



Migrant integration: How Handbook Germany community builds to overcome barriers

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Intro [00:00:02] Welcome to OECD podcast, where policy meets people.

Robin Allison Davis [00:00:07] Settling in a new country can be a scary and confusing process, particularly during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, from language barriers to cultural differences, where can refugees, newcomers and asylum seekers go to understand how their new home operates and get answers in a language they can understand? I am Robin Davis and you are listening to OECD podcasts. Handbook Germany stepped in to help close the communications gap in migrant integration and meet the needs of newcomers in Germany. I am joined here today with Mahdis Amiri, a Handbook Germany editor. Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Mahdis.

Mahdis Amiri [00:00:47] Glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

Robin Allison Davis [00:00:49] So tell me a bit about Handbook Germany. What is it?

Mahdis Amiri [00:00:53] Handbook Germany is the multilingual information platform for newcomers in Germany. Basically, a handful of newcomers who want to jump start their lives in Germany and need information about different aspects of their lives in Germany would be refugees, could be students, skilled workers. Of course, we started as a platform of four languages for refugees in 2016 when the quote unquote refugee crisis was happening in Germany. And we started with Farsi, then Arabic, English and German, and then expanded added Pashto, Turkish, French and recently Russian. We are not only talking about how to find a flat or where to give you a residence permit; it is also about the spirit of the society. We also talk about what are your fundamental rights, women's rights, labour rights, LGBTQ rights. Therefore, it is not just basic information to get by. It is about how to have a social life, feel empowered and feel settled in your host country.

Robin Allison Davis [00:02:12] And you know a little something about feeling settled in a new country. You move to Germany in 2011. Was your experience moving to Germany part of what inspired you to work with Handbook Germany?

Mahdis Amiri [00:02:24] Oh, absolutely, yeah, when it could be such a disorientating experience when I came here that I was like a whole new challenge of adjusting and learning how things work from my things in my everyday life to bigger challenges. It is a huge adjustment. And the interesting thing is our whole team has that experience. And I think not only this is my motivation partly and why I like working with this scene, the rest of our team also a great number of us are actually. During in exile, so they have gone through this whole experience and they come from the communities, for instance, our Arabic editor comes from Syria or our Pashto editor, Farsi editor, both from Afghanistan. These are the languages spoken in Afghanistan. So we come from the community. Most of us have the experience of journalists in exile and adjusted to life in Germany. And that's exactly why we feel like we know where people need to know more and more support and more empowerment, need to learn more about their rights and how they can find themselves in basically new land.

Robin Allison Davis [00:03:59] That's interesting that you brought that up, because I was wondering about that the Handbook Germany team seems to be extremely diverse, as you said, from so many different

backgrounds and cultures. You yourself, you speak at least three languages. In what ways does Handbook Germany, benefit from having such a mix of cultures?

Mahdis Amiri [00:04:19] Oh, the benefits are huge. First of all, it is such a pleasure to work with such a team, you know, you learn things every day, but that is personal. That is for me. I really enjoyed it. And then when you have this mix of people from different backgrounds, they come from different cultures, different, you know, how you put these together and the solutions that you come up with and the level of creativity somehow surprises myself. Still, after five years of working and the flexibility that these people have, the knowledge they have from their own communities, from the countries that were born, and then they come here are migrants. They are from the migrant community. You put all these together and. The perspective and perspective that is different from different cultures, you see these people, it is amazing, it is a great mix.

Robin Allison Davis [00:05:24] Handbook Germany has several editors on staff. Can you tell me a little bit, about how the organisations manage, set up and financed?

Mahdis Amiri [00:05:33] And we started with four editors, and then eventually the project has grown bigger. We are partly financed by the federal commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration. We have these meetings. We talk about the issues that occur right now. Again, a lot of it is about foreign because we had this well-established relationship with the communities before the whole crisis. So we have to quickly adjust and add a lot of new content to reach these people at times of crisis. A number of them leave their refugee camps. And I mean, there's a difference of sitting there waiting for camp managers to, for example, come and tell you how things are going to work, then being able to go online, inform yourself, know what's going on. I mean, there is a whole different sensation in these insecure times. We have our editorial meetings saying a lot of it has to do with Crono. But generally speaking, we have come up with different formats depending on the information we want to communicate. And editors have quotes from verified sources, maybe government sources, and then we modify it based on the needs of the community. For example, if there's this information, which it has a lot of details and it's jargon, for example, we don't put it out there as text and expect people to read like 10 pages of what we do is that each editor in their respective languages is in front of a camera, for example, and explaining this is what this whole story is about. This is an easy way of getting to people in some languages. Even, for example, in Pashto, the level of literacy is not as high. We do not really count on text to get information or work multimedia to give to our audiences.

Robin Allison Davis [00:07:52] You mentioned going to migrant camps, but is that one of the ways that people find out about Handbook Germany, how are you reaching your audience? How do they know to even read about Handbook Germany?

