



Germany's Opportunity to Reinvest in Refugee Protection

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After decades of leadership in refugee protection, Germany is at a crossroads. With historically high global displacement, and the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum (EU Pact)¹ set to take full effect in June 2026, policymakers have a window of opportunity now to shape the future of protection by implementing humane, well-managed migration and refugee responses that benefit Germany both financially and as a global leader.

This brief advances **four core recommendations**, drawn from decades of evidence and programmatic experience, on how to overcome practical and political challenges and build systems that protect people fleeing crises while bolstering the continent's prosperity and moral authority:

1. Prioritise safe pathways as a humane and predictable response to displacement

When people have access to safe routes including resettlement, humanitarian admission, relocation, or complementary pathways, they are less likely to undertake dangerous journeys. Expanding safe pathways allows states to respond to displacement in a planned and predictable way while saving lives and preventing exploitation.

2. Invest in refugee inclusion and integration to benefit host countries and protection seekers

Evidence from Germany, Europe, and beyond shows that when given early access to work, education, and services, refugees and asylum seekers contribute significantly to economic growth, labour markets, and community sustainability. Integration programming is a long-term investment in shared prosperity.

3. Invest in reception and processing

Policies aimed at dissuading people from seeking protection do not address the drivers of displacement and are largely ineffective. By contrast, targeted investment in reception conditions, processing capacity, and rights-based procedures can ensure timely decisions, reduce long-term costs, and uphold Germany's legal and moral commitments.

4. Reinforce global refugee protection systems

With displacement at historic highs and humanitarian resources under strain, it is critically important to uphold the obligations defined in the UN Refugee Convention and other instruments. Sustained investment in protection systems, both within and beyond Europe, is essential to promote responsibility-sharing, prevent crisis escalation, and defend the rules-based international order.



Context

Germany has long committed to doing its fair share in global refugee protection. It has hosted the most asylum seekers in the EU² for the past decade. Between 2015 and 2016, Germany welcomed more than a million refugees. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Germany granted temporary protection to over 1.2 million³ people fleeing the war. Beyond its borders, Germany has been one of the world's largest donors to UNHCR⁴ and one of the architects of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR),⁵ which seeks to balance global responsibility-sharing. Germany has also been a leader in safe pathways, with the 2022 launch of the Federal Admission Programme (BAP)⁶ being the first large-scale attempt to create safe pathways to Europe for Afghans after the Taliban takeover in 2021. As of mid-January 2026, nearly 37,550 people arrived through BAP and other humanitarian admissions.⁷

However, political commitment to refugee protection in the EU is shrinking, and Germany is no exception.⁸ Across the EU, resettlement pledges⁹ have collapsed by 83%, from around 61,000¹⁰ slots in the 2024-25 cycle to just 10,430 for 2026-27, with Germany going from the top pledging country to failing to pledge at all in the new cycle.¹¹ This decision comes while needs are soaring and the world's largest resettlement actor, the United States, has essentially withdrawn from refugee resettlement. In addition to halting resettlement schemes, Germany recently implemented a two-year pause on family reunification for people with subsidiary protection, terminated BAP, and has implemented new restrictions on asylum, leaving thousands of protection seekers stranded in danger.

DECLINING SUPPORT FOR GLOBALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE LIVING OUTSIDE OF EUROPE

Nearly 8 out of every 10 refugees and stateless people are located outside of Europe.¹² Similarly, 8 out of every 10 forcibly displaced people come from the 20 countries identified on the IRC's 2026 Watchlist¹³ of places most vulnerable to worsening humanitarian crises. Backtracking on refugee resettlement and protection and slashing of foreign aid creates a risk of a cascading "domino effect" across the entire protection system, placing even greater pressure on countries and regions already hosting the largest numbers of the world's refugees. The reforms discussed in this paper should be complemented by robust investments in asylum and protection systems in the countries where most refugees live, technical support for "South-South" safe routes, and well-funded responses to drivers of displacement.

