



Inter-religious regional conference to protect the rights of children affected by migration

Promising Practice Case Study #3: Central Council of Muslims, Germany

1. The Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD)’s work with children and youth on the move in Germany

Founded in 1994, the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD)¹ is one of the most important Muslim organizations in the country. Its “Islamic Charta”²—Fundamental Declaration on the Relationship between Muslims, their State and their Society—states that ZMD:

*Deplores the violation of human rights wherever and whenever this occurs. Thus, it is a partner in the fight against religious discrimination, xenophobia, racism, sexism, and violence [and that it] promotes an integration into society of the Muslim population, which will not be detrimental to their Islamic identity. Therefore it supports all efforts for a better minority command of the German language and for better access to German citizenship.*³

ZMD has been supporting refugees and unaccompanied children in particular, through a range of initiatives since 2015, including providing accommodation, counselling and spiritual support, translation services and German classes.⁴ It also advocates for the rights of children on the move by calling for the German government to accept unaccompanied minors after the fires in the Moria camp in Greece.⁵ Moreover, ZMD is engaged in several interfaith initiatives, for instance, through the program *Weißt du, wer ich bin?* (Do you know who I am?),⁶ a collaboration with the Council of Christian Churches in Germany and the Central Council of Jews in Germany.

¹ Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), <http://www.zentralrat.de/>

² Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), “Islamic Charta,” available at <http://www.zentralrat.de/3037.php>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.zentralrat.de/fluechtlinge>

⁵ Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), “Germany must now accept people from Moria for the sake of human dignity,” available at <http://www.zentralrat.de/32590.php>

⁶ “Weißt du, wer ich bin?” <http://www.weisstduwerichbin.de/>

In 2016, ZMD was selected as one of 29 civil society organizations to implement the federal program, Menschen Stärken Menschen (People strengthen people).⁷ Sponsored by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, Menschen Stärken Menschen is a mentoring program for migrants and refugees. ZMD then launched its Wir Sind Paten (We are mentors)⁸ program within this framework and opened a subsidiary organization, Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH (Social Services and Youth Welfare),⁸ to implement it in ten German cities. Wir Sind Paten is the main focus of this case study.

2. The context: Children and youth on the move in Germany

Germany saw the arrival of 476,620 asylum seekers in 2015, out of which 22, 255 were unaccompanied minors.⁹ In 2016, out of the 745,545 asylum seekers who arrived in the country, 35,939 were unaccompanied minors.¹⁰ Between January-October 2020, asylum applications in Germany was close to 100,000, around half of which are children and youth under the age of 18 and 77% under the age of 30.¹¹ Syria remains the most common country of origin among asylum seekers and refugees in Germany, followed by Afghanistan and Iraq.¹² Germany is also the destination country of several migratory movements within Europe and beyond. In 2019, a total of 1,127,984 people arrived from Romania (16.7%), Poland (9%), Bulgaria (6.1%) and other countries.¹³ Among the continually growing population of foreign nationals—over 11 million in recent years—in Germany over the past decade, 25% are children and youth under the age of 25.¹⁴

Between 2015 and 2017, the European Emergency Relocation Mechanism allowed for 35,000 asylum seekers to be relocated from Greece and Italy to other EU countries, of which only 823 were unaccompanied children - 139 of them were relocated to Germany.¹⁵ In 2018, Germany received a

⁷ "Menschen Stärken Menschen," BMFSFJ, available at <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/themen/engagement-und-gesellschaft/engagement-staerken/menschen-staerken-menschen/menschen-staerken-menschen/107820>; see also Deutsche Welle, "German Families to Take in Underage Refugees : Minister," DW.COM, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/german-families-to-take-in-underage-refugees-minister/a-18989142>

⁸ Wir sind Paten, <https://wirsindpaten.de/>

⁹ <https://www.soziale-dienste-jugendhilfe.de/en/>

⁹ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), "Asylum, Migration and Integration 2015," available at https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2015.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=16

