



PRESS RELEASE

Tapping the hidden reserve: SVR study on the motives and motivation of volunteers in refugee assistance

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a surge in willingness to help those who fled to Germany. The scientific staff of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR) conducted a survey on volunteer work to investigate the motives and attitudes of those who volunteer to support refugees. Based on that analysis the study discusses recommendations for future mobilisation strategies that are aimed at politicians and authorities at the municipal level as well as at employers, associations and civil society organisations at the local level.

Berlin, 16 April 2024. Over the past 10 years many people in Germany have volunteered to help people seeking protection, have made donations in money or in kind, or have assisted them in looking for accommodation or dealing with the authorities. "It is also thanks to volunteers that those seeking protection who came to Germany as part of acute refugee movements got the support they needed here. According to our data, roughly 13 per cent of all volunteers are involved in supporting refugees," says Dr Nora Storz, co-author of the study conducted by the SVR's scientific staff. "Although that means refugee assistance only ranks in the lower mid-range in terms of what areas people volunteer in – behind sports, culture and leisure activities and social and welfare issues – the study also shows that there is still a lot of untapped potential. Around three out of 10 of all those volunteers who have not yet been active in providing refugee support can imagine working in that area. And there is also a share of those who did not volunteer but are willing to get involved. Around one in four of the survey respondents can imagine volunteering." The study was based on a multi-wave survey conducted over a period of seven months from February 2023 onwards. More than 2,500 people took part in all three waves.

To find out how a general willingness can be translated into actual volunteering, the study also investigated the survey respondents' various politically relevant attitudes. The results show that more survey respondents with higher political self-efficacy volunteer in refugee work or are prepared to do so. "Survey respondents with an interest in politics are more likely to support refugees, or are more likely to be prepared to support refugees, than those who have little interest in politics. Also, refugee assistance volunteers, or those who are willing to volunteer to support refugees, rate political decision-makers' responsiveness more positively than non-volunteers. That means they are more likely to think that politicians address both the population's concerns and their own interests," adds Dr Storz.

People's motives for volunteering in refugee assistance are diverse and can vary depending on their own resources and interests. What is striking, though, is that volunteers and those who are willing to volunteer to support refugees are significantly more altruistic than those survey respondents who are not interested in volunteering to help refugees. "Many of those who volunteer in other areas are above all seeking a better work-life balance, or they have social motives for volunteering, for instance because their friends also volunteer," says Alex Wittlif, co-author of the SVR's study. "Those volunteering in refugee assistance are primarily motivated by their concern for other people. Many of them are highly motivated by a desire to shape politics. However, self-serving, or self-oriented, motives also play a role, for instance learning new skills by volunteering in refugee support work."

There are many reasons why people are prevented from volunteering. "A lack of time is one of the most frequently cited reasons for why people don't volunteer. And 20 per cent of those who are willing to volunteer state that they do not know how they can get involved," says Alex Wittlif. According to the survey results, however, many of the survey respondents also do not feel it is their responsibility to do so: One in five of those who stated they are not interested in volunteering in refugee work feel that it



is up to the state to look after refugees. Thirteen per cent of those who are willing to volunteer to help refugees are of the same opinion.

In order to take better advantage of the available potential, the SVR's scientific staff recommends paying greater attention to those motives that are most relevant to volunteers and those who are willing to volunteer. "Volunteer work can have a positive influence on a person's feeling of self-worth and gives them the opportunity to develop their own talents. These are important motives for volunteering that should also be addressed by those working at the municipal level so as to better tap into the potential of people who are willing to help," says Dr Jan Schneider, Head of the SVR's Research Unit. The promotion of civic engagement and the promotion of democracy should also be more systematically dovetailed in practice. Local cooperation structures and coordination measures should also be strengthened. "Our data show that many of those who are willing to get involved feel they don't have enough information. And so more information needs to be made available about how people can actually volunteer – for instance by addressing them personally, at information events or on a digital platform that pools information about all those people and organisations that are looking for volunteers. And refugees who have themselves received help should be more actively approached. Private sector businesses can also provide valuable assistance. Some employers are already supporting charitable projects, for instance by allowing their employees to use a certain amount of their working time to do volunteer work," adds Dr Schneider.

The study conducted by the SVR's scientific staff was part of a project entitled "Solidarity in Receiving Societies: The Perception of Refugees and Determinants of Volunteering and the Willingness to Help", which is funded by the Stiftung Mercator. "This is the first time researchers in Germany have systematically investigated the motives of people who are already volunteering to support refugees or in other areas, those who are not and those who would be willing to do so in the future. The results help us understand what drives people to volunteer and how to foster such involvement. Politicians in particular, as well as staff in administration and civil society organisations can benefit from the study results and thus foster social cohesion," says Violaine Dobel, Project Manager at the Stiftung Mercator.

The summary of the SVR's study entitled "The Motives and Motivation of Volunteers in Refugee Assistance. Results of a Survey on Volunteer Work" can be downloaded here:

<https://www.svr-migration.de/en/publication/motives-and-motivation-of-volunteers-in-refugee-assistance>

The press release is available to download here:

<https://www.svr-migration.de/en/press/tapping-the-hidden-reserve>

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