Corporate sector engagement in contemporary 'crises': The case of refugee integration in Germany

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Corporate sector engagement in contemporary 'crises': the case of refugee integration in Germany

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Refugee integration is one of the main global challenges of the present, at a time when the corporate sector is regarded as a key actor in multi-stakeholder partnerships through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This paper examines its role as a partner of the state in addressing the movement of refugees into Germany from 2015 onwards. Based on interview data and informal conversations with members of Wir Zusammen, an integration initiative, and supplemented by a review of business reports and media documentation, it discusses the multifaceted engagements by parts of the corporate sector in Germany with refugee integration. These are analysed as 'thin' and 'thick', and as following different institutional logics. The paper adds to understanding of the political dimensions of corporate responses, their potential to challenge the status quo, and their pitfalls. Ultimately, it argues that corporate involvement with humanitarian and development challenges works best when embedded locally and is context specific.

Keywords: corporate sector, corporate social responsibility Germany, global development, integration, refugees

Introduction

In the discourse of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the corporate sector is regarded as a key actor in multi-stakeholder partnerships. The same is the case for one of the main contemporary global challenges: the integration of refugees and migrants into destination countries (Betts and Collier, 2017; Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019). This makes business sector involvement an important pillar of cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs), often incorporated in wider corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas (Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019; Wang and Chaudhri, 2019). While involvement of the business sector in humanitarian and development causes is longstanding, the quasi-institutionalisation of it demonstrates a new significance accorded to corporate actors. In turn, debates about the tensions, possibilities, and indeed paradoxes of merging for-profit enterprise with developmental or humanitarian objectives have gained ground (Hotho and Girschik, 2019; Richey, Hawkins, and Goodman, 2021; Olwig, 2021).

This has led to critical interrogation of the motivations behind corporate engagement. It has been questioned whether doing good while also (or even through) making a profit, thus a combination of utilitarian and compassionate logics, is feasible or even possible (for examples, see Ong, 2006; Sharma, 2015; Andreu, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018). The

outcome of partnerships with the corporate sector has been critiqued as a commodification of humanitarian sentiment, resulting in neglect of localised humanitarian or development needs in favour of corporate strategies that in the end foster profit (Olwig, 2021; Richey, Hawkins, and Goodman, 2021).

A more positive interpretation of such partnerships asserts that they try to solve challenges that need multi-sectoral cooperation, and that different stakeholders act based on different institutional logics, ultimately allowing the sum to be more than its parts (Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019).

Based on these discussions, this paper examines Wir Zusammen (We Together), the main initiative of the corporate sector in Germany to address the movement of refugees into Germany in 2015 and subsequently.[1] Wir Zusammen, founded in 2016 and active until 2019, had the double aim of advancing labour market integration of refugees and fostering societal change through concrete solidaristic engagement. The principal research questions investigated here are what drove the response of the businesses that participated in Wir Zusammen, and how did key actors evaluate that response and its impact on wider society.

The paper expands on the literature of corporate sector engagement in development and humanitarian crises in the following ways. First, it is based on a case in the Global North, but focused on populations from the Global South, and as such transcends the logic of interventions in the Global South that has been more widely critiqued (Horner, 2020). Second, it adds to the literature on partnerships with the corporate sector through its focus on a case where the state actively seeks such a partnership in order to address a humanitarian (and arguably a development) crisis. Third, it interrogates the different ways in which parts of the corporate sector addressed the call to help.

The findings allow for a nuanced interpretation of corporate sector engagement and make the case that localised corporate engagement beyond technocratic fixes can play a valuable role. Corporate entities can indeed engage in acts that create longer-term benefits for individuals and society and foster solidarity, instead of being mainly geared towards profit or instrumental corporate objectives (Lucchi, 2018).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the context of the corporate response to the arrival of refugees in Germany from 2015 onwards, after which comes the introduction of a framework that distinguishes between 'thick' and 'thin' forms of such engagement. Next is a section on methodology and data collection. Forms of corporate engagement are then discussed and analysed as 'thick' and 'thin', and as adhering to different institutional logics. The paper concludes with reflections on the importance of social partnerships that are locally embedded and context specific.

The 'crisis' scenario: refugee arrivals in Germany in 2015 and the quest for corporate sector engagement

Owing to the war in Syria, as well as other global events, 2015 saw relatively large movements of refugees towards the European continent. In multiple incidents, refugees and migrants drowned in the Mediterranean Sea during their attempts to cross it.[2] For those

who succeeded, many were stuck in often dehumanising conditions in countries unwilling to provide support or humanitarian assistance. As the situation worsened, the then Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Angela Merkel, granted thousands of refugees stranded primarily in Hungary entry into Germany in September 2015. It should be noted that under European Union (EU) regulations, the FRG bore no legal responsibility for these refugees, as the so-called Dublin Regulation stipulates that asylum claims are to be processed in the first country of entry into the EU (Maani, 2018).

Merkel's response was not only in contrast to that of the majority of EU countries, as Germany already had been the destination of a comparatively high number of refugees (Zehfuss, 2021), but it also left Germany initially unprepared for the number of new arrivals. In 2015, 476,649 asylum applications were filed in Germany (up from 202,834 the year before), partly as a consequence of Merkel's decision. They reached a peak of 745,545 in 2016 (BAMF, 2022). Numbers dropped sharply subsequently, from 222,683 in 2017 to below 200,000 in later years. This was partly due to the EU's 2016 agreement with Turkey to return migrants from Greece to Turkey and prevent transit through the latter, and various other bilateral agreements between EU states and third countries aimed at stopping migrant journeys (Terry, 2021).

