

REFUGEE FAMILIES

Making family life possible, arriving in society

Central findings of expert forums

Introduction: The Bundesforum Familie

The "Bundesforum Familie" ("National Family Forum") is a network of organisations that are committed to continuous cooperation and a comprehensive dialogue supporting family concerns. Their common objective is to actively assume responsibility for a family-friendly society. The Bundesforum Familie's main activity is the facilitation of extensive discussion processes on fundamental topics concerning families. These discussions are organised at joint network events and in working groups that further develop particular topics more in depth. Usually, one broad theme is worked on for two years by incorporating the different perspectives of the network partners. In 2016 and 2017 the broad topic was "Refugee Families". In this paper we have documented the key findings of three expert forums:

1. "Access of refugee children and young adults to regular educational programmes"
2. "Young refugees and their families in child and youth welfare"
3. "Family reunification of refugees"

1. "Access of refugee children and young adults to regular educational programmes"

Creating heterogeneity in educational topics

All children in Germany must have access to high-quality education so that they can fully participate in society in the present and in the future. If this goal is really taken seriously and thought through to the end, then this naturally also includes children and young adults from refugee families. Inclusion also means that the children do not have to "adapt" to the educational institutions, but that the educational institutions must open up and be redesigned in such a way that all children, regardless of their background or characteristic traits, can participate in education. In this respect, the development and encouragement of a truly inclusive attitude, which of course also applies to refugees, must be a cornerstone of all efforts - with specialists and teachers, in the administration and with refugee as well as non-refugee children and parents, and ultimately within society as a whole.

In many organisations as well as at all levels of society, much is already being done to enable refugee children to access education as quickly, smoothly and successfully as possible. It is important to network the efforts of different stakeholders even more intensively and to learn from each other. Often the wheel does not have to be reinvented: There is already a great wealth of experience in many places regarding the educational participation of children having experienced migration and displacement, which must be recognised and applied. Existing structures and cooperation possibilities should be used more intensively and flexibly, thus further reducing the existing pillarization of support structures, offers and services which is problematic in the entire social sector.

In principle, even if targeted support measures may have to take place in some situations, refugee children should be included in regular offers as quickly as possible and not segregated into separate special classes and groups. With the process of inclusion of children with disabilities, society has explicitly set out to abolish special systems. They should not be rebuilt in the context of young people with a refugee background. It is also important to recognize and support the diverse resources of refugee children: in the context of flight and migration, too often children from families with

an affinity for education are made "educationally distant" by rigid institutions in Germany.

Reduce shortage of skilled workers, ensure qualification of skilled workers

In general, there is a shortage of skilled professionals in the field of education and training, as in the entire social sector. Additionally in many places there is also a lack of resources to hire additional skilled personnel, if such was available on the market. With the influx of refugee children into the education systems, this imbalance became even more pronounced: we need more skilled personnel because there are more children, and we also need more qualified personnel because they often are confronted with increasingly complex tasks. Intercultural competences and dealing with trauma, for example, are two aspects that are important in the context of refugee children (but not only there!)

A further, partly new challenge for teachers and specialists is certainly the tension between restrictive asylum policy and inclusive educational and social policy: the declared goals of providing all children with access to education and of establishing educational places as safe environments for all children are given new and glaring relevance in times when deportations are possible directly from the classrooms.

Optimal care from the start, development and quality of early childhood education

In early childhood education in particular, the intensive quantitative expansion of childcare that has begun some years ago must of course continue, so that all children – refugees or not – can enjoy their right to early childhood education. At the same time, however, a high level of quality must also be ensured, because only in this way early childhood education can really develop as a sustainable investment for the future. In this respect, significantly more resources must flow into the expansion of skilled labour so that the personnel needed for high-quality education for all children can also be made available across the board. Just as important are sensitivity and a lived appreciation for the languages refugees brought along with them, while at the same time supporting them in learning German as a lingua franca as quickly as possible.

