RESEARCH BRIEFS

Solidarity Cities in Germany and Switzerland:
A Brief Overview of Initiatives

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RCIS Research Brief No. 2019/2
November 2019

RCIS **RYERSON CENTRE**
for Immigration and Settlement

Ryerson University

Solidarity Cities in Germany and Switzerland: A Brief Overview of Initiatives

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Series Editor: Usha George

Introduction

Cities play a central role in the reception of migrants and refugees and their participation in the social and political life of the arrival society. While the nation state deliberately excludes many migrants and refugees through immigration and refugee policies and various visa, permit, and status categories (Bauder, 2013), cities often react with approaches of their own which enable migrants and refugees to belong to and participate in the urban community, independent of national status. Following such approaches, an increasing number of cities in the countries of the global north declare solidarity with excluded migrants and refugees (Ridgley, 2008; Darling & Bauder, 2019).

In North America, the term "sanctuary city" applies to corresponding urban initiatives (Bauder, 2017). Cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Toronto recognize all inhabitants, independent of their national status, as equal community members; these cities subsequently try to avoid cooperation with the national immigration-enforcement authorities. Although this measure cannot provide absolute protection to illegal residents (American Immigration Council, 2015), sanctuary cities clearly oppose the policy of the nation state.

European cities cannot implement this North American approach, given the different legal, social, and political contexts and relationships between cities and the nation state. In addition, the meaning of the term "sanctuary" is not always easy to convey to non-English speakers, and many urban initiatives reject the term's religious connotations. Correspondingly, the term "sanctuary city" is rarely used in continental Europe (Bauder & Gonzales, 2018). Nevertheless, there are many cities in which solidarity-based approaches seek to provide people with precarious or no national status access to rights and community services. In this research brief, we present evidence from a small selection of urban solidarity initiatives in Germany and Switzerland. The purpose of this publication is to illustrate the range of initiatives in different urban contexts and to inspire activists and decision-makers in other cities to develop their own approaches to offering solidarity and sanctuary.

For the research project [Urban Sanctuary Policies and Solidarity Practices in Germany and Switzerland](#), we conducted ten interviews in Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany), Berlin (Germany), and Zurich (Switzerland) with key informants involved in local activism, politics, and civil society.[1] In these three cities, local and municipal initiatives exist that support illegalised and vulnerable migrants and refugees (e.g. Neumann, 2019; Mangold & Schwager, 2019; Morawek, 2019). At the same time, these cities offer different structural circumstances due to national laws and varying geopolitical situations in Germany and Switzerland, as well as due to differing local political constellations and conditions (Dietrich, 2019; Kron & Lebuhn, 2019; Scherr & Hofmann, 2016). Below, we present examples of solidarity policies and practices from the three cities. We are not presenting the final results of our study, as the analysis is currently not completed. Rather, we offer a preliminary overview that highlights a small number of innovative and promising initiatives in the three cities.

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[1] We conducted these interviews in Germany. The below quotes are our translations.

Germany

Freiburg: Rasthaus

The *Rasthaus* (literally "rest house") in Freiburg is a central contact point for migrants and refugees with precarious status or no status. The Rasthaus is located in an inner courtyard of a housing block owned by a co-op housing syndicate and offers a certain degree of protection from the enforcement of immigration and refugee policy. A local politician describes the Rasthaus as a place "where [the] police are chased away, for example, if they go there"; the Rasthaus is "a small oasis."

Several local activist initiatives that offer legal counsel, German language courses, medical treatment, and housing referrals to vulnerable migrants and refugees have their offices at the site. In addition to providing free services to migrants and refugees with precarious status, these initiatives challenge exclusionary marginalizing migration and refugee discourses. The shared space enables the groups to network closely with each other: "The fact that we have a shared structure like the Rasthaus is probably conducive to supporting vulnerable migrants and refugees," says a long-standing activist.

