

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Due to the high numbers of arrivals of forced migrants in 2015, the challenges of refugee reception and integration have been discussed intensively on municipal and societal level in Germany since almost ten years. The national distribution system of refugees has rendered small towns and rural areas significantly more heterogenous in the last ten years. For many smaller municipalities, especially in the Eastern part of Germany, this implied considerable development regarding integration infrastructures and diversity management. In 2020, the COVID pandemic posed a serious threat to these developments and slowed down processes of integration and encounter. However, the overwhelming numbers of refugees from Ukraine in February 2022 as well as the strong increase of asylum seekers in 2023 show anew that refugee reception and integration is and will continue to be an important issue for local policy makers and administration. The research project Whole-COMM understands integration from a whole-of-community perspective and thus as an integral part of municipal development. Below, we present policy recommendations from empirical research in six case study localities in Germany.

Recommendations

- **Understanding integration as a beneficial long-term task for all community members**
 - Reception and integration measures are often set up in an ad-hoc way and in reaction to the arrival of migrants. Our research shows that in municipalities that understand integration as a long-term task, migrants' arrival processes work better and integration efforts hold benefits for all community members.
 - If integration is understood as a task that involves community members beyond migrants, it positively contributes to social cohesion. Integration as a whole-of-community process supports community members to critically reflect on stereotypes, to be open for encounter with each other and to develop visions for their community.
 - Long-term funding of integration contributes positively to social cohesion and local development. If designed and implemented carefully it supports the local economy as well as demographic and structural transformations of municipalities.

- **Understanding volunteers as real partners in local integration governance**



- Local policymakers and members of the administration should understand volunteers in refugee reception and integration as equal partners. Especially in small communities, volunteers carry out indispensable work and are key actors of the integration infrastructure. They have access to information, build dense networks and are familiar with pressing issues and challenges. It is therefore essential to not only acknowledge their engagement but also to include their expertise in local integration policymaking.

- **Efforts in the field of integration are active support for democracy**
 - Meaningful integration work targets migrants and long-term residents alike and supports both sides to cope with the fundamental changes they observe in their life and local communities. In this sense, holistic integration work contributes to counter populist and extremist attitudes.
 - Meaningful integration work that addresses all community members fosters respect for people with different attitudes and different backgrounds. It supports people to focus on similarities rather than differences and enables communities to bridge across differences.

- **Political commitment to migration as reality**
 - Germany is a country of immigration and, as a consequence, migration has become an undeniable reality, also in smaller municipalities. Local communities should understand their history of migration as a valuable part of the local identity. Political acknowledgement of migration as a fact is crucial to navigate the social transformation this implies and profit from the opportunities immigration brings.
 - Municipalities that take up migration as a productive issue and assign long-term resources to integration work have far better networks and support structures for migrants and long-term residents likewise. Local actors are then able to identify challenges, assess the benefits of migration and contribute to future development of their municipality.