objective evaluation of the number of persons that should be relocated in consideration of a fair sharing of responsibilities. The fact that the mechanisms are static, with a numerical cap on persons to be relocated, rather than dynamic, means they are unable to respond to changes or variations in the flows of persons.

Secondly, the decision over relocation is imposed on asylum seekers without taking into consideration their preferences. Finally, their exceptional, rather than permanent, nature creates the same disincentives for effective implementation that were observed in the normal working of the Dublin system. These factors significantly undermine the mechanisms that the EU and its Member States have tried with some difficulty to put into place since late September 2015.

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Volunteers and asylum seekers
Serhat Karakayali and J Olaf Kleist

People in communities where asylum seekers and refugees have appeared offered various forms of support to the new arrivals as states failed to provide even the essentials.

Amid rising numbers of asylum seekers arriving at European shores over recent years, reception and processing facilities – especially in countries of first arrival – were often overburdened. Asylum seekers faced insufficient infrastructure for their reception and integration, leading in many cases to secondary migration. For years, in the streets of Athens and on the islands of Lampedusa and Sicily, in the train station of Milan and the ‘Jungle’ of Calais, they often took matters into their own hands.

The public and political perception was generally one of failure of those countries’ migration policies, of the Common European Asylum System and of the Dublin Agreement. The focus in Brussels, Strasbourg and many capital cities was not on local situations but on rules and principles to re-establish an orderly asylum system, either by forcing countries to abide by existing standards or by creating a new system.

Meanwhile local people in Sicily helped with onward travel by giving directions, buying train tickets or even by giving lifts to asylum seekers. Volunteers at transit hotspots like Milan, Athens and Calais provided support by distributing clothing and food, and offering legal advice or medical assistance.

These engagements by volunteers – citizens and non-citizens alike – took place in the shadows; the beneficiaries were, after all, widely considered to be irregular migrants. Yet increasingly, locals who witnessed the despair and needs of asylum seekers in their communities joined traditional activists. This was the case in particular where asylum seekers and refugees were distributed to towns that had not received any contingents previously and had little infrastructure and resources beyond housing available. Locals would come forward to donate essentials but also to get to know the new residents. Thus volunteers inadvertently become a force of integration.

Taking on state duties
The engagement of locals with asylum seekers in their neighbourhoods became a widespread phenomenon across Germany, as increasing numbers of asylum applicants
meant that housing had to be found for them in new and sometimes remote locations. Established organisations working with refugees in Germany estimated an average increase of 70% of interest in volunteering for refugees over a period of three years and more than a third of volunteers were active in self-organised groups and initiatives rather than in established NGOs. This is unlike any other volunteering. Volunteers with refugees are, our study shows, predominantly female, in their twenties or over sixty, and more often with a migrant background and non-religious than the societal average. For them their engagement is not about volunteering itself but specifically about helping refugees. What we documented in our study was a mainstream movement of volunteering for refugees being established across society.

Over the summer of 2015, thousands of people in German cities rallied round to help asylum seekers as bureaucracies failed to register, house and feed the new arrivals. Previously, the main tasks of volunteers had consisted of facilitating visits and communication with officials, translation and language lessons, advice and support related to integration. Now volunteers donated and distributed food, clothing and other essentials. The solidarity and hospitality that people offered brought a dimension of welcome to the reception of refugees that state institutions cannot provide. The delicate balance between helping refugees and relieving the state of its core roles swung towards volunteers picking up where bureaucracies failed. At times, state institutions intentionally relied on volunteers.

Critics have warned about neo-liberal policies to out-source to volunteers the state’s obligations to refugees. In the long run, the role of volunteers has to be defined more precisely. It is important that volunteers do not substitute state obligations but engage in welcoming refugees to their new society. In their shared actions they create a civil society that is open to and accepting of new members. In fact, many of the tasks that volunteers fulfil cover core elements of refugees’ integration processes.

In 2015, civil engagement for refugees has sprung up across Europe. Europeans have practised solidarity with refugees irrespective of national borders in ways that European politicians have long failed to do. The challenge that arises from this grassroots
A welcoming policy in post-socialist East Germany

Anna Steigemann, Frank Eckardt and Franziska Werner

Apparently, East European countries are less willing to accept refugees than other European countries. Their experience of ethnic and cultural diversity is weak and a genuine welcome has still to be developed.

As former East Germany is now receiving refugees as part of the national distribution scheme, towns there need to adapt to accommodating refugees. There is a range of different attitudes in the East-German context – from the highly defensive to the very open. Only the state of Thuringia has an outspokenly cosmopolitan and liberal approach, which has resulted in a high-profile ‘welcoming policy’.

There has long existed a high level of xenophobia in Thuringia, as in most of East Germany. The ‘welcoming policies’ introduced by the new state government in late 2014 nevertheless were intended to create a turnaround in the general attitude towards refugees. A new Ministry of Migration adopted the principle of decentralised housing for accommodating refugees in order to enable the refugees to move into their own apartments as soon as possible.

Although these government policies have made life easier for many refugees, most importantly Ministers have used the narrative of a welcoming policy to call for more understanding from the local population and a rejection of xenophobic resistance to hosting refugees. This represents a clear difference from politicians in neighbouring Saxony who largely use language that implies a certain sympathy for protests against refugees being housed there and who are calling for more forced returns. Despite still high levels of xenophobia, Thuringia’s new ‘welcoming policies’ also initiated innovative forms of communication at the local and regional level.

Mühlhausen

The city of Mühlhausen is in a not very densely populated district in Thuringia. Two so-called group accommodations (more precisely, refugee camps) have been opened...