



How might integration succeed? Asylum seekers about their life situations and participation perspectives in Germany

Summary

Following the high levels of immigration to Germany in 2015 and 2016, there was intense debate in politics, business and civil society about how the reception, care and asylum system could be improved and how refugees could be given the opportunity to participate in society early on. However, the development of effective integration measures requires reliable information about the living conditions of refugees in Germany – information that is still missing. All too often, public debates about integration and participation fail to take the views held by refugees themselves into consideration, even if first studies on this topic now offer a more accurate picture. Indeed, it is exactly the perspectives of the refugees that are needed in order to be able to design measures and regulations that can best accommodate this group of people. How do refugees feel and what preoccupies them during their initial time in Germany? What is important to them? And to what extent do the refugees' perspectives match with what the authorities responsible for their reception and care, or the representatives of businesses, associations and civil society involved in refugee work, presume those perspectives to be? How do refugees experience the reception, care and asylum system, and how do they see their opportunities for societal participation? The present joint study by the SVR Research Unit and the Robert Bosch Stiftung focuses on this very topic: the subjective views of refugees. For the study, interviews were conducted with 62 asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia who were, at the time, living in Bavaria, Lower Saxony and Saxony, had arrived in Germany not long before, and (still) did not have a secure residence status.

The participants of the study were selected to represent as best as possible the diversity of individual traits (e.g., age, education) and contextual living conditions (e.g., city vs. country) that characterize refugees with an uncertain residence status in the early stages of their stay in Germany. A mixed-methods approach combining narrative and semi-structured interview techniques gave a lot of room to individual perspectives: In the first part of the interviews, the interviewees were given the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences and their current life situation in Germany. Then, as the conversation went on, the interviews zeroed in on certain topics according to an interview guide.

The respondents' accounts, which have been systematically evaluated by the SVR Research Unit using qualitative social research methods, document the diversity of individual life situations and the manifold associated themes and challenges that characterize the first phase of refugees' stays. Here, many see language, work and a secure residence status as key to participating in social life. In terms of the place of residence, a key finding is that many refugees would be willing to settle down outside of the metropolises if provided with the right incentives and local framework conditions. This constitutes a great opportunity that should not be missed.

A key incentive is access to education and work. The interviews show that refugees' desire to attain financial independence as soon as possible, generally achieved through a rapid integration into the labor market, may not be compatible with the desire to remain qualified over the longer term.

In addition to these structural dimensions of participation, engaging with and meeting people in Germany is a particularly important topic for refugees – a dimension of societal participation that has played a relatively minor role in public debates thus far. After all, aside from housing, work and education, it is above all the local people who shape their arrival and integration, as confirmed by many respondents. On the one hand, refugees are grateful for the involvement of civil society, yet at the same



time, it becomes clear that they not only need support but also the people themselves, as social contacts, colleagues or even friends. In other words, encounters and personal relationships are important prerequisites for refugees to gaining a foothold in society.

However, the topic of societal participation often takes the back burner for many of the respondents in the initial phase following their arrival, which is predominated by **uncertainty about the prospect for residence, and above all by having to wait for the decision on their asylum application. In addition, some people are separated from their family members.** These two factors put a lot of strain on those affected and impede any proactive effort on their part to become integrated into German society.

The interviews also made it clear that **the distinction, driven primarily by regulatory policy, between asylum seekers according to their statistical likelihood to remain in Germany is hardly comprehensible to those affected and, above all, proves counterproductive in terms of advancing integration.** Those without a good prospect to remain are treated as subordinate in the asylum procedure or in integration measures. This can prevent those affected from actively seeking integration, even if they were initially very motivated.

For people whose reasons for fleeing do not meet the criteria for being granted protection under national or European law, **other access routes to Germany may well exist, such as a work visa.** The study indicates that **these alternatives to an asylum application are not sufficiently recognized** by those who might be eligible. For example, participants from Albania, Kosovo or Macedonia (i.e., safe countries of origin) tended to see asylum as the only way to escape existential hardship and distress. Many were not aware that there are other ways of coming to Germany or, if they were, did not consider them to be feasible or realistic – despite being, in essence, suited for them.