¹⁰ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), "Asylum, Migration and Integration 2016," available at https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=16

¹¹ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), "Aktuelle Zahlen (10/2020)," available at <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/AsylinZahlen/aktuelle-zahlen-oktober-2020.html>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), "Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2019," available at <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2019.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), "Relocating Unaccompanied Children: Applying Good Practices to Future Schemes," 2020, available at https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-relocating-unaccompanied-children_en.pdf

further 25 unaccompanied children from Malta.¹⁶ Under a European relocation scheme signed in the spring of 2020, Germany pledged to accept 920 unaccompanied children from Greece.¹⁷ After the fire in the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, Germany pledged to receive a further 150 unaccompanied minors.¹⁸

Once in Germany, migrants and refugees are expected (sometimes on voluntary basis, sometimes as a requirement) to take an integration course that includes German language classes as well as addressing historical, cultural and legal aspects of German society. Since 2015, over a million migrants have attended integration courses in Germany.¹⁹ In 2020, despite the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, almost 80,000 people were offered or requested to attend integration courses.²⁰

In Germany the COVID-19 pandemic has hit migrant communities disproportionately, especially in terms of unemployment, rising by 27% compared to 20% for German nationals.²¹ Integration processes have reportedly also been affected by the closure of schools and physical distancing: children, in particular, have had fewer chances to talk to native German speakers and insufficient support in their educational process.²²

3. The Wir sind Paten Program

While the literal translation of “Wir sind Paten” is “we are mentors,” this does not capture the non-hierarchical spirit of the initiative and the principle of “neighbourhood help” that lies behind it. In fact, “Wir Sind Paten” is much more than a mentorship program. One-to-one support on issues such as finding a place to live or a job, or learning German is just one of a range of activities the project has to offer. All activities are designed to present opportunities for local communities and newcomers to get to know each other and establish bonds. The program is implemented by Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH in ten German cities: Berlin, Hamburg, Kiel, Schwerin, Rostock, Düsseldorf, Saarbrücken, Erfurt, Leipzig and Dresden.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Germany Moves Forward on Taking in Hundreds of Refugee Children from Greece,” DW.COM, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-moves-forward-on-taking-in-hundreds-of-refugee-children-from-greece/a-53059977>

¹⁸ Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, “More Children and Unaccompanied Minors from Greek Refugee Camps Arrive in Germany,” available at <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/EN/2020/10/kinder-grc-20201022-en.html>

¹⁹ Benjamin Bathke, “Integration Courses in Germany: What Are They, and Who Can Take Part?,” InfoMigrants, available at <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16814/integration-courses-in-germany-what-are-they-and-who-can-take-part>

²⁰ “Aktuelle Zahlen (10/2020),” available at <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/AsylinZahlen/aktuelle-zahlen-oktober-2020.html>

²¹ Benjamin Bathke, “In Germany, the Coronavirus Disproportionately Affects Migrants,” InfoMigrants, available at <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/26440/in-germany-the-coronavirus-disproportionately-affects-migrants>

²² Joseph Nasr, “COVID-19 Pandemic Derails Germany’s Push for Migrant Integration,” Reuters, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany-migrants-idUSKCN24V2UO>

For the first two years, the main focus of the Menschen stärken Menschen program was on refugees specifically, who were reached through reception centres and other local service providers as well as through word of mouth. Subsequently, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth decided to widen the scope of the program's framework to include migrant and local communities in the target group. While refugees were the main target of Wir sind Paten, their activities were inclusive and were open to anyone since the beginning.

Since 2016, the 29 civil society organizations implementing the Menschen Stärken Menschen program have activated over 100,000 mentorships in Germany,²³ out of which more than 9,000 are active mentorships of Wir sind Paten. Although there are no official numbers on the average age of the people taking part in the program (volunteers and the target group), many of them are 25 years old or younger, and often students.