Recognition and appreciation of civic engagement

The extraordinary contributions made in recent years by volunteers in support of refugees must be highly appreciated: they bear considerable testimony to our civil society. Not only important material and practical support was provided, but also valuable encounters between refugees and individuals took place in many areas: These personal contacts are an important step towards the sustainable inclusion of refugees in our society. Nevertheless: volunteers cannot and should not replace specialists in their fields. An intensive networking of specialists and volunteers is just as important as the professional coordination, support and supervision of volunteer structures.

Rapid inclusion for refugee children and young adults

The emergence of right-wing populist forces and the increasing division of our society, especially in asylum and immigration policy, worry many of us. We regard it as a core task of educational and social policy to enable refugee families to participate in society in a sustainable fashion by means of a rapid inclusion of refugee children and young adults in Germany's educational landscape - and by doing so, taking a step to restore social cohesion.

2. "Young refugees and their families in child and youth welfare"

Preliminary remark

Child and youth welfare is a fundamental support for all young people and their families in Germany. Accordingly, it is

necessary to secure the manifold access to services and offers and to create additional ones. The competence of the parents should in principle be promoted, recognized, valued, included and supported by the work of the child and youth welfare service. This also applies to the work with refugees. Parents generally want to educate their children well - the youth welfare service should give them space and opportunities to do so. Political efforts to partially exclude unaccompanied minor refugees from the youth welfare system and thus to create a "two-tier youth welfare system" are to be viewed very critically.

General remarks on the child and youth welfare system

In principle, the child and youth welfare system has been able to respond very well to the increased influx of refugee children and young adults to Germany and has done an excellent job for the most part. This is not least due to the personal commitment and creativity of many specialists and volunteers. Nevertheless, in many areas of the youth welfare system there have been persistent systematic problems and bottlenecks for years. These were neither caused nor triggered by the new challenges posed by the influx of refugee children and young adults, but have now become more evident. The challenge of having to support a significantly higher number of refugee children and young adults in sometimes qualitatively different situations in the short term therefore has quite positive consequences within the system despite the immediate problems: the system has been set in motion and encrusted structures have been broken up in many places. For example, new networks and approaches for action have been created in many places. These positive synergies must now be maintained, exploited and expanded.

Interfaces as important building sites

One of the most important challenges to ensure the successful social participation of all children and young adults is dealing with interfaces and transitions.

- Civil society initiatives and institutions can provide very informal and practical access to refugee families; here, professional youth welfare should be an option in order to provide further assistance when needed.
- Within youth welfare, the various service areas must be better linked to one another
- Youth welfare as a whole should be better integrated with other areas of young people's lives (e.g. education, health, housing, etc.).
- In addition, the transitions between the age and life stages of children and young adults must also be improved. For unaccompanied underage refugees, for example, the 18th birthday often represents a significant and dramatic break in support opportunities and access to child and youth welfare, as well as the prospects of remaining in country.

Professionals: The basis of child and youth welfare

The considerable shortage of skilled labour in social work in general and in youth welfare in particular is not due to the influx of refugees in recent years. However, the influx makes such shortage particularly visible and its consequences all the greater. One reason for the shortage is the high turnover of skilled personnel. It is also particularly strong among skilled personnel with qualifications and competences in the field of migration and flight. The shortage of skilled labour is currently the biggest obstacle to successful youth welfare in Germany. To this extent, overcoming this shortage is also the most important parameter for youth welfare in the coming years: The best laws, structures, financing and efforts will not achieve their goals if there are no or too few specialists who can provide the services of child and youth welfare.

