MIND THE GAP: 
AN ANALYSIS OF THE LANDSCAPE OF THE POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES AND GERMANY, AND NGOS ON IMPROVING DIGITAL INTEGRATION FOR REFUGEE POPULATIONS

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science, Concentration European Governance.

Chapel Hill
2019

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ABSTRACT

Megan Connell: Mind the Gap: An Analysis of the Landscape of the Policies of the United States and Germany, and NGOs on Improving Digital Integration for Refugee Populations
(Under the Direction of Gary Marks)

The 2015 refugee crisis has drastically altered the socio-political landscape within the European Union and has left European states with a unique set of immigrant integration challenges. Economic integration an important lens through which overall immigrant integration can be understood. Literacy, and increasingly, digital literacy, is often key to the accessibility of economic opportunity.

This thesis will seek to explore how the governments of the United States and Germany address the digital gap for refugees within their borders, through the lens of the importance of the digital divide to integration into the digital economy. Through a review of the federal refugee integration policies, the budgets of particular non-governmental organizations, and the programs of these non-governmental organizations, this thesis finds that in both the United States and German cases, lack of a central, federal digital inclusion policy creates a varied landscape of assistance.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will seek to explore how the governments of the United States and Germany address the digital gap for refugees within their borders, through the lens of the importance of the digital divide to integration into the digital economy. In this thesis, the United States’ policy of ceding the responsibility of integration to voluntary organizations will be compared to Germany’s policy of federal allocation of responsibilities to the state level. Furthermore, the paper will compare how NGO and voluntary organization networks have evolved within these contexts. Within the United States, this paper will focus on the digital inclusion programs of the International Rescue Committee and its partners; within Germany, the focus will be on the rapid development of digital projects by various volunteer groups post-2015.

Currently, existing research indicates a “digital gap” between refugees and the citizens of the countries hosting them. This gap represents an area of opportunity for research to better understand how the ecosystem between governments and non-governmental organizations operate or fail to operate to reduce this gap and leverage digital literacy and the digital economy to assist with integration.

The 2015 refugee crisis has drastically altered the socio-political landscape within the European Union and has left European states with a unique set of immigrant integration challenges. At the center of this massive shift has been Germany, which since 2015 has seen one of the largest influxes of refugees in the entire European Union by raw numbers. According to Abraham in his article The Refugee Crisis, the influx of around 1
million refugees near this time put the German system under acute strain (Abraham 2016).

The strain felt by Germany had far-reaching implications. While some policies for refugee placement and acceptance are created at the European Union level, it has largely been left the individual states, such as Germany, to determine the thrust of integration policies within their national borders. Once FRONTEX, the European border control, the free movement of people within the Schengen zone of Europe, funneled high traffic into unprepared, usually insulated states. The uneven distribution of such a massive amount of displaced people highlighted weaknesses within the European Union as a whole (ibid).

The United States has also taken on refugees following unrest in the Middle East. Spanning two administrations, United States refugee integration policies and agencies have seen monumental shifts in refugee population and the funding with which to support them.

Economic integration an important lens through which overall immigrant integration can be understood. However, the effort to access economic opportunities can often be frustrated by other barriers to integration, such as language differences, and educational and licensing requirements. This can be especially true for refugees, who experience exasperated social isolation, high risk, and lack of resources. Literacy, and increasingly, digital literacy, is often key to the accessibility of economic opportunity.

The importance of broad economic integration, and the potential impact of refugees as a labor source, has not been lost on governments. In 2014, predating the height of the refugee crisis, German labor restrictions on refugees began to ease (Maaroufi 2017:15), signalling that the national government took the potential for
positive impact from refugee employment very seriously. It isn’t simply good for the host
country, however, it is also a key part of the integration of the individuals taking refuge,
as noted by Mouna Maroufi:

“Particularly in protracted refugee crises, the right to work and earn one’s
livelihood is crucial for refugees in order to re-establish their autonomy
and membership in a society through access to good work” (Maroufi
2017:17)

Across the globe, the digital economy is challenging traditional employment
policies. For marginalized communities like refugees, this presents both a set of
opportunities, and a set of challenges. For those groups who are digitally literate and can
access the digital economy via goods such as smartphones, space may be opening up
outside of traditional avenues of employment. Conversely, for groups which are not
digitally literate or do not have the necessary equipment to gain access to the digital
economy, the growth of the digital economy may be a further impediment to economic
integration.

Therefore, the digital economy presents a new set of challenges and opportunities
to the governments which host these refugees. With forward looking policies,
governments and their NGO partners may be able to leverage new technologies to assist
refugees in finding employment and thus further economic integration. Assisting in this
area, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work with governments to create an
ecosystem between policy and application.
The importance of addressing the digital divide among high-risk and marginalized groups has been codified by multiple international groups. In its World Summit on the Information Society Declaration of Principals in 2003, the United Nations states:

“13. In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and underprivileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.”

