HOW CIVIC TECH INNOVATIONS ARE SUPPORTING REFUGEES IN GERMANY

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The arrival in Germany of a large number of refugees in 2015 and 2016 inspired an enormous willingness to help: Ordinary citizens volunteered in all kinds of ways to help welcome and integrate the new arrivals.

They developed numerous projects to make it easier to get settled in Germany. And digital media played an important role: More than a hundred digital projects were launched in 2015 and 2016. People from all different backgrounds and with different skills developed apps for language learning, information and orientation; created programmes to train refugees in the use of digital technology; used or expanded existing digital platforms; and created digital networks at local, regional and national level. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all members of the public for their extraordinary willingness to help.

In recognition of this development, the Federal Ministry of the Interior organised the first Digital Refugee Summit in Berlin in June 2016, where refugees, representatives of aid organizations, government institutions and others working in digital technology discussed its potential to help those who have fled their home countries.

With funding from the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the betterplace lab, which is the research arm of Germany’s leading philanthropy platform betterplace.org, has studied the origins, potential and challenges of digital aid for refugees. The brochure you are holding is the result of this study on digital innovation to integrate refugees in Germany. The results plainly show how much potential digital technology can offer in this area, but they also reveal the challenges.

After the initial phase of enormous growth and innovation, it is now necessary to make sure that these projects and platforms are sustainable. I invite all stakeholders to look with the Federal Ministry of the Interior ahead to the future and to keep up their digital engagement for refugee integration. We must utilize the potential this field offers. With the help of modern forms of communication and networking, we can open a new chapter of social cohesion.

Sincerely,

Thomas de Maizière

Federal Minister of the Interior
On a personal note, we are privileged to be able to work on this topic. We are a Brit, a German who grew up in Belgium, and a Syrian who had to flee his home country; we have each made Berlin our home. How we will create the cohesive and inclusive societies needed in the coming years and decades – this is something that matters to us.

As such, we’d like to thank a large number of people who have made our work possible, and helped us along the way.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We identified 112 digital refugee projects in Germany. Our research is founded primarily on 66 interviews with these projects and other stakeholders conducted between January and May 2017.

- The emergence of these projects was heavily concentrated in an intense “explosion” period. One third of them started in September-October 2015. Starting around March 2016, there was a shift towards greater consolidation, in which far fewer new projects emerged and the existing projects became more open to exchange and cooperation.

- There is a heavy concentration of activity in Berlin. Half of all projects started in the capital. A priority should be ensuring these innovations also benefit refugees in smaller cities and rural areas.

- Digital innovations can help and complement established structures in the area of refugee integration such as government agencies and NGOs, by increasing their reach and filling gaps.

- Hence, for digital innovations to realise their full potential, they should be better embedded into these existing structures. This means forging effective cooperation between digital projects, government agencies and established NGOs. There have been some positive examples of this happening, but more instances where opportunities were lost due to bureaucratic obstacles or lack of receptiveness. To facilitate partnerships in future, government agencies and large NGOs should work to make their decision-making processes more transparent and have clearly designated contact persons. For their part, digital projects need to increase their understanding of how such organisations work.

- Volunteering and donations played an integral role in the early stages of many projects. However, these do not provide an adequate basis for sustained or scaled impact. Hence projects should be supported to professionalise their operations.

- Funders have a pivotal role to play in the future development of this project landscape. What is required is not only more investment, but funding mechanisms better suited to projects of this kind.

- Responsible use of data is an under-discussed but very important issue in this field.

- Since levels of digital literacy among refugees are mixed, digital approaches risk exacerbating existing inequalities, for example in education level and gender. This should be mitigated by measures to increase levels of digital literacy.

- Even if well-intentioned, projects aimed specifically at refugees may have a ghettoising effect by isolating refugees and treating them differently from the rest of the population. Refugee-specific projects only make sense on topics where refugees’ situations and needs are structurally different.
INTRODUCTION

What happened? What does it teach us? Where do we go from here?

The world is witnessing unprecedented levels of forced migration. We agree with Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in rejecting the term “refugee crisis”. It is not the people themselves that are the problem. Instead, we have seen in recent years a crisis in the response to the displacement of millions of people. Finding adequate responses is one of the defining challenges of our time – in Germany, in Europe, and globally. Our contribution with this research is to gain a better understanding of what role digital technology can play in refugee integration.

Our approach is essentially empirical. We examine the case of Germany in 2015-17 and the emergence of a unique landscape of digital projects aiming to support refugee integration. The most direct impact we hope our research can have is to strengthen the efforts and structures that exist here in Germany for integrating refugees. At the same time, we hope that our findings might have a broader relevance. Lessons from this experience could put us in a stronger position to respond to possible future large-scale influxes of forced migrants, in Germany or elsewhere. Broader still, they can provide us with a better general understanding of the dynamics of intense waves of civic engagement, and how they can be harnessed.

The following chapters start with the general and progress toward the particular. Chapter 1 explains what we mean when we say “integration”; in it we frame the various needs which digital approaches might hope to address, and how these needs develop over time. Chapter 2 tells the story of how the landscape of digital refugee projects, taken collectively, emerged and evolved. In chapter 3 we go into more detail about the experiences of individual projects and what we can learn from them. Then in the final chapter we present our conclusions, and explore how adopting a more systemic approach could lead us to better outcomes.
What do we mean when we talk about “integration”? The term is not entirely uncontroversial. Some people object to it, arguing that it implies one-way assimilation, i.e. that newcomers need to change themselves in order to “be integrated” into the host community. This is not how we use the term. Instead we use it in a very broad sense to describe the complex process which leads not just to an improvement in refugees’ well-being, but to a situation where they are truly included within the host community, are able to support themselves and make a contribution. This is a process which has many different facets, and requires active engagement from both the newcomers and the host community to create an environment in which this is possible.

We will not examine here the role of technology for refugees in transit (on this topic, see the report “ICT4Refugees”, produced in 2016 by betterplace lab and partners). The scope of our current research begins when people arrive in Germany with the intention of applying for asylum. What role can digital technology play in supporting them from that point?

To answer this, it’s necessary to understand in more detail what passing through the asylum system involves. This is crucial contextual information, since it determines the needs that refugees have which digital projects may be able to support – and how these needs change over time.

**SHIFTING NEEDS: THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

For refugees arriving in Germany there are three particularly important checkpoints in the asylum process. On arrival, their first step is to be registered as an asylum seeker and to be assigned to one of Germany’s 16 states. This happens through the EASY-System, the computer system used by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). At a certain point following this initial registration in the EASY-System, an official asylum application is lodged, and the wait for this to be processed and a decision to be reached typically lasts a few months. Let us trace the path of an imaginary refugee passing through this system. The kind of support that she might need will change depending on what stage in the process she is at.

Immediately after arrival, she is housed in provisional accommodation, where basic necessities of food, clothing, and so on are provided for. Dealing with both a complex bureaucracy and the reality of everyday life in a foreign country, she lacks a lot of information which would be helpful. In the event that she suffered trauma before fleeing her home country or while in transit, she may be in need of psychosocial support. Naturally it is extremely important to her to maintain contact with family and friends elsewhere.

Her asylum application is registered. As she waits for a decision, and settles into her new surroundings, her atten-
tion shifts from immediate needs to longer-term concerns. She would like to start learning German. Although she is not allowed to work yet, she would like to undertake some education and training programmes – partly to improve her future employability, and partly because having a focus and a routine is far preferable to having none. At a certain point she receives notification that she is allowed to leave the provided accommodation and seek private housing. There are still some parts of everyday life that she finds confusing and difficult to navigate; she has questions, but they are different from before.

Eventually she is informed that her asylum application has been approved, and then that she is allowed to seek employment. She would like to broaden her network of German friends.

"After basic needs are met immediately after arrival, gradually the different dimensions and needs that make up long-term integration come to the fore"

The precise details will be unique to each individual. And the sometimes chaotic circumstances during peak arrivals meant that many people had more challenging experiences than our idealised example. But the overall tendency will be found in all cases: after basic needs are met immediately after arrival, gradually the different dimensions and needs that make up long-term integration come to the fore. And we take note that the decision of the asylum application is a particularly significant milestone; many important things can only begin once this has happened.

Language as a key gateway to integration

The imagined example above is drawn from interviews we conducted with 12 refugees and is in part a composite of their experiences. Through these interviews we wanted to gain a different perspective on the research of digital projects which will be the focus of the following chapters. We wanted to compare the “supply” (i.e. the projects that have been created so far) with the “demand” (i.e. the lived realities of refugees and their own perceptions of their situations and needs).

The picture that emerged was in line with the description above: more immediate needs gradually giving way to longer-term concerns. But there was one striking feature common to almost all of those we spoke to. When asked to describe their current priorities, learning the German language dominated, head and shoulders above even such important issues as finding a job, enrolling in education or training, or becoming better socially integrated.

There are two conclusions we can draw from this. Firstly, it illustrates the way in which language learning is a prerequisite for other kinds of integration such as vocational training or getting involved in local community events. It has a special status relative to other needs because reaching a level of linguistic competence is a gateway that opens up many more options.

“Our interview partners were projecting onto the language their more general difficulty in navigating bureaucratic and social systems”

The second conclusion is more pessimistic. Our interview partners expressed a confidence that mastering German would by itself solve a range of difficulties holding back their integration, be they technical, legal or cultural. This degree of confidence was probably, we’re sad to suggest, misplaced. They were projecting onto the language their more general difficulty in navigating the various bureaucratic and social systems they are confronted with. If this conclusion is true, it has implications for digital projects aiming to support refugees, since it suggests that in many cases refugees’ lack of knowledge about their new surroundings is on a fundamental level, such that they’re not well able to formulate the question that they need an answer to. In other words, their capacity for self-help may be limited in some areas.

We will return in more fine-grained detail to these considerations in the “Meeting the Needs” section of chapter 3.
**SHIFTING CHALLENGE: THE AGGREGATE LEVEL**

We’ve discussed how the needs profile of an individual changes over time. But what is the dynamic when a large number of people arrive in a short space of time? How does the aggregate needs profile develop? In other words, what does the challenge look like on a societal level?

Fig. 1 shows the number of asylum seekers per month passing through the asylum process.

The pink line shows entry into the EASY-System; this shows fairly exactly, but not perfectly, the number of people arriving into Germany. The chart shows the rate of arrivals starting to pick up in early 2015. It continued to rise steeply, with monthly arrivals reaching six figures in summer 2015, peaking in October of that year at over 200,000. Thereafter it falls away swiftly, such that by April 2016 it levels out at a much lower rate of around 16,000 per month, where it has remained ever since.

The green line shows the number of official asylum applications lodged, and the blue line shows decisions reached on asylum applications. Hence, paths of the green and blue lines can be interpreted as the asylum processing bureaucracy working to catch up with the large influx.

During peak arrivals, authorities were unable to keep pace with asylum registrations and decisions. The so-called “EASY-Gap” opened up between a person’s entry into the EASY-System and the official registration of their asylum application. There was regional variation here, but as the chart shows, on a national level it took until late 2016 to clear the backlog and close this EASY-Gap. The monthly rate of asylum applications continued to increase until August 2016, several months after the sharp drop in arrivals. Given the time required to process and decide on an application, it is no surprise that the monthly rate of decisions peaked later still. In fact, in April 2017 the rate of decisions was still twice what it was during peak arrivals in October 2015.

The work towards successful integration is only just beginning

What does all this tell us for the purposes of our research? We are aiming to understand what potential digital innovations have for addressing the needs of refugees. There was a surge in arrivals in the summer and autumn of 2015, and
meeting the logistical challenge of receiving those people and providing for their immediate needs required a major mobilisation. This is unsurprising. But a more significant conclusion from our analysis concerns the shift towards longer-term aspects of integration. Only some time after arrival do language acquisition, training and jobs become priorities for refugees. Receiving a decision on the asylum application is an important turning point. The time-lag between peak arrivals and peak asylum decisions means these longer-term needs are only now, in 2017, truly coming to the forefront. The work towards successful integration is only just beginning.

ACHIEVING IMPACT AT SCALE

There is a more straightforward point which fig. 1 expresses starkly: lots of people came. Just in numerical terms, refugee integration in Germany is a major challenge. Initiatives and approaches that help dozens, or even hundreds of refugees do something very valuable – but action limited to this scale is inadequate in the context of the arrival levels seen in 2015-16. We must aim for impact at scale.

*Digital approaches can, given the right conditions, be scaled with extraordinary success*

This will be a guiding axiom as we turn in the coming chapters to examine the digital innovations that have been developed to promote refugee integration. One great strength of digital approaches is that, given the right conditions, they can be scaled with extraordinary success. Facebook, for instance, has nearly two billion active users worldwide – far more than any other product in human history. If impact at scale is the goal, digital technology can be a powerful tool to help get there.

None of the digital projects for refugee integration that have emerged so far is yet having impact at scale. This should not be too big a surprise, or discouragement. These projects are nearly all very young. What’s more, as shown above, the real work around refugee integration is only just beginning. What we should be looking for are projects that are currently showing the potential to create impact at scale in the future. Important indicators are if a project has a solid and growing user-base, success in professionalising its operations, and achieving financial stability.

With the questions around refugee integration more clearly in view, let us look at some possible answers.
THE EMERGENCE OF THE “DIGITAL REFUGEE SCENE”

Since 2011, we at betterplace lab have been researching how digital innovation can help to address social challenges and promote common good. We have followed and analysed the development of “digital social innovation” globally, including field research in 22 countries on five continents. But in all this time, we have never witnessed such a dynamic wave of engagement as we saw in Germany in 2015-17 around the topic of refugees. This was unique.

METHODOLOGY

Our database

In September 2015 we started to hear about more and more digital refugee projects. We created a table where we started to catalogue projects we knew about. Over time we developed this resource, steadily adding new projects, collecting data about them, and introducing systems of categorisation. This database of projects is at the centre of our research. At the time of writing it contains 112 projects in Germany. It is publicly accessible online at:

bit.ly/refugee-tech

The database provides a comprehensive overview, and contains the vast majority of all projects in Germany. Nevertheless it is possible that further projects exist – or existed – which we have not heard about. (The database also links to a contact form – we’re grateful for any additions.)

We used various systematic strategies to scout for new projects. We monitored the posts in the Techfugees public Slack channel (more on this below) and Facebook groups such as Nerds4Refugees. We searched news sites and entered keywords into search engines. Many projects we learnt of through our networks. This has a kind of snowball effect to it: the better connected we became to projects in this area, and the more interconnected they became with one another, the more likely that we would get wind of any given new project that sprang up.

Inevitably, some biases remain in our methodology. Since we are based in Berlin, we are more likely to hear sooner about new projects in Berlin. That said, we believe this bias plays only a small part in the very strong concentration of projects in the capital, as shown in fig. 6 on p. 24. We will discuss this Berlin-centrism in more detail in the next chapter.

Projects that did not receive any media attention, or which did not exchange with other projects are more difficult to discover. Finally, there is an unknown number of projects which never made it past the concept phase. These will also be missing from our database.

We are less likely to hear about projects that do not receive any media attention, or projects which are like islands, working alone and not exchanging with others. Finally, there are surely a number of digital projects which people started working on but, for whatever reason, ground to a halt and never saw the light of day. These will also be missing from our database.
Qualitative interviews

Between January and May 2017 we conducted qualitative interviews with the founders and teams of the projects in our table. In total we interviewed 48 projects, in some cases speaking with multiple team members. In some cases we received no reply to our interview requests. We do not have good data for how many of the 112 projects have been discontinued, however we can say with confidence that we interviewed over half of the projects that are still active (as well as a handful which are not).