Building a Prosperous Future through Protection Commitments

Prioritise safe pathways as a humane and predictable response to displacement

The global gap between refugees in need of resettlement and available resettlement slots is at a critical juncture. While 2.5 million refugees¹⁴ will need resettlement in 2026, global pledges have plummeted. Germany's failure to contribute resettlement pledges to the EU's Union Resettlement Plan,¹⁵ its pause on most humanitarian admissions, cancelling of the BAP scheme for Afghans, and halt on family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection mean there are virtually no safe routes to Germany for most protection seekers. As these safe pathways disappear, more people are forced into dangerous routes. At least 12,000 migrants have died crossing the Mediterranean in just the past 5 years, according to IOM.¹⁶

Germany should recommit to expanding safe routes, including by making new resettlement pledges, increasing humanitarian admissions, and opening more complementary pathways.¹⁷ German federal states and municipalities have shown enthusiasm to cooperate in flexible humanitarian admissions, which, when properly supported, enhance local resources, strengthen social cohesion and enable civil society actors to play an active and constructive role in refugee response. Expanding complementary pathways can help address acute labour and skills gaps and contribute to economic, social, and innovation priorities. Community sponsorship models¹⁸ have been shown to increase the number of available admission places, accelerate integration, improve public support for refugees, and reduce irregular migration. Italy's Humanitarian Corridors initiative,¹⁹ a collaboration between faith-based organizations and the government, is another strong example of a successful sponsorship program.



Invest in refugee inclusion and integration to benefit host countries and protection seekers

Increased support for long-term, sustainable integration of protection seekers is one of the smartest investments Germany can make. The economic, social, and cultural benefits of resettlement and asylum systems that support the inclusion of newcomers are well established.²⁰ Following Germany's welcoming of refugees in 2015, the share of foreign workforce went from 10% to nearly 14%.²¹ This increased Germany's GDP by €240 billion in 2024, with up to €706 billion in total value creation linked to foreign workers. Similarly, in Poland, rapid access to work for displaced Ukrainians increased Poland's GDP²² by a net 2.7% in 2024, with refugee employment rates rising from 61% to 69% in just one year. Spain²³ has similarly benefited from a regularization-oriented migration approach, with migrants easing labour shortages and fuelling an economic growth rate of 3.2% in 2024 compared to -0.2% in Germany. Evidence from outside Europe points in the same direction. In the United States, a 2024 government study²⁴ found that between 2005 and 2019, refugees generated a net fiscal benefit of \$123.8 billion (€114 billion), with tax revenues substantially outweighing the costs of initial reception and integration. Germany faces the acute demographic pressure of an aging workforce and low fertility, thus increased immigration²⁵ will be vital to maintaining a healthy economy.

THE IRC'S PROGRAMS IN GERMANY

The IRC's programs in Germany combine direct services, system strengthening and advocacy across four outcome areas: Education, Safety and Empowerment, Safety and Legal Protection, and Economic Well-Being. The programs are carried out nationwide and currently implemented with 34 partner organizations, including several multi-national projects. In 2025, 5,100 people newly enrolled in and participated in programs offered by IRC and partner organizations in Germany, an additional 3,500 refugees and asylum seekers benefited from strengthened protection systems in reception centers through staff training and localized implementation strategies, while 45,000 children and young people were reached indirectly through teacher training and capacity building activities. 7,000 printed materials for educational work were sent to interested institutions, educators and other professionals, and are freely available for download or order at mehr-teilhabe.de.

Invest in reception and processing

New asylum claims declined across Europe in 2025.²⁶ Some policymakers have described recent drops in asylum petitions as proof that deterrent policies like border pushbacks, detention, and increased deportations are working. This not only misconstrues migration dynamics, but also ignores the moral, legal, and economic underpinnings of a well-functioning asylum system.

While initial asylum applications in Germany fell in 2025 to approximately 113,000²⁷—the lowest in a decade—this is not a reflection of a safer or more orderly world. Rather, it is due to a combination of geopolitical developments, as Syrians navigate their future after the fall of Assad,²⁸ and conflict-induced “immobility”²⁹ exacerbated by expanding externalization of the EU's border and migration controls. In other words, **people are still being displaced, they are just less likely to find safety.**

History shows that policies aimed at containing people in unsafe or undignified situations only foster instability.³⁰ Deterrence policies generally fail to lower arrivals over time,³¹ and high-profile deterrence projects like transfer deals between UK and Rwanda or Italy to Albania have been enormously costly, mired in legal challenges, and ineffective.³² The “Return Hubs” proposed by the EU Return Regulation³³ will likely face similar pitfalls. Furthermore, policies that block people from seeking safety or return them to danger violate fundamental principles of international law, which are core to sustaining the rules-based order. Beyond the moral and legal imperatives, declining immigration threatens Germany's economic prosperity.