(United Nations 2003)

The principal that immediately follows further addresses the importance of the impact of information technology on poverty and economics:

14. We are resolute to empower the poor, particularly those living in remote, rural and marginalized urban areas, to access information and to use ICTs as a tool to support their efforts to lift themselves out of poverty.

(ibid)

Furthermore, non-governmental organizations across the globe have begun to recognize the need for bridging the digital divide for refugees, and have implemented programs to assist in the access of physical technology, such as laptops, tablets, and cellphones. Concern Worldwide, in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council and a Google grant, distributed tablets to Syrian children in Ireland as part of such an effort (Ward 2018).

This research adds to the current literature in two key ways. Firstly, while literature exists that thoughtfully examines the impact of the digital gap on high risk
groups, including refugees, this literature most often views this phenomenon through social integration and capital lenses. This thesis will explore the importance of the digital gap through a digital, economic integration lens, adding a key and important facet to this complex issue. Secondly, this paper will examine the diffusion of responsibility for the application of refugee policy from the state to NGOs, and how this phenomenon creates inconsistent access to the tools necessary to bridge the digital gap.

In this research, I find that both the United States and Germany, as federal governments, disperse the authority of refugee integration to the state level and to NGOs. In particular, neither federal government centers or prioritizes the growing need for digital integration, and both fail to recognize the importance of digital inclusion to larger economic integration. In the case of the United States, the ceding of responsibility directly to trusted voluntary organizations (VOLAGs) has created a network of organizations that attempt to address this deficit. Within Germany, the dependence of the federal government on the states, and a lack of codified use of NGOs and VOLAGs has created a loose and young network of organizations attempting to address refugee digital inclusion needs. In both situations, a lack of cohesive, centralized policy creates disparity across geographic regions: in the US, between areas in which particular NGOs and VOLAGs operate; in Germany, between lande.
Methodology

This paper will focus on the refugee policies of two countries: the United States and Germany. In it, I will review the policy structures surrounding refugee benefits, and how they are dispersed once refugees and asylees have both arrived and been legally accepted into their host nations.

The paper will begin with a literature review to establish existing definitions of central concepts, the importance of addressing the digital divide in refugee populations and the importance of the digital divide to navigating economic potential.

The United States and Germany were chosen for this paper due to several factors. First, the two states are both Federal states that already cede much of the administration of their national policies to more localized levels of governance. Related to this is a marked difference between the two nations: in US refugee policy, voluntary and NGO support of refugees is codified with the explicit use of trusted voluntary organizations, and little cooperation with the states to which refugees are settled; in contrast, German national policy is enacted by the various Lande, the federal states, with no federal policy explicitly outlining cooperation with voluntary organizations or NGOs. The nature of this dispersal of power creates variations in the landscape of policy application in both nations: between the geographical reaches of NGOs in the United States and across Lande in Germany.

Secondly, since 2015 these two nations have had striking differences in an evolution of refugee policy. As the United States moved from the Obama administration
to the Trump administration, the quota of refugees was drastically reduced, certain countries of origin were banned, and programs were cut. German refugee intake, while seeing reductions after a height in 2015, remained comparatively high.

First, I will briefly review the historical context in which these policies are operating, in order to establish the historical precedent for immigration and refugee law as extensions of labor force policy. Then, I will review the refugee policies of these nations and describing the ways in which the federal governments interact with state and NGO actors. To do this, I will explore the public information given by the United States Office for Refugee Resettlement, as well as its budget reports to Congress for 2015 and 2016. In the case of Germany, I will review the materials released by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, as well as the benefits offered to refugees by the city of Berlin.

Finally, I will explore how local NGOs and volunteer initiatives work to identify and fill gaps between refugee needs and the services provided to them. Within the United States, I will describe the efforts of the International Rescue Committee, programs it has directly implemented in Utah, and several organizations with which it partners within the state of Maryland. Within Germany, I will focus on the organization Digital Inclusion programs, as well as voluntary citizen initiatives in Munich and Berlin. As part of this research, I will describe inadequacies and gaps in coverage caused by these patchwork approaches to digital access.

Limitations

There are several key limitations with this methodology. Firstly, the analysis of German policy and literature will be restricted to those policies and papers which are
available in English. Acknowledging that there is an abundant amount of excellent German literature on the evolution of refugee policy, I nevertheless believe that the amount of scholarship available in English is sufficient to examine the quality and extent of policies directed at closing the refugee digital gap.

Secondly, the scope of this paper limits it to the review and analysis of government policy and the programs of specific NGOs. Because of this, there remains a wealth of untapped expertise that expert interviews, refugee interviews, and qualitative methods could produce. While this paper is by no means an exhaustive reference on the subject, it establishes the need for further, more comprehensive, research.
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

What is the Digital Divide?

Since the advent of the internet, and its subsequent expansion worldwide into the homes of billions, the digital world has irrevocably changed the shape of society. While this expansion has created an untold amount of progress and accessibility heretofore unseen in human society, it has brought with it challenges. Just as the incredible benefits of books can be withheld from those who cannot afford to buy them or have not learned how to read them, access and digital literacy have created an uneven ground upon which these benefits settle.

