



The refugee challenge:
Why community foundations are in a
unique position to support refugees and
their communities

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Published June 2017



CENTER ON PHILANTHROPY
AND CIVIL SOCIETY

**THE
GRADUATE
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CITY UNIVERSITY
OF NEW YORK

This paper was prepared for the International Fellows Program (IFP) alumni conference held in Milan, Italy, from October 13-15, 2016. Participating IFP alumni were asked to rethink or build upon research they had undertaken as Fellows or to reflect on more current trends in the field.

Abstract: Wars, conflict and persecution are forcing more people than ever to seek refuge outside their home countries. This paper argues that community foundations are in a unique position to enable refugees to take part in their new community. Drawing on empirical research and case studies from Germany, it shows ten typical activities they employ, including supporting volunteer initiatives or establishing field-of-interest funds to make small grants. The paper explores how community foundations use their roles as community leader, grantmaker and vehicle of philanthropy to empower others and leverage resources from donors, volunteers, non-profit organizations, corporations and authorities. Community foundations can contribute decisively to building inclusive societies and transforming strangers into neighbors - by creating meeting and learning opportunities for newcomers and locals, facilitating personal relationships, integrating refugees in social and cultural life, but also identifying their assets and seeing what talents the newcomers can bring to the community.

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The refugee challenge – Why community foundations are in a unique position to support refugees and their communities

1. Introduction

Wars, conflict, and persecution are forcing more people than ever to flee their homes. Sixty-five million men, women, and children worldwide are currently forcibly displaced, many seeking refuge outside their home countries.¹ Due to wars, conflicts, failing states, and economic disparity, migration will remain one of the most pressing problems in the years to come. It poses new challenges to the countries and societies taking in refugees. Many European countries are providing shelter, leading to a new surge of civic engagement and support. At the same time, xenophobia and populist parties gain momentum in many parts of Europe, as the recent referendum in Hungary on the EU's refugee quotas exemplified.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman dissects this xenophobia (Bauman 2016). He argues that in contrast to immigration, which individual governments can manage and control through legislation, migration is like a force of nature, which cannot be controlled. Consequently, many people feel threatened by migrants who come to symbolize the loss of order and remind us how fragile our prosperity is. The “horror of global forces” thus becomes tangible and visible in our neighborhood. Bauman argues that in modern communities, where physical and social proximity are not synonymous anymore, strangers have to become neighbors if integration and inclusion are to be successful. The challenge of transforming strangers into neighbors plays out on the community level.

Community foundations are on the ground in many parts of Europe, including migrant entry or transit regions as well as their main points of destination (Kilmurray 2015). One of the major destination countries for refugees is Germany, which has 400 community foundations in place. Here, the challenges caused by the huge humanitarian inflow become visible, as do possible solutions community philanthropy can offer.

Therefore, this paper will draw on data and case studies from Germany to explore how community foundations can address the challenge of migration. Community foundations are long-term institutions that foster a culture of giving, volunteering, and civic engagement. They take on three important core functions: First, as grantmakers, they are long-term funders that can address changing local needs and their broad-based charitable purposes, giving them flexibility. Second, as community leaders and catalysts, they can foster civic engagement, bring diverse voices and groups together, and match those in need of support with those who are willing to give their money, knowledge, or time. Third, as vehicles for local philanthropy, they are able to engage donors in this process, thus leveraging resources for more impact.²

How can community foundations support refugees, connect them to their neighbors, and help build inclusive communities? How can they use their specific roles as community leaders, grantmakers, and vehicles for philanthropy in that process? How do they engage their local

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² These three roles are as defined by Dorothy Reynolds in “The Balancing Act” (2008).

communities? This paper will explore the principle of leveraging financial and non-monetary resources from local authorities, non-profit organizations, corporations, individual donors, and volunteers.

Of course, community foundations are only one player among others; most community foundations in Germany are still young and small, and their financial opportunities are limited. However, this paper argues that community foundations are in a unique position to help refugees and locals take part in their new community and transform strangers into neighbors.