Post-2015 asylum applications were dominated by Syrian nationals (more than 40 per cent of all applicants in most years), followed by people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and Iran, plus a variety of other nationalities, including Albania, Kosovo, Nigeria, and Pakistan (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh, 2020). The first weeks and months after the 2015 entry of refugees into Germany was framed in public discourse as a humanitarian or refugee 'crisis', in itself a questionable titulation (Bojadžijev, 2018; Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh, 2020).[3] But the period saw German authorities literally overwhelmed and initially not always able to provide basic services like shelter. This in turn triggered a response by civil society, celebrities, and the media, which came together to launch campaigns and provide practical support on the ground. This phenomenon was subsequently summed up by the term *Willkommenskultur*, meaning 'welcome culture' (Bock and Macdonald, 2019). It also indicated that a societal response at various levels was needed, while the 'welcome culture' in itself was contested and controversial: the response to these refugee arrivals within wider German society was based on competing conceptions of welcome and xenophobia (Benček and Strasheim, 2016; Trauner and Turton, 2017; Neis, Meier, and Furukawazono, 2018; Laubenthal, 2019). This may in part be behind the fact that Merkel became a key advocate of the EU–Turkey deal, seen to some extent as a reversal of her initial decision to admit refugees. That decision had by then resulted in various political backlashes and considerable gains by a right-wing anti-immigration party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), in general elections in September 2017 and sustained albeit plateaued support since.

In August 2015, Merkel dismissed the fears associated with the arrival of refugees, as summed up in her by now iconic statement at a press conference on 31 August 2015: *wir schaffen das* (we will manage) (Bundesregierung, 2015). The phrase in itself is vague enough to be open to all sorts of interpretations, as it is unclear who 'we' is or what, exactly, will be managed and how. Wir schaffen das is ultimately referring to the challenge of not only

or even mainly supplying immediate (humanitarian) assistance to the refugee arrivals, but also, more importantly, to providing a roadmap to becoming part of German society and its future.

For this, Merkel recognised early on that the corporate sector needed to be drawn into the response, not to help with the humanitarian angle of the evolving situation as discussed in the wider literature on humanitarian–business partnerships (see, for example, Pascucci, 2021), but with regards to the longer-term, developmental response. Here, labour market integration was a key arena. In actual fact, *schaffen* is not so much a visionary term, but a pragmatic expression of future success linguistically related to hard work and self-improvement.

Following this logic, in autumn 2015, Merkel invited a group of around 20 German business leaders to the Chancellery and the sole topic of discussion was how the corporate sector could advance the integration of these new refugees. 'This was a rare occasion', one of those present remembers, 'refugee integration was the only topic of discussion, while normally business representatives come with their own interests and lobbying objectives'. He went on to say that businesses are part of society, 'so we had to rally around this request as business leaders, we could not simply say the Chancellor has to solve the problem'.[4] Merkel's initiative can be interpreted as an active attempt at creating a CSSP with the clear objective of refugee integration, which could also fit well with wider CSR agendas.

In fact, the corporate sector in Germany has a long history of lobbying in favour of easier immigration rules in order to address labour shortages, and many German companies had regarded the admittance of refugees as a welcome starting point for overcoming such shortages and future demographic bottlenecks (Bergfeld, 2017; Juran and Broer, 2017). It was hoped that this could serve as an important milestone on the way towards greater acceptance of migration from outside of the EU.

One result of this meeting between Merkel and business leaders was the creation of the Wir Zusammen[5] integration initiative of the German business sector. The network, which existed between February 2016 and June 2019, defined itself as the focal point of refugee integration into the labour market. But it also proclaimed a much broader motivation: namely, to contribute to positive social change and an ethos of solidarity. These latter objectives are similar to those behind civil society activism around refugees. In addition, outside of Wir Zusammen, parts of the corporate sector proactively engaged with refugee integration, but in this paper the focus is on those who joined the network.

Wir Zusammen can be described as a state-mandated response of the corporate sector to the humanitarian and developmental challenges that the refugee arrivals posed for German society. It therefore provides a pertinent case study to interrogate the benefits of such a type of engagement for meeting longer-term global challenges, here, refugee integration.

In discussing the multifaceted responses by parts of the corporate sector in Germany that became part of Wir Zusammen, I assess how businesses themselves interpret their motivation and engagement. While the case study on which the paper is based centres on a perceived humanitarian crisis in the Global North, in which businesses in the same setting intervene (instead of the more common configuration of corporate interests

intervening in humanitarian crises in the Global South), it shows corporate engagement at different scales and levels. I analyse the differences between various types of corporate engagement as 'thin' and 'thick', and as following different institutional logics. The next section defines how I use the concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' engagement.

'Thin' and 'thick' forms of corporate sector engagement

In the literature on CSSPs, these social partnerships are often interpreted as strategies that are not only particularly effective in achieving societal benefits, but also equally relevant to core company activities and values (Vurro, Dacin, and Perrini, 2010). Although Wir Zusammen is not a classical CSSP, where businesses and non-profit or international organisations partner to address an important societal issue, the connections with state-demanded action aimed at social change make corporate engagement in refugee integration a form of a CSSP, as envisaged, for instance, by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Yet, as is the case with any CSR engagement, this can be driven by different parts of a business. In addition, it can be transformative within the organisation or beyond to various levels and degrees, linked, among other parameters, to motivations to engage and the legitimacy of such engagement (see, for example, Kolk, van Dolen, and Vock, 2010; Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015).

I add to this a focus on the degree of corporate engagement and distance to core corporate activities. To do so, I analyse the engagement of the corporate sector within Wir Zusammen with newly arrived refugees in Germany as 'thin' and 'thick'. These terms are borrowed from Ferguson (2006) who uses 'thin' and 'thick' capitalist penetration in relation to corporate strategies on the African continent. The most potent symbol of 'thin' penetration is the offshore oil rig, where business investment literally does not touch the ground. In contrast, 'thick' engagement relies on local labour and includes the struggles over labour conditions, unionisation, and other forms of interaction that shape wider society beyond the relationship between corporate actors and labour. Furthermore, Ferguson (2013) contrasts functional 'thin' recognition of people's entitlements visible in universal grants that abolish historical person-to-person relationships, inter alia, with socially 'thick' recognition that recognises relationships with entitlements based on social obligations linking states and citizens, and, one could add, businesses (even though Ferguson focuses on scenarios in southern Africa where wage labour and resulting social relations are illusionary for large parts of the population). Taken together, 'thick' recognition has as its key characteristic a high degree of incorporation into a specific social group, just as 'thick' capitalist penetration is related to such groups and is context specific.