The existing research establishes that inequality of digital access and literacy can be impacted by race and ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, often perpetuating and perpetuated by existing social structures (Robinson et al 2015). This concept, called the “digital divide” or the “digital gap” has long been the subject of academic research due to its vast social consequences.

The term “digital divide” was first used in the late 1990’s by the US Department of Commerce (Jan A. G. M. Van Dijk 2017). It is commonly defined as the gap between people who do and do not have access to various forms of information and communication technology, e.g. computers with access to the internet.

However, as noted by Van Dijk in Digital Divide: Impact of Access, “Obtaining physical access makes no sense when people are not able to use the technology. So, skills
and competencies are also needed for access. When people have learned to operate and understand a technology, the purpose of access and the final goal of appropriating the technology will be looked for: actual usage.” (ibid) Thus, understanding that the presence of these technologies is not enough to grant access to the vast and growing digital economy, this paper use an expanded definition, including the skill set necessary to use these technologies, or digital literacy.

As noted by Robinson et al, “It is increasingly clear that individuals’ digital engagements and digital capital play key roles in a range of outcomes, from academic performance to labor market success to entrepreneurship to health services uptake.” (Robinson et al 2015) Digital access and skills have become defining aspects of human interaction with their societal context. Of particular and important note is the growing importance that digital access on labor market access and success.

The stratification hypothesis within the study of the digital gap contends that existing social inequalities will replicate themselves within the digital sphere. Digitally mediated networks will mirror offline social structures, in no small part because offline social structures will determine which groups of people are given the physical access and education necessary to access these networks (ibid).

These concerns have been largely supported by the existing research on the digital gap. As early as the 1990’s, there was concern within the United States about growing digital divides (ibid). The trend has continued, with the issue of the American digital divide so pressing that in January of 2018, the Chamber of Commerce released a letter to the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Communications and Technology,
encouraging the subcommittee to continue pursuing infrastructure and financing solutions
to gaps in broadband access across the US. (Day 2018)

The digital divide is not limited to the United States, either. A 2000 study from
the University of Bremen found lack of internet utilization that split along the lines
expected by the stratification hypothesis: higher income was linked with more positive
attitudes on internet use, higher use, and improved access (Welling and Kubicek 2000).
The matter was of such importance that Germany adopted its Digital Agenda in 2014 and
has since made consistent progress in connectivity and access on an infrastructure level,
according to Europe’s Digital Progress Report (EDPR) for 2017.

While it might be expected, and it is certainly true, that higher socioeconomic
status is linked to improved access to computers and high computer and internet net use,
this relationship does not seem to be unidirectional (Robinson et al 2015). Current
research indicates that digital skills can raise occupational prestige beyond other socio-
economic factors (Lisitsa et al 2017) and increased earnings over non-users (DiMaggio
and Bonikowski 2008).

Digital access and literacy have not just been linked to improved outcomes in the
workplace after a job has already been secured. Individuals on the favorable side of the
digital divide also have greater success in finding and securing employment (Robinson et
al 2015). The growing prominence of social media sites, such as LinkedIn, as well as
online classifieds, such as Craigslist create economic spaces in which digital access is a
necessity. Resume, job posting search engines, and other career building tools, serve as
an incredible opportunity for access for those with established online presence. However,
it also creates an economic bind for those who need a job to secure internet access, and internet access to secure employment.

**Priorities: How UNHCR has Defined Refugee Connectivity**

The promise of digital integration and bridging the digital divide has not gone unnoticed by many of the major global players in immigrant and refugee integration. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) produced a report in 2016 outlining the need for refugee connectivity, and the priorities they identified in bridging the digital divide.

The UNHCR report ushered in a 10 country programme for which is sought 6 million USD in funding. Their prior research indicated a global need for infrastructure, accessibility, and affordability. Importantly, it noted that refugee families globally spend up to a third of their income on connectivity ("Connectivity for Refugees" 2016). Their multi-pronged approach was formulated to assist in these three areas.

Within their report, they note that the benefits of refugee connectivity are wide-ranging. However, they end the report by stating, “Most significantly, better connectivity can promote self-reliance by broadening the opportunities for refugees to improve their own lives.” *(ibid)* They go on to state that connectivity creates a multiplier effect, positively impacting both the refugees themselves and their host communities.

Within this report, the UNHCR noted three main priority areas: accessibility, affordability, and usability. In their report accessibility refers to the infrastructure necessary to access the internet. For their work, this area is addressed by advocacy and targeted investment in a country’s infrastructure meant to ensure that refugees have access to 3G networks and other internet providers. Secondly, they highlight affordability. The 2016 report found that globally, refugees spend approximately a third
of their income on maintaining connectivity, and they recommend advocacy for policies that subsidize, discount, and expand community connectivity resources. Finally, they address the need for usability. To increase usability, UHNCR recommends the development of targeted refugee resources and computer literacy programs.