2. Challenges and opportunities: Awakening of civil society and xenophobia

Germany has taken in more than one million refugees in 2015 alone (1.23% of its population), more than any other country in Europe.³ When many of the members of the European Union refused to take in their share, Germany took the opposite track. Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country to refugees in August 2015, famously stating: “Germany is a strong country. We have handled so much. We can handle this.”

Many German cities and counties were not prepared for this historic humanitarian inflow and are still struggling with welcoming thousands of refugees, providing housing, health care, education, and other services, let alone integrating them. Anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise, as is the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) (MPI 2016). More than 1,000 xenophobic offenses on refugee accommodations were recorded nationwide in 2015 alone, ranging from graffiti to arson attacks; five times more than in 2014 (Diehl 2016).

At the same time, the “welcoming summer” of 2015 saw the awakening of a vibrant and active civil society in support of refugees (Ziebarth 2016: 32). Many nonprofit organizations, among them community foundations, and countless volunteers have stepped in where the authorities are too slow or overstrained. Civil society organizations and hundreds of new volunteer initiatives have supported state and local authorities in providing short-term help to the newcomers. Now, the focus is more on their long-term integration and on perpetuating the structures that support them (Maecenata 2016).

Helping their communities to take in an often unprecedented number of displaced men, women, and (sometimes unaccompanied) children as well as supporting the refugees has fast become one of the major challenges for community foundations in Germany. Out of 400 German community foundations, 210 (53%) have been active in this field in the last two years, as the first empirical study by Aktive Bürgerschaft shows (Aktive Bürgerschaft 2016). Ten activities are typical of community foundations:⁴

³ <https://de.statista.com>. Only with regard to the European Union; Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan take in the highest percentage of refugees.

⁴ The “10 typical activities” have been developed by Aktive Bürgerschaft based on empirical research of all 400 community foundations in Germany.

- Establishing field-of-interest-funds for the support of refugees
- Fundraising activities
- Making the support of refugees a priority
- Supporting and honoring volunteers
- Initiating networks of local stakeholders
- Expanding well-established programs
- Providing practical help and orientation
- Creating meeting opportunities for newcomers and locals
- Fostering better understanding of the situation of refugees
- Taking a public stand for diversity and integration

The role of each community foundation and the scope of its activities vary from supporting one specific project to being a central community leader. One-fifth of German community foundations have made the support of refugees a priority issue. Many activities aim at empowering refugees; in one-sixth of CF activities, refugees have been engaged as volunteers themselves (ibid).

3. The added value: How community foundations use their roles as grantmaker, community leader, and vehicle for local philanthropy

Although their model is more than 100 years old, community foundations have proved to be well-equipped to respond to the new refugee challenge, not only in Germany. They have been quick to take action, with their “ear to the ground,” picking up local sensitivities and opportunities (Kilmurray 2015). Most German community foundations are still young and not as well-endowed as their North American counterparts. Their strengths lie in their know-how and experience in working with volunteers, their community leadership, and their versatility. Their income largely comes from donations and unrestricted funds, allowing the board the discretion to make grants to address the most urgent needs locally.

The following examples and case studies show how community foundations use their roles as grantmakers, community leaders, and vehicles of philanthropy to develop solutions to the current refugee challenge. There is a saying that if you have seen one community foundation, you have seen one community foundation, meaning that each foundation is unique and reflects the community it serves. All communities are different: affluent or poor, urban or rural, more or less experienced in integrating migrants, etc. Although each foundation tailors its approaches to its specific community, the methods and measures utilized can often be adapted to align with other community foundations’ strategies.

3.1 Grantmaker: Addressing local needs and opportunities

Unlike in many other countries, German community foundations not only make grants, but also operate their own programs, often with the help of volunteers. They give away about half of their annual disbursement as grants, and use the other half for their own programs (Hellmann 2011). Accordingly, community foundations respond to the refugee challenge in their grantmaking by developing new programs and expanding well-established existing ones (Aktive Bürgerschaft 2016). They often focus on fields which are prerequisites for successful integration, such as language acquisition and job training. Another emphasis is on establishing connections between newcomers and their local neighbors, e.g. through mentoring programs.