3.1. Objectives of the Program

In the words of Nicolai von Skerst, Project Developer and Fundraiser at Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH:

The overriding goal is of course to bring together both sides, [local] civil society and migrants and refugees and give them a safe space where they can meet and just get to know each other.

This is reflected in the main objectives outlined on the organization's website, which include promoting social cohesion through intercultural and interreligious exchange, providing training and educational opportunities and "supporting Muslim families in culture-specific and social matters."²⁴

3.2. Strategies

To attain these goals, Wir sind Paten's strategies are manifold. In all ten cities, tutoring and mentoring take place, while many other activities respond to the specific needs of the local communities. In general, activities are planned to attract people from both the local community (volunteers) and migrants and refugees.

Tutoring usually takes place in small groups of people (it can also be individual). It focuses on German, English, computer skills and other topics of choice, from basic to university level. Many of the volunteers are university students, and there are many children and young refugees and

²³ "Menschen Stärken Menschen," BMFSFJ, available at <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/themen/engagement-und-gesellschaft/engagement-staerken/menschen-staerken-menschen/menschen-staerken-menschen/107820>

²⁴ Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH, available at <https://www.soziale-dienste-jugendhilfe.de/en/mission-statement/>

migrants among the participants. These activities sometimes lead to a mentorship program between a member of the local community and a migrant or refugee—once they feel like they have built a relationship of trust. This is done by signing a simple form that is used by the Federal Ministry to quantify active mentorships. However, the form does not indicate specific activities of the mentorship program. It is instead, a flexible agreement that is built on the needs and availability of the people involved.



Source: Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH

Other activities of the Wir sind Paten program include seminars for asylum seekers on the application process and seminars for volunteers on intercultural competence. There is also a focus on fostering peaceful coexistence through workshops against xenophobia and hate speech,²⁵ training on the topic of racism and discrimination, combined visits to museums or memorials (especially in Eastern Germany) of the Holocaust like the Buchenwald Memorial,²⁶ and opportunities to discuss and reflect on the experience together.

Many activities are aimed at empowering the target group and Muslim communities in particular. Sometimes, certain undertakings turn into self-reliant and independent projects that are not sustained through the Meschen Stärken Menschen funding scheme. For instance, in Leipzig, a group of volunteers started offering translation services and support to a growing number of migrants and refugees who had to visit the doctor or go to an appointment with the local authorities; it later turned it into a separate project. In Leipzig and Dresden (and likely in Erfurt in 2021), a spin-off project of Wir sind Paten called “For Me, You and Everyone,” provides support to

²⁵ See e.g., “Against Racism And Hate On The Net - Blogger Workshop,” Wir sind Paten, available at <https://www.wirsindpaten.de/gegen-rassismus/>

²⁶ Islam.de, <http://islam.de/30914>

Muslim women who want to start their own project according to their interests, which range from upcycling initiatives to organising a reading group.

While ZMD is responsible for most of the advocacy and political work at the national level including through interfaith work (*see section 3.4*), (Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmb with its ten offices across Germany managing the Wir Sind Paten program), it is also engaged in advocacy at the community or municipality level. Often, they are members of working groups on integration or other migration-related topics with local authorities and other civil society members and local networks.²⁷ Moreover, they take part in local interfaith and intercultural initiatives. In general, they work on social cohesion, building spaces for exchange and communication based on mutual trust, creating educational and work opportunities for disadvantaged communities, manages to mobilise community members and establish collaborations between ZMD and local authorities.

3.3 The role of faith

The place of faith in the activities of Wir sind Paten is, as Nicolai von Skerst puts it, “the same place that it has in the life of the people who participate in the program.” Religion plays multiple roles in the program—not in a formal way. For instance, there is always a room where people can pray if they wish to do so. It is often a topic of conversation, together with cultural traditions, during a monthly event called “Contact Kitchen,” where participants from the local, migrant and refugee community cook together. Moreover, mosque communities are often helpful in reaching out to the program’s target group through their networks. Concerning Wir sind Paten staff’s religious affiliation, while there is no clear data available, many of them are young Muslims, some of whom are refugees themselves. Owing to their German and Arabic cultural and linguistic skills, they can connect with other volunteers and with newcomers. Typically, each Wir sind Paten team in the ten different cities in Germany has one person in charge of the office, who usually belongs to the Muslim community.