Most interviews were conducted in person in Berlin and Munich, but we did also aim for a geographic spread in our interviews, and spoke to projects from other cities either by phone or when they were visiting Berlin.

Some projects opened their door to us: we were able to observe them at work, in order to get a richer sense of working culture, atmosphere, routine, etc. The six projects we did this with were Flüchtlinge Willkommen, InfoCompass, clarat, ReDI School of Digital Integration, GoVolunteer and AsylPlus.

In addition, we interviewed 12 refugees, as discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, in order to investigate how digital platforms affect volunteering, we spoke to three volunteer managers within NGOs and five volunteers. A complete list of the interviewed people and projects is on p. 4 except for the refugees, who will remain anonymous.

What we define as a digital project

The basis of our approach is to catalogue and then to investigate digital projects. However, defining what does and what doesn’t qualify as a digital project is not entirely straightforward. For one thing, in 2017 even essentially analogue and offline projects mostly have some kind of web presence. For instance, the Berlin initiative Über den Tellerrand kochen creates connections between refugees and locals by bringing them together for cooking classes – and they have a website with information and videos about their programme.

Conversely, even projects which are ostensibly digital involve crucial elements which are analogue and offline. One example is HiMate!. This is an online platform, but the HiMate! team’s product development and outreach strategies are heavily reliant on the events and focus groups they hold for refugees in their office, and the community that has built up around this.

There are few if any purely digital projects

The interplay between offline and online, analogue and digital will be discussed in the “Meeting the Needs” section of chapter 3. For now it’s enough to note that there are few if any purely digital projects. In fact, projects exist on a spectrum where they combine different elements from each.

We define digital projects as projects which have a central digital component to the service they offer, which goes beyond simply providing information about themselves.

One kind of project with a special status are refugee coding schools, i.e. programmes to teach refugees computer programming skills. We know of four such projects in Germany, and there are more internationally. These do not have a digital product in the sense of, for example, an app or a platform that they have built. But they are important to include, since the digital dimension is the core of their work and “theory of change”.

Another feature of digital projects in our definition is that they are meant to be used by people other than the people who built them (often refugees, but in some cases also volunteers, for instance). What we do not look at is the digitisation of internal processes within organisations, such as the authorities that administer the asylum process. Issues around “e-government” are very relevant to the area of refugee integration, and no doubt have much potential, but these matters are beyond the scope of our research.
TWO PHASES IN THE DIGITAL REFUGEE RESPONSE

Explosion: September 2015 - February 2016

Our definition of project start dates are operational rather than legal. It’s the point at which they first went “live” – that is, when their offering became available to users. This is more interesting than the point at which they register as a legal entity, which in some cases came earlier, in some cases later, and in many cases not at all. For projects which we didn’t interview, our data here is based on what we could gather from their websites and media reports about them. In fig. 2 we plot this data as the cumulative total of projects over time.

Over a third of all projects started within a two-month window, averaging four new projects per week

Only five out of 112 projects predate 2015. There was a slow trickle of projects in the first months of that year, but the most striking part of the chart is the spike in activity in September and October 2015. Altogether 36 projects, over a third of the total, started in that two-month window – an average of four new projects per week. We know from our interviews that the initial ideas and early conversations for several of these came in the months previous. In other cases there was almost no “lead time” and the team put together a rudimentary first version in the space of a few days.

The chart gives a good reflection of the sense of engagement and mobilisation at that time. This was when Germany’s “digital refugee scene” was taking shape and gaining momentum. In August two young graduates, Paula Schwarz and Katharina Dermühl, organised Startup Boat, in which a group of young software developers, designers and others, mostly from Germany, travelled to the Greek island of Samos for five days to see first-hand the thousands of refugees arriving there by boat, and to develop projects that might be able to support them. Out of this grew what would later become Migration Hub Network. Also on board the Startup Boat was the still-embryonic team of Kiron, the online higher education platform which would go on to be the biggest digital refugee project of all (see profile on p. 38).
This was a period of hackathons. The Refugee Hackathon in Berlin on 23-24 October is cited by several still-active projects as an important event. It is where metacollect was founded, and where new people joined the team of Volunteer Planner. HiMate! and Konfettichange also took part. A moment of comparable significance for Munich’s digital refugee community was the Hack ‘n’ Help event in December, attended by integreat, hire.social and WelcomeRide among others.

Beyond Germany, similar phenomena were unfolding. In September 2015 the well-known London-based technology writer Mike Butcher started Techfugees, a network for people with technology backgrounds to come together and create projects supporting refugees. The resonance was enormous. Within 48 hours, thousands of people were following Techfugees on Facebook and Twitter. Over the following months, hackathons were held in cities across the world under the Techfugees banner, and Butcher hosted two live-streamed conferences. Techfugees soon became – and remains today – the most important international network of people working on digital refugee support. In particular their Slack channel – a public online messaging forum – is an important resource for people working in this area to network or seek help.

In the digital refugee community, the overall mood was shifting around this time. Excitement, optimism and determination gave way to a sense of disillusionment. Many teams which had been working hard for several months, almost all unpaid, saw that their product wasn’t being used in the way they’d hoped – or they became more acutely aware that somebody else had done something very similar.

In spite of these efforts to coordinate, the situation during the explosion period was nevertheless chaotic. There was a lot of fragmentation and duplication, instances in which more than one person or team had landed on a very similar idea for a project and begun to develop it. Talking to projects about this time, the universal impression is of terrific urgency, leading to a kind of tunnel vision. Driven by their pressing determination, most people expended all the energy they had in developing their own projects, rather than looking around at what others were doing.

Some closely-aligned projects started to talk to each other – some of the job-matching platforms for example, some volunteer coordinators, some mapping projects – but each were so firmly set on their own trajectories, and so limited in capacity, that no partnerships or mergers took place.

**Consolidation: March 2016 onwards**

This explosion period was characterised by frenzied and uncoordinated activity in many quarters. But even by November, the rate of new projects launching had dropped considerably from the peak, and by spring 2016 there was just a slow trickle. Returning to fig. 2, what is almost as striking as the vertiginous increase in projects in the autumn of 2015 is how rapidly this levelled off again.

The atmosphere in Germany at large was changing too. As fig. 1 shows, by the new year the rate of refugee arrivals was decreasing. The closure of the Balkan Route and the EU’s agreement with Turkey led it to decline further. The topic was becoming gradually less dominant in the German media, and what coverage there was became more ambivalent, in part as a consequence of the terrorist attacks in Paris. Although these were not committed by refugees, they ignited a debate more focussed around internal security, which influenced media reporting from that point on.

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**Excitement, optimism and determination gave way to a sense of disillusionment**

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In the digital refugee community, the overall mood was shifting around this time. Excitement, optimism and determination gave way, to some extent, to a sense of disillusionment. Many teams which had been working hard for several months, almost all unpaid, saw that their product wasn’t being used in the way they’d hoped – or they became more acutely aware that somebody else had done something very similar.

In spite of these efforts to coordinate, the situation during the explosion period was nevertheless chaotic. There was a lot of fragmentation and duplication, instances in which more than one person or team had landed on a very similar idea for a project and begun to develop it. Talking to projects about this time, the universal impression is of terrific urgency, leading to a kind of tunnel vision. Driven by their pressing determination, most people expended all the energy they had in developing their own projects, rather than looking around at what others were doing.

Some closely-aligned projects started to talk to each other – some of the job-matching platforms for example, some volunteer coordinators, some mapping projects – but each were so firmly set on their own trajectories, and so limited in capacity, that no partnerships or mergers took place.

**Consolidation: March 2016 onwards**

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A certain amount of naivety which had existed in some parts of the scene was dispelled at this point. Writer Evgeny Morozov has criticised what he calls the “solutionism” of some technologists, which is a misguided belief that complex social problems can be transformed and solved with simple technological solutions. During the explosion phase, some people harboured solutionist hopes that, at the risk of caricature, “an app might solve the refugee crisis”. These hopes were disappointed, and a phase of consolidation began.

It is hard to say exactly how many projects simply stopped at this point. Some websites were taken down, but perhaps more projects became dormant: their websites still online but not maintained or updated, their apps still available for download. It’s fair to assume that these dormant projects are hardly used, but nevertheless there is a slim risk in some cases, as Meghan Benton from Migration Policy Institute in Washington DC has argued, that refugees will use them to access outdated and incorrect information.

Other projects, such as Volunteer Planner and Lale, took a middle way. With user levels dwindling fast (Volunteer
Planner), or never having taken off (Lale), the teams kept their platforms running, and intend to do so for as long as people are still using them, but have stopped actively developing them or trying to attract new users.

The teams and the projects that did remain active during this phase became more open to deviating from their original idea, and to more actively cooperating with digital projects and other organisations. These are points which we will examine in more depth in section “Networks and Consolidation” of chapter 3.

These changes in attitude were reflected in the tone of discussions within the community. In June 2016, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior hosted the “Digitaler Flüchtlingsgipfel”, a conference in Berlin which convened people working on digital refugee projects (betterplace lab was one of the organising partners). Under the slogan of “more wood behind fewer arrows”, the conference directly addressed the challenges of fragmentation and duplication. In the opening remarks, interior minister Thomas de Maizière urged attendees to try to pool their efforts more.

The Techfugees network also fundamentally altered their strategy. Summed up with the slogan: “Fewer unicorns, more tech support”, they aimed to shift their members’ energies from prototyping new products to lending technical support to existing projects and NGOs.

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT OR JUST HYPE?

Some commentators suggested that there was a “hype” around the “refugee crisis”. By this they meant that there was a lot of media attention and enormous willingness to help among the host community – but that this interest and engagement fell away almost as rapidly as it arose. To what extent does this critical assessment hold true in the domain of digital projects?

To answer this, we can consider the two timelines in fig. 3 and fig. 4. Between them they show the progression of four variables since January 2015. They have been plotted against each other although they are on different scales – here the absolute values are less important than the shape of the graph.

The top timeline displays data taken from two digital projects, and tells us about the willingness to help in the German population at large.

The blue line shows visitor numbers on the Flüchtlinge Willkommen website, a project which allows people to offer their spare room to house refugees (see profile on p.32). The traffic levels on the site – which are an indicator of people interested at least in finding out about helping – spike dramatically, closely mirroring peak arrivals and media attention. But the high is short-lived and traffic quickly plummets, in fact plateauing lower than the levels of early 2015.

The green line on the top timeline shows total donations to refugee projects through the Zusammen für Flüchtlinge and betterplace.org donation platforms. This tells a rather different story. The two big spikes are both in December and have more to do with the annual surge in donations at the end of the financial year than factors relating specifically to the refugee situation. Discounting these two spikes momentarily, the overall pattern is of a sharp increase in late summer 2015, but which then declined only rather gradually over the following months. It seems that on the whole people’s willingness to help, as measured by donating their money, was more enduring than the blip of intense media attention. Even by December 2016, the end-of-year spike in donations was lower than twelve months previously, but not dramatically so.

So for digital projects that rely on widespread engagement among the host population, the picture is mixed. In some ways, people’s willingness to help has sustained well, but as the experience of Flüchtlinge Willkommen shows, some projects may experience a drastic drop-off.

The bottom timeline tells us something about how the response played out within the digital refugee community.

On the whole people’s willingness to help was more enduring than the blip of intense media attention

The green line shows the level of activity in the Techfugees Slack channel. Although this is not a perfect indicator of how much work is being done, it does suggest that the tech community which activated around this topic have maintained their interest and engagement quite well. The line shows only a gradual downward trend since the channel started, rather than a short-lived burst of hype.

The pink line is the same data on when projects started as displayed in fig. 2, but here it is shown as the number of new projects per month, rather than a cumulative total. As already noted above, the number of new projects launch-
ing spikes dramatically and falls away rapidly. But this
does not mean that the digital refugee scene was powered
primarily by hype.

We should expect to see a difference here between projects
serving short-term needs and those serving long-term
needs. As fig. 5 shows, the most common types of proj-
ects were of the short-term kind: coordinating volunteers
and in-kind donations, and providing initial orientation
for new arrivals. When the rate of arrivals drops, these
projects have served their purpose (or they haven’t), and
are no longer required. It’s natural for them to stop, and
not a sign of fickleness, or an indictment of the value of the
whole enterprise.

As explained in chapter 1, we should now be looking at
projects dealing with longer-term integration – the green
and dark blue categories in fig. 5. Although these mostly
emerged in the same burst that produced the short-term
projects, many of them are enduring and maturing, as we
will see in chapter 3.

**Fig. 3: Willingness to help**

**Fig. 4: Digital Engagement**
### Fig. 5: Projects by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>Exchange through Q&amp;A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping</td>
<td>Directories of services available to refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Multilingual news for refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Advice and resources for newcomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Host Community</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td>Coordinating volunteers and/or in-kind donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>Raising money for refugee projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>Finding volunteering opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connection</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectivity</td>
<td>Providing wifi in refugee accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Language learning, translation and interpreters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Bringing locals and newcomers together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Health care or psychosocial support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Finding accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>Finding a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Vocational training and qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Online higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>Projects for financial inclusion, domestic violence and managing appointments with asylum officials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SIX TYPES OF ORGANISATION

One of the fundamental points about this field and these projects is that it’s not only the initiatives which are novel, but also the organisations behind them. With very few exceptions (such as Ankommen App, RefuShe and Work For Refugees), these projects are not initiated by public bodies or established NGOs, but rather by a new breed of technologically savvy groups and organisations.

These are sometimes collectively referred to as “civic tech” or “digital social innovation”. The Techfugees network describes itself as “coordinating the international tech community’s response to the needs of refugees”. Although the civic tech scene is very diverse, our research reveals several recurring characteristics, which allow us to identify six categories of organisation.

These descriptions are idealised versions of a more messy reality. The aim is not that each of the 112 projects is precisely described by one category. Some projects sit somewhere between two different types, some do not fit into any. Ultimately, these are artificial boundaries. But we think that viewing the project landscape in terms of these types can help to understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of projects, and how they relate to one another.

Newbies

A number of projects are the work of students or recent graduates, including Daheim and the co-working space Migration Hub. Indeed, some projects, such as Afeefa, were developed as a part of the curriculum itself. The job-matching platforms Workeer and HIRE.social also began as student projects – they graded as a part of the founders’ degrees – and both of them then grew to have a life of their own beyond this academic setting.

Newbies have struggled to understand and navigate established structures, and to get funding

Despite their youth, these are impressive individuals, focussed and passionate, committing huge amounts of energy to their endeavours. It’s true that they have little or no professional experience. Newbies have typically struggled to understand and navigate established structures, such as how policy is made. In particular, most of them have struggled to attract adequate funds to properly finance their projects, meaning that in many cases teams have worked unpaid or for nominal wages for an extended stretch. What funding they have received is more likely to come from smaller fellowships and stipends than from larger grants or impact investments.

For these projects to achieve impact at scale requires them to professionalise, thereby transcending their Newbie beginnings. Kiron is a project started by students but it has been able to professionalise and attain financial stability. Wefugees also shows signs that it might be able to move in the same direction, hence it exists somewhere between Newbies and our next type: the Social Entrepreneurs.

