



Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Germany country profile

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Key messages

- **Germany is one of the most important countries of immigration in Europe.** In 2018 there were 10.9 million refugees and other migrants, accounting for 13% of the German population, of whom 1.2 million were refugees.
- **There is a strong tradition of refugee protection in Germany.** A large majority of Germans believe that countries including their own have an obligation to accept refugees. Yet there is also growing concern about the cultural impact migration could have long-term.
- **Most Germans do not have strong positive or negative views about refugees and other migrants,** with 59% concerned about the negative externalities of immigration but also open to its potential economic benefits and supportive of the moral obligation to protect refugees.
- **By 2021 refugees will contribute more than they cost to the German state** through filling labour shortages, paying taxes and contributing to the economy.
- **The private sector is actively engaged in supporting the integration of refugees and other migrants** into German society and the economy. Often working in partnership, they have spearheaded initiatives offering practical support and employment opportunities for refugees and other migrants.

This paper presents an overview of migration and asylum policy in Germany, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives towards refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project funded by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with refugees and other migrants.

History of immigration in Germany

Germany has been one of the most significant immigration destinations in Europe for decades (see Figures 1,3; Green, 2013). Following the Second World War, 12 million Germans expelled from former German territories returned, with another 4 million returning after 1950 (ibid.). The division of the country between East and West Germany also generated considerable internal movement.

Recent decades have seen a drastic shift in how migration is viewed and approached in Germany. Migrants were traditionally seen as filling temporary labour shortages or seeking temporary refuge. From 1955 to 1973 a ‘Guestworker’ scheme attracted several million unskilled workers from Turkey, Italy, Spain and Greece. Three million of these ‘guestworkers’ stayed in Germany, joined by their families, after the scheme ended (Prevezanos, 2011). Little attention was

paid to integration; learning German was seen as optional, as it was felt that migrants retaining their language and culture would encourage them eventually to return home (Rietig and Müller, 2016). There were also few legal channels for labour migration from beyond the European Economic Area (EEA).

More recently there has been a shift in policy to allow labour migrants from outside the EU to enter Germany (Oberstadien and Stuttgart, 2019). Immigration law was overhauled in 2000, alongside efforts to encourage the integration of migrants, including courses in the German language, law and culture (Rietig and Müller, 2016). Integration policy was tightened in July 2016, following the mass movement of refugees into the country the previous year, with benefits and the right to settle linked to participation in integration courses and outcomes such as fluency in German (Agence France-Presse, 2016).