Rather than trying to keep asylum seekers out of Germany, policymakers should invest in well-functioning and humane asylum systems that provide fair, efficient processes to protection seekers. As Germany formalizes its Pact implementation plan, investments in dignified reception, increased processing capacity, legal and psycho-social support, and procedural safeguards including independent monitoring will help guarantee the quality of individual assessments and support protection seekers in rebuilding their lives.



EU PACT IMPLEMENTATION

By June 2026, all EU Member States must fully implement the EU Pact, which attempts to standardize migration rules and practices across the continent. Germany's national implementation plan,³⁴ approved in September 2025, focuses on border procedures and the expanded Eurodac biometric system, with detention centres and processing facilities³⁵ being constructed near major airports and land borders. While the plan details crosscutting measures to monitor and protect fundamental rights, many of the details remain unresolved or unfunded, including mechanisms to coordinate with established civil society organizations on monitoring activities. This focus on control without a corresponding commitment to humanitarian protection is raising alarms. Some of the Pact concepts like Safe Third Countries and Safe Countries of Origin³⁶ create presumptions of safety that do not account for individual circumstances, particularly for vulnerable groups. As the Pact rollout is translated to national and local-level action, opportunities remain to recommit to protection-centred policies and strengthen municipal actors in their integration efforts, benefiting their local communities and labour markets.

Reinforce global refugee protection systems

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention, and its fundamental principle—that the global community must agree to never return persecuted people to danger—remains as important as it was in 1951. Yet calls to revisit core refugee protections, whether through Convention reform or reinterpretation of regional instruments like the European Convention on Human Rights, continue to gain traction.³⁷ At the same time, global aid for refugee responses and lifesaving humanitarian work is declining. The IRC has framed this backtracking from the rules and norms established after World War II as part of a “New World Disorder,”³⁸ which threatens the lives and dignity of people impacted by crises and conflict in cascading ways.

Germany, as a key defender of the rules-based order, must stand as a bulwark against this backsliding. Germany should lead both diplomatically, and programmatically, to reinforce international norms and systems that protect refugees and asylum seekers and promote dignity and respect.

Recommendations to Policymakers in Germany

The decisions made in the current policy environment will have long-lasting impacts on the future of refugee protection in Germany and across Europe. Now is a moment for German leaders to recommit to their historical role in demonstrating that humane, well-managed refugee protection is both possible and necessary for a prosperous future.

1) Restore and expand safe routes to Germany

- a. **Reclaim Germany's role as champion of humanitarian admissions and resettlement.** The sharp decline in EU resettlement pledges and Germany's failure to pledge this cycle threaten the viability of resettlement as a durable solution. Germany should reverse this trend and announce ambitious resettlement and humanitarian admission commitments in line with global needs and the Union Resettlement Framework's objectives.
- b. **Uphold the right to family life.** Germany should resume family reunification for individuals with subsidiary protection status, respecting the fundamental right to family life. While the pause is in place, Germany should adopt simplified waiver requirements and prioritized processing to ensure vulnerable families are not kept apart unnecessarily.
- c. **Scale up safe complementary pathways, including through education, labour, and sponsorship models.** These pathways should be designed to include vulnerability criteria, alongside tailored support mechanisms to ensure equitable access.
- d. **Streamline consular processing and visa issuance.** The German government should simplify and accelerate admission and pre-arrival procedures by fully digitalizing processes. Digital systems enable faster and more transparent processing, improve accessibility for applicants, and reduce administrative burdens. This should be paired with increased staffing capacities, improved scheduling systems,



prioritised processing for vulnerable individuals, and dedicated support for people with barriers to digital services.

2) Invest in refugee inclusion and integration from day one.

- a. **Germany should grant immediate and unconditional access to the labour market** for protection seekers by removing employment bans upon registration and improving the recognition process for skills and certifications.
- b. **Ensure access to high-quality, non-discriminatory education** for refugee children from the moment they arrive in Germany. This requires removing barriers to childcare and early education, training and sensitizing educators on diversity and inclusion, and providing childcare and education options outside of accommodation facilities.
- c. **Germany should facilitate access to longer-term protections for people displaced from Ukraine**—including third country nationals—by making available multiple pathways to other long-term residence with flexible eligibility criteria and ensuring that individuals wishing to apply for asylum can do so before temporary protections expire.

3) Create and strengthen dignified and humane asylum and reception systems.