Social Entrepreneurs

Social Entrepreneurs approach their work with a business mindset, but geared towards maximising impact, rather than generating a profit. Projects of this type are typically run by people a little older, in their late-twenties or thirties, who have gathered some professional experience. In particular, these projects have a strong affinity to the world of tech start-ups, which is reflected in their attitude, mode of working, and approach to project development. Even down to the appearance of their working environment – open office spaces with offbeat décor – these initiatives either emulate, or are actually a part of, the well established scene of tech start-ups and co-working spaces.

Being somewhat more experienced than the Newbies, the Social Entrepreneurs are able to draw on connections and prior expertise to get ahead. They are more likely than the other types to have developed a social business plan in the hope that the project will eventually be able to finance itself rather than relying on donor support. As far as we know, Devugees is the only project so far which has managed this.

Social Entrepreneurs are mission-driven, not profit-driven. Nonetheless, this type is generally more focussed than the others on achieving financial stability. They are more open to funding from corporations. The most successful crowdfunding campaigns have nearly all come from Social Entrepreneurs. This tendency to follow the money means that the Social Entrepreneurs are sometimes viewed by others – such as Hackers and Activists – with some suspicion.
Hackers

These project teams are drawn from, or at least aligned with, the “hacker” subculture embodied by Chaos Computer Club and similar networks and associations. This subculture is made up of people with a background in software development, who also wish to spend their free time using their programming skills to pursue side-projects, often with a bent towards addressing social issues rather than commercial interest.

Many Hackers described to us witnessing the chaos in summer-autumn 2015 and wanting to try to restore more order. As such, many of the Hacker projects were variations on coordinating efforts – either directly like Volunteer Planner (although this project also has some traits of the Professional type below), or indirectly by mapping and cataloguing what other people were doing in order to create an overview like metacollect and HelpCamp.

Hackers felt that funders lacked transparency, and generally that the value of their work was not appreciated

Hacker projects on the whole only started to ask the question of how to finance their efforts several months in, if at all. And then many of them were frustrated by the fundraising process. They were unfamiliar with available funding channels and felt these lacked transparency, and generally that the value of their work was not appreciated.

The Hackers prize a spirit of community and cooperation. They are active in exchange networks such as Techfugees and OK Labs (see chapter 3, “Networks & Consolidation), and they participate in hackathon events. This can come at a cost, since some Hacker projects expended so much energy on seeking internal consensus on strategy and execution that it paralysed their ability to take the project forward. In fact we believe, but are unable to properly verify, that many Hacker projects never saw the light of day, grinding to a halt before the time invested in them had produced a viable output.

We reluctantly conclude that Hacker projects have not proved themselves to be a good model for producing sustainable and impactful integration projects. This is not to say that the individuals involved have nothing to contribute. Instead it is a question of finding models and structures in which they can apply their skills more constructively. For example, Nerds4Refugees, a Munich-based network of Hackers, did not itself produce any viable project so far as we know, but we heard from projects of other types who had successfully appealed to Nerds4Refugees for technical support. This suggests that hacker communities might be most valuable as pools of expertise and intermittent support for others.

Professionals

These are projects run by mid-level and high-level professionals, some but not all of them in the IT sector. Most had no previous engagement with refugees and migrants. But as the “crisis” became acute they were moved to help, and felt that their skill-sets were better suited to building a digital project than handing out blankets at railway stations.

Hence there are several similarities with the Hackers in terms of the profile of person involved. The points that distinguish the two types mainly concern their attitude and their ultimate ambition for the project. The Professionals are less interested in networking, roundtable events, or exchanging ideas with people doing something similar; they prefer to focus their energies on building their own product.

Professionals hoped to build something and then hand it over for someone else to run

Unlike the Social Entrepreneurs, the Newbies, and some of the Hackers, the Professionals have no intention to turn their projects into their main job. Instead, they hope to build something of high quality which can be handed over in its entirety to be run by an appropriate authority or NGO, so that they have no further operational role. We don’t know of any instance where this has actually happened.

The products that Professionals build are mostly to a high technical standard. Some, such as the app Help2, are projects that people build in their spare time. Others, such as MOIN or WhatsGerman develop inside these people’s places of work, and spending time on the project is sanctioned and supported by the employer. As such, Professional projects do not actively seek external funding.
Of all our types, the Professionals are the most sanguine about the idea of failure. Not that they are less emotionally committed to the success of their endeavour, but they are more prepared to conclude that it is not working and move on.

### Activists

These groups are driven by a deep and often long-standing commitment to the cause of helping refugees as a political stance. Where previous types have started out with tech skills and explored how these can be applied in the context of refugee integration, with the Activists it is more often the other way around. They devise a project with a digital focus, even if in some cases it requires them to gain new tech skills or recruit somebody who has them.

Some Activists would welcome someday becoming obsolete

Activists see themselves as filling a gap or providing a service which they believe should properly be the role of the state. Hence Flüchtlinge Willkommen for instance, would welcome someday becoming obsolete.

Providing wifi in refugee accommodation is a particular area of focus for Activists, something which officials and established NGOs have been unable or unwilling to provide – in part because of legal obstacles. These organisations may seek donations and engage in crowdfunding, but they are averse to thinking in business models.

### Newcomer-Led

This is a type which is still embryonic, but whose development we should look out for – and hope for. In the chapter 3, “Meeting the Needs” we argue for the importance of co-creation and user-centred design – in other words, talking to refugees and newcomers before and during any attempt to make a product for them.

The existence of Newcomer-Led projects would be a potent indicator for genuine empowerment and integration

The extension of this idea is that refugees themselves become active, initiating projects by refugees for refugees. The existence of such projects would be a potent indicator for genuine empowerment and integration, demonstrating that newcomers are able to contribute, and help themselves and each other.

We are starting to see the first few digital projects of this type. So far they appear to be mostly limited to information and news sites. We are still waiting to see more technically ambitious Newcomer-Led projects, with one notable exception, Bureaucrazy, an interactive tool to help refugees understand and fill out official forms.
Chapter 2 described a shift, beginning in early 2016, from explosion to consolidation. While some projects packed up shop, those that stuck around were becoming more open to exchange and collaboration. Forums and clusters of exchange emerged.

**LAGeSo Roundtable**

One of these was convened in February 2016 by Sebastian Muschter, who was at that time president of the Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales (LAGeSo). LAGeSo was the authority in Berlin responsible for processing asylum applications, as well as providing provisional accommodation and basic welfare support for refugees. (Disclosure: Muschter is on the advisory committee to this research project.)

Having already initiated a successful partnership between LAGeSo and the language-learning app Babbel, Muschter invited a wide range of people connected with digital refugee projects to participate in a roundtable, to discuss what they were doing and how it could be improved. To begin with, Muschter urged participants not to shout about the existence of the group. LAGeSo had been the subject of critical press coverage when its overstretched capacity was unable to keep pace with peak arrivals in 2015, and Muschter’s concern was that convening this group of digital innovators would be denounced by some as a misguided priority.

The group met a number of times over the following months. The most concrete thing that resulted from these meetings was the development of a Facebook page for LAGeSo, through which refugees could get reliable information and answers about the asylum process. Although the tangible fruits were rather modest, these meetings nevertheless served two valuable functions. They were an important and early networking forum, where people working in this field got to know each other. And they opened up a constructive dialogue between fledgling digital projects and a relevant public authority, and increased the level of mutual understanding. Many of those round the table, for example, found the difficulties involved in launching this LAGeSo Facebook page to be an eye-opening experience, since it highlighted how often the freedom of public authorities to innovate is constrained. We have more to say about the relationship between digital projects and official administration in the “Partnerships” section below.

**Helfer-Allianz**

The Helfer-Allianz (“Helper Alliance”) was created as a direct result of the “Digitaler Flüchtlingsgipfel” conference with its appeal to projects to pool their efforts. The group, which is made up of representatives from numerous projects, largely of the Hacker type with some Social Entrepreneurs mixed in, has met semi-regularly since the conference in June 2016.

The Helfer-Allianz is a group of peers with no formal hierarchy. However, a central figure in the founding of the group was Malte Bedürftig, founder of GoVolunteer. This project typifies the shift from explosion and consolidation. The GoVolunteer platform launched in February 2016, and the months before that were spent narrowly focussed on building it. After the platform launched, Bedürftig and his team realised that success in their project required more than just software – they also needed to be actively working with NGOs and other projects. Since then, Bedürftig has invested a lot of time in developing a broad and diverse network.
The objectives of the Helfer-Allianz are to share knowledge and look for ways to pool resources, both on an operational level and in communicating a unified message to the press and public. There were some earlier attempts prior to the Helfer-Allianz to set up a network of this type. That the Helfer-Allianz gained traction where previous attempts had not is evidence of greater openness for exchange.

### Other influential clusters

A network that predates the proliferation in digital refugee projects, but that became an important point of activation, were the OK Lab network. Organised by the Open Knowledge Foundation Germany, the OK Labs are groups of coders and developers who share an interest in applying their skills to social issues, and meet up regularly in their free time to work on such projects. They fall squarely into the Hacker type described above.

There are OK Lab chapters in cities across Germany, and in summer 2016 the Open Knowledge Foundation chose four of them to participate in a new programme titled “Digital Refugee Labs”, funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (BpB). The idea was that existing digital refugee projects would be invited to present the current state of their projects and receive support from the participating OK Lab members. This was a much more constructive approach than starting from scratch to brainstorm yet more new projects. Volunteer Planner and metacollect were two projects that participated, and both reported that they profited from the experience.

Finally, there appears to be an informal clique of exchange centred on Kiron. As described in the profile of the project on p. XX, Kiron began to attract serious levels of attention and funding while other projects were still in early stages of development. In a couple of cases, Kiron used this position of strength to offer support to other digital projects under the banner of “Kiron Ventures”, although they have since dropped that name. Workeer and Wefugees are two projects that received financial support from Kiron, as well as pro bono assistance.

### Co-working spaces

Co-working spaces have played a significant role, incubating a number of digital refugee projects. The Social Impact Lab in Berlin, which offers modest seed funding as a package together with providing office space, has seen several of the projects in our database pass through its doors, including Kiron, Wefugees and Daheim.

Migration Hub is a co-working space which grew out of the Startup Boat expedition. On returning from Samos to Berlin, the Startup Boat organisers opened an office space to house and incubate innovative projects working on refugee integration (not necessarily digital ones). Since then Migration Hub is under new management, in new premises, and sees itself as not only a Berlin co-working space but also a centre of expertise internationally, an organiser of events, and more. The young team has recently been granted substantial EU funding and may develop into an important actor in the development of the digital refugee scene.

Interestingly, there seems to be a clear divide on the point of co-working spaces between the different types of projects we identified. The Social Impact Lab and the Migration Hub have typically housed projects from the Hacker and Newbie types. The Social Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, have opted instead for commercial co-working spaces, rubbing shoulders with for-profit start-ups. For example, Taqanu is based at the well-known Factory Berlin. Daheim, GoVolunteer and ReDI School have been incubated in Axel Springer Plug and Play Accelerator; indeed ReDI has worked in various commercial spaces, as detailed in the project profile on p. 47. The team behind WelcomeRide run it, along with their other for-profit enterprises, out of the #Neuland co-working space in Munich.

### Berlin-centrism

Fig. 6 makes clear the striking concentration of activity in Berlin. Half of all the German projects we know of began in the capital. This highly uneven distribution suggests both that there are important characteristics of the city which made it especially fertile soil for projects to sprout from, and also that there are likely to be self-reinforcing network effects – that is, the more projects there are in one place, the more likely others will follow.

Berlin is home to an established and thriving tech start-up scene, and consequently there is a large pool of people with IT skills and mindsets, as well as a surrounding infrastructure of co-working spaces, events, social networks, etc. These networks were mobilised during the explosion phase of engagement.

With the exception of Munich, there does not seem to be a cluster of people working in this field in any other city. Indeed, some people we interviewed in Munich and elsewhere look towards Berlin as a reference point for their work and can even, in the case of AIDEN and Daheim, end up moving there.
Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that project activity is focussed in Berlin. But it certainly doesn’t follow that the potential impact of these projects is also limited to the city. On the contrary, refugees in small towns and rural areas probably have more to gain from digital integration projects, since they may be less well served by offline integration services. A priority for the community of digital projects should therefore be ensuring that projects based primarily in Berlin can scale their work to have an impact nationwide.

An example of where this was not possible is provided by Volunteer Planner. In October and November 2015 the project began to receive attention in the national press, leading to large numbers of people from all over the country signing up to the platform. However, the refugee shelters using the site to organise volunteers were almost exclusively in Berlin, so these would-be volunteers from elsewhere were not actually able to use the platform.

Network analysis

Alongside our interviews, we also commissioned a network analysis of the digital refugee scene in order to shine a different light on the connections and dynamics between projects. Our partners at LEAD Academy gGmbH conducted this analysis for us, and their findings helped to inform our conclusions throughout this chapter. See p.26-29 for the network visualisation and guest text from Ben Sahlmüller of LEAD Academy offering his own analysis of what it shows us.
More and more cooperation

So overall we’ve seen a clear trend – also visualised in the network analysis – towards greater interconnectedness, with various clusters and groups serving as important centres of exchange. And projects are increasingly reaping the benefit of this.

In our interviews we heard of many small but valuable instances of projects helping each other out. When Wefugees were struggling to draw up their framing documents, for instance, they turned to clarat for advice. HiMate! helped Devugees find participants for their coding courses. The programmes run by Asylplus are made possible in part by the wifi provided by Refugees Online and the laptops from Project Reconnect.

This shift towards greater constructive interaction, and projects seeing themselves as part of a larger and interconnected system is a key theme of chapter 4.

Joining forces

But the problem at the end of the explosion phase was serious fragmentation. Perhaps provocatively, we could argue that the solution to this needs to go beyond just exchange. Perhaps it needs fewer projects, and that teams working on similar projects should joining forces. And while there has been more and more discussion, so far there have been very few such mergers.

This is in part because combining two projects into one is much easier said than done. Take as an example just one category of projects: job-matching platforms. This is a kind of project with clear economies of scale: the more job offers are listed on the platform, the easier it will be to attract job-seekers to use the platform, which will make it a more attractive to place job offers there – there is a positive feedback loop. Conversely, if there are several competing platforms, it is possible that none of them will achieve the critical mass needed to be viable. It is crucial that consolidation overcomes fragmentation.

During the explosion phase, several such platforms emerged. We know from our interviews that they soon became aware of each other and had preliminary conversations about pooling their efforts. But different platforms store data in different formats – combining the datasets is not a simple matter of copy-paste. Moreover, when merging, the teams would presumably have to agree on using one of the platforms they had programmed and dropping the other. And if the teams are located in different places, it may not be feasible to keep working in a decentralised way, so some people may have to either relocate or leave the project. In short, when it’s played out in practice, it’s difficult to envisage a merger that is not really just one project stopping and the other continuing.

Personality also comes into play. Are the teams sufficiently aligned in terms of approach, attitude, and simply getting along to make joining forces viable? More than one potential collaboration between job-matching platforms failed on these grounds. Equally salient: are people willing to discontinue a project in which they are very emotionally invested and have worked on unpaid for many months? It is understandable if this is difficult, even if it would serve the greater good to do so. And nobody can force them; in the social sector there are no hostile takeovers.

Consolidation takes time

Given all these hurdles, we should not expect miracles. It is promising that there is greater exchange and collaboration. But we cannot expect a project landscape that started off so fragmented to consolidate overnight, with everyone lining up behind the most promising project in each category.