Language acquisition: Experts, as well as refugees themselves, emphasize the relevance of language skills as a precondition for social, cultural, and structural integration (Bosch 2016). As many refugees are waiting for their official approval for months or even years, they don't have access to services like publicly funded language and integration courses. Also, there is a shortfall of about 200,000 slots in existing public programs. Consequently, many community foundations focus on funding language courses. For example, the community foundation in Gütersloh funds German classes for mothers while simultaneously providing childcare. The one in Berlin supports the language development of refugee children and their parents with its signature program "Bilingual Picture Book Cinema" in which picture books are projected on a whiteboard and bilingual volunteers read them in German, Arabic, Farsi, and other languages.

Access to jobs: The employment rate of refugees is low and studies indicate their jobs are often poorly paid (Bosch 2016). In order to help young refugees become self-sufficient and get a good education, one community foundation has partnered with local companies. They provide combined language training and internships for a group of young adults, followed by vocational education. Others connect job seekers with companies via an online job portal, provide volunteer job mentors, or advocate at professional associations and chambers of commerce for the recognition of the refugees' existing professional qualifications.

Programs creating meeting opportunities: Studies show that creating opportunities for refugees and locals to meet and interact is key for successful integration. Less than half of Germans have been in direct contact with refugees. Those Germans who have established personal relationships have a more optimistic outlook; positive experiences and perceptions prevail (EKD 2016). Whether newcomers and locals get to know each other is related to whether there is a structure in place which provides meeting opportunities (Bosch 2016: 6). Community foundations often provide this structure and facilitate direct contacts. Activities include a choir, intercultural festivals, concerts, workshops, potlucks, and brunches.

To establish personal relationships many community foundations create one-to-one mentoring or partnerships between a local and a refugee. "Max goes to the opera," for example, is a mentoring program of the community foundation in Halle, matching volunteer mentors with elementary school children from Halle and from families who have fled Syria or Afghanistan. While visiting museums, puppet shows or concerts, the children establish relationships with their individual mentors and with other children. The community foundation's learnings will be evaluated and its know-how shared with others nationwide.

Long-term tolerance and violence prevention: Long before the current refugee inflow, community foundations have established programs that are geared towards fostering a more tolerant, nonviolent, and inclusive society. One among many is that in Heilbronn, which has initiated a coalition of all local kindergartens and schools, ensuring that all children – locals and newcomers alike – receive ongoing training in social competence and peaceful conflict resolution.

Other community foundations have a long-term focus on fostering civic engagement and strengthening democracy, especially in Eastern Germany where the democratic and philanthropic traditions were disrupted by the Nazi and socialist regimes. In some regions, right-wing extremists and parties are gaining ground, increasingly recruiting youths. The community foundation Barnim Uckermark, for example, initiated several projects to educate children and youths about their democratic rights and diversity as well as enable them to implement their own ideas, e.g. with youth-to-youth grantmaking. The foundation also honors outstanding achievements for democracy and tolerance with an award.

3.2 Vehicle for local philanthropy: Raising funds and partnering with donors

Many community foundations have raised funds for the support of refugees either through fundraisers or by establishing field-of-interest funds. Some use their role as a vehicle for local philanthropy to engage and partner with their donors to create added value for the community. Accordingly, they use their networks, expertise, and experience in helping donors to support refugees effectively. This strategy can be a powerful way of leveraging resources.

Leveraging resources and impact by partnering with donors

When the Bürgerstiftung Hannover decided to partner with its donors, it hosted a networking event to discuss local impacts of the refugee inflow, its activities, and how the donors could get involved. Now, three of its donor-advised funds support literacy programs and language courses for migrants.