In this paper, I will use UNHCR’s three priorities from the 2015 report to frame the research and explore how the United States and German policies and infrastructure impact refugee digital integration. In a third portion, I will outline the role NGOs and voluntary organizations play in developing an ecosystem that advocates for, develops, and addresses any gaps within federal policies on these three points of focus.

A New Field: Academia’s Growing Response

While UNHCR has raised global awareness of the potential for positive impact of refugee connectivity on their ability to access economic opportunity and integrate into their host communities, this potential for impact has also been explored by researchers outside of the multinational organization sphere. This research has been spread across several disciplines, and has attracted the interests of migration Think Tanks, as well as researchers in information technology (IT) and immigration studies.

The Migration Policy Institute of Europe found that the IT sector holds particular potential for labor market integration. (Mason 2018) The Migration Policy Institute further found in 2015 that refugees in developed nations are often smartphone users, and under their assumption that access and affordability need were met to allow use, smartphones represented a significant portal by which this particular population could be reached to assist with job acquisition and labor market integration. (Mattoo et al 2018)
Within the realm of IT research, several proposed research agendas, as well as articles and papers, explore the impact of IT integration on refugee populations. The University of Potsdam’s Chair of Information Systems has, as of February 2019, an ongoing project looking into the impact of IT enabled refugee integration. Within this project, panel discussions revealed that, of seven key research themes, experts indicated the importance of IT integration to admissibility to the labor market and entrepreneurship.

Gilhooly and Lee found in their 2013 study that, in particular, digital literacy practices assisted ethnic Karen refugees in the US in several key ways. These practices allowed the refugees to maintain co-ethnic relationships, connection to their diaspora community, promoted ethnic solidarity, and allowed them to create and share digital productions. They further found that internet access allowed youth within the community to navigate economic demands of resettlement. As stated by one of the interviewees:

“Many people don't know how to do many thing, and with Internet, they do. My father don't do on computer, but telephone, he talk to many friend. Many people ask question for school, job, house, and they tell every people.” (Gilhooly and Lee 2014)

This particular field of research is still in its infancy, and many of the papers and articles rest on potential and not yet on published results. The focus of this research has largely been on the social aspects of digital inclusion. The positive impacts of digital integration on social movement cannot be understated. Emerging research indicates that bridging the digital divide assists refugees in navigating new social realities in their host
countries, enables them to engage in online cultural understanding classes, and allows them to create networks with established members of their communities.

However, while many of these studies note the importance of digital inclusion in labor market inclusion, few academic sources focus on this aspect in its own right. Within the literature, the importance of digital inclusion on labor market integration has largely been the purview of think tanks, the United Nations, and non-governmental organizations.

Refugees or Asylees?

For the purposes of this paper, it should be recognized that United States law differentiates between refugees, those who applied outside the country and were selected for resettlement, and asylees, those who apply for protected status upon arrival. Similarly, at the height of the European crisis in 2015, the Dublin Accords that would usually limit entries into Germany nearly entirely to refugees resettled after external processing were relaxed. With this change in EU policy, Germany began processing many arrivals internally, and has granted protected status to many who arrived on the German border and then applied. Because in both circumstances these two legally distinct groups are given access to the same federal support once their applications have been processed and accepted, this paper will refer to these groups both by the title “refugee”, for clarity and simplicity.

Refugee policy, as a subset of a country’s larger Immigration policy, largely consists of two parts: immigration control, or the rules by which immigrants and refugees are accepted for admission; and immigrant policy, or the ways in which the government handles and provides for immigrants (Meyers 2000). For the purposes of this paper, I will
focus on immigrant policies that impact the integration of refugees after they have been legally established within the United States and Germany.
CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS

United States Refugee Integration Policies

Despite the moniker of being a country ‘founded on immigration’, the United States has a long and fraught history with immigration. In its infancy, the US largely largely eschewed federal regulation of immigration. However, as the nation matured it went through several major waves of immigration enforcement and encouragement, often tied to two major priorities: racial hierarchies and labor needs. The Chinese Exclusion Act, the Asiatic Barred Zone, and later quotas placed on countries of origin deemed racially inferior all marked several waves of immigration closure through to the 1930’s, however increased labor demands would force the system back open again. (Bloemraad & de Graauw 2011)

With the end of the Second World War, United States immigration policy began to shift back towards filling labor needs. It was at this time the United States began to take on refugees for humanitarian reasons. Immigrants from Latin America were granted temporary stays to fill labor shortages (ibid). Simultaneously, large numbers of refugees from the war were granted entry outside of the normal quota system. This widening of immigration law would mark a significant moment in United States refugee policy, and also serves as a reminder of the integral part that the needs of the labor force plays in US immigration policy as a whole.

In the current era, the United States refugees face a quota system that is determined by the President in consultation with Congress. In the fiscal year of 2016,
85,000 refugees were resettled into the United States ("Yearbook 2016" 2017). This number that reduced to 54,000 in the next fiscal year under cap reductions made by the Trump administration (In Wake of Cuts to U.S. Refugee Program, Global Resettlement Falls Short), a number further reduced in the following two fiscal years to a low of 30,000 ("Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2019" 2018). These reductions in the caps directly impact the flow of funding to resettlement.