I adapt this distinction proposed by Ferguson, moving from degrees of incorporation to degrees of engagement and their distance from core corporate activities and the social relations that emerge from them. In my analysis I define 'thin' engagement as forms of engagement removed from daily business activities and encounters within companies; or where engagement centres on the donation of goods, often combined with some form of branding or the manufacturing of future customers. 'Thin' engagement also includes

instances where employees are allowed to use their working hours to volunteer outside the company. In contrast, I define 'thick' engagement as engagement that takes place within core business activities, is integrated into daily routines, and involves time and resources of management and employees combined. Other forms of 'thick' engagement are the use of time and resources to challenge the legal environment within which refugee integration takes place, a process that aims to influence wider society, not dissimilar to what Ferguson analysed as 'thick' capitalist penetration.

The categories of 'thin' and 'thick' engagement permit a discussion of the transformative potential (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos, and Palmer, 2010) of the different forms of engagement within Wir Zusammen, and how they are related to the motives and rationales behind this particular form of CSR. These range from the 'instrumental motives' (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos, and Palmer, 2010, p. 147) dominant in 'thin' forms of engagement to the idealistic and/or intrinsic motives (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos, and Palmer, 2010, pp. 147–149) dominant in 'thicker' forms of engagement. In this regard, the categories of 'thin' and 'thick' engagement allow for a reinterpretation of the clusters of institutional logics proposed for the analysis of CSSPs (Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019)—namely, state logics (bureaucracy, politics), community logics (humanitarianism, forms of altruism), and market logics (resources, customers, profits)—as they focus on how micro practices of engagement relate to desired processes of social change.

Before discussing in detail the modes of 'thin' and 'thick' engagement by a sample of companies that joined Wir Zusammen, the next section sets out the methodology and data collection procedures.

Methodology and data collection

Methodologically, the main argument of this paper is based on interviews and informal conversations with company representatives of businesses that engaged in Wir Zusammen conducted between 2017 and 2020. Informal conversations took place at two public events of Wir Zusammen in Hamburg and Berlin on 30 May 2017 and 14 September 2017, respectively. I also carried out a review of relevant business and media reports.[6] This choice of methodology was based on the rationale to interrogate business sector responses in concrete detail, including how they were judged by key participants in the respective companies, which is best achieved through in-depth face-to-face interviews.

After initial interviews and informal conversations with company representatives at the two public events, and a detailed study of the different modes of engagement within Wir Zusammen, I contacted in writing 33 companies from the network whose main focus was on providing work placements, apprenticeships, or other forms of work opportunities. I decided to concentrate on employment provision and concrete labour market integration measures as my intention was to investigate the longer-term objective behind wir schaffen das and the impulse to engage with it.

Of the 33 companies, nine agreed to participate, and six responded by sending materials about their engagement and/or newspaper clippings that featured some of their

refugee employees, but declined to be interviewed or visited. The rest (18) did not reply or declined the invitation after various follow-ups.

The choice of methodology, and its reliance on business representatives to consent to participate, might have introduced a potential bias into the data, but it was the only feasible approach in relation to the wider goal of focusing on motivations and micro practices. In particular, the relatively high number of businesses that declined to be interviewed may suggest a bias towards those for which civic engagement beyond corporate interests is a higher priority. Even if that were the case, the company representatives interviewed did provide valuable insights into company motivations for engagement. Furthermore, in the majority of businesses that declined to be interviewed, the main reasons were time and staff constraints; and in a number of cases, those originally in charge of establishing Wir Zusammen engagement had meanwhile been given other responsibilities within their respective companies. More generally, as also reported elsewhere (Torfa et al., 2022), the knowledge gap that exists with respect to corporate engagement in refugee integration is strongly connected to the refusal of businesses to participate and/or share data, or an over-reliance on known gatekeepers. In contrast to the study by Torfa et al. (2022), I had no previous contacts with gatekeepers, but started from the data available via Wir Zusammen, which allowed me to engage with a much more diverse set of corporate actors and geographical locations. Therefore, even this small sample, based on in-depths interviews, can make a valuable contribution to an important but under-researched issue.

Between May 2017 and February 2020, I interviewed 20 company representatives and visited 12 companies. Geographically, the companies involved covered the city states of Berlin and Hamburg, as well as the states of Baden Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia. The companies visited comprised: five global players with German origins (GGPs); one tech startup with less than 100 employees; three Mittelstand companies supplying household goods, catering, and transport, respectively, each with up to 30 employees; a German health insurance company; and two infrastructure companies majority-owned by Länder governments.[7] The company representatives (sometimes more than one in each company) interviewed were either the chief executive (for small companies), the person(s) in charge of apprenticeships and personnel issues, and/or the person(s) in charge of personnel management; in the case of some of the GGPs, a post of manager for refugee integration had been created and I interviewed the person in that position. In addition, I held informal conversations at the two Wir Zusammen public events with company representatives of additional companies that were the focal point of that engagement within their companies.

All interviews with company representatives were open-ended and framed by an interview guide. The interview guide contained questions about: the motivation for engagement and for participating in Wir Zusammen; the objectives of that engagement; concrete details about the engagement; experiences of this engagement at the time of the interview; expected benefits for the company and/or wider society; and the longer-term expected impacts on public life and society, based on (previous) experiences. Interviewees were encouraged to raise any other issues. I took notes during the interviews, which were all conducted in German, and wrote up an extensive interview report immediately afterwards.

Interviews usually lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. I then translated the interview data into English. The interviews and the notes from conversations and observations at the two public events were analysed using thematic analysis. I entered all the data into a FileMaker Pro database that I created based on specific themes, in line with the key questions in the interview guide. Key themes included: motivations for engagement; objectives; concrete forms of engagement; experiences with refugee apprentices/refugee employees/mentees; link between engagement and government policy; evaluation of impact on wider society; and evidence of such an impact.

All interviews have been anonymised and all companies that were visited participated on the condition that the data and company would be anonymised. Interview data presented therefore only indicate the type of company; geographical location has been removed as this could easily identify the company in some cases. Where companies or networks are mentioned in the analysis below, the data are not based on interviews but on public events or other publicly available resources. The project received all required ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of The University of Manchester.