By the time two or more projects are up and running with a digital product, the ideal time to consider working together is already long past. If in the future there were another explosion of engagement and innovation, perhaps it would be possible to connect the dots more quickly, but ultimately some degree of inefficiency through fragmentation is inevitable. So too is the fact that some of the consolidation will happen through projects fading and failing, even though mergers and collaboration would be a more satisfying outcome. Funders have an important role to play in all this too, which we discuss in chapter 4.

Consolidation will be a gradual process, but there are promising signs. At the time of writing, the first significant merger between two job-matching platforms was newly confirmed: MigrantHire is to be rolled into jobs4refugees.
Fig. 7: Network Analysis

A high-resolution and fully labelled version of the visualisation can be found at betterplace-lab.org/integration
Method & Visualisation

A network analysis is a quantitative scientific method that can help understanding the structures of social relations. For our analysis, we asked the projects in betterplace lab’s database to list, through an online survey, which projects and other actors they cooperate with. They then classified aspects of these collaborations and specified whether the relationship consisted in partnership, active support, exchange of information, providing resources and/or personal friendship. In total, we contacted 101 projects, of which 40 took part in the survey.

This graph is a schematic visualisation of the network. Circles represent digital projects and other organisations. The lines between them reveal the web of collaborative relationships. The number of different aspects a relationship had was what we used to measure the intensity of the relationship. The position of points relative to one another is determined by the strength of the relationship between them. The more intensively two projects work together, the closer they appear on the graph. The size of the circles represents the strength of the collaboration from the perspective of partners. The more a project or organisation was named by others, and the more aspects these relationships had, the larger the circle. In summary, larger circles indicate greater perceived importance; circles positioned near the centre are better connected overall.
Internal connections: Geographical proximity and social ties outweigh strategy as driving force of partnerships

The majority of refugee integration work is locally organised. At the same time, projects are trying to create digital platforms and products which are used nationwide (or even internationally). How does this tension manifest in terms of partnerships and cooperations? What kind of clustering and what degree of centralisation can we observe?

Our network analysis shows that the level of interconnectedness of projects between one another is very mixed. 75% of all digital projects were only known about by less than a quarter of the survey participants, and only 9 of the 122 projects were known about by more than half of participants. Whereas the offline volunteering efforts to receive refugees were highly localised and dispersed, this was not the case for digital projects. On the contrary, with the singular exception of the *Ankommen App* based in Nuremberg, the projects which occupy a central position in the community are all based in Berlin. There is no evidence of any other local clusters.

The nature of the cooperation between digital projects is mostly intensive and on a basis of equality. More than 75% of cooperations are described by participants as close friendships and/or as partnerships. Even when there is a relationship of active support, this is often mutual rather than one-way. In the context of innovation, this is a surprising finding. In one of the most important contributions to the study of networks, American sociologist Mark S. Granovetter showed that in fact it was informal “weak ties” that are most conducive to innovation. Whereas close, intense connections lead to the formation of clusters that promote unity, what helps more is informal connections and exposure to new ways of thinking outside of one’s own everyday environment. Among our digital projects, in contrast, relationships which are limited to just learning from one another made up less than 10% of all cooperations.

External exchange: intersectoral partnerships create synergies and allow greater reach

Digital projects occupy a special role within the social system at large. Although they share the same objectives as government, civil servants, NGOs and foundations, demands of their work more often resemble an entrepreneurial mindset. Understanding the target market; rapidly and iteratively testing ideas; scaling successful solutions; securing sustainable funding; all of it done at speed with
few resources – this requires the mentality of a start-up. How does this play out in the networks that these projects develop? In general, digital projects form different types of relationships with organisations from different sectors. Public sector organisations (which account for approximately 11% of external partnerships), companies (24%), foundations (6%) and welfare organisations (3%) tend to be sources of resources and active support. It’s also noticeable that cooperation with public sector organisations and welfare organisations often has more aspects to it. Also, exchange with companies is perceived to be less complicated, and foundations are rarely seen as more than simply funders.

Projects typically find close personal cooperation where they’re able to follow their experimental mode of working: with other NGOs (38% of the partners), and above all with start-ups (9%) – this is where cooperations are especially multi-levelled.

The structure of a project’s network varies according to the organisational type. The “Social Entrepreneurs” are mostly the ones who have contacts in the start-up scene, while “Activists” gravitate towards NGOs and “Hackers” develop contacts within the digital community. It’s worth noting that having a large reach – like GoVolunteer, Kiron, ReDI School and Start with a Friend all do – often comes with having a network that spans all sectors, and thus in its diversity combining the relative strengths of various partners. Hence the network analysis suggests that digital projects are more likely to be successful if they are able to develop a broad network of partners. That way, large and established organisations provide the resources, while the know-how and support with regard to interacting with the target group come from NGOs, and the innovative ways of working draw their inspiration from start-ups.

Shaping social change: decentralised impulses in the eco-system

The network analysis testifies to the way digital projects have successfully managed to reach every important stakeholder. The 40 projects that participated in the survey have between them 323 partner organisations drawn from all sectors, including ministries, around 80 companies (some of them large corporations like Google or Deutsche Bahn), six universities, 18 foundations, various start-up accelerators, as well as large and small NGOs. The only notable group lacking would be media partners.

The visualisation shows that almost two years after the influx of migration, change-makers are still building a complex and multi-faceted eco-system. Instead of forming fixed clusters based on geography, or alliances based on various contexts, the picture that emerges is decentralised.

There is a remarkable absence of any central actor outside the community of digital projects. Neither foundations nor public sector bodies nor organisations from the start-up sector have managed to position themselves as thought-leaders or direction-setters within the community, helping young projects to find their way and helping to develop a collective structure.

Changes to the system as a whole are not centrally directed. Instead, the eco-system grows and develops organically. Leadership is widely distributed. When asked which person or organisation acts as a role model, there were 51 different answers given, but only three of them more than once: ReDI School, Kiron and betterplace. Similarly, when we asked projects to evaluate their cooperations in terms of whether impulses came more from their own side or from their partner, the answers revealed a picture of decentralisation: only in 12% of cases was the answer that the partners were more dynamic. In a field like this one, searching for the one correct response to this is difficult, and any kind of centralised steering is almost impossible. Instead, it’s important that all parties develop a sense for the eco-system as a whole, as well as an ability to use their position within it to guide and shape it.
An integrated approach to integration

For digital integration projects to reach their full potential will require them to be better connected and embedded into existing structures. If they are only working in isolation then their impact will remain limited. The goal should be to build digital innovations into Germany’s broader infrastructure of refugee integration – which means above all working together with the public sector and established NGOs.

Digital approaches can increase the reach of existing programmes and fill gaps

This would give promising projects greater stability, as well as greater scale, and thus impact. In turn, established players stand to gain from being more open to digital approaches, which can help increase their reach and fill gaps in service provision. Online learning platforms such as ADIA Erding and Asylplus, for example, make it possible for refugees to learn German at their own pace in the period before they have access to official language courses.

Working with public agencies

Providing refugees with accommodation and essentials is primarily the responsibility of state and local governments. Hence these have a crucial role to play in coordinating and intermediating between all the other organisations engaged in supporting refugees. The new positions created at local government level to do this coordinating work were praised by several projects we spoke to. The projects felt these represented a step forward in getting different parties to work together more effectively.

There are already examples of successful cooperation between digital projects and public agencies. The project Integreat offers local governments a refugee orientation app for their specific location. The team also offers workshops to train local authorities on how to programme the app with location-specific information. So far eighteen cities have taken up this service. Project founder Daniel Kehne also reports that some of these cities have even started to seek more general advice and support from him regarding the digitalisation of their work.

The most promising instance to date of a digital project working with a public agency comes from the coding school Devugees, which offers refugees courses in software development. In spite of many bureaucratic hurdles, the school has succeeded in becoming a state-accredited provider of vocational training. The significance of this is that it provides Devugees with a stable source of funding, since the Jobcenter (the German employment agency) finances the training they provide. That they managed this was partly down to having a team member with prior experience in further education who knew the ins and outs of the certification process.

The Jobcenter’s strict regulations are difficult to reconcile with the quickly changing needs of the IT sector

One challenge for Devugees in this process is that all instructors are obliged to take a German language test before they can teach courses. This despite the fact that all courses are taught in English, and the faculty come from a wide range of international backgrounds. Furthermore, as programme director Johannes Kleine explains, the Jobcenter’s strict regulations are difficult to reconcile with the quickly changing needs of the IT sector, as even the smallest alterations to courses must be officially approved. But he’s not complaining; “you can get used to it” he says.

The platform InfoCompass is in fact a joint project with Berlin’s public agencies. It was created through a direct collaboration with the integration officers of Berlin’s
The app MOIN was designed as a navigation system and directory for refugees in Schleswig-Holstein, with a map function and available in six languages. It was developed in the summer of 2015 by employees of Kiel-based design agency Markenwerk. After the app was finalised for Kiel, the idea was for it to be handed over to the municipal authorities and gradually expanded to cover the whole of Schleswig-Holstein. However, the project was discontinued at the end of 2016, when the municipalities failed to reach a decision on whether to participate, despite several attempts. In total, the app has been downloaded 5,000 times.

The majority of refugees who arrived in Kiel, on Germany’s northern coast, during the summer of 2015 hoped to continue to Scandinavia by ferry. However, they were soon facing longer and longer waiting times. As Sweden and Denmark tightened their entry requirements, several hundred refugees were stranded in the city. The population of Kiel displayed a strong willingness to help, and the employees at Markenwerk began to consider what they could do to improve the situation too. While they weren’t, as they put it, “the kind of people who show up at the train station with blankets”, they thought about possible ways they could use their skills to ease the refugees’ arrival. The team already had experience in developing apps, so the idea was born to create an orientation tool to support refugees with their first steps in a new environment.

It took more editorial work than expected, but after three months and, thanks to the support of numerous volunteers, the eight-member team was able to develop and release the app in November 2015. Refugees were themselves employed as translators during the app’s development.

The project received attention in the media and was awarded the “Land of Ideas Award” by the German government in the summer of 2016. The app was praised by local politicians for being especially innovative. But when it came to transferring the project to the municipalities for further data management and expansion, the team encountered reluctance and numerous bureaucratic hurdles. Despite several attempts, the project lost steam. In the end, financing couldn’t be maintained and the project was discontinued at the end of 2016. The agency had provided their employees and resources pro bono, investing a six-figure sum in the project in total. According to the project’s manager, Paul Lewandowsky, “it almost spelled the end of the company”. All parties were disappointed with the outcome. They now think of it as a “Pandora’s box that shouldn’t be reopened.”

This outcome is particularly unfortunate in light of the team’s effort and the company’s commitment. Markenwerk provided a considerable sum and exposed itself to risk. That this investment came to nothing is disappointing. Moreover, the company sustained such heavy financial losses that it is unlikely to become involved in such projects in the future.

The whole affair can be seen as a missed opportunity for the municipalities. They were offered a finished, high-quality product. It’s difficult to say which systemic hurdles got in the way here, as we only heard one side of the story. It is, however, a recurring theme in our conversations with projects that collaborations with public administration can be challenging. This example also clearly shows that positive resonance in the media and among politicians doesn’t automatically translate into financial support. Other projects have found the same thing.

The fact that no other orientation apps have achieved widespread use so far may also indicate that this is not the right approach to meet refugees informational needs. Since MOIN had to give up prematurely, it was not possible to test the hypothesis here.
Reichert feels the many rules and bureaucratic obstacles with skills that are highly sought after on the job market. However, alongside these success stories, there are numerous municipal authorities, as well as volunteer coordinators within Berlin’s other state-level authority for refugee management (LKF), as well as volunteer coordinators within Berlin’s other municipal authorities.

However, alongside these success stories, there are numerous examples of projects that stumbled over bureaucratic hurdles and left wanting for more support.

One example concerns providing refugee accommodations with free wifi connections. In the “Meeting the Needs” section we discuss how important it is that refugees have secure internet access. Since a refugee’s right to internet access is not legally mandated, however, there hasn’t been any unified management of the issue. Many places have failed or refused to provide internet access. A common justification for this points to liability regulations in German law, specifically the principle that anyone who provides a wireless hotspot is responsible for any possible illegal or cost-incurring downloads.

As a consequence of inaction on the side of officials, this gap has been filled in many places by volunteer projects such as Freifunk and Refugees Online, which have provided hundreds of accommodations nationwide with free wifi. Both projects have reported mainly constructive interactions with the responsible accommodation managers as well as with local authorities. But they have also encountered some difficulties and resistance. Volker Werbus from Refugees Online reports that it “took a lot of work” to convince the Bavarian state government to allow them to begin installations in refugee shelters. The project team has had to expend a lot of energy just gaining permission to carry out their work, even though it “doesn’t cost the state anything”. Both projects would have wished for more support and flexibility from politicians and public agencies.

It’s difficult for a young project to break its way into the system

The ReDI School, which has a similar approach to Devugees, has been trying for some time to similarly become recognised as an official vocational training centre. Founder Anne Kjær Reichert says that so far she doesn’t have the impression that the Jobcenter considers the school to be a partner, despite the fact that ReDI equips its students with skills that are highly sought after on the job market. Reichert feels the many rules and bureaucratic obstacles are slowing her down, and she emphasises how difficult it can be for a young project like ReDI to break its way into the system. For this reason, in contrast to Devugees, ReDI hasn’t yet been able to achieve financial stability. (See the project profile on p. 47 for more information.)

As a final example, Flüchtlinge Willkommen’s (see profile on p.42) dealings with the authorities are mostly indirect. The state provides subsidies to cover refugees’ rent – depending on asylum status this typically comes either through the Jobcenter or the welfare office (Sozialamt). However, Flüchtlinge Willkommen told us that, in the vast majority of cases, it takes a long time for these subsidies to be confirmed and, for example, for the money for a damage deposit to be transferred. This meant that the project regularly ends up stepping in and financing the rent payments and deposits through their own donated funds, so that landlords aren’t forced to wait for months.

Working with established NGOs

In general, the respective expertise of NGOs and digital projects complement each other well. The former have many years of experience working with refugees and are also familiar with the structures of public authorities. The latter are agile and flexible, and know how to take advantage of what digital technology has to offer.

These strengths are recognised by both parties. NGOs have stated, for example, that they have been able to gain better overviews of the diversity of services that are offered thanks to directory and orientation platforms such as clarat. Information centres which previously didn’t have a digital presence have started to use the Wefugees platform to increase the reach and efficiency of their work. Posting one answer to a public question is quicker than answering the same question twenty times by email.

When it comes to the execution of joint projects, the record is mixed

On the other side, many of the digital projects we interviewed have made use of the expert knowledge of NGOs. Many of the projects also use information centres to increase awareness among refugees of their services. Projects like Integreat and Start with a Friend thus consider information centres to be important multipliers. When it comes to the execution of joint projects, however, the record is mixed. There is more potential here than we have seen realised so far.
People arriving Germany for the first time have a lot of questions. What’s the process for applying for asylum? How do I find an apartment? Who can translate this letter for me? As thousands of refugees arrived in Germany, information centres were sometimes overloaded and unable to keep up with demand. The Berlin project Wefugees aimed to tackle this problem. Wefugees is an online platform that connects refugees, helpers, and specialists. Questions about a wide range of topics are posted on the platform and then answered by the community. Anyone who creates an account can ask or answer questions. Specialists – for example, people working at information centers – are marked as such, and their answers are thus immediately classified as trustworthy.