Central connecting factors for this are:

- Working towards increased recognition and appreciation of specialists in child and youth welfare. They must be given the necessary security and substantive support for their work.
- Improving the remuneration of skilled social workers
- Developing and simplifying access to qualifications and guidance (training and supervision)
- Improving working conditions, e.g. by increasing staff numbers, shorter shifts, permanent contracts

Volunteers and semi-professional staff: A valuable addition, no replacement

Volunteers cannot and should not replace skilled personnel, but they can make important additions to the work with refugee children and young adults and their families, as their support can have a very different quality than that of professionals and they can open up completely new spaces of experience. This has been particularly evident in supporting the welcome culture at the height of the arrival of refugee families. At the same time, volunteer work in this area must also be supported intensively, e.g. through coordination, advice and support. Semi-professional staff (e.g. parents' companions, "district mothers" [often having a migration background of their own and acting as multipliers and a support system for refugee mothers], "backpack mothers" [also often coming from a migration background, these mothers teach German to other refugee mothers], centres for mothers) also do very important work and must be advised and accompanied. Such semi-professionals should be promoted in such a way that further training as a specialist is made possible, including recognition of the acquired competences where possible. Financial resources, investments in child and youth welfare are important investments for the future. This applies not only, but of course also to the work with young refugees and their families. In view of the increased influx of refugees, additional investments have been made in the youth welfare system in recent years. In previous years, however, the funds available had declined, so that an overall compensation regarding the status quo ante had been achieved. In this respect it must now be ensured that at least the current status is maintained in order to be able to continue to secure the participation of all children and young adults in Germany. This also applies when the immediate topicality of the subject of refugees declines.

Problem of project funding: Project funding can be important for innovations in social work. However, projects are not permanent solutions. The aim here is to create long-term transitions to ensure the continuity of measures. The sharp increase in project-based financing in child and youth welfare leads to great uncertainty among employees (and young people), ties up scarce resources of the experts in the project organisation and hardly permits solid evaluations, since potential project-based follow-up financing in turn depends on positive evaluations. The diversity of society also requires the provision of resources for subject-specific and culturally sensitive language mediators/interpreters, including plain language and sign language.

3. "Family reunification of refugees"

Enabling family reunification

Enabling family reunification is first and foremost a human and constitutional imperative. International human rights treaties as well as Article 6 of the German Constitution place marriage and family under special protection - this naturally also applies to refugees staying in Germany. The value of the family as a unit should be actively lived and must apply to all.

Sharpening the holistic view on family

Individual refugees must be perceived as part of a family system, even if the family may not be in one place at times - this also applies to Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (UMR). At the same time, the well-being of the family plays an important role for the inclusion and participation of all its members (see 6. German Family Report) and family reunification is thus an interdisciplinary topic. Having one's own family safe and at home is an essential prerequisite for arriving in Germany and participating in society.

Extension of the family concept: In principle, in Germany only the so-called "nuclear family" of recognised refugees (i.e. spouses / registered partners and minor children as well as parents of minors) has a right to come to Germany via family reunification. Other family members (e.g. underage siblings of UMRs) can only join them in cases of absolute hardship, and it is known from practice that this is handled quite restrictively by the authorities. This narrow family concept usually does not correspond to the family obligations and realities of refugees in practice ("de facto family") - nor does it correspond to the variety of families forms that are now lived and desired in Germany. In this respect, the flexible and extended concept of the family, which dominates family policy in Germany, stands in stark contrast to the rigid and narrow concept of the "nuclear family", which applies to residence law. Especially in the context of war, flight and displacement, this regulation can present families with insurmountable difficulties if, for example, young children of age or parents in need of care are categorically denied reunification.

Enabling family reunification again also for persons with subsidiary protection status

The complete suspension of family reunification for persons with subsidiary protection status for (initially) two years, which was introduced in March 2016 with the so-called Asylum Package II, is highly problematic. This is exacerbated by the fact that at the same time the granting of subsidiary protection status has increased enormously in cases where a higher level of protection had previously been granted. While at the beginning of 2016 less than 1% of Syrian asylum seekers were classified as eligible for subsidiary protection, the quota rose to 70% in August 2016 in a very short time after the entry into force of the Asylum Package II (annual average 2016: just under 65%). This policy sends the wrong signals to the remaining family members in crisis regions to set themselves on the dangerous path - which can end in death for them in the worst case (see Hajder case). The fact that in the political debate about the suspension of family reunification in the Asylum Package II Article 22 AufenthG [Resident Act] was cited as a possible alternative for family members joining in hardship cases is also very problematic - practice has shown that Article 22 hardly applies to family members who are affected by the suspension. There is therefore a complete lack of adequate regulation for cases of hardship.