Religion is very much the focus of ZMD’s other activities, for example, through capacity-building provided to 6 mosques assisting refugees and other vulnerable groups in Sachsen, through a project to promote exchange among young Muslims and prevent religious extremism,²⁸ and through interfaith work (*see section 3.4*).

3.4 Partnerships

²⁷ See e.g., “Strong together for democracy and against racism in Saxony,” Netzwerk Tolerantes Sachsen, available at <https://www.tolerantes-sachsen.de/>

²⁸ Central Council of Muslims in Germany, <https://5hoch4.com/>

At the local level, Wir sind Paten staff are often part of working groups on migration-related topics (especially on integration) with local governments and other civil society actors at the city level. These working groups are vital in avoiding duplication, networking and establishing partnerships based on each organization's strength. For instance, as a result, Wir sind Paten collaborates with service providers like the job centre.

As previously mentioned, at the national level, ZMD is engaged in several multi-religious initiatives. For instance, ZMD members are involved in the JuMu Deutschland (Jews and Muslims Germany) initiative,²⁹ and they have collaborated with the Central Council of Jews and other religious actors on refugee responses.³⁰

3.5 Impact of COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the physical distancing measures imposed by many German states (Länder), Wir sind Paten began offering online tutoring, support with asylum procedures and German language classes. Additionally, they introduced a new online service that provides support to people who need shopping assistance, collecting medicines from the doctor's or the pharmacy etc.³¹ In response to the COVID-19 crisis, in Schwerin, the Wir sind Paten team conceived and implemented an initiative called "SANAD"—providing various solutions, such as tutoring for children and babysitting. In July 2020, the city of Schwerin awarded them the title of "Corona heroes" because of their engagement.³²

4 Challenges and lessons learned

The initial plan of ZMD for the Wir sind Paten program was to open an office of the newly established Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH in 13 cities. However, they encountered some issues in three of them. For example, in Magdeburg, it was hard for them to build a network of volunteers, participants and people who were supporting the program with the local authorities.

Another problem that people working on the program have encountered is the lack of interest in the media for Muslim welfare and success stories in this area. Although there have been some articles and some journalists have expressed the intention to write about Wir sind Paten, they still lack visibility due to shortage of resources on that front.

²⁹ Jumu Deutschland gGmbH, "Salam & Shalom," available at <https://www.jumu-deutschland.de/>

³⁰ "Weißt du, wer ich bin?" www.weisstduwerichbin.de/

³¹ "Ich Brauche Hilfe:" Wir sind Paten, available at <https://www.wirsindpaten.de/hilfe-suchende/>

³² "Award-winning pandemic heroes: The SANAD team," Wir sind Paten, available at <https://www.wirsindpaten.de/preisgekroente-pandemie-helden/>

When it comes to funding, the future is uncertain for Wir sind Paten, because the Menschen Stärken Menschen funding scheme is linked to the national legislature; thus it remains unsure if funding will be extended after the elections at the end of 2021. However, ZMD and Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH are actively looking for alternative ways to support their activities and ensure the program's sustainability, including through local funding.

Finally, one challenge identified by Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH was that of monitoring and quantifying the work in a way that would respond to the Ministry's need to assess the results of the Menschen Stärken Menschen initiative, but also reflect the qualitative nature of their work. So far, the Ministry counts the signed mentorship agreements, sends a member of staff to conduct interviews with volunteers and participants, and receives one report per year from each implementing organization. Soziale Dienste und Jugendhilfe gGmbH has complemented this by conducting their own interviews with their most active participants and volunteers and disseminating them through their website and social media channels.

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