The basic idea was an inclusive information system – not limited by opening hours, relieving pressure on information centres, and a simple way for volunteers anywhere to provide help by sharing their knowledge online. Other refugee support organisations can profit from this too, because it means answers they give can help not just one but hundreds or thousands of people. That means organisations can greatly increase their reach. If their employees answer a particularly high number of questions, that organisation receives more exposure, meaning users are more likely to take a closer look.

The project began in the summer of 2015 with several co-design workshops for refugees and volunteers, in which the most urgent issues were identified and discussed. Access to trustworthy information was quickly identified as a central challenge. Although at the time information on certain topics was being exchanged via hundreds of Facebook groups, this information was quickly lost without the means to categorise it by subject matter and display it in a useful way.

About a dozen people currently work in the core team, but most of these are still volunteers. The project has long financed itself exclusively from donations and grants, such as the Startery-Stipendium from SAP and Social Impact. A further financing strategy besides these are cooperations with companies. Wefugees offers business-
es intercultural workshops for their HR and CSR departments. Together with Deutsche Telekom, Neue Deutsche Medienmacher and the Chancellor’s Office (Bundeskanzleramt) Wefugees is also part of the project Handbook Germany. It is intended to be the official information platform for refugees in Germany, and it also allows Wefugees to finance one and a half paid positions. They hope that by the end of 2017 they will have five paid staff.

Wefugees sees itself as a “bridge between digital and analogue”. On one hand, the platform can absorb demand for refugee counselling which, due to lack of resources, can’t be met by established information centres. On the other hand, Wefugees provides many of the smaller information centres and organisations, which themselves aren’t digitally connected, with a consulting channel which functions more easily than support by phone or email, and reaches more people. Other digital projects can also run their customer support over Wefugees and thus save themselves work.

Up to 1,800 registered users go on the platform each month. Since about half of these are volunteers, co-founder Cornelia Röper argues the actual reach is considerably higher than this, since volunteers act as multipliers, passing on their knowledge into wider communities.

Wefugees is the only project of its kind in Germany. Its particular potential lies in its ability to serve as a link between different parties. Wefugees strives for cooperation with established NGOs and other projects, communicating the importance of combining digital and analogue services. Wefugees makes clear what a digital service can contribute when combined with others: large reach, quick reaction times, and direct exchange between various actors.
A number of projects describe similar experiences when approaching large NGOs with the idea of establishing a partnership. The projects report a definite initial interest on the part of the NGOs. But in spite of this, we did not encounter a single instance where this developed into a proper partnership. This is mostly because internal decision-making processes of the NGOs took too long, and the projects were either unwilling or unable to wait.

In the particular case of partnering with the organisations running refugee shelters, experiences were very mixed. As well as examples of very successful cooperations, like Freifunk, there were also more difficult instances. Rüdiger Trost, the founder of Helphelp2 found it consistently difficult to convince accommodation managers to use his app to list online what donations in kind they required. Often he was unable to reach the appropriate contact person, or else met with flat dismissal.

Other projects also described being met with suspicion and a competitive mindset in their dealings with NGOs. The general impression was that they were still fundamentally hesitant about digital solutions.

On the other hand, it’s understandable that NGOs found it difficult to act decisively when faced with the emergence of so many new digital projects. To be able to judge which of them, if any, to cooperate with, would require making a well grounded judgement about the quality of their work. Given how young most of these projects are, this was far from easy.

**Joining the dots**

*Decision-making processes are not easy to understand for outsiders*

In summary, our interviews show that there are two important hurdles for digital projects in collaborating with public agencies. The first is that the internal decision-making processes of such organisations are often not easily understood from the outside. Projects often don’t know whom they should be talking to. Often they don’t have one constant contact point, and instead end up starting again and again from scratch. The second obstacle is bound up with the strict requirements sometimes involved in working with agencies. These are often difficult to reconcile with the agile and flexible working mode inherent to digital projects.

Both when dealing with public agencies and with NGOs, projects felt impeded by a lack of openness to new approaches. This lack of flexibility and complexity of internal processes made it difficult to act responsively to a rapidly changing situation.

To improve conditions for collaboration in the future will require work and compromise from both sides. Public authorities should work to increase transparency of their internal processes so that they’re more comprehensible to outside parties. There should be designated access channels and contact persons. On a more general level, both public authorities and large NGOs will need to make their operations more responsive and adaptive if they are going to meet future challenges effectively. And these are points on which they could have something to learn from young digital projects.

*It’s not possible for the structures of the public sector to match the pace of start-ups*

For their part, digital projects need to try to deepen their knowledge of how other organisations work, and practice patience now and again. It’s not possible for the structures of the public sector to match the fast pace of start-ups. And both public agencies and NGOs need reliable ways of establishing the reliability and the quality of prospective digital partners.
Securing funding was named by the majority of projects we interviewed as their greatest challenge. In order for projects to stabilise and eventually scale up their work, reliable sources of financing are necessary. Because these have been thin on the ground, most projects rely on a range of various sources to keep themselves above water in the medium-term.

**Personal Funds**

With very few exceptions, such as *clarat*, which is completely financed by the Benckiser Stiftung, most projects depended on the personal investments and unpaid labour of their founders to get off the ground. Projects in the Professional type such as *MOIN*, used the infrastructure and resources provided by their businesses, but with the objective of developing a product and subsequently handing it over to other organisations. Teams which were hoping that their projects would eventually become their full-time paid job, including the founders of *Kiron* and *Daheim*, invested their own money during the early stage of their projects. But this was only ever going to be an option to get things started, so securing other sources of funding quickly became a priority.

**Donations, Stipends, and Competitions**

Many projects were highly reliant on donations to begin with – indeed, some still are. For a short period in 2015 this was a good source of financing. For a while, willingness to give financial support to refugee projects was high. In September 2015 *Kiron* initiated a campaign on the crowdfunding site startnext which raised over half a million euros in just two months, the most successful such campaign ever in Germany. Projects such as *GoVolunteer* and *HiMate!* were also able to incorporate crowdfunding as a component of their financing models.

Several digital projects used the donation platform *Zusammen für Flüchtlinge* to raise funds for their ideas. The platform (operated by betterplace) ran various initiatives to stimulate higher donation levels. These included two “matching funds”, which were used to double donations made by members of the public.

However, over time it became clear that additional and more stable financing mechanisms would be necessary.

A few projects applied for social entrepreneur stipends, whose purpose is to give founders an period of several months to develop their ideas. *Wefugees*, for example, received the Startery grant from Social Impact Lab, while one of its team members received the Pep grant from Ashoka. *Workeer* received funding from the start-up incubator of the Berlin School of Economics and Law. These programmes typically provide projects with a range of non-financial support such as material resources, work-spaces, coaching and access to important networking opportunities. The financial part is normally only enough for the founders to live off, rather than permitting real investment in the project.

This is where various forms of early-stage financing come into play. One example is the “Innovationsfond Integration”, started by Ashoka together with Zalando and betterplace.org. This was bound together with the “Hello Festival” event in March 2016. Here decision makers from charities, civil society, and politics came together in order to bring the best refugee integration innovations from around the world to Germany. Organisations that wanted to implement one of the approaches in a German context were given the opportunity to apply for financing from the innovation fund. Digital projects that benefited from this initiative included *Ipso e-care, Jobs4refugees* and *SINGA Deutschland*. 
While pursuing her master’s degree in France, it struck Madita Best that very few international students were actually improving their French because among themselves they only spoke English. Language courses at the end of a long day of study were not very helpful. From these observations came the idea of a video-conferencing platform for occasional language exchanges with other users.

As the refugee situation started to dominate news headlines in 2015, Best decided to act on her idea together with five friends. Language acquisition is particularly important for refugees to help them find their feet in Germany. But the platform is also meant for others who want to learn the language.

Initially the idea was to use Skype and adapt it for the project. User research determined, however, that few people would be willing to share their Skype data. Moreover, the platform is intended more for spontaneous exchanges with whomever might be online, rather than for fixed appointments. To facilitate this, an algorithm determines matches according to common interests.

The project was founded as a non-profit in March 2016, and in April it moved with its team of three into the Social Impact Lab in Duisburg. To begin with, Daheim financed itself through personal savings, but later it received funding from the Gelsenwasser Stiftung. It is now also supported by donations. This isn’t yet enough to finance the entire team. Best and one of her colleagues are employed part-time at the e-learning platform Babbel, which gives them an income. They are supported by a paid student, and the remainder of the team of nine still works unpaid.

Given that the startup scene in the Ruhr area is small, and that there are few digital refugee projects, Daheim has mostly cooperated and networked with other projects in Berlin. “The people there have more experience”, says Best. Daheim actively seeks possible ways to collaborate with other projects, including Jobs4refugees. When Daheim received a place in the Axel Springer Plug & Play Accelerator Programme in September 2016, part of the team moved to Berlin.

Daheim sees itself as a complement to currently existing analogue services, not as a replacement for direct exchange. Above all, the platform hopes to provide more flexibility than traditional courses and language cafes. To this end, the team has sought to build relationships with offline offerings. However, multiple attempts to build collaborations with NGOs have failed because the procedures involved have been too complex and protracted. Best also has the impression that a basic scepticism towards digital approaches was an obstacle.

In spite of this, the goal of fostering closer collaborations with offline services remains, such as with a language cafe. This should bring the project closer to the target group and keep it abreast of current challenges. The next step is to stabilise the project and strengthen the team. At the moment, secure financing is lacking.

In our conversations with refugees, language was frequently mentioned as a central challenge. Since access to German classes is limited, flexible solutions not tied to a particular location could be a valuable addition. Daheim currently has approximately 3,000 registered users (around 70% of them refugees), of which 30-50 are online on an average day. The project faces the challenge of having to reach not only refugees but also enough volunteers willing to participate in a conversation. The project’s success will therefore depend on whether volunteer engagement remains stable or declines. Lack of funds is also an obstacle in scaling, as well as the difficulties in working with established NGOs which are not very open to digital solutions.

Lessons learnt
The Google Impact Challenge, which took place in early 2016 in partnership with betterplace.org, was developed for social initiatives that wanted to start a new project or improve their existing work with an innovative digital idea. An initial selection was made by a jury, after which the vote was given over to the public. Among the winners were Kiron and Ipso e-care. Other projects, such as the VitaminB-App for bringing together local women and refugees and the app be-able made it to the final round, but the projects seem not to have subsequently made it past the concept stage.

The most recent example is the Integrationspreis (Integration Prize), which will be awarded in October 2017 by the Foundation in Frankfurt. The Integrationspreis has multiple stages. First, refugee integration projects had to run a crowdfunding campaign on startnext to make it to the next round. Taking in 45,000 euros, Jobs4refugees came out far ahead of the other projects as the clear winner of this round. However, Flüchtlinge Willkommen, GoVolunteer, Share on Bazaar, and Vostel also managed to meet their funding goals. More than 700,000 euros was raised in total, making the Integrationspreis the most successful crowdfunding competition ever in Germany.

Reactions to this kind of competition among projects were not universally positive, however. Workeer, for example, declined to take part. In a Facebook post they argued that such campaigns use up precious resources desperately needed elsewhere, and led to projects being pitted against one another.

**Businesses, Foundations and NGOs**

A few projects have managed to secure funding from the German government. Kiron and Start with a Friend received funding respectively from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). These are grants that typically extend over several years, and made it possible for Start with a Friend to professionalise and gradually expand operations across more parts of the country.

These partnerships are an encouraging development. At the same time, financing through government ministries presents its own challenges. It necessitates precise long-term planning, which is not especially compatible with the agile approach that characterises digital projects. Because of this, it only allows for limited flexibility in reacting to changes in external circumstances, which can be very important when dealing with refugee issues.

However, the biggest overall challenge for project teams appears to be in getting a good overview of which funding sources are even available and how to access them. Many projects expressed frustration about the lack of transparency in the funding landscape and the difficulties involved in applying for public funds. We know of no projects that have tried to apply for EU funding except for the Migration Hub Network. Basically, according to those we spoke to, applying for grants would require a full-time member of staff, but almost no projects have the resources for this.

**Social Business Models**

In order to become independent from donations and grants, some projects have been looking for revenue streams that could support them long-term as a “social business”.

Workeer, for example, introduced paid-for job advertisements in April 2017. On Facebook they explained that the level of funding they had got through grants, donations and subsidies had only allowed the platform to continue through part-time staff supported by unpaid volunteers. In the long run, they explained, “it won’t be possible to continue
Young people who have fled their homes have often broken off their studies, or discarded plans they might have had to go to university. Even after gaining asylum elsewhere, they can be locked out of restarting their studies by a combination of bureaucratic and linguistic barriers. Kiron Open Higher Education aims to support refugees by giving them access to online courses (MOOCs), and at the same time fast-tracking their entry into the university system. The idea is that after completing two years of study online, students can apply to transfer to a partner university where some of these online courses count towards a fully accredited bachelor’s degree.

Online learning could be particularly well-suited to the refugee population for a number of reasons. It allows people to continue a course of studies even if they are moving – be that within Germany or internationally. Crucially, they have the opportunity to study while they are waiting for a decision on their asylum application, or before they have acquired the local language, a time in which so many doors such as employment or university enrolment are closed to them. This is not only an efficient use of time, but can provide an invaluable focus and structure in a period of limbo.

Kiron is based in Germany but is active internationally. They are working with 41 partner universities in 6 countries. They recently celebrated their first transfer success: a student who had completed courses with Kiron enrolling at Bard College Berlin.

Within the landscape of digital refugee projects, Kiron is an extreme outlier in terms of its size and visibility. Of all the other projects in Germany, only clarat even comes within an order of magnitude. This is the result of sustained growth since autumn 2015. This is all the more remarkable given that the project was founded by two graduate students in their mid-twenties with little previous management experience.

Founders Vincent Zimmer and Markus Kressler both had previous volunteering experience working with refugees. They first conceived of Kiron in summer 2014, and developed the idea for a year alongside their studies, gaining their first few team members along the way. When attention on refugee arrivals into Germany spiked in summer 2015, they assembled a team of 15 young people who began, initially on a voluntary basis, to “work like crazy”.

This was soon rewarded. In September of that year Kiron launched a crowdfunding campaign, which gained an extraordinary level of support. They may not have reached the fundraising goal of 1.2 million euros that they set themselves, but they did raise over half a million euros from over 1500 donors. This was the first of a long list of fundraising triumphs from a diverse range of sources, which has also included a 250,000 euro prize as winners of the Google Impact Challenge and their first big grant of 1.5 million euros from the Schöpflin Foundation. They now have funding from a broad range of sources including government, foundations, corporations and private donations. This has allowed them to go further than other projects in, for instance, working to quantify and analyse impact. Kiron has also been the subject of much admiring media attention and the winner of several prizes and awards.

This level of support catalysed a period of rapid growth which continued for over a year. At the time of writing, May 2017, the Kiron team had just surpassed 70 paid employees (some of them part-time), alongside a large number of volunteers and an advisory network of experts. The growth rate seems to be slowing, however, with the focus shifting towards consolidation.

