰

⁷ GERmREF003

⁸ GERmREF003

⁹ It is important to note that local residents often *include* established immigrant communities that settled many years ago; the conflict does not solely exist between immigrant/non-immigrant groups, but reflects tensions that crosscut diverse social enclaves within local communities.

¹⁰ GERfBO030

Many of the volunteers and affiliates of the LFC regard assistance of refugee populations as a moral duty in response to the long-standing global inequalities that drive processes of displacement. Peace-building practices that aim to raise awareness and increase social cohesion are considered critical interventions towards strengthening the resilience of local communities and building a more inclusive German society for the future.

Key Reflections for the CRRF

- Flüchtlingskirche's inclusive and integrative approach **eases pressure on host communities and enhances refugee self-reliance** through the provision of direct access to language courses, medical and psychological attention, and legal counsel.
- Community events hosted by the organization that aim to bring together refugees and local community residents, such as weekly international dinners, theater performances, and language cafes, **build social cohesion** among both refugee and host populations and promote **long-term social integration of refugees**.
- Flüchtlingskirche's **innovative partnerships** with legal aid organizations supports the ability of refugees to access Church asylum in order to ensure that their cases for international protection are adequately reviewed and to promote resettlement.
- **Spiritual and psychosocial support** helps mitigate the emotional sequelae that refugees experience as a result of previous trauma, **builds resilience** among refugee populations, and promotes inter-religious dialogue and **cross-cultural collaboration**.