The multiple corporate sector responses to refugee integration within Wir Zusammen

As noted, engagement by the corporate sector with newly arrived refugees in Germany can be analysed as 'thin' and 'thick'. Those categories add important political and societal dimensions to the literature on corporate responses to 'crises'. As the discussion below demonstrates, the type of engagement is: partly related to the kind of business; connected to a division between local and global; and, in relation to multinational companies, depends on whether they are of German or non-German origin. The latter predominately engaged in 'thin' activities, even though such boundaries are often fluid, whereas companies with more local roots or local embeddedness tended to follow the call for 'thick' forms of engagement more readily.

The various forms of 'thin' engagement

Paradigmatic examples of 'thin' engagement, showcased at the two public events that I attended in Hamburg and Berlin, are multinational tech companies that have a presence in Germany, that teamed up with the non-profit sector, and that provided 'hardware' to help the response, often through an intermediary organisation. This could take the form of donations of notebooks or other hardware, handily with the software of the donating company installed, or support in the transfer of technical know-how. The rationale behind this was based on the idea that the non-profit sector with expertise in the area of refugees 'knows better what to do', and is best placed to provide a response adjusted to local needs.[8] Such responses are often made up of collaborations between international global tech companies, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sometimes including start-ups, and consortia that facilitate these collaborations, and as such, are examples of the

types of CSSPs envisaged by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Two prominent examples related to the response in Germany linked to Wir Zusammen initiatives are the work of: Nethope, 'a consortium . . . [that] unites with technology companies and funding partners to design, fund, implement, adapt, and scale innovative approaches to solve development, humanitarian, and conservation challenges',[9] and here specifically the Project Reconnect that linked hardware donations to NGOs that provided refugees with access to online education, language training, and other resources (Nethope, 2017); and the online learning platform Kiron.[10]

This type of response mirrors in many ways contemporary humanitarian and development responses to refugee 'crises', including in refugee camps. Here, local NGOs (and in the case of refugee camps also the United Nations Refugee Agency and other United Nations partners) are given support or services by business companies—which also make sure that their brand names are widely advertised. One notable area of such engagement, as the two examples above also demonstrate, is furthering refugee education through access to technologies, teaching materials, and professional development of educational workers. This development raises important questions in relation to the de-contextualisation of interventions and an overemphasis on technological solutions (Menashy and Zakharia, 2019). The latter has also been critically observed in the wider literature on humanitarian interventions by the corporate sector, as it supports an ideology where it becomes quasi natural for the private sector to assume responsibilities traditionally fulfilled by the state and/or non-for-profit entities, frequently based on market principles (Burns, 2019; Le, 2019).

Such corporate support or donations are often provided not by the main company, but by its foundation arm or a charity attached to it—a form of what has been called 'philanthrocapitalism'. This is partly a means to reduce company tax obligations while fostering market-based solutions and, directly or indirectly, long-term profits for the company in question—for further details, see the discussion in Kapoor (2013) and Haydon, Jung, and Russell (2021).

What is more, some of the companies active in Wir Zusammen had an approach with a corporate volunteering element, where employees could use part of their work time to engage in help for refugees. This 'thicker' form of engagement was partly started through 'soft pressure' by employees who were direct witnesses of the initial humanitarian crisis the refugee arrivals triggered, such as on their way to work via train stations where refugee groups had set up provisional campsites.[11] Such corporate volunteering took different forms, including 'buddy systems' through which individual employees became the dedicated 'buddy' of a refugee, often assigned via an NGO, and helped them one afternoon a week with any problems they may have. In other companies, employees, including those in senior positions, were freed from work obligations to dedicate one day a week as mentors to study German with a refugee. Staff were also given time off from work to help refugees with technical and software issues, in particular among tech companies.[12]

These activities, as reported by representatives of those involved and in line with the wider literature on corporate volunteering (see, for example, Beyond Philanthropy and Universität Mannheim, 2018; Saz-Gil et al., 2020), not only contributed to happiness and

personal gratification among staff volunteers, but equally 'changed the overall culture within the company in subtle ways'.[13] In some cases, these opportunities for voluntary engagement with refugees became integrated into a company's official CSR strategy, which allowed for longer-term engagement beyond the initial 'emergency' response, and arguably can become a form of 'thick' engagement.

In a different way, such 'thicker' modes of 'thin' engagement have parallels to the response by the voluntary sector, partly established and partly newly formed in Germany as a consequence of the refugee arrivals. Such engagement, often started by a group of employees, may initially have centred on a call for donations of clothes or help with food provision, for instance, sometimes, as an interviewee of a GGP put it, 'triggered by a nearby refugee accommodation facility that made the issue seem very real'.[14] This, as was the case in this example, has led over time to a distinct budget line and the creation of a full-time post to coordinate all engagement with refugees, not 'least to demonstrate that the corporate sector supports refugees'.[15] At this GGP, this has resulted in long-term financial support of language courses for refugees (offered by outside providers) and the opportunity for short internships for refugees who participate in any trainings offered by the German agency responsible for labour market integration, the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BfA), that have an internship component. By providing some form of longer-term engagement, I would call this a 'thicker' form of 'thin' engagement, as it remains largely centred on donations or financial contributions, any volunteering by employees is unconnected to their work, and the cost of short-term internships is covered by the BfA. It thus remains an activity not connected to the core business of the company.

'Thick' engagement on the shopfloor and beyond

The engagement that Merkel arguably had in mind when she called upon the corporate sector for help, was a form of 'thick' engagement, a focus on long-term perspectives and integration into the labour market, in particular, for which concrete in-company engagement was necessary. Many of the businesses involved in Wir Zusammen did indeed provide such opportunities in different ways, not only by offering internships as a starting point and subsequent apprenticeships, but also employment opportunities for those with the required skill base, often combined with in-house language teaching to make sure potential employees could acquire the required language skills in the best possible way. The head of training of a GGP remarked in this respect: 'For us it was important to engage in an activity that could be a first step for long-term integration, for a fulfilled life; we started with offering internships. . . . I remember when we interviewed refugees for the first internships, we interviewed often highly qualified people and they sat there nervous and shivering; this chance of an internship was so important for them as the starting point for a new life after often long, enforced periods of boredom in refugee accommodation'.[16]

There was also hope among businesses of being able to influence a shift in state structures and bureaucracy in relation to recognition of previous qualifications from outside of the EU. This hope was based on the fact that integration and an outlook for the future were not only important for refugees themselves, but also for social peace in Germany,

especially in those locations where large numbers of refugees came to reside. In the words of a representative of an infrastructure company with an advanced apprenticeship programme, a key motivation of the initiative was not only to make it 'part of normality to employ refugees . . . but to make Germany their home [*Beheimatung*], to contribute to make refugees feel comfortable living within a German cultural environment'.[17]

In concrete terms, there were moves by various companies to judge pre-qualifications and competencies differently from the strict rules set out by the Chamber of Commerce for each profession, as few refugees would have abilities that corresponded to the specific German dual system (*duales System*) of an apprenticeship—yet, many, estimated at around 50 per cent by some, had professional competence that one could build upon, thus needed not to start at zero.[18] This aspiration, to adjust entry qualification recognition procedures, mainly worked in some smaller city states; in general, this avenue remained closed.