Similarly, Kiron now has a much clearer focus on its core mission strategy, namely their higher education programme. Before now, they were rather more open to taking on other projects as opportunities presented themselves. For example, and by way of disclosure: Kiron were partners of betterplace lab for the “ICT4Refugees” research project in February-May 2015, where they contributed some of the field research and organised the accompanying conference. The section “Networks & Consolidation” also describes their erstwhile attempt to create an incubator for other digital projects under the banner “Kiron Ventures”.

Lessons learned
This narrower focus is well advised, since as well as the great potential that online higher education has for refugees, there are also substantial inherent challenges. Course completion rates on the major generally available MOOC platforms are very low. Kiron hopes that by building an infrastructure and learning environment around the course content (which they take from other providers, rather than creating it themselves) they can achieve completion rates of around 50 percent, which would be far above other platforms. This learning environment includes creating “Study Centers”, physical spaces where students can go to work, since often they are in accommodation poorly suited to concentrated work.

For now, Kiron’s impact is not commensurate with the scale of investment. However this investment does mean, from a resource and organisational perspective, that Kiron are much better positioned than most other projects to achieve impact at scale. Currently 2,300 students have access to the courses on the Kiron platform. Data is not currently available on rates of course completion; Kiron’s in-house research team intends to publish a paper on this in autumn 2017. The decisive phase will come over the next 12 months, since that is when the first large cohort of students should be transferring to universities.

Kiron has a lighthouse status, towering above the rest of the digital refugee landscape. They are also centrally connected to other projects, as shown on the network visualisation on p.26-27. Consequently, how successfully they are able to capitalise on the opportunity they have will have knock-on effects far beyond their own work. If they succeed, the project will light the way for others to follow, including demonstrating that major investments reap dividends in terms of impact. If they don’t, it may cause lasting damage to the eco-system as a whole.

So far Devupees is the only project that has managed to finance itself through a social business model.

A Better Funding Environment for Digital Social Projects

One of the issues that frequently confronts digital projects is receiving legal charitable status. The fact that digital projects can also be possible non-profit organisations for public good is apparently not yet widely recognised. Non-profit status is naturally a prerequisite for accessing certain funds, and for that reason is of obvious importance to these projects. Accordingly, Lale attempted to register itself with charitable status. The application was denied, however, because Lale doesn’t provide aid directly to refugees, but instead helps NGOs and support organisations in making their work more efficient. Wefugees also reported that non-profit status was initially denied to them on the grounds that information on the platform is available to everyone, not just to refugees. Only after enlisting the support of a lawyer were they able to obtain non-profit status by integrating the topic of public education into their application.

The founder of the app Konfett4Change, Maxie Lutze, told us that these hurdles illustrate the need for more funding possibilities like the Prototype Fund, a programme run by the Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland with funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Individuals are able to apply to the Prototype Fund, which provides the opportunity to develop a civic tech idea to demo version without the need to first deal with finding an appropriate legal framework for the project. (Disclosure: betterplace lab is a junior partner in the Prototype Fund.)

As a general rule, the projects that have been more successful were the ones which, like Start with a Friend, have worked to secure funding from as broad a range of sources as possible. Kiron managed to tap into a particularly large number of sources, thus acquiring more funds than any other project. Kiron also benefited from
the fact that some funders were willing to provide supplementary support, on the basis of the funding they had already secured, as well as the particularly visible media presence the project has enjoyed. While Kiron has been remarkably successful, for now many other projects remain more or less empty-handed.

Some of them have managed, by cobbling together a mixture of donations, stipends and competitions, to keep their heads above water, but without being able to plan more than a few months into the future. Teams which had no prior expertise in applying for state funding (i.e. the majority of them) have mostly not had the resources to hire somebody with such knowledge. As such, projects’ success in achieving financial stability has been dependent in large part on what previous experience founders had with various financing models.

Some projects concede that they started to think about these questions too late, and placed too much store in receiving media attention, which in the end didn’t translate into financial support.

So far, from the various strategies we have examined here, only a very small minority of projects have managed to create a stable, long-term financial foundation for their work. For the continuing consolidation of the landscape, in which the most promising projects are able to refine and then scale up their approach, it will be necessary to find new funding streams.

In chapter 4 we will discuss how a more systemic approach to the funding of digital social projects could lead to greater impact.
Volunteering is at the core of digital refugee support. We can distinguish two areas where digital innovation and volunteering intersect. On one side, there are the digital tools developed in 2015 to mobilise and coordinate a large wave of volunteers. On the other side, a great many of the digital projects still active today continue to depend largely on volunteer support.

A wave of engagement

In chapter 2 we examined the dynamics of the volunteer engagement which surged around the refugee issue starting in summer 2015. Without the spontaneous well of support from countless volunteers, receiving and providing for the immediate needs of the refugees that arrived in Germany would have been near impossible. As the infrastructure threatened to buckle – to some extent actually did buckle – under the pressure of very high arrivals, volunteers plugged gaps and stopped things getting worse.

Most of those getting involved were people who had never volunteered before

What was remarkable about this wave of engagement was not only its size but also that the majority of those that participated were people who had never volunteered before. This also influenced the way that they went about it: it was in large part self-organised, with digital technology playing a vital coordinating role.

Self-organisation

These new volunteers utilised Facebook and Google-Docs to organise help and communicate where donations were necessary. As such, they essentially completely bypassed the existing organisations, structures and communication channels which previously managed refugee reception.

Self-organised volunteers were able to use digital tools to organise more quickly than traditional NGOs or the state

The advantages of digital tools in crisis situations soon became apparent: self-organised volunteers were able to use them to organise more quickly than traditional NGOs or the state, thereby helping a greater number of people.

Numerous neighbourhood initiatives sprang up, primarily organising over Facebook, and quickly took over the aid coordination for individual districts and neighbourhoods. The Berlin initiative Moabit hilft is an important example. Its members coordinated care for the refugees waiting outside the LAGEso office to register themselves. Their impressive contribution, as well as their vocal criticism of how the authorities were handling the situation, meant that Moabit hilft received a lot of media attention.

Digital coordination tools

As the growing number of volunteers itself became an organisational challenge, software developers in Berlin developed Volunteer Planner, an online tool with which volunteers could register for shifts in emergency shelters. The purpose was to ensure that volunteers were being appropriately divided between the shelters according to need.

At the same time, platforms such as Schnell helfen and HelpTo emerged, applying a similar principle to coordinating in-kind donations. The platform Lale went a step further by offering volunteer groups a comprehensive tool for communication and administration aimed at increasing the efficiency of organisation and information exchange. Although Lale didn’t meet with the reception it was hoping for, in general online shift-planning apps, donation platforms, and Facebook groups were successful in creating a certain degree of structure in the chaotic circumstances.

Volunteer management platforms

Now that there is less need to coordinate volunteers, platforms like Volunteer Planner and Lale have faded into the background. In their place, others such as GoVolunteer and Zusammen für Flüchtlinge are trying to provide a volunteering platform that does something subtly different – instead of just organising the volunteers that are already...
Flüchtlinge Willkommen is one of the few projects that predates the summer of 2015. Co-founder, Mareike Geilig, rented her room to a refugee when she was living abroad in autumn 2014. This gave her the idea of a platform for connecting refugees with rooms in shared flats. Geilig, together with co-founders Jonas Kakošhe and Golde Ebding, wanted to make a point against the centralised system for housing refugees in provisional and communal accommodation. They didn’t anticipate that it would develop into a larger project.

But then things happened quickly. Just days after the launch, the project was picked up in media reports. After one week there were already 80 people signed up offering rooms. From January 2015 refugees were able to sign up.

As increasing numbers of refugees arrived and news coverage expanded correspondingly, interest in Flüchtlinge Willkommen also grew. In the first half of 2015 the project received media attention from all over the world. With no assistance from the team, both donations and registrations soared. Monthly registrations peaked in September 2015, at over 1,000. The public’s willingness to help was enormous. Many people got in touch wanting to become volunteers.

Local volunteer groups were trained to supervise the allocation of rooms in other German cities. Despite this, the team could barely keep up and the number of staff and volunteers continued to rise until March 2016.

But from November 2015 onward, engagement was falling. The attacks in Paris and the events in Cologne on Christmas Eve had changed the media’s tone. Geilig sees a direct connection to the sudden decline in donations and volunteer activism, saying things turned “180 degrees”. In particular the high desertion rate among volunteers was “indescribably frustrating”. This was a challenge for the team which had grown so quickly, and which had to downsize to seven positions. Since the start of the project, they had been the target of right-wing hostility and threats.

Since then the situation has stabilised. They aim to maintain this stability, and for the moment are proceeding cautiously, since the project is still largely financed by donations. However, in 2017 they managed to get their first large grant. They received funding from Aktion Mensch, der UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe e.V. and Hamburg Pride to provide accommodation for LGBTQI* refugees.

Today the platform receives around 10 to 15 new registrations per month. This leads to around five rooms being filled per month. At Flüchtlinge Willkommen, only the registration is digital. Every placement is arranged personally during a meeting with both parties, in order to determine their compatibility.

Flüchtlinge Willkommen are taking on one of the most pressing problems for refugees: finding adequate housing. This is a central prerequisite for successful integration. A shared flat offers important advantages over emergency shelters and collective housing: more privacy, contact with locals, and the chance to improve language skills. It is the founders’ hope, however, that the project will eventually make itself obsolete when decentralised accommodation facilities receive more state assistance.

Until then, the project continues to fill an important gap. So far, 386 rooms have been allocated. For those people, this is a significant impact. In terms of the number of refugees who have arrived in Germany, though, it is not enough. The barriers to scale are, on the one hand decreased willingness to rent rooms to refugees. On the other hand, Flüchtlinge Willkommen’s labour-intensive allocation process only allows a certain volume per month.
there, they want to get more people to sign up and volunteer. Hence the focus is less on coordination and more on creating new pathways to volunteer engagement.

These platforms hope to appeal to younger target groups and give them a wide overview of the ways they can become involved. Vostel follows a similar approach, but unlike GoVolunteer does not only focus on refugee issues. However, Vostel has recently started to reach out directly to refugees who might be interested in volunteering themselves. There are some new functionalities that have been added to the platform to help them search for suitable opportunities.

**Cohort of new volunteers less likely to stick around long-term**

So far we’re not able to conclusively say whether digital volunteering platforms affect the way in which people volunteer, for example whether people who use such platforms are more likely to commit for a shorter length of time. Coordinators with whom we spoke reported that the new wave of volunteers typically demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and personal initiative. At the same time, they suggested that these people were less likely to stick around long-term. That mostly pertains to the acute phase in summer 2015. Both volunteers and those responsible for managing them say of this time that there was a lot of fluctuation and turnover, in the sense that some of the volunteers didn’t stay for long. But this seems to have more to do with the overall dynamic of people’s willingness to help in this time (discussed in chapter 2), and is not necessarily related to digital technology serving as an intermediary. And at the same time it’s important to note that there has been a stable bedrock of volunteers who are still active.

No data are currently available about activity levels on digital volunteering platforms such as Vostel or GoVolunteer. As such it’s still difficult to judge how much potential these projects have, or what kind of scale they would be capable of achieving. But it seems at least plausible that projects of this kind are able to attract a younger demographic, and lower the barriers that stop more of these people becoming active volunteers.

Our interviews with the users of such platforms also supported this idea. They explained that they found online tools like this to be particularly accessible and easy to use, and that this made searching for a way to volunteer considerably easier. One refugee who had used Vostel to volunteer at several different places was enthusiastic, saying “you just enter in the time you are available, and then you can just turn up and help.”

**Volunteering within Digital Refugee Projects**

With few exceptions, the digital projects in our records were initially started on a volunteer basis. From here, they took various paths. For instance, the hackers described in Chapter 2 were driven above all by the desire to introduce some structure into the chaos. For them, the satisfaction of programming something new played an important role, which is why they were willing to sacrifice their free time, and also why they were less interested in professionalising what they were doing. Other projects from the Professional type, such as Iconary in Bremen and Helphelp2 in Munich, were never envisioned as more than free-time projects.

**Sustaining an unpaid position for months on end isn’t sustainable**

But those projects that did aim to professionalise also started on a volunteer basis and then sought ways to secure financing. As examined in more detail in the “Funding” section, only a small number of projects have yet managed to secure long-term financing. As a result, some project founders still don’t have a stable income, or else only some of the core team can be paid. Many are willing to invest a large amount of unpaid labour into projects that are close to their hearts. At the same time, sustaining an unpaid position for months on end isn’t sustainable. Sooner or later projects working on this basis are going to run out of steam.

A model that has proven itself to be more sustainable combines a salaried core team with a broader network of volunteers. These volunteers can provide a lot of support when it comes to expanding operations to other cities or contact with the target group. For that reason, projects such as Flüchtlinge Willkommen and Start with a Friend where volunteers play a very active and central role invest a lot of time into volunteer management, in particular in precisely defining tasks and striking the right balance between volunteer and paid labour. The ReDI School also goes to great lengths to ensure that volunteer instructors also get a lot out of their personal involvement, and that they are not placed under too much pressure or have too much demanded of them.

Projects have had varying experiences when it comes to volunteer reliability. While some claim to have a very steady volunteer base and not to have noticed a significant decrease, others such as Flüchtlinge Willkommen and Refugees Online have experienced a sharp decrease, which has presented serious difficulties.
Lessons learned

A related point, which is vital to consider, is that almost all projects for refugee integration rely, at least to some extent, on the willingness and engagement of the host community. *Start with a Friend* and *Flüchtlinge Willkommen*, for instance, in the end only work if there is a large enough supply of people willing to offer their time as a mentor, or their spare room. Already both projects have a long waiting list of refugees hoping for matches, set against a much more modest list of locals offering their help. Similarly, 70 percent of the users registered on the *Daheim* platform, where refugees and locals can chat online, are refugees. The extent to which engagement within the general population remains steady, or even grows again, is thus of crucial importance to such projects.

A more sustainable model

Volunteers and paid staff need each other. That was the message at a recent conference in Berlin on refugee integration work at local level. True enough.

> While volunteers can help to plug holes in crisis situations, ultimately they are supplementary to existing structures and not an alternative to them

While volunteers can help to plug holes in crisis situations, ultimately they are supplementary to existing structures and not a viable alternative to them.

A running theme in our conversations with volunteers was the feeling that although officials of various kinds have nothing but praise for volunteers, these words rarely translate into action. Many felt frustrated by what they saw as empty gestures and a lack of concrete support. This view was held most strongly by projects of the Activist type, such as Freifunk or Moabit hilft who provide support which they believe should really be the responsibility of the state.

Joint events, prizes and words of praise are important tokens of recognition. But they ought also to lead to real support measures and improved working conditions for projects. This has only occurred in a few cases so far. Some have been left with the impression that the overall refugee integration effort is continuing to rely too heavily on volunteers, rather than trying to strengthen other forms of support.

For many digital projects, a supporting community of volunteers is important to being able to deliver their services. That’s not going to change. But at the same time, the projects themselves will not be able to sustain themselves, much less achieve scale, unless the core team is able to derive an income from their work.
MEETING THE NEEDS

How well do the projects that have been developed so far address the issues they’re trying to address? Which of them are instances where good intentions don’t automatically translate into good outcomes? This field is too young to be able to give any definitive answers to these questions. But we can make a first approach at such an evaluation. This requires two steps – firstly to ask whether the projects have identified the right problems, secondly to ask whether they’ve alighted on the right answers.

Messy realities

A subset of digital projects – represented by the pink bars in fig. 5 – are aimed at members of the host community, to activate and coordinate them. The remarks in this section are less relevant to those projects, and pertain more to the majority of projects where refugees are the intended end user.

