



Refugee Open Cities



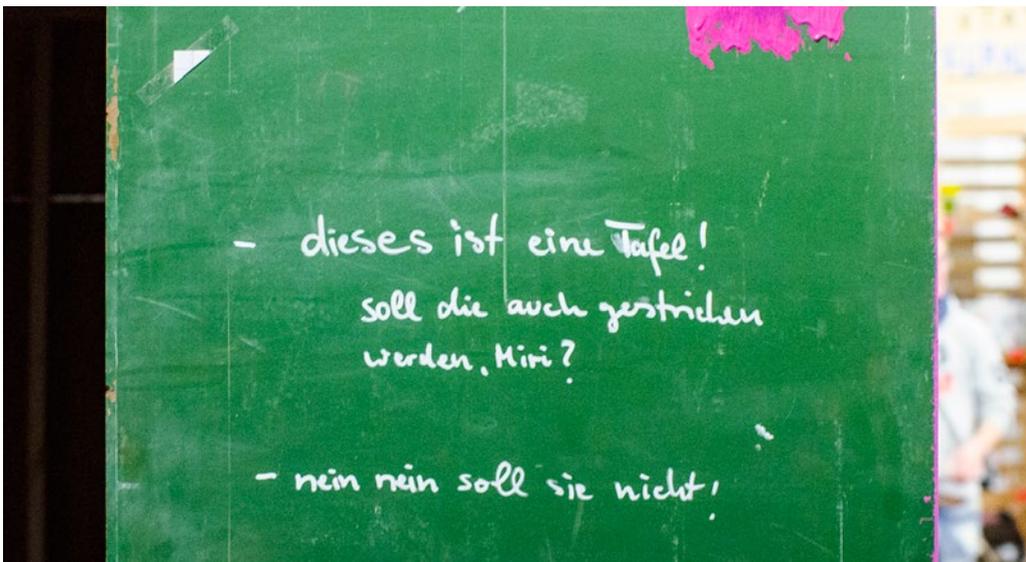
Refugee Open Cities

How can successful inclusion work out?

Five theses for German & European policymaking

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Smart Questioning Beats the Know-it-All

Problems instead of people: Even after years worth of experience, refugees are measured and taken care of in anonymous quantities. This results in one-size-fits-all solutions - the language course as the magic silver bullet. But instead of imposing integration we could use the time for open conversations: What prevents the newcomers from making progress? What are the individual strengths and weaknesses?

All well-intended offers only work if they make sense within an individual's biography. Otherwise refugee relief, just like outdated development aid, only throws its recipients into lethargy and smothers any attempt for self-development. There's only one solid way to achieve inclusion: First ask, then understand, and then connect the recipients with the various offers.



Construction First, Concerns Second

But bureaucracy has the last word - yet

Germany, home of thinkers and engineers. Everything works smoothly. However, this attitude does not allow for handling complex, even chaotic challenges like the current one. Therefore, effective inclusion needs less studies, norms and concerns and more experiments, prototypes and error tolerance. With that we would all get ahead faster. Could exchange experience and data. Go for agile iterations, neat evaluations, horizontal scalings.

This is why we built a village in an emergency shelter: Because a floor was empty and could be filled with meaning. Impossible but true. And in the end yet again impossible due to bureaucracy. This isn't going to work: We can't violate human rights on a large scale by leaving people in emergency shelters for two years, and then be picky with the norms when common sense is needed.



Inclusive Architecture and City Planning

The latest move: Out of the emergency shelters, and into the container villages! From the centre to the margins; out of sight, out of mind. But frustration and disappointment with the German state are moving too. The Canadian journalist Doug Sanders conducted worldwide research to find out what makes a cities an inclusive “arrival city”: Besides affordable rents and jobs it is mostly easy access to one’s own ethnic group. There, migrants find not only their own language, but also a stepping stone into the new society. If they find fragments of their old home within their new home, their own inclusion into the mainstream becomes far more likely.

Segregating refugees on the other hand is a tinderbox - instead we need more open spaces, cohousing projects where students, retirees and refugees can live in solidarity, and a social housing scheme that can buffer the artificial competition between poor Germans vs. migrants. None of this is new, as innovative yet time-tested concepts like the tiny-houses movement show. Now the state can embrace it by providing more allowing frameworks.



Informal Access to Jobs and Entrepreneurship

We met refugees who want to work but aren’t allowed to, who are able but not qualified. Here too we need new ways next to the worn-out chain syllogism of “learn German, acquire certification, write flawless applications”. This is why we developed the “I can do this” app, a system to certify manual skills, relying on peer-to-peer recommendation to supplement formal qualification. It also works for active retirees, welfare recipients and DIY-enthusiasts, and thus carries an egalitarian and inclusive potential. And it enables people to more easily move into an internship or an apprenticeship.

On top of that, in places with an anyway stressed job market like Berlin, we could learn a great deal from the local entrepreneurial culture. Which business models are successful in the Turkish community? What jobs are created by settled-down Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians? Which practices of a “misfit economy” (Alexa Clay) can we retrieve from the legal limbo and turn into a franchise for the many?



Double-crossing populism

Refugees and arabs, easterners and westerners - we're sliding back into a world of simple biases; nationalism and ostracism threaten the open European society. Neither politics nor the media are currently doing a good job in keeping populism at bay and recovering lost voters. This is why new inclusion must incorporate communication more profoundly.

Better access to jobs, housing, education (see above) for migrants must be granted to disadvantaged locals too. Filter bubbles must be popped, and surprising, maybe even artistic ways must be found to enable seemingly foreign people to meet and discover common fears and hopes. Policymakers that advocate innovations in inclusion must do so confidently and persistently, foreseeing right-wing attacks with arguments prepared to disarm them.

Conclusion

Tomorrow's inclusion is less about language, nations and qualifications, but seeks the potential within everyone who entered our country - no matter if born here or freshly arrived, no matter if employed westerners, self-employed easterners or academic arabs. The sum of all successful inclusion projects must weave into a coherent story of the people, and can ideally transform into a second, cultural reunion of our country.