The community foundation in Berlin trains its donors and helps them to develop programs which make an impact. A well-known soccer star sat in on one of the community foundation's programs to learn more about poverty, migration, and asylum before he established a fund that brings together refugee children and their local peers.⁵ Meeting opportunities between children are often limited, as refugee children are schooled in so-called "welcome classes" to prepare them for regular classes in schools. An Afghan-born donor created a fund which trains bilingual and bicultural "culture coaches" to help families navigate their way in the new society.

The community foundation also held its 2015 art dinner and auction in a former airport terminal building right before it was rededicated to provide provisional housing for thousands of refugees. More than €230,000 was raised to provide language training for refugee children.

⁵ <http://arne-friedrich-stiftung.de/de/stiftung/>

Impact investing for social change

The Community Foundation Pfalz has helped a couple to initiate the donor-advised fund “Willkommen in Deutschland” (Welcome to Germany), which provides housing for refugees and tackles segregation.⁶ Due to the huge inflow of refugees, not enough housing exists to accommodate all, so in many places trailers, school gyms, or hotels have been turned into provisional housing. The living quarters are often not only crowded, they also isolate refugees from the surrounding community.

The fund is a simple and efficient model of impact investment, which provides housing and simultaneously fosters integration and language acquisition. It invests its endowment in real estate. Currently the foundation owns three houses. The apartments are rented out to officially approved refugees whose rent is provided by public authorities. The rental income is then used to fund language training and other support. Living in integrated neighborhoods makes it easier for the refugees to establish relationships with their German neighbors. One of the houses hosts a meeting room which is used for trainings and as a gathering place for migrants and locals. Construction of the houses has also been a stepping stone into the labor market: an Eritrean woman interned at one of the electric companies involved in the renovation of the houses and will soon start vocational training there.

For the community foundation, support of refugees also helps to counter other challenges Pfalz is facing. This rural, agricultural area has not been able to profit from Germany’s strong economy; its per-capita-income is below average. The region is deeply affected by demographic change; with an aging and declining population, villages are shrinking.⁷ A study has shown that “building vacancies are a sign of decline and reduce the value of neighboring properties” (Berlin Institut 2011: 47). Therefore, “Welcome to Germany” also serves the community foundation’s larger strategic goal to foster sustainable regional development, to revitalize villages and reduce demographic change.

Establishing field-of-interest funds to make small, flexible grants

Many community foundations have created flow-through field-of-interest funds to provide small, flexible, and quick grants where public funding or services are not available. They raise money and leverage their resources by reaching out to other foundations, corporations, or private donors. In some cases, the fund is the central pooled donations account in their city or region.

When the refugee situation in Hamburg became more urgent in spring 2015, 21 funders under the leadership of the BürgerStiftung Hamburg initiated the fund “refugees and civic engagement.” By then, more than 20,000 refugees lived in Hamburg, but that number would double by the end of the year.⁸ More than 2,000 volunteers were active in a number of initiatives

⁶ <http://wid-stiftung.de>

⁷ www.statistik.rlp.de

⁸ <http://www.hamburg.de/fluechtlinge-daten-fakten>

to help them. The fund provides flexible and non-bureaucratic support for these initiatives. Local initiatives and volunteers can apply for grants of up to €1,000, and decisions are made within two weeks.⁹ So far 160 projects have received funding, including materials for German language classes, transportation costs for a trauma recovery program for children, and an initiative that enables young refugees to complete a voluntary year of social service. Other community foundations have followed suit, thus providing reliable support that enables volunteers to do their work better.

Using the community foundation network to distribute nationwide funds

In addition to local funds, support organizations of community foundations in several other countries have started to raise funds nationwide to support the efforts of local communities in helping refugees. They partner with community foundations to distribute the funding where it is most needed.

When Canada's government committed to welcome 25,000 refugees from Syria and called on corporations to contribute to the effort, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) responded. By January 2016, it had established the "Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees" to steward approximately \$5.5 million in contributions from the corporate sector.¹⁰ The fund addresses immediate needs for transitional housing, job training and skills development. It will support communities across Canada through the network of 191 community foundations, many of which have established designated funds for Syrian refugees.