A note about the German education and apprenticeship system is in order here: the usual route into many professions attractive to skilled refugees is the German apprenticeship system called the dual system. It is based on shopfloor learning as an apprentice combined with, partly profession-centred, secondary school education. Hence, an apprentice goes to school either one or two days a week and the other days he/she is on the shopfloor, or, alternatively, blocks of school attendance alternate with blocks at work, depending on the profession. An apprenticeship in most professions lasts for three years. Successful completion offers a good chance to gain permanent employment and further qualification opportunities. In that sense, for anybody wanting a professional life in Germany, an apprenticeship is perhaps the most valuable entry point, almost like winning the lottery as one research participant put it.

Apprenticeships also include an examination at the local Chamber of Commerce; consequently, good expertise in the German language, including technical German for the relevant profession, is a prerequisite for completion. For businesses engaged in offering apprenticeships, the entry route for applicants usually is an internship of between three weeks to three months, to work out if the job and the applicant's profile fit, but also if the applicant suits the company culture.

The companies playing a key role in 'thick' integration of refugees through labour market schemes focusing on apprenticeships and other work opportunities were: GGPs; (partly) publicly owned companies; and the medium-sized companies for which Germany is famous, the Mittelstand (the latter, though, often outside of Wir Zusammen as part of other initiatives, as is briefly discussed later).

The guiding philosophy was usually composed of a mixture of considerations. The starting point was often the firm belief of management that anybody 'who arrives with a refugee biography needs to be given a chance to build a future in Germany',[19] and the workplace can be an important location where feeling at home (*heimisch werden)* can be fostered.[20] In addition, to exchange shopfloor experiences with refugees was seen as fostering a more global and diverse outlook. According to a representative of an infrastructure company: 'If you spend the whole day with somebody who has fled war and other hardship, that does something to how you see the world'.[21]

Generally, the majority of companies active in Wir Zusammen have some global reach and engagement, while it is increasingly recognised that Germany is in fact an immigration society (*Einwanderungsgesellschaft*), a fact often denied or contested in political discourse (Laubenthal, 2019).

Lastly, current or future bottlenecks in the labour market in specific fields were also part of the rationale to engage in Wir Zusammen, but not the main driving force for many. The head of training of a GGP said in this respect: 'We became part of Wir Zusammen because it was good to see what other companies were doing . . . we offer entry qualification programmes, but we do not see refugees as a means to combat labour shortages; the labour we need is technical and highly specialised'.[22] And an interviewee from another GGP offering internships stated: 'We do not have a shortage of labour, rather the opposite, we are currently reducing employment, but we still find it important to be part of a movement that gives people a perspective for the future'.[23]

However, even businesses that suffer from labour shortages, and where this was part of the decision to offer apprenticeship programmes, are clear that an apprenticeship is a substantial investment by the company in question, not only in terms of finance, but also the additional support that refugee apprentices need on the shopfloor and in dealings with state bureaucracy, and sometimes in navigating legal issues (see also von Dewitz, 2018; Müller, 2021). The head of a Mittelstand company said in that respect: 'It takes a lot of additional time to train refugees, they need help with many other issues, and sometimes they have issues among themselves, strange hierarchies . . . you need to remind them all the time they are here to complete a professional training, then it is usually OK'.[24]

Furthermore, the head of training of a health insurance company, which proactively engaged with refugee integration before Wir Zusammen was founded and also accepts those with uncertain legal status as apprentices, commented: 'Every time refugees receive any official correspondence, they are scared and disturbed, and we need to spend time to go through the correspondence together and help deal with bureaucratic demands . . . sometimes we need to include our legal department'.[25]

The latter points, legal issues combined with state bureaucracy, often require an additional form of 'thick' engagement, in relation to challenging the interpretation of laws and regulations that vary in the different Länder.

Merkel did not only call on the corporate sector for help, she also publicly confirmed the 'three plus two' regulation. This stipulates that any refugee with subsidiary status (not formally recognised) in an apprenticeship would be allowed to complete the programme and work for two years afterwards, without having to fear being sent back to their country of origin. Yet, while some Länder in Germany's federal system did fully implement this rule and the corporate sector lobbied in favour of it, in other Länder, refugee apprentices, or well-integrated refugees with key positions in companies, were sent back. Business lobbying did not always manage to prevent such returns in an overall climate of increasing hostility towards refugees amongst some parts of the German population after the welcoming summer of 2015 (von Dewitz, 2018; Bock and Macdonald, 2019).

This presented additional challenges for the corporate sector, and ultimately resulted in various initiatives to advocate for a firm legal basis for those in work but without

official status. Within companies, different avenues were pursued to address the insecurities surrounding the status of refugee apprentices and employees, which affected refugees and employers in different but related ways. Some companies did not employ people without full refugee status, as they feared the upheaval within the company if such a person was deported.[26] In the words of an interviewee from an infrastructure company: 'One wants to avoid protests within the company, if, for example, an Afghan apprentice may be deported as happened in other places, so we only accept those with legal status'.[27]

Others were prepared to fight the case of their employees in court. In Baden-Württemberg, for instance, one of the states known for its restrictive recognition practice, an apprentice with a GGP was to be deported. The company helped to organise missing paperwork, redrafted the apprenticeship contract, and took the case to court at the company's expense—and won. In the words of the head of the unit where this took place: 'As a family business, even if we are now a global player with a non-German CEO [chief executive officer], we of course will support all our employees'.[28]