Figure 1 Timeline of immigration to Germany

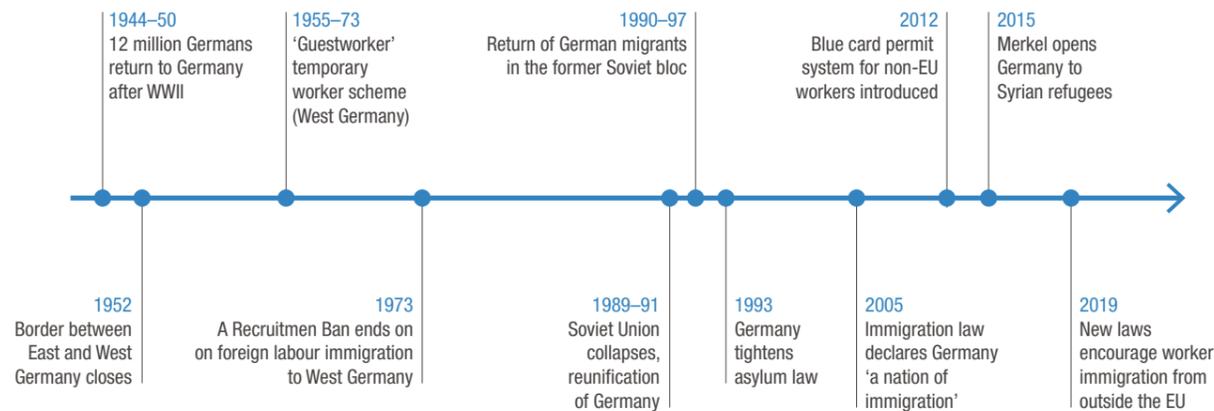
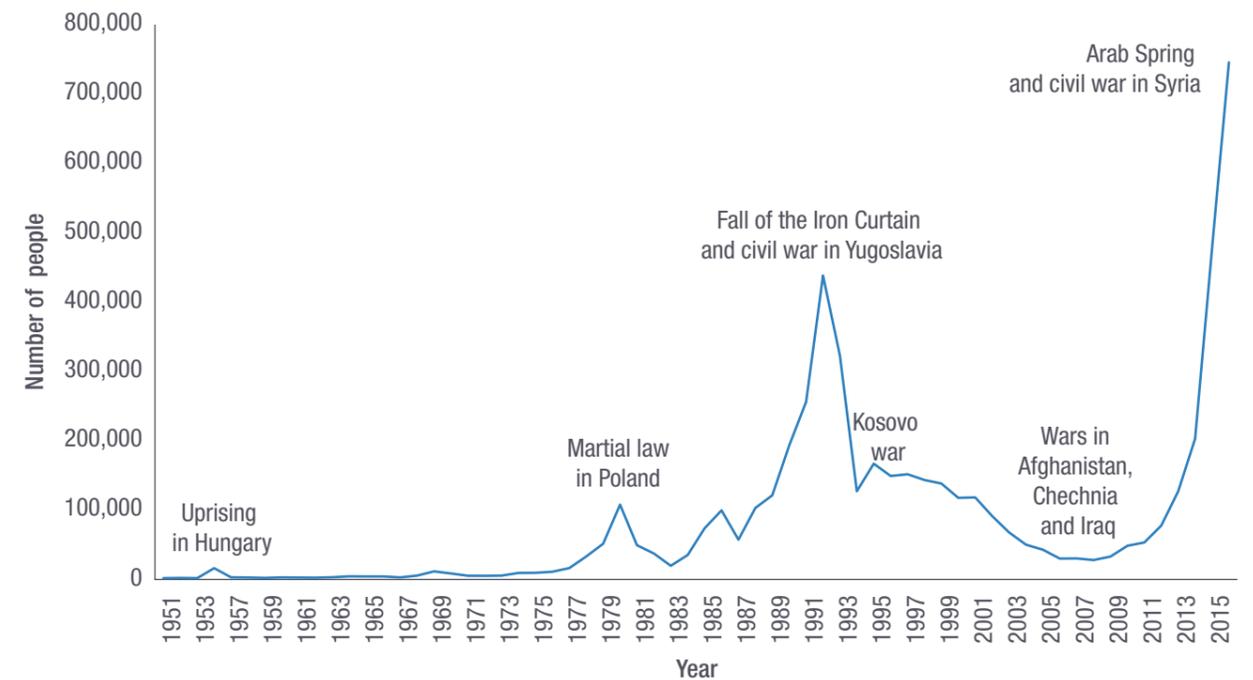


Figure 2 Applications for asylum in Germany, 1951–2016



Source: Mansour-Ille et al. (2019), based on data from Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, key figures 2016

Germany has been and remains one of the major destinations for asylum-seekers in Europe (see Figure 2). Chancellor Angela Merkel’s response to the refugee influx to Europe in 2015 famously stated ‘We can do it!’, opening Germany to half a million Syrian refugees and reinforcing the country’s position as a major sanctuary destination in Europe. In 2018, refugees and other migrants made up an estimated 13% of the German population, of whom 1.2 million (11%) were refugees (DESTATIS, 2019).

