

Private accommodation through the 'Refugees Welcome International - Network

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Refugees Welcome International is a network founded by the German-based NGO *Zusammenleben Willkommen*. There are currently eleven active national chapters in the network of Refugees Welcome International, located in Argentina, Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. All of them are working to facilitate the private housing of refugees.

A specific attempt is made to acquire rooms in already existing flat-sharing communities and other private flats. The idea behind the project is that it can make a double contribution: On the one hand, it contributes to more effective use of living space in areas where it is scarce. On the other hand, the NGO's involvement lowers refugees' access barriers to private housing. It enables all participants to have intercultural encounters and mutual learning.

The network was launched by the German NGO *Zusammenleben Willkommen*, which emerged in 2014 in the wake of the already emerging accommodation crisis for refugees in Germany. Initially, the group used the name *Flüchtlinge Willkommen* (Refugees Welcome). It all began with a rather private project: To be able to pay for a room in a shared flat for a refugee activist from Berlin's *Oranienplatz* Initiative, a micro-donation campaign was launched. After the rapid success of the first arrangement, the idea arose to take the whole project to a larger dimension. In 2015, when the migration events to Germany reached their largest scale to date, the idea and the offer of *Zusammenleben Willkommen* received wide publicity and fast growth.

The German NGO is based on cooperation between full-time staff and volunteers. Permanent staff and designated volunteer managers cooperate with local groups of volunteers. It tries to cover all German cities with more than 60,000 inhabitants.



People who have a room to rent can either contact the NGO via their homepage or personally contact one of the volunteer groups. The same holds true for refugees, seeking accommodation in a shared flat. The number of requests from refugees clearly exceeds the number of rooms available though. This points to the high demand to move out of official accommodation centers as well as to the difficulties in finding private housing. Other refugees may already live in private apartments, but experience very bad conditions and seek more contact with people from their host country.

With the help of a matching system, the NGO tries to meet the needs of refugees as well as the possibilities and interests of the flatmates. Before a potential move-in, there is a mutual meeting. Furthermore, *Zusammenleben Willkommen* has more knowledge dealing with bureaucratic issues such as residence status and housing permits and can help to facilitate the rental contract or provide financial support in emergency situations. Many flat-sharers and landlords feel more secure with the support of the NGO, also because it can bridge rent payments in emergencies.

Overall, the network shows what more inclusive forms of accommodation and housing beyond isolating state-run shelters can look like. It combines practical criticism with individual support. It is thus an illustrative example of how, since 2015, civil society actors have increasingly been able to step in to fill gaps and shortcomings in the state infrastructure and the established service infrastructure.

Further Information:

Homepage of the network: <https://www.refugees-welcome.net/>

Homepage of *Zusammenleben Willkommen*: <https://zusammenleben-willkommen.de/>

Podcast (in German Language): <https://solidaritaet.podigee.io/63-wgs-fuer-gefluechtete>