- a. **Invest in humane reception.** Prioritize decentralized, community-based reception models that allow for freedom of movement and early integration from day one. Germany should refrain from using detention-like conditions at borders and in reception centres and ensure freedom of movement and adequate service provisions and safeguards.
- b. **Build effective safeguards into Pact Implementation.** Germany should centre protection as it formalizes the Pact implementation plan, to ensure that safeguards are fully implemented and that the speed of new accelerated border procedures do not compromise the quality of individual assessments. Concepts like “Safe Third Country” and “Safe Country of Origin” pose serious due process concerns, and Germany should avoid relying on them. If implemented, they must be accompanied by due process guarantees including legal assistance, interpretation, and sufficient time to challenge presumptions of safety.
- c. **Establish an independent fundamental rights monitoring mechanism.** Germany’s National Implementation Plan for the EU Pact includes the creation of an independent rights-monitoring mechanism, but lacks details on funding, guarantees of independence, or a mandate to coordinate with civil society. This mechanism should be well funded, fire-walled from political interference, and systematically involve and strengthen civil society organizations.
- d. **Reject deterrence models like “return hubs.”** Reliance on return hubs would erode safeguards, increase refoulement risks, and shift pressure onto third countries without proper monitoring and oversight. Return hubs are costly and ineffective at deterring migration; resources should be invested in more efficient asylum and reception processes.

4) Uphold the global refugee protection regime.

- a. Germany should defend the 1951 Refugee Convention as the essential legal foundation of the global refugee protection system, resisting efforts to reinterpret or dilute its core principles. Germany should use its diplomatic influence to reinforce international norms that protect the right to seek asylum.
- b. Germany should reconsider recent ODA funding cuts and recommit to sustainable, multi-year funding to support both the most fragile and conflict-affected countries as well as those hosting high numbers of refugees.
- c. Aid serves a dedicated goal of poverty eradication and life-saving assistance. Germany should not link its international aid commitments with migration governance conditions, such as cooperation in deportations or returns. Similarly, although OECD rules³⁹ allow donor countries to count some domestic spending towards temporary support for refugees and asylum seekers as ODA, Germany should use this rule conservatively and without undermining the main objective of ODA – which is support for developing countries.



ABOUT THE IRC

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) works in more than 40 countries and in 26 U.S. cities to help people affected by humanitarian crises to survive, recover and rebuild their lives.

IRC Deutschland is the IRC's European headquarters, combining a country program implementing programs for refugees and other vulnerable populations in Germany, with representational functions of IRC's global work vis-à-vis the German government and raising funds for project work worldwide. Established in 2016, IRC Deutschland now employs a dynamic team of approx. 200 staff across two offices in Berlin and Bonn, projects spaces in Halle (Saale) and Hanover, and remote across the country.

Impressum

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2 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_applications_-_annual_statistics

3 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260112-1>

4 <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/germany>

5 <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/gcr-action/countries/germany>

6 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/afghanistan-node/2558750-2558750>

7 From May 2021 until May 2025, there were 36,762 people, including 21,076 former local staff, 6,620 people on the human rights list, 7,558 people via the bridging program, and 1,508 via BAP. Since May 2025, only 788 people were able to travel to Germany.

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12 Analysis of statistics from UNHCR data finder. For this analysis Türkiye was treated as outside of Europe.

13 <https://www.rescue.org/watchlist2026>

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19 <https://www.humanitariancorridor.org/en/homepage/>

20 A report by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre finds that, in the medium to long term, the social, economic, and fiscal benefits of refugee integration significantly outweigh the short-term costs, with annual GDP gains of between 0.2% and 1.4% above baseline growth.

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28 <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-january-june-2025/applications>

29 Throughout 2024, movement restrictions have constituted one of the most prominent protection threats in the Central Sahel. At least 40 towns and villages, primarily in Centre-Nord, Est, Nord, and Sahel regions, were under blockade by the end of 2024, affecting up to two million people. In December 2025, communities in Dilling and Kadugli in the south of Sudan were trapped in "siege conditions", with the UN calling for the parties to the conflict to provide safe passage to civilians forced to flee.

30 See, e.g. Okpanachi & Kauner, "Migrants in the throes of multiple crises: fragmented state authority, informal networks and forced (im)mobilities in Libya" Third World Quarterly, April 2023; Enaeme Minko, "On Shifting Sands in Africa's Sahel Region: Tensions between Security and Free Movement" MPI, August 2025.

31 See, e.g. Abdelaaty, Lamis, "Do rights violations deter refugees?" Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, May 2022

32 See "A cautionary tale: Why the UK's Rwanda bill is doomed for political failure" European Council on Foreign Relations, Apr. 2024; "Italy-Albania migrant deal: Millions spent, few results" EU Observer, Oct. 2025

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