There have been repeated attempts to move into a larger house. The idea was "a kind of hostel where people actually find shelter. [...] Like a house as a place of refuge," says a Rasthaus activist. The initial plan was to involve the city administration in such a project because local authorities would need to tolerate such a project, the activist explains. This plan, however, failed. After his election as Mayor in 2002, Dieter Salomon withdrew his initial support for a larger Rasthaus. If the Mayor had participated, then "this would have been the first step towards a sanctuary city," the activist explains.

We find it noteworthy that civil-society initiatives have been able to create a place of refuge where they can bundle their work without support from the city council or the city administration. In this way, Freiburg fulfills many of the conditions of a solidary city (Bauder & Gonzales, 2018).

Berlin: Anonymous Health-Insurance Card

"[In Berlin] there is a relatively large number of people whose health care is extremely precarious or non-existent; we have worked something out here." This is how an activist from the Solidarity City Alliance (*Solidarity City Bündnis*) describes the motivation to approach the new Berlin Senate that was elected in September 2016 with the aim of introducing an anonymous health-insurance card. The coalition agreement between the partnering parties represented in the current Berlin Senate already stipulated that people without health insurance should obtain access to health care. Since then, the Senate has approved a corresponding health-insurance card.

However, activists from various civil-society initiatives argue that the card is still insufficient to fully cover illegalised people. The Senate has set up an agency to arrange health insurance for people who lack coverage by a provider; if this agency is unable to offer coverage, it will refer them directly to cooperating medical practitioners. The agency will then pay these practitioners for the treatment. For more than half-a-year after its establishment, the agency could not be used by people without status since the practitioners did not bill anonymously. Although the agency says that this has been possible since summer 2019, an activist points out that many illegalised migrants and refugees still cannot freely choose their doctors and thus may not be

able to receive medical services in their mother tongue.

Civil society organizations, such as *Medibüro*, are therefore [demanding](#) that an anonymous health-insurance card be issued to illegalised persons – but not through the mediating agency but rather through an association of public health insurers, with the city-state of Berlin bearing the costs. In this case, illegalised migrants and refugees would be able to choose their doctors freely. A corresponding agreement with the association of health insurers is currently being negotiated, says a spokeswoman for the Berlin Senator responsible for health care.

According to an activist, the problem that the anonymous health insurance card is still not fully implemented does not lie with the Berlin Senate but the city administration. Civil society groups have apparently had continuous contact with the Senate throughout the development and negotiation of the anonymous health insurance card. For example, for several years, local politicians have been involved in a round table discussing health-care access for illegalised migrants and refugees in Berlin. "This is a setting where the idea of the anonymous health-insurance card became a reality," says an activist from the Solidarity City Alliance. However, the city administration ultimately decides on the implementation, and, according to our respondents, it has been inaccessible to civil society groups.

Berlin: Student-Transit Ticket

As of summer 2019, all students in Berlin can use public transport free of charge. An interviewee explains:

> There is compulsory education for children of illegalised (families) and they (children) must be able to officially ... go to school. There is still always a fear that the data will of course be passed on (to other authorities); this is one hurdle, and the other hurdle was ... always also the way from and to school, because the illegalised (children) for example can not use the cheaper (Berlin transit) tickets .... And so there is the question ... how do we reduce the hurdles (for illegalised students)? And this group was clearly taken into account in the consideration of making public transport free for all students.

The free transit ticket was linked to the student ID card, ensuring that free transportation is available for children without a residence permit.

For an activist involved in various urban policy initiatives, free public transit for school children is not only a step towards the "right to mobility in the city", but also a successful example of "overarching policies" that "do not make a specific policy only for illegalised people" but for all of the city's vulnerable inhabitants. This is an important aspect of a solidary city: many interview participants confirmed that the solidary city idea does not support only illegalised migrants and refugees but also other marginalised groups.

Freiburg and Berlin: Sea-Bridge

The [*Seebrücke*](#) (sea-bridge) initiative comprises a network of more than 100 local projects that advocate an open Europe and safe harbours, explicitly opposing the restrictive migration and refugee policy of the national government. On the one hand, these initiatives generate public attention by organising demonstrations and other media-effective activities. On the other hand,

Seebrücke initiatives correspond directly with local political actors to introduce corresponding proposals in city council.