While to an extent refugees within the US are distributed to different states, United States policy is explicitly marked by the federal government passing the responsibility of integration to its trusted voluntary organizations, and not state governments. As found by Bloemraad et al, “Today, the federal government provides most of the funding, but civil society organizations engage in most of the service work that assists refugees with short-term settlement and longer-term integration.” (Bloemraad & de Graauw 2011) These public-private partnerships define US refugee integration policy.

US refugee policy is singular in that it codifies the use of trusted voluntary organizations (VOLAGs). The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) lists nine trusted partners, 8 of which are NGOs, and one of which is a governmental organization. These are: Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief Corporation ("Voluntary Agencies" 2012).
Once refugees have been processed into the system, the United States Bureau for Population, Migration, and Refugees coordinates admissions and allocates refugees to resettlement agencies. The nine primary partners work in conjunction with approximately 250 local associates and partners to administer assistance and deploy benefits. These VOLAGs and their associates are the primary point of contact for refugees, by which they receive housing, funding, and other support ("The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program – an Overview." 2015).

Bloemraad et al found that, "...immigrants are largely expected to use their own resources, family, friendship networks, and perhaps the assistance of local community organizations to survive and thrive in the United States." They go on to state, "There is no coordinated national integration policy" and "In the absence of a uniform national integration policy, this tiered political system has produced a patchwork of social policies that affect newcomers" (Bloemraad & de Graauw 2011)

However, Bloemraad also found that refugees are the only immigrant group that receive federal assistance within the United States (ibid). Bloemraad et al indicate in their paper that their belief is that a better organized effort across all levels of United States government would result in more effective integration of refugees and other immigrants.

Further, while not directly part of the benefits that refugees receive, it should be noted that the United States has a history of affirmative action and anti-discrimination laws that often extend to refugees. These laws assist in labor market integration, and according to Bloemraad et al, despite the piecemeal nature of US support for refugees, the Migration Policy Index ranked the United States 9th out of 32 developed nations in overall immigrant integration policy (ibid).
Refugees are further excluded from the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Prior to this act, legal migrants had access to important, if sparse, federal assistance, such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). However, the PRWORA of 1996 issued a citizenship criterion. Despite this limitation on many other legal immigrants, refugees were issued an exemption, and have maintained access to these emergency assistance measures (ibid).

These factors all together create a complex integration policy that assists refugees during their first months in the United States. It further creates a foundation on which a cohesive economic integration policy could be built. However, none of these policies explicitly assist refugees in addressing their digital integration needs, a key component in economic integration in the digital age.

In its description of refugee benefits, the ORR does list labor market and employment assistance. These measures include English language support, vocational training, and job-related transportation. The ORR fails to list any digital integration policies within these benefits, revealing that digital integration is not at the forefront of its strategy for labor market integration ("ORR Benefits at a Glance").

A deeper look at the ORR’s policies reveals that digital integration fails to be adequately represented throughout its reports. Review of the ORR Annual Reports to Congress from 2016 and 2015 indicate that partner organisations are permitted to purchase computers for refugees under their Individual Development Account Program, for the reasons of either education or micro-enterprise. While this constitutes some work towards affordability and access, it fails to assist with usability. Furthermore, the ORR
makes no references to policies or initiatives prioritizing the digital integration of
refugees in any of its reports to congress in these years.

This grant program was dispersed to voluntary organizations based on the
purchases and programs they created themselves. In this way, the United States federal
government has ceded the responsibility of both digital economic integration to the
VOLAGs with which it partners. This in turn has created a diverse landscape in which
not all the needs of digital integration are being addressed, and programs that do address
these needs vary incredibly in size, capacity, and priority, an issue that will be discussed
further in depth in a later portion of this paper.

The variations in landscape for refugees entering the United States creates an
uneven coverage of programs designed at bridging the digital divide. This, in turn, holds
the potential of restricting refugees who are geographically isolated from these groups
from accessing the technologies that would better enable them to navigate economic and
labor force integration. While the diverse and established ecosystem of NGO and
VOLAG projects within communities indicates that some needs are actively being met,
there nevertheless remains the potential for a more cohesive, efficient, and
comprehensive policy. Given the United States Federal Government’s central role in the
funding of these groups, a federal policy recommending that the UNHCR priority focuses
be met could assist in organizing these efforts.
CHAPTER 3: GERMAN REFUGEE INTEGRATION POLICIES

While the United States is a country largely perceived to be built on immigration, this does not hold true for Germany. While immigration occurs in all countries to some extent over time, the end of the Second World War ushered in a time of increased immigration, with large efforts necessary to resettle first refugees, and later bring in ethnic Germans to assist in labor force needs. ("The Impact of Migration on German Society" 2005)

