

Projects and project management for a sustainable social impact¹

Project management in support of war refugees – The case of Germany²

Reinhard Wagner

Once again, we have to witness a war in Europe that brings endless suffering to the people, death and destruction. This time it is Ukraine that is afflicted by a terrible misery. In the years before, it was nonsensical wars in Syria, or the Balkans, which mostly lead to people leaving their country and heading for neighboring or safe countries, such as Germany. In these situations, the question for us project managers is: Can we do something to help the people and alleviate the suffering?

This is an important question for Germany, as many Germans themselves experienced the consequences of leaving their homeland after the Second World War. My father-in-law, for example, had to leave his home in the east as a young boy with his mother on a ladder wagon, and for a long time he still told stories about the attacks on the way, the death and suffering of all the refugees. At that time, the displaced persons were grateful for the reception in the West of Germany, the integration and the opportunity to build up a new peaceful existence. Fortunately, my generation has so far been spared this experience, for which we are all very grateful. Nevertheless, this story has been passed on through the stories of our parents and comes up again and again when it comes to war and displacement.

After the peaceful fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany, there were also migratory movements around and to Germany, but the war in the Balkans at the end of the 1990s resulted in a strong movement of refugees, and many people from the former confederation of Yugoslavia came to Germany even then. At that time, the GPM Deutsche Gesellschaft für Projektmanagement (the German Project Management Association) already existed, but I am not aware of any significant activities to support the refugee crisis at that time. This was certainly also due to the fact that the GPM was still a small association with volunteers at that time and did not have the means to provide support. This was quite different when in 2015, as a result of the war in Syria, a large

¹ This series of articles is by Reinhard Wagner, PMWJ honorary global advisor and former Chair of IPMA. The series aims to position projects and project management in the context of society as social activities performed by and for people. The focus is on a sustainable social impact, which is to be achieved through the projects, and less on the management of the projects and the immediate deliverables. At the same time, projects are to be positioned as a means of self-realization through which people can jointly work for their communities, the environment or society as a whole. The series is aimed at the global community of project management practitioners, researchers, and those interested in learning about current developments in the field of project activities in society and how to achieve sustainable social impact through this engagement. See the author's profile at the end of this article.

² How to cite this article: Wagner, R. (2022). Project management in support of war refugees - the case of Germany; Series on projects and project management for a sustainable social impact, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue IV, April.

number of refugees came to Germany. At the height of the crisis, more than 1 million refugees arrived in Bavaria via the Balkan route and had to be cared for. The state was completely overwhelmed by the masses of people, and it was only thanks to the great support of the people in the communities and towns that the refugees could be accommodated, cared for and, in the years that followed, partially also integrated into society. A particular challenge was a different language, religious affiliation and cultural values of the refugees compared to the German population.

In discussions in the GPM leadership circle, ideas were spun on how GPM and its members could help the refugees on a practical level. In contrast to aid organizations such as the Red Cross or disaster relief organizations, GPM is not geared to providing immediate assistance in an emergency situation, even though individual members have privately taken care of refugees. The strength of GPM and the project managers who joined it only came to the fore after some time. For example, some active members of GPM have become involved as coordinators of local aid projects, using their language skills as interpreters or teachers for refugees, thus creating concrete added value. In companies or at service providers, apps were developed for the refugees by means of projects and project management, which, in addition to translation services, also provided tips for dealing with authorities and many other integration issues (see for example: <https://www.wefugees.de/>).

Building on these rather spontaneous experiences, GPM then launched a [refugee relief project](#) that developed tools in various working groups, such as a [guide for refugee assistance](#) at the municipal level. This document is intended to provide concrete support to helpers in the municipalities in structuring the aid work and organizing the helpers. Together with the Protestant Church and Sciences Po, a [comparative study](#) on the situation of refugees in Berlin and Paris was prepared with corresponding recommendations. Refugees interested in project management were offered a basic qualification in project management with subsequent certificate for professional inclusion.

Finally, a master plan for the integration of refugees was developed for cities such as Berlin and Nuremberg, which, with a respective Work Breakdown Structure and specifications for stakeholder, opportunity and risk management as well as communication, provided a planning basis for the coordination of all administrative levels involved in the crisis at the federal, state, city and local levels. GPM was then able to exchange essential experiences with the representatives of the authorities at a prominent congress on migration and integration, which then resulted in an [Action Program](#) "Shaping Germany's Future with Projects".

This program is the result of a dialog between GPM Deutsche Gesellschaft für Projektmanagement e. V. with the federal, state and local governments on the question of what contribution project management can make to maintaining the future viability of our country. One key to economic and social sustainability lies in our competence to shape change and implement ideas and initiatives in projects. In order to shape change in a way that is oriented toward the common good, we need a culture of shared success, the development of organizational and individual competencies at all levels, conducive framework conditions.

Even though the current refugee crisis related to the war in Ukraine has not yet reached the same proportions (at the beginning of April, approximately 300,000 refugees from Ukraine have reached Germany), mainly women and children as well as elderly people are arriving in the West, and these refugees can move freely in Europe without visas, the social challenge is again enormous. And again begins the support at the local level by citizens, associations and initiatives, which take care of accommodation, food, clothing and integration in school education, etc. GPM volunteers help to organize demonstrations and support actions on a local level (for example in [Weimar](#)), collect funds and organize transports to and from the Ukraine (for example in my hometown [Friedberg/Bavaria](#)).



Local refugee initiatives in Germany, for example in Friedberg/Bavaria. This may serve as an example that project management cannot only be used in the context of engineering projects or for economic purposes. Especially in the face of growing societal challenges, particularly in a humanitarian catastrophe such as the refugee crisis in connection with the war in Ukraine, it becomes apparent that project management, the project managers, consultants and trainers organized within the context of project management associations can offer hands-on assistance. This relief begins to make sense when the initial activities of first aid organizations, the military and rescue forces have been completed and the focus is on the coordination of integration or even reconstruction measures.

Close coordination and orchestration of all federal, state or local agencies is important, if necessary together with aid organizations, volunteers, businesses and civic initiatives. For example, the Ukrainian associations in Germany are currently helping to clarify the need for relief supplies that are required in Ukraine. Volunteers then take these to the border and on the return trip bring refugees to Germany.

At the local level, it is important to match the need for accommodation with the supply and to offer the refugees an initial social integration with the comfort of feeling that they are in a safe place.

Since communication with family members still at home plays a major role for refugees, telecommunications providers such as Deutsche Telekom, have organized an offer for [free SIM cards](#), and many other examples could be given here. In this context, project managers are called upon more than ever to offer a substantial contribution to the common good in society and to refugees in particular.

Reinhard Wagner

About the Author



Reinhard Wagner

Germany



Reinhard Wagner has been active for more than 35 years in the field of project-related leadership, in such diverse sectors as Automotive, Engineering, and Consultancy, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. As Managing Director of Tiba Managementberatung GmbH, a leading PM Consultancy in Munich/Germany, he supports executives of industrial clients in transforming their companies towards a project-oriented, adaptive and sustainably successful organization. Reinhard Wagner has published 36 books as well as several hundred articles and blogposts in the field of project, program and project portfolio management. In more than 20 years of voluntary engagement he served the German Project Management Association (GPM) as well as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in a range of leadership roles (including President and Chairman) and was granted for his international commitment with the Honorary Fellowship of IPMA and several of IPMA's Member Associations. Reinhard is Senior Lecturer at the Alma Mater Europaea and is currently finishing his doctoral thesis on the topic of Project Society. He can be contacted via reinhard.wagner@tiba.de.