One aim of these proposals is to persuade city council to publicly demand a different migration and refugee policy from the Federal Ministry of the Interior and to signal the city's willingness to accept additional refugees. In particular, council resolutions typically call upon the Federal Ministry of the Interior to permit the local admission of additional refugees. Freiburg and Berlin, together with [numerous other cities](#), have joined such a call. An activist explains the strategy: "If there are enough cities and federal states in Germany that say that we would accept (the refugees) in every instance, then at some point the Federal Ministry of the Interior can no longer say that this is problematic for the other federal states".

The Seebrücke initiatives make clear that the solidary-city idea is not only about illegalised and vulnerable migrants and refugees living within an urban community. It also involves solidarity with people who do not yet live in the city but are welcome there. The initiative also demonstrates solidarity between cities that pursue similar local approaches towards migrant and refugee inclusion and oppose national migration and refugee policy.

Switzerland

Zurich: Züri City Card

Following the example of New York City, the city council of Zurich decided to introduce a city identification card, the so-called the Züri City Card (Mangold & Schwager, 2019). This card is intended to enable all residents of the city, regardless of their residency status, to gain access to municipal services and identify themselves to the police without having to disclose their lack of status.

This Zurich initiative began with the art project "The Whole World in Zurich" (*die ganze Welt in Zürich*). In the context of this art project, a group was formed that sought talks with local political representatives and the police to explore the implement the Züri City Card. "In the beginning, we encountered open doors and found that everyone was very enthusiastic about the idea," recalls one activist.

To increase the pressure on local politicians, the Züri City Card Initiative was founded. This initiative launched a petition and sold mock-up cards to both raise money for the campaign and sensitize the public to the situation of *sans papiers*, i.e. people without status. An initiator of the Züri City Card initiative says: "There was lots of media attention [...] and you noticed that this is somehow a sexy idea." In the campaign for the municipal elections in 2018, all candidates were asked to state their position on the Züri City Card, says an activist. Finally, the newly elected City Parliament adopted the proposal with a large majority, instructing the city administration to implement the Züri City Card.

A difficulty with the Züri City Card's implementation could be the resistance of the police, which have to accept the card as identification for the initiative to be successful. However, since the police are obliged to investigate an initial suspicion, it is precisely by showing the Züri City Card that a person raises suspicion, forcing the police to determine residence status. One solution to this problem would be to make the Züri City Card attractive to as many Zurich residents as possible, for example, by offering discounted admission prices to public institutions and events. A member of the city administration, however, is somewhat skeptical about the impact of the

Züri City Card's changes: "It is unclear how this benefit (to the general public) can be generated and at what cost." Nevertheless, an activist warns against focussing too much on the Züri City Card practical implementation, whereby "we only speak about whether a City Card is legally feasible in Zurich or not". Instead, we should also use the Züri City Card to foster public debate about the rights of residents without a Swiss passport.

Conclusion

The wide-ranging policies and practices presented above illustrated the complexity of initiatives that can be attributed to solidarity cities. While in Berlin, the anonymous health-insurance card is intended to extend access to the health-care system to the entire urban community, Zurich seeks to provide legal ID cards to all residents, irrespective of national status. In both cities, the initiatives involve the municipal council or Senate. In Freiburg, civil society initiatives have so far taken it into their own hands, without council approval, to support people with precarious or no national status. In these cases, Berlin, Freiburg, and Zurich focus on people who are already in the city but whose residence status denies them access to various rights and services. The Seebrücke initiatives take a different approach. These initiatives concern people who flee to Europe but who have not yet arrived in the respective cities due to restrictive European migration and refugee policies. Seebrücke, too, engages local councils that are prepared to accept additional refugees.

The different approaches of Berlin, Freiburg, and Zurich show that solidarity initiatives adapt to their political, social, geographical and geopolitical circumstances and that they act flexibly and strategically. Nevertheless, there is a common denominator: *urban* communities oppose the migration and refugee policies of the nation state and define belonging independently of national status. At the centre of this approach lies solidarity – not only within an urban community but also between cities.

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