Eliminating practical hurdles

Even those refugees who are entitled to family reunification because they are recognised and have been granted asylum are often faced with enormous practical obstacles that significantly delay the entry of their family members or, in the worst case, completely prevent them from entering the country. These obstacles in the process of family reunification must be removed with urgency. Both in Germany and especially in the German missions abroad, there is a real backlog of authorities. All family members, including children, must present themselves personally for visas in regard to family reunification, which is often associated with dangerous and arduous journeys for the applicants, especially in crisis areas. In many places there are extremely long waiting times for appointments (sometimes up to 14 months, especially in the representations in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey), and in some cases non-transparent appointment arrangement systems prevail. Another obstacle in many cases is the strict handling of documents to be

provided, which are often not available or difficult to obtain, especially in the context of flight and persecution. Even if all documents are available, their authenticity can be questioned by the German authorities, which often leads to lengthy and costly "legalisations". All this is at the expense of the families, some of whom do not even see each other for years because of it. Even family reunification within Germany often fails due to bureaucratic requirements. In the case of unaccompanied minors, the lengthy process poses an aggravated problem, as they often become of age in the course of the process and thus completely lose their entitlement to parental reunification. The insufficient cooperation of the various competent authorities and stakeholders at home and abroad is another problem. An immediate simplification and improvement of the bureaucratic processes, e.g. by making it possible to submit an application without personal consultation, in favour of speedy family reunification, is absolutely necessary. Also, only within a three-month period after recognition of the asylum or refugee status is there an entitlement to bring family members to Germany without proof that one's livelihood is secured or that housing is in place. Once this period has elapsed, it will be at the discretion of the authority to demand both. In many cases, this makes family reunification impossible. The abolition of this deadline would be welcomed in the interests of refugees and their family members.

Interdepartmental thinking and strengthening the family policy perspective

There is a strong tension between (restrictive) asylum policy and (supportive) family policy. Family policy stakeholders (government, administration and civil society) are in demand in the current context of the restriction of family reunification: a more self-confident advocacy for families towards representatives of domestic/security policy is urgently needed. Overall, there should be more space for interdepartmental communication and cooperation between the various stakeholders in the field of family reunification of refugees - the corresponding working group of the German Association for Public and Private Welfare (Deutscher Verein) can be cited as a good example. The work of this working group has now resulted in the creation of guidelines. Equally desirable are training courses on family reunification for all professionals working with refugees in authorities, counselling centres or youth welfare support systems, so that a higher level of expertise is created and families are not separated longer than necessary by ignorance or false information. At the same time, much more research is needed on the quantity, quality and processes of family reunification and family and flight in general - research on the 6th Family Report dealing with families with a migration background in Germany, is now almost 20 years old and should be updated in terms of content.

Ensuring support for all family members

It is important to understand family reunification as a process that generates different support needs in the different phases of the process - which may well differ within the family. Accordingly, broad access should be provided to a wide range of counselling and support services for the various members of the family. The pressure to succeed and the burden on the first family member to enter should also be taken into account, as this member often bears the main responsibility for family reunification - especially if this is a minor. At the same time, the potential "downsides" of family in the context of family reunification of fugitives should not be lost sight of. The individual rights of all family members must always be protected and it must also be possible to actively live them by means of shelters and counselling services. For example, all family members should be able to acquire an independent residence permit (independent of the reference person in Germany) as quickly as possible in order to prevent dependencies within the family.