A small catering company dealt with these legal and bureaucratic issues around work in a different way.[29] When it heard about Wir Zusammen, the company owners thought 'we are a rich country and have a responsibility to help, we must become part of this. We soon realised, the main need of many refugees was an opportunity to work, and in catering this does not need too much training. But we also soon realised this was very complex, as most did not have any status yet—we managed by creating a sort of mini job, but even for this we had to rely on the staff at the employment office, and they supported us in doing this'.[30]

The uncertain legal situation made businesses outside of Wir Zusammen, largely made up of Mittelstand companies, start a form of 'thick' engagement with a longer-term strategic objective, beyond their companies and individual employees. In 2018, they established a coalition to challenge legal practice through the 'status through work' (Bleiberecht durch Arbeit) initiative, involving a group of 1,500 medium- and small-scale businesses that between them employ around 2,500 refugees.[31] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this initiative in more detail, but according to the rationale presented by key members in media appearances and on the website, it was initially targeting well-integrated refugees in whose professional development the companies had often already made substantial investments (von Dewitz, 2018). But even this narrow focus can be interpreted as a form of 'thick' engagement, as it aims to change exclusionary societal parameters in relation to refugee integration.

Turning back to Merkel's original call to the corporate sector to help with the integration of the post-2015 wave of refugees, the 'thick' engagement of many of the companies that joined Wir Zusammen provided integration into the labour market and, in many instances, also the German way of life. At this level, it can be interpreted as successful cooperation between parts of the corporate sector and the state. Ultimately, though, the same state puts this cooperation in jeopardy through restrictive rules on migration and asylum, and the right to remain, as well as on occasion, the right to work itself.

Discussion: 'thin' and 'thick' corporate engagement with refugee integration

When looking at corporate engagement with refugee integration in Germany within the Wir Zusammen network, explicitly requested by Chancellor Merkel in 2015, this case confirms and challenges some of the wider literature on corporate sector responses to humanitarian and developmental crises. It should also be noted that few studies exist on the role of the corporate sector in refugee integration specifically (for exceptions, see Omata, 2012; Rietig, 2016; Goethals et al., 2017; Müller, 2021; Schmidt and Müller, 2021; Torfa et al., 2022). This is a rather surprising fact as corporate actors are seen to have an increasingly important role to play here (Global Compact on Refugees, n.d.).

In line with other observations in the wider literature (for a good overview, see Hotho and Girschik, 2019), some of the examples presented above reveal that a key motivation of business sector engagement was at least partially a perceived moral or ethical responsibility for those in need of help and support. At the same time, while to different degrees driven by philanthropic motives or reasons not directly related to core business activities and future profits, forms of 'thin' engagement in particular were driven considerably by profit, branding, or other utilitarian factors.

'Thin' engagement is dominated by market logics (Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019) and in the examples above often propelled by a focus on the short to medium term, in providing resources through charitable-type interventions that have many similarities to the response of the voluntary sector. The corporate sector here is one actor among many and does not contribute to integration in a sustained way by using its key advantage in relation to the voluntary sector: namely, to provide employment or longer-term labour market integration. The main advantage of this type of 'thin' corporate engagement is potentially the fact that in contrast to volunteers in the non-profit sector, whose engagement is reportedly partly underpinned by emotional satisfaction from helping others and accompanied by direct or indirect expectations of gratitude (Karakayali, 2017), corporate volunteering rather 'helps to strengthen corporate belonging, and works well when management and employees plan together what would be useful to do'.[32] It should be noted here that regardless of a partly critical view of volunteer activities, those volunteers and civil society as a whole played and continue to play an important role in refugee integration, beyond the initial response when volunteers often supplied services that state actors were unable to provide (Funk, 2016; Neis, Meier, and Furukawazono, 2018).

This aspect, that a corporate response has potential positive externalities for companies and employees alike, is also a key feature of the 'thick' forms of engagement that Merkel's call targeted, which address the strategic agenda of long-term integration combined with future labour market bottlenecks. Here, the institutional logics of the state, community, and market (Hesse, Kreutzer, and Diehl, 2019) seem on the face of it to combine. Taking a closer look, however, while the logics of community and market seem to align in important ways, the logic of the state does less so. For most employers that offered 'thick' engagement in the shape of apprenticeships, for example, it was soon evident that this also required considerable community engagement in the form of extra time and

support at various levels. Yet, such engagement seemed worthwhile, as demonstrated by the sharp increase of Afghani and Syrian refugees in particular who entered vocational training (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh, 2020), who also saw this as a route to long-term integration and the fulfilment of their personal aspirations as well.[33]

From an employer's perspective, refugee apprentices partly help to fill gaps in labour for some companies, often taking jobs that 'we [referring to German-born staff] do not want to do any longer' as they require an 'apprenticeship, whereas nowadays most people want to study at university'.[34] For most companies, though, this was not the main driver, as discussed above. Rather, a major benefit was the intangible externalities from encounters with people from different backgrounds. As demonstrated in other studies on corporate sector engagement in humanitarian responses, the most-valued advantages of such engagement were the strengthening of skills and staff competencies (UN OCHA, 2017). In a context like Germany, where demography dictates that immigration needs to accelerate to retain productivity, joint learning and engagement on the shopfloor are key aspects. Such encounters also extend beyond the world of work: employers and employees alike talk at home and with their friends about these encounters, and that changes society in the long term. An interviewee from a GGP put it this way: 'Some of the refugee-apprentices have a better CV [curriculum vitae] and more experience than I have, and still they have few changes for employment, that makes one think'.[35] More generally, it has been shown in the wider literature that in workplaces with regulated working conditions, workplace integration works better than integration into wider society, and thus the former can aid the latter (Schmidt and Müller, 2021).

'Thick' engagement by the corporate sector was helped by a market logic: the point in time when larger than usual numbers of refugees arrived in Germany coincided with a dearth of qualified people for some professions—thus, the starting point for integration via the labour market and employment was good.[36] At the same time, such engagement followed a humanitarian logic and enhanced a sense of purpose among staff and employer–employee relations, as also noted in a consultancy report on Wir Zusammen (Berger, 2017). This is not to deny that in some instances, tensions could arise as a result of business engagement. After all, 'employees are a mirror of society, and some vote for the AfD and want nothing to do with refugees',[37] but on the whole, very few such tensions were reported (see also Schmidt and Müller, 2021).