The post-War economic miracle of Germany quickly expanded labor force needs, and by the 1960’s, West Germany had begun the first of its “Guest Laborer” programs. These programs started with agreements with Italy, but soon after branched out to include several other nations, such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, and more. Unlike resettlement efforts of ethnic Germans, these programs were intended to be temporary, and workers were expected to cycle back to their home countries and be replaced by other individuals, however this expectation was relatively short-lived. (ibid)

Immigration as a form of labor market support has thus long been a norm in Germany, both with the historical encouragement of the return of ethnic Germans and the series of guest worker programs beginning in the 1960’s. This pattern of behavior has not been lost on many academics, who view the current asylum and refugee policies not as immigration policies singularly, but also as clear attempts at bolstering the labor force by increasing population. (Abraham 2016)
Following the 2015 European refugee crisis, Germany has been at the center of the global debate on whether and how to integrate a large influx of refugees. Although within the global conscious the refugee crisis in Europe began in 2015, Germany saw increased refugee applications over the course of 2014. Within the 2014 refugee flow, 130,000 were denied full refugee status, however most of these have stayed. By 2015, Germany had famously received over a million refugee and asylum applications (ibid).

The climbing numbers of applications, among other political forces, precipitated the beginning of a series of policy shifts regarding refugee integration. European Union policies began shifting refugee policy in the early 2000’s by advocating for increased access to education and work for refugee populations throughout Europe. The convergence refugee policy and labor policy can then be seen clearly in German policies in 2012, during which time refugees that were highly skilled were processed through the Germany embassy in Lebanon (Maaroufi 2017:19). In 2014 Germany updated its asylum and refugee integration laws, opening the labor market to refugees three months after arrival, much sooner than had previously been allowed. As noted by Maroufi, in *Precarious Integration*:

“...The law eases refugees’ labour market access by shortening the period during which refugees do not have the right to work, expanding the kinds of employment relations refugees can enter into, and reducing bureaucratic burdens.” (Maaroufi 2017:17)

Furthermore, Maroufi notes, refugees are also allowed to work voluntary jobs, although the pay for these is quite low, at 80 cents per hour. Germany also temporarily
suspended “priority review”, another barrier to job market entry, in many regions during this timeframe (ibid).

Although the legal hard barrier to workforce entry had been lowered, refugees in Germany still face extensive licensing and education requirements in many fields. These requirements represent an area where digital integration has huge potential for impact. With growing development of applications for smartphones and tablets, digital integration can assist refugees in navigating the newly opened workforce and gaining language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and accessing online courses for professional certification.

Despite these overtones of immigration law and refugee integration being viewed through a policy lens of a potential augmentation to the labor force, German policy is remarkably similar to United States policy in its failure to create a cohesive integration regime. However, unlike the United States, Germany does not codify the use of VOLAGs and NGOs. Instead, once the cash value of the benefits has been described at the federal level, the government then allows the federal states (the Länder) decide how this cash is then spent.

As noted by the Asylum Information Database:

“The wording of the latter provision implies that authorities on the regional or local level have wide-ranging discretionary powers when deciding how allowances are to be provided. It therefore will be dependent on local conditions and policies whether non-cash benefits will be reintroduced or not.” ("Forms and levels of material reception conditions")
The provision mentioned above allows states to supply the same value of benefits in the form of non-cash assistance as necessary. However, although *Lande* can formulate benefits packages that include digital inclusion measures, that doesn’t mean they do.

Take for example, the case of Berlin. In their outline of benefits, the city of Berlin notes that refugees will receive accommodation and food, medical care, pocket money, and a public transit ticket good for the first three months after arrival. After the initial three months in the city, refugees are allowed to exit the provided accommodation and live on their own, and at this point they receive higher cash or transfer payments. ("Information for Refugees - Benefits" 2017)

At no point in an explanation of benefits does the city of Berlin indicate any targeted assistance towards digital inclusion measures. While many other needs are met, and therefore cash allowances could be individually applied to acquiring internet capable devices and paying for internet access on those devices, refugees in this case still lack access to state-run programs that would address any computer literacy deficits.

Furthermore, as noted by the UNHCR Connectivity Report, refugee families spend large portions of their finances on connectivity, limiting their ability to accrue the capital that assists in other facets of integration, such as education and cultural inclusion.

Germany stands apart from the US in its accessibility hurdle to digital inclusion. A law, *Störerhaftung*, places liability for illegal activity occurring over a network on the owner of that network. In the United States, no such liability exists, and so free wifi hotspots, or hotspots connected with businesses, create a network of connectivity. Within Germany, many businesses forego wifi due to these liability concerns. Simultaneously,
refugee housing is not required to have internet access. This barrier to accessibility has represented a substantial opportunity for improvement.