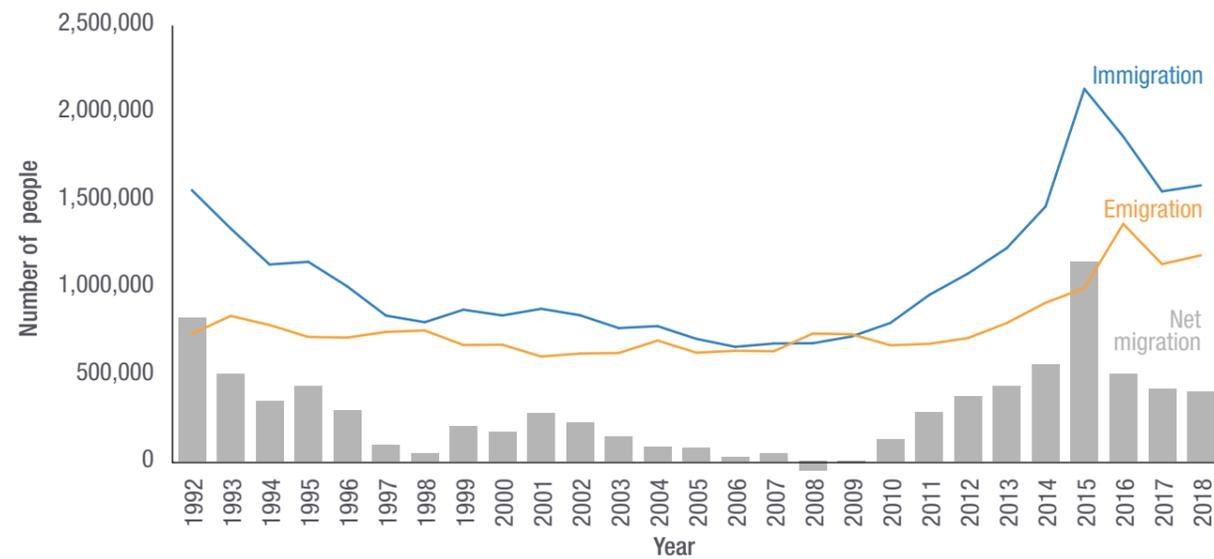
Of the 890,000 asylum-seekers who came to Germany in 2015, more than 307,000 were employed by 2018 (ibid.). The majority of this group are under 35, and over two-thirds are paying social security contributions (Ferguson, 2019). Increasing public unease about the numbers of asylum-seekers led to a tightening of asylum policy in 2015–16, along with a

controversial deal between the EU and Turkey led by Merkel.

Under the deal, illegal arrivals (including refugees) to Greece will be returned to Turkey. In exchange, for each person returned the EU commits to taking in one Syrian refugee from Turkey. The deal has made it easier to deport failed asylum-seekers to ‘safe’ countries but also included legislation to allow for the integration of skilled migrants into the labour market (Mischke, 2019).

Despite the leadership shown by Merkel in opening Germany’s doors to refugees, Germany’s response to the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 failed to set the tone for the rest of the Europe. The majority of European countries took and continue to take a far more restrictive stance to welcoming and integrating refugees, driven by politics, perceived public hostility to refugees and other migrants and fuelled by polarised media coverage across Europe.

Figure 3 International migration to Germany 1992–2017



Source: BAMF (2019a)

Current German immigration system and approach

EU citizens are free to live and work in Germany without a visa and have similar access to benefits as German citizens. Non-EU migrants require a visa to stay in Germany long-term for the purposes of work, study, family or medical treatment. Visa applicants are required to prove that they have enough funds to cover €45/day

and have an employment contract or German sponsor. In 2012 Germany adopted the EU blue card, facilitating the labour migration of skilled non-EU citizens with a university degree and an annual salary of €50,080, reduced to €39,624 for a ‘shortage occupation’, including doctors (BAMF, 2014). Box 1 gives an overview of German citizenship and asylum policies, while Box 2 outlines a major demographic challenge for Germany, the country’s ageing population.

Box 1 Overview of German immigration and asylum policies

Citizenship policy. German citizenship was historically defined by ethnic heritage (*jus sanguinis*), rather than place of birth (*jus soli*) or length of stay. This meant that you had to have a German parent or grandparent in order to be considered German, rather than acquiring citizenship by virtue of being born or having resided in Germany for a specific number of years. Since the 2000s, *jus soli* elements have been introduced. For instance, children born to immigrant permanent resident parents in Germany for eight years now automatically receive German citizenship. A first-generation migrant who has been in Germany for eight years may become a citizen if they pass a naturalisation test and have adequate German-language skills, no criminal record and enough income to meet living expenses, and if they give up their nationality (exceptions are EU and Swiss citizens, who may have dual nationality) (DOMID, 2019).

Asylum policy. Asylum in Germany is a two-step process. Following initial registration, the applicant is allocated to a reception centre according to a quota system, from which they formally apply. Applicants originating from designated ‘safe’ countries enjoy fewer rights while seeking asylum than applicants deemed to have a better chance of remaining, including being prohibited from working. The types of protection granted are refugee status, subsidiary protection or bans on deportation. In 2015, 50% of asylum applications were accepted (BAMF, 2019a).