The study identifies four cross-thematic aspects that characterize the real life situations of refugees. These appear in different parts of the interviews.

(1) Knowledge makes people capable of acting: No matter how efficient structures and processes are or how diversified the offer of measures are – they lead nowhere if people do not know and understand them. The system of reception, care and integration and the associated landscape are often incomprehensible to refugees.

(2) Contact persons as “guides” offer orientation: Refugees need information as well as help for self-help. For this reason, it is especially important in their beginning phases that they have access to one main contact person, which is where the important role of professional social workers comes into play. To be taken into consideration, however, is that the support structure for refugees at the local level is often decentralized, whereby refugees are not necessarily assigned or given access to such a contact person in a clear and consistent manner.

(3) It is the local level where the initial integration takes place: The city, county or community are not only the refugees’ first gateway into society, they also invariably represent German society as a whole, insofar as they are often the only area of the country that the refugees know when they first arrive. For this reason, the role of the local level in the integration policy framework cannot be appreciated enough. That said, the local authorities may well be expected to accept and carry out this role in a responsible manner.

(4) Refugee reception and integration must always be viewed in the family context: In the majority of cases, the arrival and participation of refugees in Germany is not limited to individuals; instead, many come together with their core or extended family. Above all, the temporarily suspended family reunification for people who are entitled to subsidiary protection, in particular from Syria, plays an important, and usually problematic, role for the persons affected during the asylum procedure: The



uncertainty and concern about the future of the closest family members puts a strain on everyday life and makes it difficult for these refugees to focus on their integration.

The following integration policy conclusions can be derived from the study:

- In order for asylum seekers in Germany to be able to gain a foothold early on, the circumstances must be clarified as quickly as possible. For this, asylum procedures must be significantly accelerated. In addition, the temporarily suspended family reunification for people entitled to subsidiary protection should be reintroduced as planned.
- Asylum seekers with good and moderate prospects to remain should be subjected to the same standards with regards to admission and asylum procedures, and measures to promote societal participation should be expanded and made accessible to asylum seekers with a moderate perspective. Asylum seekers from safe countries of origin should be placed in more individual housing arrangements after six months if their asylum procedure has extended beyond six months for no fault of their own.
- When distributing asylum seekers within the German federal states (Bundesländer), more consideration should be given to integration-related issues in cities, counties and communities – in particular access to housing, language, education and work. In addition, communities should provide their asylum seekers with incentives to stay early on so that these, once they become recognized refugees, do not continue to migrate and concentrate in certain regions.
- Work-related offers for guidance, placement and qualification should be better adapted to the needs of refugees. Above all, this concerns the field of tension between the desire for a quick entry into the job market on the one hand and for a long-term qualification on the other. Here, low-threshold employment opportunities during qualification phases have proven to be helpful measures, as have the addition to the classic vocational training system of modular offers that build on one another and that can be combined as needed.
- Social encounter and participation is an important resource for all other areas of life. That is why it is important to strengthen this resource, which should include continuous offers that allow for contact and exchange between refugees and the local population. These meeting places should allow for all parties to meet at eye level, engender a “we feeling,” and give refugees the opportunity to engage in an active way. However, efforts should not be limited to creating “refugee-specific” meeting places only and instead involve refugees more generally in community life.
- Especially at the beginning of their stay, refugees face a wide range of common everyday as well as emotional challenges. Nonetheless, many manage to “land” in Germany relatively quickly and to strive for integration into society. Others, however, need more time for this. That time should, in fact, be granted to them. Otherwise, the commonly applied approach of expecting refugees to cultivate a sense of self-responsibility when being offered support may leave some of them feeling overwhelmed.
- Policy should always keep in mind that refugees are above all individuals. To ensure their success, measures to promote participation should be tailored to the refugees’ individual capacities and preferences as much as possible.