
Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

Weltoffen, bürgernah und kompetent!

Kommunen als Spiegel einer vielfältigen Gesellschaft

The issues of immigration and diversity provoke a particularly emotional and controversial discussion in our country. Surveys show that people in Germany are of two minds: On the one hand, the advantages of immigration are seen, while on the other, there are fears that the social system will become overburdened and that social cohesion is under threat.

However, no one can today doubt that society in this country has changed significantly in recent decades. Could someone from the 1950s be catapulted in a time machine to the year 2014, he would likely rub his eyes in surprise: In the bus and the subway, in waiting rooms and in pedestrian zones he would find people with the most varied cultural roots – diversity in every sense of the word. In many large cities, from Munich to Hamburg, about a third of the residents already come from an immigrant family.

Another striking difference is the lack of children on the streets. This is because the birth rate, which rose until the mid-1960s, has declined dramatically since that time. In recent decades, Germany has not only become more colorful, but also older. Forecasts show that without immigration, the population will shrink from today's 82 million people to just 65 million by 2050, and the number of employed people will fall from today's 45 million to 27 million people. This means the business sector and the government must redouble their efforts to encourage immigration in the coming years in order to meet this demographic challenge.

To paraphrase author and migration researcher Mark Terkessidis, "becoming fit for diversity" is one of the key development tasks for local authorities in a society characterized by immigration. In this regard, a number of specific questions must be answered: Are municipalities and their administrations open-minded, so they can work and communicate with people from a wide variety of national backgrounds? Are they culturally aware? Are they accessible and service-oriented in dealing with people of all kinds? Does the public administration reflect the community's diversity? That is, does the number of people from immigrant families working here correspond to their share in the population – and not only in the porter's lodge, but also in leadership positions? Are programs on offer, promotional materials and facilities appropriate to the intended target groups?

In an honest stock-taking, municipalities will be forced to answer many of these questions in the negative. But quite a bit has already happened in recent years. The intercultural opening of city administrations and politics is now squarely on many municipalities' agenda. Large cities have been particularly active in this regard for a number of years. Campaigns such as those in Berlin ("Berlin needs you!"), Hamburg and Bremen have set a precedent for other locations. In the meantime, it is now vital to develop the "Fit for Diversity" goal further so as to encompass new immigrants. It is at last clear: The necessary and much sought-after skilled workers from abroad will only settle in Germany and in a particular city if they find attractive working and living conditions there.

Cities such as Hamburg, Dresden, Stuttgart and Essen are a considerable way along the path toward reorganizing their immigration authorities to become "welcome centers." The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees is promoting this project. In other cities such as Arnsberg, Wuppertal and Hamm, immigration offices and integration services have for years been located in a single location, also with the aim of offering better service and cutting out unnecessary steps, following the "one-stop shop" principle.

But this is about much more than giving immigration authorities a newly pleasant profile. It is in essence about a newly inclusive attitude regarding not only new immigrants, but also people with foreign roots that have long been resident in a local community. And ultimately, it is about promoting participation by all people who live in the community, whether or not they have a background of immigration. The culture of welcome so frequently invoked today, which is demanded particularly by the business sector due to the looming shortage of skilled workers, must therefore be inextricably associated with a culture of recognition, in the sense of a culture of participation and inclusion.

However, those who want to develop a culture of welcome and recognition in local communities do encounter ambivalence toward immigration in a broad portion of the population. The intense debate over the alleged poverty-driven immigration in relation to the expansion of EU internal mobility to Bulgaria and Romania, and municipalities' indications that their capacities are being overstrained in this regard, are not precisely catalysts for inclusive attitudes.

Undoubtedly, local communities need the support of the federal states, the federal government and the European Union if they want to successfully meet the chal-

lenges of the new social reality and the further immigration. But they must also face the challenge of developing their own solutions and initiatives.