Box 2 In focus – Germany’s ageing population

Germany’s ageing population presents a major challenge – by 2060 it is estimated that one in three Germans will be over 65 (Ferguson, 2019). The German labour market sees a net loss of 300,000 employees per year (Schulz, 2019), with the country lacking low- and medium-skilled labour to meet the needs of an ongoing period of very high employment (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019).

In 2018 the German labour office noted there were 1.2 million unfilled vacancies in Germany (Germany Visa, 2019). Policy makers have suggested that a key way to meet the challenge of an ageing population and the resulting labour shortages is through migration, with a 2019 study by the Bertelsmann Foundation suggesting that Germany needs around 260,000 migrant workers per year to plug the gap created by its ageing population, 146,000 of them from outside the EU (Kaiser, 2019). Key trends include:

- **Changes to migration policy:** With labour shortages in many low- and medium-skilled sectors in Germany, migration has been proposed as a key way of helping employers meet their labour needs. The Skilled Workers Immigration Act introduced by the German grand coalition will extend the rules covering the employment of foreign graduates and trained workers from 2020 – meaning employers can employ non-EU workers to fill shortages so long as their German is good and they are trained to German standards (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019).

Concerns remain about the ability of these new regulations to engage and attract the amount of foreign labour needed by Germany, with the quality of training given to German nationals making it very difficult for non-EU nationals to prove an equal or greater competency with German standards (Oberstadion and Stuttgart, 2019). Innovative approaches to the migration of semi-skilled workers are required to meet German employment demands both now and as its population ages in the coming decades.

- **Addressing the skills shortage:** Germany has sought to integrate many of the Syrian refugee arrivals to the country into the labour market to address its labour needs caused by its ageing population. Of the 890,000 asylum-seekers who came to Germany in 2015, more than 307,000 were employed by 2018 (Ferguson, 2019). The majority of this group are under 35 and over two-thirds of are paying social security contributions (ibid.).

One example of the harnessing of skills of refugees and other migrants to fill labour gaps was the introduction of the Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures (2015), which allowed immigrant doctors who had requested qualification recognition to work alongside certified doctors in refugee centres until they were recognised (Buchan et al., 2019).

- **A rise in demand for care labour:** The demand for care work is expected to grow as Germany’s population ages. In 2018 just under 3 million people required nursing care, a number that is expected to double by 2050 (Ziegler, 2018). There are currently 40,000 vacancies in the German care sector (The Local, 2019), with shortages in qualified nurses at care homes and hospitals (Ziegler, 2018). Germany has one of the largest populations of foreign-trained medical and healthcare professionals in the EU (Rada, 2016), and increasing numbers of Germans are paying migrant workers for in-house, round-the-clock care. More than 250 recruiting agencies offer this service (Gutenberg, 2019).

Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Since 2014, issues related to migration, foreigners and refugees have consistently ranked as the most important problem in Germany (Gerhards et al., 2016). There is widespread concern about the impact of large-scale immigration on Germany's society and economy; most Germans support only subsidiary protection,¹ and want people to be sent back once conditions in their home country improve (ibid.). In contrast there is strong support for refugee protection. A large majority of Germans believe in the obligation of countries to accept refugees: 69% believe that people should be able to seek refuge in other countries, including Germany, to escape war and persecution, and only 8% reject this view (Helbling et al., 2017). This is reflected in 'Willkommenskultur' ('welcome culture'), used to describe many people's willingness to help and engage in the large-scale civic activism that followed the arrival of refugees at train stations and elsewhere in Germany in the autumn of 2015.

While the extent of this welcome culture may have been exaggerated in the German media (Haller, 2017), successive opinion surveys in 2016, 2017 and 2018 suggest that attitudes towards refugees and migrants have not substantially shifted since 2015 (SVR, 2018; Gerhards et al., 2016; Helbling et al., 2017; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017). In the most recent Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees survey in 2016, a clear majority (81%) were in favour of admitting refugees and people fleeing political persecution, despite more than half of all respondents stating that admitting refugees brought more risks than benefits (Gerhards et al., 2016). Even so, the rise of the far-right, anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)) would seem to indicate growing anti-refugee sentiment, fed by public anxiety and by incidents such as a fatal attack by a refused asylum-seeker on a Christmas market in 2016. In a 2018–19 survey by the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung Foundation,