Mahdis Amiri [00:08:07] Since 2016, when we started, we have tried so many different things, we have different events. For example, we went personally to events, which were organised for the refugees. We ourselves kind of cultural communities, people we were talking to, other people from our own community. And this applies to other editors. So there is this link. And a lot of people in Germany are people I personally always in the rest of our team. But of course, apart from that, we promote whatever that's produced online. There are the usual techniques are mentioned on the website of the commissioner, the federal

commissioner for Integration and Migration, as a source of information for refugees, migrants who are looking for information. So we are not part of this kind of information.

Robin Allison Davis [00:09:18] Well, let's talk about the Covid-19 pandemic. It's created a new set of challenges for the migrant communities. I know that the German Ministry of Interior has a dedicated Covid website for migrants with information in 20 languages in a lot of countries have done something similar. How does Handbook Germany's Covid communications differ from the Ministry of Interior's communications?

Mahdis Amiri [00:09:45] It all comes down to the network that was already well established and existing before corona happened. Of course, the website is great and they are trying to get more and more people, but this is not easy. We already had a network on Facebook, about 240,000 followers. This is a number of our followers on Facebook. So there was something already and this is a double-sided communication. We get questions. People get to write comments or send their questions and ask about all this to civic problems. So when you already have that communication that we have faces, it is not just texts. We have editors, for example, people who write in Farsi right after our colleague Shamila. So they know this person. They trust this person this other time, before this other time that they had a problem with their child's school. They asked Shamila astronomy that helps them, for example, with the problems they come back, you know what I mean? So this is the difference when when a network of trust is already there.

Robin Allison Davis [00:11:04] Do you have any examples of the communications you did around the Covid-19 pandemic, maybe what worked, what didn't work?

Mahdis Amiri [00:11:12] Our formats are constantly developing. We had to be we have to work very flexibly when we happened, we had to be very quick, for example, when one of the best things that actually worked was the fact that there were these big summits, corona summits, in which Chancellor Merkel and 16 premiers of the states came together and had these very long discussions to agree on the rules and regulations in Germany. And sometimes in these meetings and at midnight, we could immediately or shortly after these meetings with Soulive without because they have this journalistic experience, they can stand there and say, like, wow, yes, the long meeting is finally over. This is the results and this is what it means for us who are living in Germany. This was one of the most efficient. Formats, that that was one of the channels of communication that we had and of course, we had for shorter information that we needed to do that to people's attention. We did this for cards. We called in phone cards, visually attractive cards, where you can see the basic information, the most important information. We want as many people as possible to see this. So we use these. But then there were other ways right now that are happening in the pharmacy in Germany or our your producer who took the camera and went to a pharmacy and talked to a pharmacist and a person who was there to show people how it's done and what the problems are. So the formats that we use and it is better every day.

Robin Allison Davis [00:13:17] It sounds like social media is the biggest way that you reach out to your audience. Why is it so important for Handbook Germany, to have an interactive community with its audience? And how are you keeping them engaged?

Mahdis Amiri [00:13:33] It is very important because we do not want to sit up there and tell people how things are done. We are from the community and we need to know what is going on, what the problems are, what the main issues are. So this close connexion is very important for us. And it's part of the reason people, I think, have been showing us trust is that they can ask us their questions. They can, and then they reply. And then you see that actually they ask for solutions. They use your help. They find your help useful. They come back and you see that the help was used in a way to find this information. Is it possible if the person is fluent German, can sit and read pages after pages, that it is possible, but here it is done in a way more personal and a quick way, I think.

Robin Allison Davis [00:14:39] You have mentioned before that there are a lot of journalists on the Handbook Germany staff. Do you think that that plays a role in how your audience interacts with you, why they trust you so much?

Mahdis Amiri [00:14:50] Yeah, in a sense, yes, a journalist you are kind of used to. Go to community to get in touch with the community rather than, you know, it is a little different. The researchers are still sitting in their offices literally as a journalist, you have to get there and ask people questions like tell me what is wrong with me, what the main issues are. That is how we can do things better to fit what we are doing to tailor the constantly back to your needs. So, yes, I think a lot of this just has to do with me being a journalist means you get out there and getting out there means, you know, people you ask or ask questions.

Robin Allison Davis [00:15:40] Well, thank you so much for joining us, Mahdis.

Mahdis Amiri [00:15:45] Sure. It was a pleasure. Thank you for having me. It was a great discussion.

Robin Allison Davis [00:15:50] If you would like to read more about Handbook Germany, go to their website at HandbookGermany.de. For more information on the OECD work on communications in migrant integration, go to OECD.org/Migration/Netcom. Thank you for listening.

Outro [00:16:09] To listen to other OECD podcasts. Find us on iTunes, Spotify, Google podcast and SoundCloud.com/OECD.