A similar fund was installed by UK Community Foundations, together with other partners, in February 2016. The £525,000 "New Beginnings Fund" is to support frontline organizations and community groups by giving modest, short-term grants via the community foundation network.¹¹ In July 2016, the German Community Foundation Initiative also announced a fund to which 26 funders contributed a total of €500,000.

3.3 Community leader: Convening, advocacy and fostering civil society

Community foundations are accustomed to working with numerous stakeholders, so they are naturally collaborative in their long-term approaches to the refugee challenge (EFC 2016). In Germany, community foundations focus strongly on their leadership role. This emphasis might be due to the fact that they can build on a strong tradition of civic engagement and a vital landscape of nonprofit organizations. Other than in Anglo-Saxon countries, however, there isn't a strong cohesion and common identity as civil society. Community foundations can play a vital role in shaping that identity and fostering collaborations.

One approach is to connect the different institutions supporting refugees so they can exchange knowledge, better coordinate their activities, create synergies, and identify what is needed.

⁹ http://www.buergerstiftung-hamburg.de/fonds_fluechtlinge_ehrenamt/

¹⁰ <http://communityfoundations.ca/category/belonging/welcome-fund-for-syrian-refugees>

¹¹ http://ukcommunityfoundations.org/programmes/new_beginnings

Other approaches are to foster civic engagement, empower volunteers and the refugees themselves, promote understanding, or take a public stand against xenophobia (Aktive Bürgerschaft 2016).

Empowering refugees and the community

Since it was founded in 2006, the Community Foundation Wiesloch has been working with a method it calls “fostering civil society.” The foundation identifies a community challenge and makes it a funding priority for several years. Then it convenes volunteers, donors, nonprofits, companies, or local authorities competent or interested in this field to develop a solution. Serving as an incubator, it often creates a new initiative and equips it to become self-sustaining. What started as a means for the young community foundation to learn about the needs and stakeholders of its community has become an efficient way of dealing with new challenges.

When news came out that the first refugees would be arriving soon in Wiesloch, a city of 25,000, the community foundation and the municipality proactively established an “asylum network,” to which nonprofit organizations in charge of refugee accommodations, language and integration classes, churches, etc., were invited. To prevent prejudice, locals were invited to an open house in the newly established refugee center. Now, a strong network with 300 volunteers is in place to support the 530 refugees. The network builds community between long-term residents and newcomers with events like hikes, game evenings or shared volunteer activities.

To promote tolerance and foster a deeper understanding of the situation refugees are in, Wiesloch hosts public events, e.g. trainings on intercultural competency or lectures. One about the civil war in Syria ended with refugees talking about their personal experiences. The inclusion and empowerment of refugees is at the heart of other projects, too. A drama group of local high school students and young refugees developed a play about youth fleeing their home countries, weaving in their personal stories about finding shelter, their hopes, traumas, and relationships with Germans. With the support of professional translators, refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, and Eritrea translated a basic German language workbook into their native languages and helped 50,000 users nationwide who downloaded the workbook.¹² Thus, the community foundation and its partners educate the public about the situation of refugees while at the same time giving the refugees a voice and encouraging empathy.

Supporting and honoring volunteers

Community foundations in Germany were quick to recognize that in order to perpetuate civic engagement the volunteers themselves need help and encouragement. Therefore, supporting and strengthening the volunteers who work with refugees is at the core of many activities. Community foundations offer funding, networking, capacity building or give awards for tolerance or outstanding civic engagement. Some also reach out to refugees and migrants as volunteers.

¹² <https://netzwerkasylwiesloch.wordpress.com/2016/01/21/fluechtlinge-aus-wiesloch-uebersetzen-deutschlernheft/#more-436>

Recent research attests that volunteer work not only offers important practical and humanitarian support, but catalyzes integration threefold. The personal relationships between volunteers and refugees help 1) Foster the social and emotional integration of refugees; 2) Overcome social and spatial segregation between locals and newcomers; and 3) Empower volunteers to become strong advocates of refugees and to counter rightwing or xenophobic tendencies (Han-Broich 2016). Therefore, fostering voluntary engagement can make an important contribution to building inclusive societies.