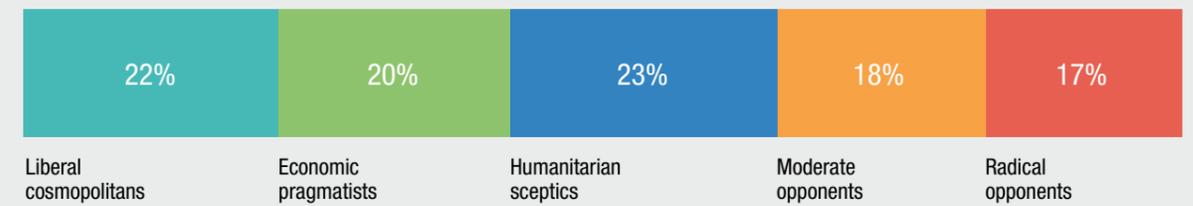
53% of respondents expressed negative opinions about asylum-seekers, higher than the 44% of people who thought this in 2014, prior to the considerable increase in refugee arrivals (Friedrich Stiftung, 2019).

Ultimately, public opinion towards refugees and other migrants in Germany is driven by an economic pragmatism, evident in attitudinal segmentation research by More in Common that roughly divides the German population into five groups based on their attitudes towards immigration and globalisation, as outlined in Box 3. People in the 'conflicted middle' present opportunities for tailored messaging. These groups are more likely to be influenced by carefully advanced arguments on the benefits of immigration for Germany, as well as the costs associated with effective integration in the society and economy and are less emotionally driven than the two groups on the extreme ends of the spectrum. Key messages and priorities for engagement could include:

- **Control of migration.** People in the 'conflicted middle' need reassurance that the government is in control of immigration and is effectively working to integrate refugees (Helbling et al., 2017).
- **Global identity.** Communication about refugee policy should be sensitive to differing interpretations of Germany's global role and the role of migration within it. As a rule, those who feel positive about Germany's integration within Europe and its interaction with the global economy support assisting refugees, while those who are less positive about globalisation are more sceptical. Persuading the 'conflicted middle' to be more positive about refugees and other migrants may require communication around Germany's global outlook and identity (Helbling et al., 2017).
- **Contact with refugees and other migrants.** A key determinant of successful integration is interaction with people from other cultures. The more contact people have with refugees

¹ Subsidiary protection currently means permission to stay for a year initially, with the possibility of repeated extensions of two years.

Box 3 Segments or 'tribes' of the German population by attitude to refugees and other migrants



Source: Helbling et al. (2017)

Liberal cosmopolitans: people who perceive immigration as beneficial economically and culturally and support the idea that refugees ought to be able to live in Germany permanently; they are highly educated and live in larger cities; many come from families with a recent history of migration.

Economic pragmatists: people who take pride in German identity and are generally positive about the future; believe immigration makes Germany more open to ideas and cultures but are concerned about the compatibility of Islam and German culture; do not believe that refugees should be allowed to live permanently in Germany; have medium to high incomes and medium education levels.

Humanitarian sceptics: people who see accepting refugees as an obligation and a matter of principle, perhaps due to Germany's history and European countries' responsibility for conflict and its consequences in the Middle East; have doubts that refugees will integrate successfully into society and are less likely to believe that refugees should be permitted to live permanently in Germany; are the oldest segment, are highly educated but many have low incomes.

Moderate opponents: people who have deep reservations about Germany's refugee intake, with security concerns and doubts that arrivals are *bona fide* refugees; they worry that immigrants disproportionately benefit from public services; hold negative views towards Islam; think refugees should not be able to live in Germany permanently and many support closing Germany's borders; most have low incomes and an intermediate level of education.

Radical opponents: people who are the most opposed to migration and refugees; they believe that admitting refugees is a security risk and that refugees are actually economically motivated migrants; believe immigrants are a burden on public services; feel left behind by globalisation and are concerned that Germany's identity is disappearing; demand the closure of Germany's borders; tend to be older with lower education and income levels; and are most likely to live in small communities in former East Germany, Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate.

According to this analysis the majority of Germans (59%) are located in a 'conflicted middle' (i.e. Economic pragmatists, Humanitarian sceptics and Moderate opponents). The rest of the population are 'outliers': Liberal cosmopolitans and Radical opponents who are most strongly in favour of and most opposed to immigration.

the more positive their view of integration. There was a significant discrepancy in attitudes to refugees and other migrants between the former East and West Germany, again largely determined by the degree of contact people

had with refugees and migrants (Helbling et al., 2017). Engaging the 'conflicted middle' should employ contact theory and examples of lived experience to make a positive argument for refugees and other migrants in Germany.

