



Refugee Initiatives in Germany: Social Work and Advocacy Challenges

Elizabeth Snook

University of Michigan School of Social Work



Germany and its "Refugee Crisis"

Population: 80.62 million (2013)

Unemployment rate: 4.2% (Jun 2016)

Population growth rate: 0.2% annual change (2013)

GNI per capita: 45,620 PPP dollars (2013)

Official language: German

(Source: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/Germany>)



Background

- In 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel agreed to accept responsibility for the asylum applications of Syrian refugees after other EU countries refused.
- Over 1 million refugees and migrants from other countries arrived in Germany in 2015; that is more than the United States has accepted in 10 years (despite having a population four times greater than Germany). (Source: qz.com/567469)
- Refugees and asylum-seekers are actually legally very different. (Refugees typically wait for approval to enter the country, whereas asylum-seekers come and then register ASAP.) However, Germany has allowed refugees to use their asylum procedures as a way of providing Syrians more immediate relief from danger.

Special Study Topic

I wanted to understand how the response to refugees has evolved in the last year and the impact that current events have had on social workers and their ability to serve refugees. I set out to interview representatives from refugee initiatives, with questions like:

- How does your community view the work that you do? How has that changed?
- How have current events (/media coverage) impacted your organization?
- How have you managed your resources in light of mercurial policy shifts?

I spent a week each in Stuttgart, Berlin, and Cologne, visiting refugee camps and neighborhood organizations as well as asking regular community members to share their own perspectives.

Agency/Community Partners

A partial list of community agencies I interviewed and/or shadowed:

- Refugee Council of Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart) — an advocacy organization which educates public institutions and private volunteers about refugee rights in the German state of Baden-Württemberg; also serves as a resource to refugees
- Moabit Hilft (Berlin) — a neighborhood organization considered a first responder to refugees in the capital because of its proximity to the asylum processing center to which all refugees in Berlin must initially report
- Migration Hub (Berlin) — a collaborative co-working space for those interested in projects related to mass migration
- Refugee Law Clinic (Cologne) — a non-profit associated with the University of Cologne Law School which provides legal advice to asylum-seekers

Outcome

I am currently compiling an *annotated bibliography* on the so-called "migrant crisis," based on research I conducted prior to travel, recommendations I received during my trip, and resources which have since provided me with answers to lingering questions.

Skills Utilized and Developed

Project Management Skills Utilized Prior to Departure:

- Formulating a project proposal
- Outreach to research contacts
- Drafting a project budget
- Writing funding proposals
- Travel planning and contingency planning

Skills Developed During Travel and Research:

- Cultural humility and adaptability
- Professional networking
- Self-guided, informal learning

Classroom Connections

SW 799 — Immigration Policy at the Contested Border (Arizona/Mexico)

Professor Sherri Kossoudji emphasized the multiplicity of perspectives to be taken into consideration when exploring immigration policy and practice, as well as encouraged us to practice ethical methods of bearing witness.

SW 663 - Fundraising and Grant-Getting:

This course covered management topics such as the appropriate use of volunteers and the importance of diversifying funding sources in order to build a sustainable organization. Many of the initiatives I visited have suffered from mismanagement in these areas.

Lessons Learned

- Retired adults tend to be the most reliable volunteers, especially when the work is considered controversial.
- When campaigning for the rights of a vulnerable group, be aware of negative press coverage tied to that group. Failure to acknowledge this damages the credibility of the advocate in the eyes of opponents.



Career Connections

Radical change does not happen easily within existing German bureaucracy! I was incredibly inspired by the start-up spirit in Berlin. Though some of the new initiatives may not be built to last, extraordinary circumstances required all hands on deck, and the new nonprofits helped to fill service gaps. It is also so important that there be a space for new ideas and approaches to be cultivated independently of slow-changing institutions ridden with path dependencies.

This experience has helped me understand that I am most interested in projects with the following characteristics:

- Innovative
- Interdisciplinary
- Inter-agency Collaborations
- Localized/regional approaches to social justice issues

Advice for a Global Independent Study

- Plan some unstructured time! The best conversations and experiences happen when you least expect them, and talking to those outside of the work you are laser-focused on can provide valuable context.
- Learn at least some basic phrases in the language even if you do not need it to get by. People will appreciate it and it communicates that you are genuinely interested in them.

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