With no coherent integration regime, and responsibilities for such integration ceded to Lande struggling to process new intakes, refugees faced multiple hurdles to integration with sparse tools with which to navigate them. As noted by Maroufi:

“Arguably, instead of constituting a ‘refugee crisis’ the movement of refugees towards Germany has thus triggered a crisis of administration (‘Verwaltungskrise’), which could only be handled thanks to voluntary and private support structures.” (Maaroufi 2017, 15)

While the use of voluntary organizations and NGOs are not explicitly listed on any of the policy sites available in English, research into the funding for Caritas, an NGO operating within Germany, found that in 2016 they received 73 million euros from the German government, with 68.8 million of that earmarked for services rendered within the country (“Fiances” 2018).

However, Caritas is an exception and not a rule, having been founded in Germany in 1897. Global international leader, the International Rescue Committee, did not start work in Germany until 2016, a clear indication of the strain under which the German system had come under during the height of the crisis. As will be explored more in depth later, the IRC was part of a large uptick in programs, projects, and organizations beginning with and just following the months that saw the highest refugee intake in Germany. Many of these organizations have primary focus on bridging the digital divide explicitly for the purposes of improved economic integration.
The German federal system has worked to disperse the responsibilities away from the federal government and to local actors, much like the United States system has. However, unlike the United States, this system largely disperses power and responsibility to the Länder and not to VOLAGs and NGOs. Despite this difference, Länder have failed in some cases to address the triplicate needs of accessibility, affordability, and usability. As will be discussed, this has left an opportunity for the growth of a new, complex network of non-government organizations.

**The Role of NGOs**

Both federal systems have made room for the development of complex NGO systems by nature of failing to fill the need of their refugee populations. In the United States, the development of this system has been long a long and perhaps intentional process. Its codification of primary, trusted VOLAG partners has directed money into public-private partnership, and smaller organizations work in tandem with the larger VOLAGs. By contrast, in Germany, the diverse array of larger partners, such as the IRC, and smaller projects has burgeoned since the beginning of the refugee crisis.

In both the United States and German cases, a lack of direct federal requirement for digital inclusion measures has resulted in a diverse array of NGOs and voluntary organizations rising to meet the needs of newly resettled refugees. Led perhaps in part by digital inclusion efforts by the United Nation, digital inclusion initiatives have increased globally. Using the guidance of the UNHCR 2016 report on refugee connectivity, these efforts within the United States can understood within their collective ability to meet the three UNHCR priorities: accessibility, affordability, and useability.
According to the UNHCR report Connecting Refugees, refugees living in North America and Europe are likely to be covered by, at the least, 3G cell coverage. However, this does not necessarily represent accessibility for refugees attempting to access the internet. While extensive internet infrastructure exists in the United States, access is often not affordable, and infrastructure and laws regarding wifi liability have limited the spread of wifi access to refugees in Germany.

Within the United States, a number of established networks of ORR trusted VOLAGs and their local partners have worked to overcome various portions of the UNHCR’s three priorities. In 2017, in Salt Lake City, Utah, the IRC hosted a “Bridging the Gap” digital inclusion event. This event included assisting 60 refugees with getting personal computers, free access to the internet, and basic computer literacy programs. For their Digital Inclusion project, the IRC partnered with PCs for People and Mobile Beacon, both established non-profits.

In Maryland, three separate groups work to assist refugees with computer literacy, addressing the UNHCR priority of usability. Well-established within their local NGO ecosystem, these three groups work near to established IRC offices and areas in which refugees are regularly settled. However, within the state, there are no groups that further digital inclusion initiatives with the comprehensive, if small, plan shown by the IRC in its efforts in Utah.

Here, perhaps, is the largest struggle of the United States in digital inclusion efforts. While NGOs and VOLAGS have a codified place in refugee integration policy, and have risen to the challenge of addressing the digital gap within their networks, a lack of central and comprehensive planning has created vast disparities geographically. In
Utah, a holistic approach to all three UNHCR priorities reached only 60 refugees. Those who are in Maryland receive a number of opportunities to learn to use computers, but are unlikely to receive a computer or internet-enabled device on which to use those skills.

In a report by Newsweek, lack of infrastructure and liability laws in Germany made it particularly difficult to supply refugee welcome centers with access to wifi. The report notes that, in at least one case, there was no internet access available to the refugees in the welcome center, and there were only 4 computers available within the facility (Lopez 2016). Similar access concerns have been faced in Munich, where a report notes that, of over 100 refugee accommodations, only between 5 and 10 of them provide internet access (Hiller 2018).

In both these cases, the “hacktivist” group Freifunk has made efforts to rectify the situation. Freifunk has worked within Berlin, Potsdam, and Munich, as well as other locations. In Berlin and Potsdam, as of 2016, their actions were considered civil disobedience. However, in Munich and Bavaria, the Europa report notes that Freifunk activists were working with the local government to subsidize their infrastructure building and expand access legally.