Implications for public and private investors

The current climate in Germany is highly favourable to the integration of refugees and other migrants into the economy and society (Fleischer, 2019). Germany spends more on refugee assistance than refugees contribute in taxes and contributions. Yet research suggests that the balance will shift by 2021, after which refugees in Germany, many now employed and filling labour shortages, will contribute more to the German state than they cost it (German Institute for Economic Research, 2017). One report by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees found that 50% of refugees in Germany surveyed were working in skilled jobs, despite the fact that only 20% of the refugee population have the required qualifications. The survey highlighted that many refugees have acquired skills informally or in their home countries, and then taken up jobs unfilled by German workers (Dowling, 2019). Yet the challenges for refugees and other migrants seeking work in Germany

remain significant: from language barriers to ensuring recognition of existing skills, with the bar often set unrealistically high for acquiring German qualifications.

Many businesses and investors in Germany have demonstrated how the private sector can support the integration of refugees and other migrants alongside government and civil society efforts. Programmes range from individual companies with large-scale initiatives to collective platforms developed to share experiences of integration, galvanise support and open up opportunities for refugees and other migrants among businesses. The aim of these initiatives is primarily to facilitate employment and sustain integration in German economy and society. Good business practice can also have an impact on broader public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants by demonstrating how internships, job opportunities and skills development can enhance integration.

Box 4 provides examples of good practice by businesses engaging with refugees and other migrants in Germany. Businesses and investors can play a vital role in providing support

for refugees and other migrants' economic and social integration, and in doing so help demonstrate to the 'conflicted middle' how this can be achieved in practice. The following are priorities for effective engagement:

1. **Framing that makes the most of Germany's 'economic pragmatism' and the need to fill labour shortages.** Targeted messaging from businesses and investors should take into account key anxieties about refugees and other migrants, particularly around long-term integration and the perceived threat of immigration to German culture, values and security.

2. **Businesses and investors should harness the economic opportunities presented by refugees and other migrants** to fill labour shortages and skills gaps, recognising, investing in and building the skills of often highly qualified refugee and migrant employees and job applicants.
3. **Build innovative partnerships among like-minded businesses and investors in Germany and beyond.** Drawing on existing initiatives and coalitions such as the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, German businesses have knowledge and expertise on the integration of refugees and other migrants that could be useful to businesses in other countries, particularly in Europe.

Box 4 Examples of good business practice in engaging with refugees

- The **Network of Businesses Integrating Refugees** includes hundreds of companies of all sizes supporting refugee integration in the labour market. It aims to provide a platform for exchanging information and practical knowledge around refugee integration (NETZWERK Unternehmen integrieren Flüchtlinge, 2019).
- **Bertelsmann Stiftung** and seven other foundations fund the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration. Supported by a research unit, the council develops reports, policy briefings and policy recommendations to promote Germany as a country of immigration and integration (Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration, 2019).
- Under an initiative dubbed **We-together**, 36 German companies have joined forces to showcase how German businesses can promote the integration of refugees and support a more tolerant and open public climate. These companies' wide-ranging initiatives spread far beyond employment and work towards an integrated, welcoming Germany (Wir Zusammen, 2019).
- **Deutsche Post** has established 1,000 new internship places for refugees, and more than 10,000 staff members engage in voluntary work with refugees. The company also supports projects to teach refugees German and employs 100 coordinators to support the company's integration work (Dams et al., 2016).
- **Henkel**, a washing powder and cosmetics company, provides essential hygiene items to new refugee arrivals, as well as long-term integration initiatives supporting language and music training for refugee children. The company's employees receive eight days' paid leave per year to engage in voluntary work in support of refugee integration (Dams et al., 2016).

About the project

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: implications for action is a two-year project led by the ODI's Human Mobility Initiative, funded by the IKEA foundation. It aims to provide detailed and practical recommendations to help businesses and investors influence attitudes to migrants and refugees, with a focus on the UK, Germany and more in-depth studies of attitudes in the global South. The initial creation of briefing papers such as this will feed into broader events and roundtable discussions where practice, partnerships and policy can be developed and shared among businesses developers and sector experts.

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