While one would expect this engagement and its positive externalities also to feed into the state logic, this was frequently not so. A number of interviewees reported that refugee-apprentices quit or disappeared from one day to the next, because they heard of fellow apprentices who were deported even though they would fall under the three plus two regulation discussed above.[38] This was especially the case for refugees from Afghanistan, as parts of that country were considered a 'safe country of origin' by organs of the state at the time, to which refugees could be sent back. Such occurrences also create unrest and fear within workplaces, and they pose serious problems for employers that invested money and other resources in their apprentices and staff (Bollmann and Kloepfer, 2019; Riese, 2020).

New legislation in Germany aims to make staying perspectives more secure, but it remains to be seen if this is to become reality in all Länder. For now, company lobbying in favour of granting rights to refugees who are skilled and/or have employment, if because of utilitarian or civic motives or a combination of both, has not fundamentally changed the institutional logic of the state. While individual and collective business integration initiatives are important, neither labour market integration nor the wider civic concerns of the business sector have fundamentally altered many of the exclusionary politics of the German nation-state, or if they have, only at the margins.

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the engagement of the corporate sector with one of the main contemporary global challenges: the integration of refugees into host societies. I have done so based on the example of the German business sector integration initiative Wir Zusammen. I have assessed the different forms of corporate engagement as 'thick' and 'thin' and interrogated what forms of institutional logics proposed for the analysis of CSSPs—state, community, and market logics—were driving such engagement.

The paper is based on a comparatively small sample of companies active in Wir Zusammen for reasons outlined in the methodology section, and therefore the findings should be read as exploratory and not generalisable—but it is worth noting that a paper recently published with similar limitations and based on only a city arrives at comparable conclusions (see Torfa et al., 2022). Another caveat is that labour market integration driven by corporate actors can only address the integration of those refugees who aspire to have a professional life in Germany (see also Müller, 2022). Those with different long-term aspirations require different forms of engagement. This is exemplified by this experience narrated by an interviewee from a Mittelstand company, who had six refugees as apprentices over time: 'Four of them quit after a few weeks, they realised they have different plans for their life, and as far as I know they are no longer in Germany . . . but the two who stayed are doing very well, even though there is the worry that one does not have status yet'.[39]

With those caveats in mind, I come to the following conclusions. First, some forms of 'thin' engagement are predominately driven by market logics, but also support state logics, most pronounced in the provision of short-term humanitarian support when the state comes up short. They also include an element of community logics in that employees have a means to follow their own humanitarian impulses with little cost to the employer. Such responses were particularly pronounced in multinational corporations, and based on a similar template as has been analysed for humanitarian–business partnerships, for example, in refugee camps: providing electronic platforms or logistical solutions (Pascucci, 2021).

Second, the focus of 'thick' engagement is long term and involves challenging the status quo and often also the institutional logics of the state, especially in relation to the application of asylum practices, whose legal formulations are frequently vague and hence

subject to interpretation at local levels. A main feature of 'thick' engagement, based on the combined institutional logics of market and community, is the offer of entry qualifications, apprenticeships, or employment (the latter only in exceptional cases as most refugees lack the necessary qualifications). While such initiatives partly aim to address current or future labour shortages and are seen to enhance the profile and reputation of a company, they equally require a lot of dedication and thus follow community logics to an important degree. It is, perhaps not surprisingly, predominately GGPs or Mittelstand companies that engage in these forms of 'thick' engagement and that stress their responsibility for wider German society as being a key reason for their engagement (see also Berger, 2017; Müller, 2021; Torfa et al., 2022).

These types of companies are also the drivers when challenging the implementation of asylum legislation. They critique the still restrictive law on right to remain connected to work (Beschäftigungsduldung) and have created the corporate-initiative Bleiberecht durch Arbeit that advocates status being granted to those in employment.[40]

These two findings speak to the wider literature on corporate sector engagement in humanitarian and development causes in the following ways. One can interpret some of the findings as being yet another example of what Richey, Hawkins, and Goodman (2021, p. 3) call the realisation of humanitarian compassion through a humanitarian response 'synonymous with the capitalistic and corporate sentiments of profit'. This is visible here, for instance, in brand advertising as forms of 'thin' engagement, combined with making employees feel good about themselves as a form of 'solidarity as irony' (Chouliaraki, 2011). Even to address labour market shortages that may threaten future profits could be seen as centred on corporate profits, as could making visible such engagement as a means to create new consumers.

Yet, when looking at the motivations behind 'thick' engagement, such an interpretation does not hold (which is arguably also the case for some forms of 'thin' engagement). Rather, corporate engagement is driven by institutional logics beyond profit, and grounded in moral values specific to the locality, Germany, and its specific forms of corporate society relations and the resulting understanding of social partnerships. These values in relation to engagement with refugees are summed up in exemplary fashion by two of my interviewees from a tech company and an infrastructure company, respectively. The latter said: 'As an employer, we need to help make normality the norm, to show that having a refugee biography is not something alien, but a normal biography, and that is why we have great interest in making all apprentices feel at home'.[41] Or to put it differently, in the words of the former interviewee: 'Everybody who wants to contribute is welcome',[42] and the role of the corporate sector is to help facilitate this.

These findings point to the usefulness of evaluating corporate sector engagement with humanitarian and developmental causes at localised levels and as local solutions, paying attention not only to the geographies of refugeeness, but also equally to the geographical embeddedness of corporate actors. For parts of the business sector strongly embedded within Germany and its fast ageing society, regardless of global reach, 'thick' engagement driven by the belief that Germany should be a country where anybody with a migrant biography is welcome and can become fully integrated, makes perfect sense in terms of

market and community/humanitarian logics combined—and which of those may dominate seems of little relevance. After all, what is on offer through corporate localised 'thick' engagement also fosters dignity, well-being, the achievement of the aspirations of refugees, and more generally, new perspectives for their lives.[43]

At the same time, even if not always successful in challenging exclusionary state logics and perhaps in danger of helping states to enhance their 'cultural, emotional and reputational value' (Mavelli, 2018, p. 485), the initiatives to contest exclusionary asylum legislation have the potential for longer-term change over time. As they are grounded in and combined with concrete examples of 'thick' encounters on the shopfloor, they have repercussions beyond that context. Every situation where people interact daily, even if such interactions are transitory, are meaningful at the moment in time when they occur—and as such, shape political cultures (see also Häberlen, 2016).

