

On handling conflicts among refugees and migrant communities

Assuring equal treatment and enabling participation on equal terms

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Policy recommendations

\ Address hostilities between refugees and people with a migration history.

Many refugees experience discrimination and hostilities in Germany as a result of their ethnic or religious affiliation or their political views. Some of them feel that this is a continuation of conflicts from their context of origin. To avert this, the state government and municipalities must develop strategies for preventing such conflicts.

\ Establish multi-language, culturally sensitive complaints offices in shelters.

Discrimination and hostility are often very subtle when occurring in everyday life, but can lead to violence if refugees do not see any other way of addressing the conflict. Accommodation facility operators, municipalities and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia must, therefore, provide easily accessible mechanisms for the non-violent resolution of conflicts.

\ Raise awareness with employees and volunteers of possible discrimination.

Unequal treatment, but also open discrimination against refugees by the staff of refugee shelters and volunteers reinforce conflicts. Shelter operators must prevent this by providing information and awareness training for staff and by improving coordination of voluntary support.

\ Assure the neutrality of contractors and service providers.

Some refugees are confronted with hostilities from translators at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) or employees of security service providers in shelters. These types of incidents must be strictly prosecuted, as they cause fear and present a security risk. The responsible parties must use training and reviews of service providers to take preventative action.

Encourage migrant self-organisations and incorporate them into existing integration concepts.

Preventing conflict does not only mean integrating refugees into the majority society, but equally involving all sections of society on equal terms. Here, migrant self-organisations can make a valuable contribution but to do this, they need capacities and knowledge. The NRW state government and municipal authorities must thus support migrant self-organisations financially and with capacity-building on the basis of transparent criteria.

On handling conflicts among refugees and migrant communities: Assuring equal treatment and enabling participation on equal terms

Refugees not only face discrimination and hostilities by members of the majority society but also by other refugees or people with a migration background from the same context of origin. This is a frequently overlooked part of their daily lives. Many of those affected withdraw in reaction to this kind of experience or isolate themselves socially to avoid conflicts. This poses an obstacle to their integration into society. As those participating in such conflicts are deeply involved emotionally and hostilities are often directed sweepingly towards entire groups, there is also a risk of escalation. This *Policy Brief* provides suggestions for preventing such conflicts.

This publication is based on data gathered since mid-2016 by the BICC research project “Between civil war and integration—Refugees and the challenges and opportunities of societal change in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)”. The team conducted qualitative individual and group interviews with 40 refugees as well as expert interviews with 15 representatives of migrant self-organisations and social workers. Data from field research that was gathered as part of the same project for a study on conflicts and conflict prevention in refugee shelters was also used (Christ, Meininghaus & Röing, 2019).

Subtle discrimination and unequal treatment: Conflicts in refugee shelters

In refugee shelters, conflicts frequently arise among the members of different ethnic, religious or ideological groups. At the same time, some of those interviewed recognise a connection to constellations in the participants’ countries of origin. Christian and Yazidi refugees, for example, report that there are Muslim refugees who are dismissive of or even hostile towards them and ascribe this to the conflicts between the religious communities, especially in Syria and Iraq. Those affected mostly react by hiding their religion and attempting to not draw attention to themselves in their daily lives and leaving the

shelters quickly. They understand this repudiation as a continuation of the discrimination experienced in their home country. Accordingly, some interviewees believe that these hostilities are the manifestation of prejudices that people bring with them from their home countries—reinforced by “cabin fever” within the shelters. Often, the shelter staff are not aware of these conflicts, as they play out on a non-verbal level or in the native language of those involved.

This type of conflict is intensified by shelter staff or volunteers—to some extent unwittingly—who show preferential treatment to the members of certain groups and discriminate against others. Shelter operators must, therefore, raise awareness of discrimination among their staff and volunteers and explain to refugees their right to non-discrimination. The equal treatment of all refugees—regardless of their religious, ethnic or ideological influences—is vital. This also applies for offers by volunteers.

Refugees consistently report religious or political hostility from translators of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and members of the security services in their shelters, who have a migration background from the same context of origin. They perceive this as a continuation of the persecution and repression in their countries of origin. Besides, this causes concern that they will not receive protection in Germany and, in the worst case, will be sent back to war zones.

As a result of the language barriers and existing interdependencies between refugees and staff, some refugees fall back on avoidance strategies that have a negative impact on their everyday lives. This includes avoiding contact with other refugees or hiding all the time. Administrative bodies and municipalities should, therefore, ensure that staff and service providers concerned are vetted accordingly and are more aware. They should also offer refugees multilingual, culturally sensitive entry points for complaints.

While operators of state shelters in NRW are required to establish complaints bodies and to implement the state's concept for protection against violence, this does not yet apply for municipal shelters, even if many towns and municipalities have, in the meantime, developed their own concepts and, in some cases, established local ombudsman services for cases of discrimination.¹

The state government should, therefore, adopt mandatory minimum standards for protection from violence and for dealing with cases of discrimination at the municipal level and provide financial support to municipalities to implement these. The employees of these offices must be made aware of discrimination among refugees and people with a migrant background. Until then, municipalities should be guided by best practice examples within the state.² The NRW state government should also establish an easily accessible ombudsperson office where complaints of discrimination can be lodged. A strict policy of persecution of offences which have come to light must be established to ensure that people who have fled from conflicts and persecution are able to feel safe in Germany.