According to the German think tank Betterplace Lab, these projects were part of a massive explosion in refugee support projects that occurred from late 2015 to early 2016. These projects ranged from accessibility drives like Freifunk, to volunteer and donation coordination. Importantly, one of the largest areas of growth was seen in projects intended to assist refugees in finding jobs and in skills development to enter the job market. (Mason, Schwedersky, & Alfawakheeri)
This report by Betterplace Labs further noted that refugee integration is not under the purview of one person or project. Rather, they state that this broad goal is something that happens as a result of a system of actors working in concert with one another. Given the young and disorganized nature of this ecosystem of projects, the synthesis that can be created through central organization has been lost. This is perhaps no better illustrated by the failure of the projects represented in this report to address affordability concerns at all. With no federal requirements that the Länder provide cell phones, tablets, or other internet capable devices, and few resources dedicated to ensuring access to those devices coming from NGOs or other voluntary organizations, this key third priority has been entirely overlooked within the German system.

Betterplace Labs find that organization and collaboration with the government is a weak point in many of these projects and new organizations (ibid). The importance of the government and its ministries as a funding source here is paramount. Just as in the American case, the lack of a centralized, cohesive plan for refugee connectivity has created blind-spots within the ad-hoc network of projects pursued by NGOs and voluntary organizations.

While many of these projects do focus on assisting refugees in finding jobs, and in acquiring skill sets to enter the labor market, these digital projects and applications can only be accessed if refugees have an internet capable device and the infrastructure by which to access the internet. Given that restrictions on refugee labor market involvement have been eased, and the historical importance of economic integration for refugees, a smart policy would address these blind spots and create a unified, national priority of reducing the refugee digital gap.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

While immigration, and immigrant integration, has been at the forefront of American political discourse for many years, the needs of refugees has only recently come into the broader public attention. Since the start of the European crisis, governments, the public, and media have all been deeply involved in intense debate over whether and how to serve this high-risk population. The needs of this new population has occurred in the context of an ever-connected world, with increasingly complex digital systems governing integration as a whole, and entry into employment specifically.

The United Nations, NGOs, and VOLAGs have been the vanguard in championing the digital inclusion and connectivity of refugees, but countries themselves have been slow to prioritize closing the digital divide as a codified portion of their integration regimes. The United States, largely ceding the responsibilities of integration to its trusted VOLAGs, has entrusted such measures to a patchwork of networks across states. This, in turn, has created a diverse landscape, with many refugees benefiting from regions rich with helpful programs and organizations, and still others left in digital deserts. As stated by Bloemraad, “Immigrants can be treated very differently across political jurisdictions and regions of the United States. Furthermore, not all policies seek inclusion.” (Bloemraad & de Graauw 2011)

Across the Atlantic, the German federal policy has predominantly passed on the responsibility of refugee integration to the Länders to which the refugees are assigned.
These jurisdictions then have wide discretion to apply the federally designated aid in whatever way they please, from cash payments to accommodations. However, no federal policy explicitly prioritizes refugee connectivity and digital inclusion, so access, affordability, and usability can all vary from state to state.

While Germany makes far more explicit use of its federal states than the United States does within its policies, much like the United States, it has trusted NGO and voluntary organization partners. Organizations like Caritas receive grant money from the German government for their assistance with refugee advising and assistance services. However, unlike the United States, these partnerships are not as explicitly relied upon, and are secondary to the support given to refugees by the Länder.

This is where divergence between these two stages largely occurs. Within the US, the explicit reliance on VOLAGs as resettlement partners has created a vast network of supporting voluntary organizations and NGOs that work with primary resettling partners to create programs and assist in integration. These programs operate in tandem with the larger VOLAG partners, offering supplementary services. Many of these programs are well-established, if sometimes hyper-local, and operate within their space in the local NGO ecosystem. As part of a holistic view of refugee integration, many of these programs offer digital literacy courses.

However, the United States system is limited. These holistic programs have stark geographical limitations and are not broadly available across the United States. Not every network of VOLAGs and NGOs are able to produce such extensive assistance, and many refugees are left with computer literacy courses, but no computers.
By contrast, the onset of the European refugee crisis placed the German system under acute strain. Established partners, such as Caritas, certainly rose to the occasion of meeting the everyday needs of integration. However, the refugee crisis was marked by an explosion of new projects, many of which were aimed at digital integration. These projects, by nature of their youth, lacked the placement within an established ecosystem that is much more readily seen within the United States system. These diverse projects have been advocating for increased wifi access, and designing apps to assist refugees in finding better jobs, but have largely done so as individual units, without the synthesis that could expand their outreach to more people in need.

As governments have worked to integrate refugees, these stark differences between refugees and the citizens of the host country. While citizens, cell phone in hand, can check job-finding applications at a moment’s notice, refugees are left waiting in line for a computer. Citizens have access to any number of online course to learn new, marketable skills, while refugees struggle to obtain the same access that could assist them in learning the language of their new host nation.

This limitation on the capacity of refugees to integrate economically is something that could be mitigated through the organization of efforts. In both the United States and German systems, the federal government plays a key role in setting policy and funding those bodies to which it cedes the responsibility of integrating refugees. In order to maximize the economic potential of this group, and to assist in their integration into their new communities, policies that center digital inclusion and a reduction of the digital gap are of utmost importance.
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