I conclude ultimately that 'thick' corporate engagement with the global challenge of refugee integration, when grounded in localised realities and working with (or sometimes also against) the state and driven by a combination of market and community logics, can indeed be a force for good in the frame of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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Endnotes

1. I use the term 'refugee' here not in its legal sense, but to refer to all people who seek asylum or other forms of protection outside of their country of origin, irrespective of their status. This choice of term also acknowledges the fact that while the circumstances of people's migration journeys are complex and multifaceted, the majority experience forced displacement and rely in some ways on current host country policies to be able to re-establish their lives.

2. According to the Missing Migrants database, 4,055 migrants died in 2015 and 5,136 migrants died in 2016. In total, 23,312 migrants lost their lives between 2014 and 2021. For more information, see https://missingmigrants.iom.int/ (last accessed on 4 May 2023).

3. The term 'refugee crisis' is misleading in two important ways: first, the 'crisis' does not refer, as one might expect, to the crises that made people flee their country of origin; and second, it (wrongly) implies that the mere presence of these refugees presents a major and unprecedented crisis (for further discussion, see Bojadžijev, 2018). In addition, actual numbers of refugees who entered Germany in 2015 are often exaggerated in public discourse and media reporting. Taken together, since 1953, 5.8 million people have requested asylum in Germany, of whom 4.8 million did so from 1990. Peak years here were 1992 (438,191 people requesting asylum), 2015 (476,649) and 2016 (745,545). These figures include the follow-up applications of those who were rejected in the first instance but had the right to appeal. All data and additional information such as a breakdown of figures according to nationality, ethnicity, or religion can be found at https://www.bamf.de/DE/Startseite/startseite_node.html (last accessed on 4 May 2023).

4. Conversation with a founding member of Wir Zusammen at a public event in Berlin on 14 September 2017.

5. For more information, see https://www.wir-zusammen.de/ (last accessed on 4 May 2023).

6. This paper is based on a British Academy-funded research project titled 'Moving the Goalposts of Citizenship? German Business Sector Engagement and Refugee Integration'. The project had three main objectives, namely, to analyse: what drove corporate sector engagement (the topic of this paper); the expectations of refugees who took up opportunities created by the business sector and how these were negotiated through everyday practices; and if this engagement had the potential to change public discourse and the parameters of engagement with refugees. For the latter two objectives, written up in two other publications (Müller, 2021, 2022), refugees and other key actors were also interviewed and observations made on the shopfloor.

7. 'Mittelstand' refers to small-to-medium-sized family-owned businesses. Länder are the German 'states' that in the decentralised structure of German governance have considerable power and often own important infrastructure companies.

8. Representative of a global tech company, Wir Zusammen public event, Hamburg, 30 May 2017.

9. See https://nethope.org/who-we-are/ (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

10. See https://kiron.ngo/en/ (last accessed on 5 May 2023).

11. Various conversations with business representatives, Wir Zusammen public event, Hamburg, 30 May 2017.

12. Various conversations with business representatives, Wir Zusammen public events, Hamburg, 30 May 2017, and Berlin, 14 September 2017.

13. Interview with the leader of a company mentoring programme, public event, Berlin, 14 September 2017.

14. Interview, 30 October 2019.

15. Interview, 30 October 2019.

16. Interview, 1 November 2019.

17. Interview, 28 January 2019.

18. Presentation at a Wir Zusammen public event, Hamburg, 30 May 2017.

19. Interview, health insurance company, 29 January 2019.

20. Interview, GGP, 1 November 2019.

21. Interview, 11 September 2019.

22. Interview, 30 October 2019.

23. Interview, 1 November 2019.

[24] Interview, 15 January 2020.

[25] Interview, 29 January 2019.

[26] German asylum legislation includes the legal term *Sicherer Herkunftsstaat* (safe country of origin). It refers to countries where state persecution is not the rule—thus is a quite elastic phrase that has been applied, for instance, to parts of Afghanistan at the time of the research. For more details, see https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/AsylFluechtlingsschutz/Sonderverfahren/SichereHerkunftsstaaten/sichereherkunftsstaaten-node.html#:~:text=The%20law%20defines%20countries%20as,persecution%20as%20a%20matter%20of (last accessed on 12 May 2023).

[27] Interview, 28 January 2019.

[28] Interview, 15 March 2019.

[29] Whether a refugee has the right to work is connected to their title of stay: recognised refugees can work and have the same rights as German employees. If a refugee is still engaged in the asylum application or decision process, or was rejected but is in a state of *geduldet* (meaning that they are not sent back for now for a variety of reasons), the immigration office (Ausländerbehörde) and the employment office (Arbeitsagentur) have to give their consent. There are exceptions for professionals in fields with a shortage, but the situation is rather murky and varies in different federal entities. Mini jobs, a certain category of job within the German labour system, have fewer hurdles.

[30] Interview, 5 April 2019.

[31] For more information, see https://www.unternehmer-initiative.com/ (last accessed on 10 May 2023).

[32] Conversation with various members of Wir Zusammen, public event, Berlin, 14 September 2017.

[33] For an in-depth discussion of the latter, see Müller (2022), in which interview data from refugee respondents is analysed (see also Elger and Jaensch, 2019; Klauß, 2019; Steeger, 2020).

[34] Interview, representative responsible for refugee integration programme, GGP, 5 November 2019.

[35] Interview, 1 November 2019.

[36] Interview with two representatives of different sectors, public event, Berlin, 14 September 2017.

[37] Interview with a GGP, 30 October 2019.

[38] Various conversations, public event, Berlin, 14 September 2017.

[39] Interview, 14 September 2017.

[40] For more information, see https://www.unternehmer-initiative.com/ (last accessed on 10 May 2023).

[41] Interview, 28 January 2019.

[42] Interview, 29 January 2019.

[43] It is not possible to discuss this point further here, so see Müller (2022) for the standpoint of refugees; see also Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019.

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