The Stuttgart Community Foundation had heard from several volunteers that they were overstrained by working with often traumatized refugees. To find out what kind of support they needed, the Stuttgart community foundation organized a roundtable as an instrument of leadership and needs assessment. The community foundation's role was to be a neutral moderator of the process and to guarantee funding of the proposed solution. The institutions and volunteer initiatives at the roundtable quickly identified a void in the coordination, support, and training of volunteers. They decided to provide funding for workshops and volunteer initiatives and hire a coordinator who organizes citywide volunteer trainings. The community foundation joined forces with five foundations to secure funding for a three-year period. Former refugees who have been through the asylum process themselves are included as interpreters and offer workshops for volunteers.

The Community Foundation Barnim Uckermark runs a volunteer agency which hired a Kenyan migrant as volunteer coordinator. His first task was to reach out to refugees and identify their needs. He now matches refugees with volunteers, organizes training opportunities for volunteers, and helps migrants who want to give back to society by volunteering themselves. The website helpto.de connects locals and newcomers with offers like: "Syrian heating installers are seeking a volunteer job mentor" or "Introduction to Arabic cuisine in return for bike-riding lessons." That way, many informal bonds between newcomers and locals come into being.

One-sixth of all community foundation activity gives migrants the opportunity to volunteer and to use their know-how, talents, and experiences for the public good (Polterauer and Biedermann 2016). Changing the role of refugees from beneficiaries to active players who make a valuable contribution not only changes their self-perceptions, but also those of the receiving society.

Advocacy: Taking a stand against xenophobia and for tolerance

Community foundations have employed various means to take a public stand against xenophobic and populist tendencies and show the benefits of migration for their communities. They host public discussions, lectures, and events, write open letters, or organize and form alliances for tolerance and democracy and against violence.

For example, the Karlsruhe community foundation addressed a letter to its community referring to a 300-year-old charter, which encouraged newcomers to settle in the newly-founded town. The letter formulates rules that hold public authorities, residents, and newcomers accountable

for a culture of welcome, tolerance and integration. More than 2,400 people have signed the letter, which has been translated into seven languages.¹³

4. Conclusion: Building community and a more inclusive society

Many communities, in Germany and elsewhere, are struggling to take in an unprecedented number of displaced women, men, and children. Successful integration requires major efforts from everyone involved – local authorities and institutions, civil society, corporations and individuals, locals as well as refugees.

Community foundations make a valuable contribution. As place-based organizations, they know the needs and assets of the community they serve. They can convene those who have time, money, talents or know-how to create solutions to challenges the humanitarian inflow has brought. Using their roles as community leader, grantmaker, and vehicle for local philanthropy, community foundations foster collaboration and leverage financial and non-monetary resources from donors, volunteers, non-profit organizations, and other stakeholders to increase impact. They can also identify newcomers' assets and see what talents and experiences they bring to the community.

Empowering others is at the heart of many activities. Community foundations give crucial support to countless volunteer initiatives, encouraging and honoring them, strengthening their networks, providing funding and building capacity. Their deep local knowledge enables community foundations to help refugees take part in their new community and educate and open up the host society.

Community foundations are in a unique position to connect newcomers and locals as fellow community members. By facilitating personal relationships and creating meeting and learning opportunities for all, they can help integrate refugees in social and cultural life and overcome segregation. In order to foster understanding, they give newcomers a voice and present them with opportunities to tell their personal story. Thus, community foundations can contribute decisively to transforming strangers into neighbors and building a more inclusive, tolerant community.

¹³ English version can be downloaded here: <http://buergerbrief.buergerstiftung-karlsruhe.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Buergerbrief-english.pdf>

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