Talk with refugees about their circumstances, their aspirations and frustrations, and patterns and parallels start to emerge, such as the gradual shift described in chapter 1 from short-term to long-term concerns.

Schemata for integration will only capture a part of people’s lived realities

But the picture which emerges does not stop at this simplistic schema. Rather, it is rich, textured and varied. Refugees, like all other people, are individuals and their lives consist in complex mixtures of biography, personality and circumstance. Frameworks of refugee needs will only capture part of this. Lived realities are messy.

To make this less abstract, here are some factors that emerged from our interviews which might not be immediately obvious aspects of refugees’ lives, but which in some cases fundamentally affect outlook and priorities:

• Some refugees feel an urgent need for a quick income. There can be different reasons for this. Some are supporting families back home through remittances, or else trying to finance family reunification. Some are heavily in debt, including to people-smugglers who played a part in their journey. If a person feels under intense pressure to gain an immediate income, they may take low-paid work now for which they are overqualified rather than investing time in training and gaining qualifications in order to get higher-paid work later.

• All refugees are in need of consultation. On being displaced into a totally foreign environment and subject to incomprehensible bureaucracy, the default state for many is a mixture of confusion and despair. Support is needed which addresses both the informational and the emotional side of this. Furthermore, a considerable subsection of the refugee population has suffered serious trauma in their home country or in transit, and is in need of professional psychosocial support.

Anne-Marie Kortas, a researcher at the Hertie Foundation’s Center for Advanced Practitioners, has drawn up a list of refugees’ needs synthesised from her own interviews with refugees in Berlin. Alongside points that might be expected, such as finding work and family reunification, Kortas identifies more subtle but important priorities. Among these are:

• the desire to be perceived and treated as an individual, rather than as a part of a homogenous mass;
• the need for a supportive space for men to reflect on their experiences with specific regard to gender roles, including the dissonance between the powerlessness of their situation and the ideal of a male provider figure;
• the wish not just to participate in piecemeal integration measures, but to be able to see a complete pathway towards successful integration and a better life.
The key point is this: when designing ways to support refugee integration, there is no substitute for talking with them, listening to them, incorporating them as actively and as centrally as possible into the project design and implementation. Failing to do this is likely to lead to working with simplistic or wrong assumptions about refugees’ lived realities.

Dialogue is also the best way to understand what position potential users of a product are starting from. As discussed in chapter 1, many refugees struggle to understand and navigate the systems of integration. The way they formulate questions may not match up with the structure in which information is provided. Projects that exist to provide information should think about whether the way it is structured and presented is itself a barrier to people’s being able to benefit from it.

User feedback

Lack of input from refugees was one of the weaknesses common to much of the digital engagement during the explosion period. Some hackathons brought together programmers with little prior knowledge about the lives of refugees, and encouraged them to brainstorm and then build tools to help them.

**Just starting to code without an adequate understanding of the target group rarely produces something useful**

There may be some value in this in terms of activating people and assembling teams. But if these teams start simply coding without first working to better understand their target group, their efforts are unlikely to produce something useful.

More recently, and during the consolidation phase, however, there has been an improvement. An increasing number of digital projects are working to get feedback from users, and make dialogue with refugees more central to their approach. Some have recruited refugees onto their team.

*ReDI School* has excelled here. From the start, *ReDI* has built strong personal relationships with its students based on deep mutual respect and trust. This is demonstrated in the extended and very loyal community of supporters and alumni that has developed around the project.

As argued in the previous chapter, the logical extension of this would be to promote migrant-led innovation. Several organisations are trying to do just this. The Open Society Foundation has pledged large sums to fund migrant-led enterprises. Project MEnt is offering incubation and mentorship. PLACE is working to change people’s self-image so that they see themselves firstly as innovators, rather than defined by their asylum status.

Understanding User Behavior

Involving refugees more in project development would also lead to products which are better suited to the way this group uses digital tools. The importance of this point is illustrated by the numerous information platforms and the orientation apps that were developed. As fig. 5 shows, this was the second-largest category of projects.

Such projects have certainly identified a real need. Refugees who come to Germany initially need a lot of information in order to find their feet, and they need to know where they can go to get further help when they have problems. Despite this need, pure information services have not managed to generate a large user base. Why is this?

In October 2016, researchers at the FU-Berlin published a study entitled: “Flucht 2.0 – Mediennutzung durch Flüchtlinge vor, während, und nach der Flucht” (“Forced Migration 2.0 – Refugee Media Usage Before, During and After Transit”). In it they concluded that a large proportion of the refugee population uses Facebook and WhatsApp as a medium of communication, but their usage of digital technology beyond this is very limited, often not even extending to simple use of search engines.

Owning a smartphone doesn’t automatically mean that a refugee is familiar with using apps and other web services.

Another important insight from the study – also from our own interviews with refugees – is that seeking information is founded on a basis of trust. Thus when asked where they turn first if they have questions, most refugees answer that they ask friends, other refugees or volunteers. Information on the internet is generally less trusted than personal recommendations.
At the ReDI School of Digital Integration, refugees learn computer programming in order to subsequently find work in the IT sector. The prospects are good: Bitkom estimates that there are currently 51,000 unfilled IT vacancies in Germany.

The idea for the project came to founder Anne Kjær Riechert during a conversation with a refugee from Iraq. (Disclosure: Riechert is part of the advisory committee for this research project). The refugee explained to her that he'd had to break off his studies in computer science, and for the past two years had been unable to recommence because his asylum application was still pending. And, lacking his own laptop, he couldn't even study independently. This encounter inspired Refugees on Rails, a project developed together two other co-founders. The ReDI School later separated to become a separate project.

The first courses started in February 2016 with help from volunteer teachers from the Berlin startup and tech scenes. Each course begins with a “design thinking” process. The students are asked to identify the challenges they encounter in Germany, and consider possible technological solutions to them. It’s important to Riechert that refugees are given the opportunity to develop their own solutions instead of having to wait for others to do so. This is how the app Bureaucrazy came about. Developed by ReDI School students, it is intended to serve as a guide through the jungle of Germany’s public agencies.

So far ReDI has received support predominantly from businesses. As a consequence, the ReDI project has ended up touring a series of co-working spaces that these companies – Axel Springer, Deutsche Telekom, Facebook – have provided. This pattern also applies to funding. Six months in, the project received financial support from Klöckner & Co which, according to Riechert, ensured at a critical moment the project’s continuation.

Since then ReDI has established further business partnerships and has received considerable media attention.

High profile visitors to see ReDI’s work have included Mark Zuckerberg, who donated 100,000 euros to the project, as well as chancellor Angela Merkel in April 2017.

Despite this recognition, ReDI still hasn’t managed to achieve financial stability. Riechert is still only able to plan up to the coming semester, and hasn’t yet been able to scale the service. Her strategy has always been to “nail it before you scale it”, but now the concept has proven itself and the project is ready for growth.

Corporate partnerships notwithstanding, ReDI’s long term goal is to become accredited by the German employment agencies as providers of vocational training, and thereby create a stable revenue from these agencies. But so far this has been foiled by various bureaucratic hurdles. Riechert says that successfully applying for accreditation would effectively require a full-time member of staff, but this is not possible due to lack of resources.

The ReDI School has nonetheless become quite successful, largely due to its network of volunteers and the strength of the community that has grown around it. Many former teachers and students alike have remained loyal to the project, staying involved long after their courses have ended. ReDI has yet to experience the slump in volunteer engagement described by some other projects.

Most ReDI students have applied for asylum but are still awaiting a decision. ReDI therefore helps make productive use of the ‘fallow’ time in which refugees are not allowed to study or work. A survey of 55 former students in April 2017 showed that 45 per cent of those that completed the course went on to get an internship or job in the IT sector. 28 oper cent had enrolled at university. To date 214 refugees have completed the ReDI School programme, and 115 are in the current cohort (April-July 2017). For such a small social enterprise, this is impressive, but not yet at the scale necessary. Nor is it enough to fill Germany's shortfall in IT specialists.
It’s not enough to simply programme an app or build a website and then hope that users will come of their own accord

This doesn’t mean that digital solutions are in principle the wrong approach. But it does mean that it’s not enough to simply programme an app or build a website and then hope that users will come of their own accord.

Then they’d be of little help to people who have never used an app or a search engine before. And people who are generally sceptical of information on the internet won’t use them. These projects should develop a strategy early on for how they’re going to reach potential users. Technical barriers should be kept as low as possible, and volunteers can be invaluable as intermediaries.

Outreach

Wefugees is an example of a project thinking along these lines. Information on various topics is shared online over the platform, but this is done through dialogue, rather than just through a static list. This approach gets much closer to a direct interaction. Furthermore, Wefugees makes an effort to use offline events and workshops to explain their platform to refugees.

The voucher platform HiMate! also quickly discovered how usage of their service required an understanding of the voucher system and trust in their product. Early attempts to attract users thus consisted in speaking directly to refugees and giving them vouchers that were already printed out.

Many projects initially spread the word through placing flyers and posters in refugee accommodation and information centres. The Ankommen-App from BAMF had a particular advantage in this regard. Posters were placed in BAMF offices across the country, where refugees had appointments as part of the asylum process.

It’s worth working with social workers and volunteers as multipliers in promoting and explaining services

Other projects have reported, however, that these locations were sometimes so flooded with posters and flyers that they were lost in the mass. With this in mind, it’s worth going one step further by working actively with social workers and volunteers as multipliers in promoting and explaining services. Most projects have now started to do this.

Of course, there are also projects whose experience was atypical. For example, Start with a Friend and Flüchtlinge Willkommen both reported that they didn’t need any outreach strategy, as refugees apparently found their own way to the services. This seems to mainly have happened by word of mouth in the refugee community. As they tell it, the main challenge was in enlisting not refugees but enough members of the host community willing to offer rooms or donate their time.

Combining online and offline

Admittedly, both of these projects are fundamentally analogue services, with only the registration phase happening online. Projects whose core services are essentially digital, however, should also look for non-digital ways to reach people. This is important not only in order to increase awareness about projects, but also to more successfully integrate them in existing structures.

Possible ways of doing this include working together with existing offline programmes. The video-conferencing platform Daheim, for instance, aims to collaborate with “Sprachcafés”, regular events where refugees and volunteers meet and chat in order to get language practice. Indeed Kiron’s concept pivots precisely on being able to combine digital and analogue. It requires partner universities who will accept students and recognise the credits they have gained through online learning. In addition, on a different level, the Kiron programme increasingly includes offline elements such as its “Study Centers”.

Many refugees aren’t aware of a single digital project

Despite the fact that some projects have already attracted thousands of users, our impression remains that refugees don’t have a comprehensive overview of all the digital services on offer. Indeed, many refugees aren’t aware of a single digital project. This could be in part because of insufficient outreach work, or because the digital projects aren’t well integrated into the broader framework of integration programmes. However, it also appears that many refugees simply don’t have the sense that these projects are relevant to them.

Inclusion

For one thing, digital projects predominantly appeal to a younger demographic. They are most readily accessible to those who are at least familiar with using basic digital
tools. It’s relatively easy to explain to this group how to use an app. But what about older refugees who may have little to no experience with digital technologies?

There is a general risk when adopting digital approaches that existing inequalities will be reinforced

What’s more, many projects told us that it’s particularly difficult to reach female refugees. They explained that women are generally much less familiar with digital tools, and because they’re often responsible for childcare it’s more difficult to involve them in activities. Higher education projects such as Kiron are also inherently limited to people with a certain level of education. Overall, there is a general risk when adopting digital approaches in refugee integration that already disadvantaged groups will be further excluded and that existing inequalities will be reinforced.

The community of digital refugee projects therefore has a responsibility to search for ways to counteract this, by making digital services accessible to the wider refugee population.

Access

A part of this is working to raise levels of digital literacy, particularly among disadvantaged subsections of the refugee population. Projects like Asylplus that provide training for computer use and basic applications can also help ensure that more refugees profit from digital services. Some projects are doing this aimed specifically at disadvantaged subsections of the refugee population. The ReDI School, for example, is planning programmes and workshops aimed at women, catering specifically to their backgrounds and situations.

Alongside digital literacy, a second requirement is reliable internet access. This is the underlying foundation on which the entire area of digital refugee support is built. Internet access not only allows refugees to keep in touch with friends and family and stay informed about developments in their home countries – it’s also the prerequisite for basically all the digital projects aimed at supporting them.

Unfortunately, it still can’t be taken for granted that refugees have access to free wifi in provided accommodation. In many cases it has been volunteer initiatives such as Freifunk and Refugees Online who have jumped in to pull this gap. These initiatives witnessed first-hand the impact they were able to make for refugees. Volker Werbus from Refugees Online told us that he was welcomed “like a rock star” in the accommodation, after word got round that he had installed wifi. Philipp Borgers from Freifunk similarly reported that “as somebody who works in IT” you seldom encounter “such happy people”.

A final essential component is access to hardware. Project Reconnect was an initiative run as a collaboration between the non-profit NetHope and Google, whereby thousands of Chromebook computers were distributed to charities working with refugees. Refugees Online as well as educational initiatives like Asylplus were among the projects that benefited.
ADAPTATION

As anybody who has worked in the IT sector knows, building good software is hard – it requires a lot of time and money. This is a problem if the software is supposed to respond to an urgent and rapidly changing situation. There are different strategies available to overcome this tension. One is simply to accept that creating a digital project is a resource-intensive undertaking, and make these resources available – this is what Lale and clarat did.

Minimum viable product

A different strategy is not to aim for an extremely sophisticated and polished product, at least not to begin with, but instead deliberately to put together something “quick and dirty”. The Volunteer Planner team did just this, building the first version of the platform within just a few days of intense activity. As a consequence, the site looks very rudimentary, but this did not seem to put people off using it.

This is the favoured operating mode of tech companies, and tech start-ups in particular. In the jargon, the idea is to create a “minimum viable product” and put it online as a “beta-version”. It is developed in further iterations from there. This means that people are already using the product very early in the development process, so it’s possible to let real user experience and feedback guide the course of development.

Responsible use of personal data is an important and under-discussed topic in the field of digital refugee projects

Here however a slight note of caution. This strategy of rushing out an imperfect initial version and tweaking from there may be problematic in some cases, specifically when dealing with refugees. If the project serves to inform, or if it has some other bearing on an individual’s asylum application, then inadvertently providing incorrect information could cause real damage. Furthermore, responsible use of personal data is an important and under-discussed topic in the area of digital refugee projects. Some refugees have fled oppressive regimes and may have left family members behind. Data about their identity and location can be very sensitive, with potentially dangerous consequences if it is not treated as such.

Adapting what already exists

A powerful strategy to accelerate the development of digital refugee projects is to work with and adapt things that already exist, rather than starting from scratch.

The clarat platform had already been built for a different topic and was then extended to include the topic of refugee services. Similarly with the Zusammen für Flüchtlinge donation platform, which was based the infrastructure of the betterplace.org platform (a project of the organisation we also work at). From this basis it was possible to create an individual portal with new functions for the particular areas of fundraising and volunteer matching for refugee projects.

In both examples, a lot of work was still necessary to adapt what already existed for a new purpose. But given that the respective organisations already existed with all their knowledge and processes, it was nevertheless much more efficient in both time and resources than starting from scratch.