Hostility and hiding: Conflicts in everyday life

Refugees report that they also experience hostility outside of shelters, which relate to events in their context of origin. Conflicts of this sort do not, however, take place exclusively among refugees; in some cases, Germans with a migration background from the corresponding context of origin also have a share in this. Thus, social workers report, for example, disputes between Kurdish and Turkish or between Yazidi and Arabic students in school (Hanrath, 2011). At the same time, Arabic refugees accuse some Kurdish refugees of "behaving as if [they were] better", because they

receive their residence permits and voluntary support from migrant self-organisations more quickly. Accordingly, awareness must be raised among teachers for dealing with these kinds of cases.

A further example of such conflicts are the experiences of refugees from Turkey. Since the failed coup in 2016, which the Turkish government holds followers of the preacher Fethullah Gulen responsible for, around 21,000 Turkish citizens have applied for asylum in Germany. Many of them report that people with a Turkish migration background insult them in public by calling them "traitors" or "supporters of terrorism". This happens, for example, at markets, around public events or in school. In reaction, some of those affected fall back on tactics of self-protection that they already used in their country of origin, e.g. isolating themselves from the outside world or concealing their own identity in public. This aggravates their settlement in Germany and participation in society.

These examples show that political developments in the contexts of origin of refugees and migrants influence coexistence in the wider German society. Conflict prevention, therefore, means not only the integration of refugees into a supposed German majority society, it must also get all parts of the population involved, meet them on equal terms and take their everyday experiences seriously.

Between political participation and identity formation: The role of migrant self-organisations

For many refugees in NRW, migrant self-organisations are important points of contact, due to shared experiences among their members and a common cultural background. These organisations offer orientation and support in day-to-day life, as well as practical

1 \ For example the Cologne Ombudsperson Service: <https://www.ombudsstelle.koeln/#>

2 \ The NRW Refugee Council provides several exemplary concepts: <https://www.frnw.de/themen-a-z/unterbringung-von-fluechtlingen/unterbringung-in-den-kommunen/kommunale-unterbringungskonzepte-und-standards.html>

solidarity. In some cases, refugees become politicised in the process. Thus, interviewees reported that refugees from a Kurdish background often develop a marked Kurdish self-image via the contact to people and organisations with a Kurdish connection in Germany. Representatives of Yazidi organisations gave similar reports of refugees who connect with Yazidi communities in Germany. An example to the contrary are those who have fled Turkey since 2016 as they do not show such a reinforcement of identity. A pronounced identification with ethnic or religious group identities therefore does happen, but not inevitably.

At the same time, within migrant communities that settled in Germany some time ago, debates arise around different political, cultural, and societal ideas. Thus, for example, those of the first and second Yazidi generation in Germany discuss the appropriate political representation of their communities within society and towards politics intensively, or how to live religious and societal values and traditions in the German context. It is likely that refugees will also take part in these debates, as many of them have a strong desire to participate in society and, through their presence in Germany, are changing the demographics of migrant communities already present. Processes of this sort are, however, not a sign that migrant communities have a stronger tendency towards conflict. On the contrary, they show that the democratic, pluralistic societal order in Germany works and allows debates on identity to take place, which are suppressed in the context of origin of the participants.

Migrant self-organisations can thus make a valuable contribution to the integration of refugees and to convey democratic values—also including the majority society. At the same time, however, they can promote a nationalism related to their countries of origin and play an ambivalent role in the conflicts in those countries. The state government and municipal administrations must, therefore, support the activities of these organisations while also probing their role within migrant communities and in the context of

origin. Furthermore, municipalities and the state government should involve migrant self-organisations in the development of their integration policies. This could happen, for example, through roundtables or advisory councils or through the joint development of integration concepts. This already happens in practice in many cases but municipalities are not required to do so.³ However, the creation of a communal integration concept can trigger fruitful discussions about the foundations and structure of co-existence at a local level and thereby make an important contribution to unveiling and working through conflicts. (Damm, 2019, pp. 5-6).

Conflict transformation instead of conflict importation: Making use of potentials

The statements from the interviewees show that conflicts among refugees and migrants are not merely a reproduction of conflicts in the country of origin. Conflicts change significantly due to the experience of migration and life in a new society. The circumstances under which refugees and migrants live in the place they settle, and how the host society treats them, also play an important role. This can become problematic if, as a result of socio-economic exclusion, discrimination and societal marginalisation, a vacuum is created which is then filled by nationalistic world views or ideas of exclusivity based on religion or ethnicity. Targeted interference from the context of origin can reinforce this process, such as is currently the case, for example, in some Turkish migrant communities in Germany. As a result, conflicts which display a strong semblance to events in the country of origin of those involved can arise. Research refers to this as conflict transportation (Feron, 2016). Integration policies can counteract such developments and help to transform conflicts into non-violent and democratic disputes. The aim should be a productive discussion on equal terms about co-existence in society.

3 \ The NRW Association of Towns and Districts has, however, recommended this (Städte- und Gemeindebund Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2016, p. 9).

FURTHER READING

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