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A humanitarian admissions programme for Afghans

One year after the Taliban seized power, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating. What Germany can do now to help Afghans

The figures reveal a success story: Germany is one of the countries worldwide that has admitted the most people from Afghanistan. The reality, however, paints a different picture: the many people the Federal Republic has assumed responsibility for are suffering greatly. Germany has evacuated over 22,000 Afghans since August 2021, including almost 70 per cent of the local staff who have received a commitment from the federal government to take them in. But aid organisations point out that thousands of people who have worked with Germany in the Hindu Kush have not yet received such a promise, even though they are acutely threatened because of their work.

Many of these people do not qualify for the so-called 'local staff procedure' because of their temporary work contracts – for example, police trainers in a project of the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ). But the Taliban don't care whether someone has supported the West as an employee or as a self-employed person. What matters to them are the actions, not the legal form of the contract.

In addition to the local forces, there are also many activists who followed the promise of freedom and democracy and, as a result, are now being persecuted by the Taliban or other radical groups. Moreover, there are numerous groups at risk with a special need for protection – for example because of their gender identity, sexuality, or minority affiliation. All of these people would have very good prospects of having their protection request recognised in an asylum procedure in Germany. However, they are not in Germany, but in Afghanistan, where they can only hope for the goodwill of Western countries. In the meantime, they must somehow ensure their own survival – in secret hiding places, in safe houses, in the cellars of relatives and friends.

Humanitarian admission under difficult circumstances

Germany could help some of these people with its instruments for humanitarian admission. However, there is no legal right to admission. These programmes are the result of political decisions, such as those made last year in the case of Afghanistan. This is because the agreement of the 'traffic light coalition' says: 'We will create a permanent federal humanitarian admission programme [...] and now use it for Afghanistan.' In other words, the Federal Government has committed itself to its international responsibility towards acutely endangered people in Afghanistan by providing direct admissions.

A similar federal admissions programme was started in 2013 for Syrian refugees.

In this context, the government can determine the criteria as well as the scope and framework of admission itself. If political interest were to be focused primarily on particularly vulnerable groups, as in the case of Afghanistan, a number of questions arise: How can it be ensured that, from among all the persecuted and threatened people, those who are most at risk are selected? How then to ensure fair access to the programme? How to deal with the enormous demand?

There are not very many examples and experiences to fall back on here. Although Germany has carried out many ad hoc resettlement campaigns for people in need of protection in the past few decades, the conditions were very different. A similar federal admissions programme was started in 2013 for Syrian refugees. Is there anything to be learned from that programme vis-à-vis the current effort to help people in Afghanistan? Yes. First, there need to be resilient structures that support the many people seeking help. Secondly, there is a need for experts with specialist knowledge, who are familiar with the area to check on the credibility of the cases. Thirdly, it must be clear to all the actors involved that such a programme represents an incredible organisational challenge.

In Afghanistan, this challenge is even greater, because we are talking about admission from the persecuting state itself. Germany does not maintain diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. International organisations such as the UNHCR are not available for an on-site selection process. In Afghanistan itself, there is basically no organisation that can make a selection, because this would expose its employees to direct danger. So other ways have to be found to make humanitarian admission possible.

Solid foundations

Therefore, the German government has announced that it wishes to involve civil society in Germany in designing the programme. This is certainly a sensible step that other countries – for example Sweden and Great Britain – have also taken. However, the basic question of access to the programme can only be answered by the state itself. The dramatic images of the chaotic evacuation at Kabul airport exactly one year ago are still fresh. But far from the cameras, hundreds of thousands of people have directly contacted the German government, along with German politicians and civil society, asking for help. Thus far, the question of how to handle these inquiries has not yet been definitively clarified. Politically, numerous references have been made to the humanitarian admission programme.

Humanitarian admission programmes are not a panacea in refugee policy.

Humanitarian admission programmes are intended as ad hoc solutions to crisis situations. Each crisis can only be understood in its specific context. However, this must not repeatedly lead to excessive demands. The federal government should therefore take the current challenge as an opportunity to build resilient structures for the registration and selection processes in admission programmes of this kind. Asking the same questions over and over again can hardly amount to a strategy. And institutionalised access to humanitarian reception does not mean leaving civil society out of the loop. Rather, it means that the federal government can flexibly call on its expertise, while still being able to react quickly and effectively in acute crisis situations as they arise.

Moreover, the debates about Afghanistan also show that complementary access routes are needed, especially in emergencies. The demand for humanitarian admission programmes might not be as great if there were better solutions for local workers; or if people with a right to family reunification with their relatives in Germany could assert this more quickly instead of waiting years for reunification. Those who have been rescued must not be left alone after being admitted. The state must continue to ensure that they have sufficient access to the support and integration structures. Thinking about these issues from the outset of the planning phase is essential.

Humanitarian admission programmes are not a panacea in refugee policy.

They can only help a very limited number of people. However, in order for them to be effective at all, they need to stand on solid, institutional foundations.



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