

# BEYOND THE EMERGENCY

TEXT: EVA VÖLKER

Five years ago, the arrival of thousands of refugees within a short period of time presented the administrative offices of the German municipal authorities with a huge challenge. Taking three towns in Lower Saxony as an example, Miriam Schader from the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Goettingen studied how the municipal authorities handled the situation.

um-sized towns (with 165,000 and 130,000 inhabitants) and one small town (with 80,000 inhabitants) in Lower Saxony, she analyzed examples of the structures and administrative procedures that were in place when the refugees were received. In 2015/16, the three towns took in up to 100 new arrivals every week. This presented them with an enormous challenge, since no information was provided in advance as to how many people would arrive and what their particular characteristics or requirements were. Furthermore, the legal framework in Germany was repeatedly changed by a large number of new or amended laws, which were passed in quick succession from 2015 onwards. The individual local authorities also found it hard to retain an overview of EU political developments.

Although the authorities often had to react spontaneously and an enormous amount of work was involved, the local structures certainly didn't collapse during this period. Instead, the administrations in many local authorities made sure that the new arrivals were received properly and that the departments involved coordinated with each other. "With reference to Merkel's famous words, the municipalities can say: 'We made it,'" says Miriam Schader, the author of the study. The administrations in all three towns studied first initiated an "emergency operation" so that decisions could be made quickly. This enabled them to overcome the period of uncertainty in the short term. However, clear differences emerged between the local authorities, particularly in terms of how they handled the medium- to long-term challenges. This was ascertained by the scientist following numerous interviews with staff working in the administrative offices at different levels.

We've arrived: during the peak of the 2015/16 migration, over 100 people seeking protection arrived in German towns and municipalities every week. This presented a challenge to the local authorities, but it was one that they were able to meet.

For example, the middle town of the three that were studied temporarily refused to accept any more asylum seekers. When significantly fewer asylum seekers entered Germany following the closure of the Balkan route in the spring of 2016, the local authorities quickly resumed their normal everyday business. Nothing was changed with regard to some structures, and reception capacities were quickly reduced again. Today, for example, there is now just a part-time employee working in the office for integration in the municipal authority, and with ten new asylum seekers arriving every week, reception capacities are already fully stretched. The two other municipal authorities developed a very different strategy. They turned a period of uncertainty into a period of fundamental change, by actively shaping the situation themselves and improving the structures for migration and integration



"We can do this." With these words, Germany's Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel attempted to reassure the country at the end of August 2015. Just a short time previously, Germany had suspended the Dublin Regulation for Syrians. This meant that the refugees were no longer sent back to the country in which they first entered the territory of the European Union. On 4 September 2015, the German and Austrian governments decided to accept thousands of people seeking protection who had become stranded in Hungary. Almost overnight, towns and municipal authorities had to find accommodation for the new arrivals. With incredible speed, gymnasiums were turned into temporary accommodation, and food and medical supplies were organized.

Today, five years later, the question arises as to whether Merkel's optimism was justified. Miriam Schader, a sociologist at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, has been looking for scientific answers. In two medi-



PHOTO: PICTURE ALLIANCE / DPA | ALEXANDER KOERNER

that had previously been in place. For example, the largest of the three towns studied merged two administrative areas responsible for migration and integration in order to make it easier for refugees to access various state support payments, such as child allowance, the services provided in accordance with the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act, and Hartz IV social support funds. The smallest of the three towns set up an advice center for administrative and legal issues, which worked closely with voluntary integration advisers. On its own initiative, it created a new bus link to the accommodation housing the asylum seekers, which was located outside the town center. Asylum seekers were also issued with an electronic health insurance card. These measures and the new structures in two of the towns were not only intended to deal with the consequences of the immigration wave in 2015/16, but also to better re-

flect the migration and diversity among the local population in the long term. In this way, two of the three municipal authorities studied proved their ability to cope and to develop a sustainable strategy.

However, the measures designed to improve participation also went hand in hand with a process of exclusion. Much of the accommodation offered was simply buildings that had been quickly converted, which were only suitable for habitation to a limited extent, and which offered almost no private space, even though large numbers of people lived there for longer periods of time. Other buildings were located in the middle of industrial estates. By only housing men in accommodation facilities, the refugees were further isolated in some cases, since there was no support from volunteers, for example. "Some buildings were also used for disciplining those who

did not fit in, and for disciplining those who preferred to be cautious for fear of being assigned to a certain accommodation building," Schader explains.

Overall, the study concludes that municipal authorities made little use of orientation aids such as best practice models. This also created a patchwork of different municipal models for receiving refugees. The experience of the people seeking protection therefore varied between one place and another. The opportunity was not used everywhere of making long-term changes in order to receive the refugees. According to the Miriam Schader's findings, this omission indicates a lack of far-sightedness. After all, it's only a question of time before more people arrive in Germany seeking asylum.