Other projects incorporated and adapted some pre-existing elements. The basic structure of the Ankommen-App, for example, is an adapted version of a media-player app which had already been developed by the Bayerischer Rundfunk. Moreover, parts of the content in Ankommen-App were also not new: for the language-learning modules, Goethe Institute provided, with only minimal alterations, its standard digital course material. Similarly, the Kiron platform uses pre-existing MOOCs (massive open online courses) from various sources.

Going to where the users already are

This logic can be taken a step further. Some projects are built around commercial software built and maintained by others. This was more common in the emergency response phase, when people self-organised using Facebook, Google-Docs and more. But it’s also possible for integration projects.

Take for example WhatsGerman. It’s one of several projects that helps refugees to learn the German language. But it is
There are tens of thousands of support services available to refugees in Germany – from legal advice to healthcare, education and much more. However, refugees do not know the full extent of what is out there. How could they? The offering is so large from such a broad range of organisations that nobody has a good overview. This is where clarat comes in. By creating an online directory to map services offered by others, clarat quickly allows refugees to find the right kind of support when they need it, and at the same time creates an overview of the sector, thereby improving coordination and transparency.

In fact clarat predates the increase in refugee arrivals. The project began in 2014, doing the same mapping work described above, but for the area of family and youth services. (Disclosure: betterplace lab was a partner of the project until 2016, when clarat became its own legal entity. Furthermore, Lavinia Schwedersky, co-author of this report, was employed at clarat prior to joining betterplace lab.) In October 2015 the clarat team, along with so many others, asked themselves how they could respond to the unfolding refugee situation. They decided to take their family and youth platform and extend it to include refugee services. Today clarat family and clarat refugees run in parallel.

clarat was devised, and is completely funded, by Benckiser Stiftung Zukunft, a Munich-based foundation. This makes it an outlier in the landscape of digital refugee projects, in that the team does not have to invest time and energy in developing relationships with potential new funders, applying for grants, etc.

In fact, it goes further than this. As a conscious strategic decision by the Benckiser foundation, clarat has invested much more heavily in their product and their organisation than most other projects have (or have been able to). The clarat team, including both family and refugees, comprises over 40 paid employees at the time of writing. The platform is built to a high technical standard by a full-time team of developers. There are people working on marketing, language, user feedback and, above all, the researchers who maintain the database.

clarat devotes considerable time and attention to internal matters, such as the information exchange processes between the various teams, its extensive knowledge-management practices, and organisational development and restructuring. Some benefit from this spills over to the broader community of digital refugee projects. For instance, clarat has developed a simple language which is not only particularly easy for users to understand, it is also optimised to be parsed by Google Translate, thereby much improving the automated translation of their site. This is something which other projects could also profit from.

There is also a consistency to the investment strategy, since the task that clarat has set itself is only achievable through major investment. The thorough way in which clarat performs data entry, the task at the centre of the team’s work, is extremely labour-intensive. This is something which a small, lean, cash-strapped start-up simply would not be able to do.

clarat’s working mode and mindset may not have been helpful. Its culture of doing everything with the utmost thoroughness stands in stark contrast to the model of many tech start-ups, which prefer to roll out a “minimal viable product” as rapidly as possible and build iteratively from there. Admittedly, a more lean approach may not have been compatible with the nature of the project. Still, it must be noted that clarat refugees has been slow to get out there with its product, and only recently has the focus shifted to actively trying to grow the user base.

The crucial point to understand about clarat is that it is, in a sense, two projects in one. That is, it has two distinct ways in which it hopes to create value. The first way is by providing a platform to be used by refugees (as well as people supporting refugees) to find services that can help them. The second way – driven by the Benckiser foundation – is more of an ideological agenda attached to mapping a sector, thereby permitting greater transparency.

These two aims, and the attempts to accomplish them, are quite independent, and may sometimes even be at odds with each other. Building a visually appealing frontend and getting high levels of traffic on the site are not especially relevant to the latter aim of creating a database for the purposes of transparency.

For now the value proposition for both aims remains untested. There is no doubting that refugees often lack information on how to access support services, however it is unclear whether a mapping platform like clarat is in line with the way in which this group typically uses technology to access information. A focus on volunteers supporting refugees might be more promising.
unique in that its vehicle to deliver the courses is not a self-built app or website but the messaging service WhatsApp. Every day subscribers to the service – of which there have been over 90,000 – receive a daily WhatsApp message with some new vocabulary or grammar.

This greatly reduces the technical workload for the project, compared to building everything themselves. It is not reduced to zero, since the agency which runs WhatsGerman (WhatsBroadcast) has developed its own mass distribution tool around WhatsApp. But as for the fundamental messaging service that underpins the project, they’re able to piggyback.

*Any digital project that goes beyond Facebook and WhatsApp would present a major barrier to large numbers of potential users.*

And such an approach is advantageous not only in terms of development but also outreach and adoption. Within the refugee population usage of a small number of apps that come pre-installed on smartphones is very high (Facebook and WhatsApp above all). But any digital project that requires higher digital literacy than this – a new app that needs to be installed, or even a simple website accessed through a browser – would present a major barrier to large numbers of potential users.

**When is a refu-app the right answer?**

The example of WhatsGerman raises a more fundamental question. When does it actually make sense to build a product aimed only at refugees?

One curious trend in this space has been the high proportion of projects whose name contains a pun on the word “refugee” (more often the English word than the German “Flüchtling”). Looking both within Germany and beyond we’ve seen Refuchat, RefuGerman, RefuGPS, Refinite and RefuShe. There is Basefugees, Devugees, Mapfugees, Techfugees and Wefugees. But the dubious honour of most imaginative refu-pun probably has to go to Refoodgee.

*Were we systematic enough in asking whether an existing product could do the job better than a new one?*

These names are creative, but there is a serious question here too. During the explosion period, and the rush to create new projects to address the needs of refugees, were we systematic enough in asking whether these functions could be better served by an existing product, rather than a new one?

*Creating a service specifically for refugees may have a ghettoising effect by isolating refugees and treating them differently*

What’s more, creating a service specifically for refugees, although well intended, may have a ghettoising effect by isolating refugees and treating them differently from the rest of the population. This point is supported by the fact that many refugees dislike being referred to as refugees, or at least feeling they’re being defined by their asylum status.

*There is no need for a “WhatsApp for refugees”. The “WhatsApp for refugees” – is…WhatsApp*

Our answer is that a digital service aiming to support refugees specifically makes sense in those areas where the situation and needs of refugees structurally differ from those of the broader community. An obvious example is help with the asylum process. This is a set of needs particular to refugees, and that’s why the project Bureau-crazy targets its support at refugees. An example going the other way is text messaging, where the needs of refugees are no different from anybody else’s. There is no need for a “WhatsApp for refugees”. The “WhatsApp for refugees” is…..WhatsApp.

In the area of labour market integration, there is a good case that the situation of refugees is structurally different from that of other job-seekers. Refugees are subject to restrictions on whether and when they are allowed to seek employment, and there are issues shared by many refugees about having their vocational qualifications from their home country recognised. Thus a job-matching platform specifically for refugees, such as Jobs4refugees, Workeer or HIRE.social, which connects refugees with prospective employers and supports both sides with the bureaucratic side, is sensible and valuable.

A topic which falls on the other side of the line is language acquisition. High-quality digital resources already exist for language learning, and there is little reason why these shouldn’t be as useful to refugees as anybody else. AsylPlus and Ankommen App did not create their own language learning resources but instead used those already developed by others. The caveat here is that there may be unmet demand for German courses in refugees’ first languages and/or with delivery mechanisms particularly well suited to this group, as with WhatsGerman.
Coming full circle: the end of digital refugee projects

The challenge of refugee integration is a moving target. One way of framing successful refugee integration is trying to reach a situation where the needs of refugees are not significantly different from the needs of the population at large. So arguably, the ultimate success of digital refugee projects would culminate in their becoming obsolete.

Some projects acknowledge and embrace this, looking forward to the day when their work is no longer necessary. As an alternative route for digital refugee projects after the “refugees only” distinction ceases to make sense: they could expand their service to others. This is something we’re starting to see with some projects such as HiMate!

The team expanded its target group from just refugees to include other socially disadvantaged groups. Coding school Devugees has also taken a step in this direction, although it was not planned. As described in the section “Partnerships”, Devugees is an accredited provider of vocational training, and recently the Jobcenter assigned a job-seeking German citizen to one of their courses.

German citizens learning software development alongside people from Syria, Afghanistan and beyond becomes a potent symbol of equality and inclusion

This is a trend to be welcomed. Just as projects aimed specifically at refugees can inadvertently ghettoise them, projects which welcome refugees as well as members of the host community are powerful sites where integration happens. If German citizens are learning software development alongside people from Syria, Afghanistan and beyond, that becomes a potent symbol of equality and inclusion.

We come full circle, with newcomers helping us to understand our own bureaucratic systems

In fact, the team behind Bureaucrazy argues that their app can actually be helpful to anybody, not necessarily only newcomers. After all, Germans also have to struggle in the face of a perplexing landscape of officialdom. And so we come full circle, with newcomers helping us to understand our own bureaucratic systems.
CONCLUSION

Refugee integration, in our definition, is about reaching a situation where refugees are empowered to support themselves and to assume an active role in society. The goal must be that eventually people’s asylum status is no longer a relevant distinction, so that their situation is not structurally different from any other member of the population. This also requires the participation and support of the host community. This is not, in itself, a new challenge. But in Germany it did take on a new prominence following the large number of refugee arrivals in 2015 and 2016. And as we’ve seen over the previous chapters, the landscape of actors trying to address this challenge has also changed. The more established organisations and structures – such as government agencies or NGOs working with refugees – have been joined by a newer breed of digital social innovators.

Encouraging experimentation

Digital tools can help to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our responses to social challenges

This kind of innovation has great potential to have a positive impact. They can help to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our responses to various social challenges, not only those around refugee integration. Our research sheds light on how digital social innovation emerges, and how it might be encouraged.

The first step is to activate a large group of people with diverse skill-sets to experiment with a wide array of ideas. In other settings and circumstances, outreach work and programmes to support early-stage projects can act as a catalyst for this initial experimentation phase. But in the particular case of Germany in 2015-16, the landscape of innovations emerged organically as people were moved to ask what they could do in response to the emotive refugee situation.

At this point, encouraging more newcomer-led innovation is worthwhile, but apart from this, increasing the number of new projects would be the wrong focus. Instead, the most important task is better embedding existing projects into the established structures.

A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

Bringing about successful integration is multi-faceted. It is not something any individual organisation or project can do; it can only be the result of a system of different actors working together.

People need to start to see themselves as part of a broader, interconnected system

A crucial factor in achieving better outcomes will be the ability of the people and projects working in the area of refugee integration to see themselves as part of a broader, interconnected system.

For the digital projects that have been the focus of our research, that means not viewing their work in isolation but also how it interacts with what others are doing. Think, for example, about a coding school and a job-matching platform. The coding school needs a mechanism for its stu-
dents to progress into employment, and the job-matching platform requires a steady stream of desirable candidates. The success of each is, to a significant extent, bound to the success of the other. The landscape of digital projects is becoming better connected. Efforts to collaborate should be directed to recognising and exploiting this kind of synergy.

**Relating to established structures**

But cooperation must not be limited to interactions between digital projects. As we explore in chapter 3, digital projects and more established parts of the system, such as government and NGOs, need to learn to work together more effectively. This requires effort from both sides.

Public agencies and large NGOs should recognise the potential of digital approaches to complement and enhance the work that they already do. In turn, they could use their deep understanding of the complexities of integration work to guide digital innovation. They could help to frame and define the problem in more detail, so that innovators can design solutions which are well adapted to the problem.

There are various stumbling blocks which can impede NGOs or the public sector when trying to partner with digital projects. As we explore in chapter 3, there can be a lack of transparency or clarity about who is responsible for establishing such partnerships. Or else regulations around procurement and cooperation inadvertently get in the way, because they were not drawn up with this new kind of agile project in mind. One example is the difficulties some digital projects face in attaining charitable status. Exploring how to reform these structures to allow greater flexibility should be a priority area looking to the future.

**The need to professionalise**

But digital projects must also work to better understand and accommodate the ways that established organisations work. Faced with the spontaneous emergence of over 100 digital projects, it’s no surprise that organisations with strict accountability requirements were hesitant to rush into partnerships. They lacked the information, and in many cases the expertise, to judge the quality of the various offerings or the reliability of the teams behind them. Hopefully this will become less of a problem as the landscape matures, consolidates and professionalises.

Professionalisation is desirable for other reasons too. Volunteering and donations both played an important role in the early stages of many digital projects. However, a project having an unpaid core team, or having public donations at the centre of its financing strategy, is an inadequate basis to achieve and sustain impact at scale. There is certainly still an important and valuable role for volunteers in digital refugee support. But it is more in supporting the projects of others in than leading their own projects.

**Funders in a pivotal role**

The most powerful lever in steering the system towards greater impact lies with funders – be they foundations, ministries, corporations, or others. The perception of the majority of digital refugee projects is that there is not much money available for the work they are doing, and what funding does exist is made difficult to access by cumbersome bureaucracy and an overall lack of transparency.

*There is a need for more funding sources that are better suited to digital-social projects*

This has led to a situation where several promising projects are still under-financed after many months. This shows there is a need for more funding sources that are better suited to projects of this kind.

Funders too should be thinking systemically. Instead of assessing a project’s merits in isolation, they should also think about which other organisations and structures it interacts with, and what it requires for these interactions to work well.

There are some potential pitfalls for funders. They should try to avoid unwittingly pitting projects which should be cooperating against one another in competition for resources, or causing teams to divert too much of their time and focus to fundraising. They should try not to neglect projects that do valuable work building infrastructure and strengthening the system as a whole but which struggle to communicate emotively their human impact.

More coordination between funders could lead to a better distribution of resources overall. This would mitigate the risk of either duplication or “bandwagon” effects, where a small number of projects receive a great deal of support and media attention, while other promising initiatives go without. With the interdependence of different projects in mind, funders should aim to strengthen entire regions of the integration system, rather than just island projects.

Finally, although extremely unequal concentration of funding is a problem while the landscape is maturing, the story changes when it comes to the scaling phase.
Funders should be rigorous in assessing whether projects have potential to deliver impact at scale, and where they do, they should be willing to invest accordingly. The landscape is approaching a stage where such assessments are possible, and achieving the full impact that is possible will require larger investments than have been made to date.

The full potential of digital routes to integration

What we are describing demands serious investment in several respects, in the efforts to embed novel approaches into established systems, as well as in providing resources and improving the way they are distributed. The case for such investment is compelling. As chapter 1 showed the work needed towards integration is only just beginning.

Moreover, finding adequate responses to the realities of forced migration will be one of the defining challenges of the coming years and decades.

Our increasing ability to use digital tools to help ever more people is an irresistible trend. The area of refugee integration, as the example in this report show, is a site where its potential is especially great.
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ABOUT BETTERPLACE LAB

As Germany’s first digital-social research centre, the betterplace lab takes a microscope to attempts to use digital innovations for social good. Over the past seven years, our work has taken us to far-flung corners, and we’ve carried out field research in 23 countries on five continents. But in fairness, we also spend quite a bit of time at our desks in Berlin. We stand on stage and try to inspire people about the potential technology has, and once a year we organise a conference, the betterplace labtogether. The betterplace lab is part of gut.org gemeinnützige Aktiengesellschaft, which also runs betterplace.org, Germany’s largest online donation platform.
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