



**Future?**

Position Paper:

**Social Work with Refugees in  
Refugee Accommodations Centers**

Professional Standards and Socio-political Basis

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Position Paper:

## **Social Work with Refugees in Refugee Accommodations Centers – Professional Standards and Socio-political Basis**

### **Preamble**

For over a hundred years, social workers<sup>1</sup> have been concerned with improving the situation of socially disadvantaged people excluded from equal access to social inclusion. For a long time the context of social work was the nation state, its citizens and the poor and needy. Even today, social work remains tied to the provisions of the welfare state, which in turn are shaped by the nation state; many social, political and civil rights are conditional to citizenship. Thus, by law, refugees and migrants have a disadvantaged status. Social work developed embedded in the context of the welfare state; it was, however, simultaneously impacted by human rights, subject-oriented, and in the broadest sense humanistic perspectives and approaches that were free of restrictive conditions. From this came a commitment to guaranteeing human rights and to the pursuit of equality in legal and actual terms. In the present day state of advanced globalization, social work with those who cannot invoke rights of citizenship, who have only partial access to the services of the welfare state or who live under the threat of deportation is becoming an increasingly large field. Social work thus bears the challenge of having to support new arrivals achieve a good and secure life while simultaneously criticizing their inferior legal status as a constraint on individual and societal development. It has to deal with problems that arise from the uncertain conditions pertaining to residence (or weak and restrictive residential statuses). The practical work – especially in mass accommodations – is impaired by the fact that social workers work in a mostly poorly equipped, ambiguously regulated and hastily conceptualized field. Consequently, there is a great discrepancy between what is professionally and ethically required and what is legally and practically possible. Social work, as both discipline and practice, is thus charged with challenging the legal stipulations that deny people the right to accommodation, protection and support. This applies to both the disadvantaged status in general as well as to the current measures which deprive people of their rights, of adequate support and result in the termination of residence (the so-called “voluntary departures” and deportations). This also implies not acquiescing to the expectation of cooperation in the implementation of measures resulting in the forced termination of residence.

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of readability, we only refer to social workers. Included are social workers and social pedagogues.

## **The Purpose of this Position Paper**

This position paper seeks to offer a professional self-understanding for social work with refugees, but also to play a role in broader social and political discussions. It should allow social workers to refer to shared professional and ethical standards in their actions and justifications for their actions. Moreover, it should result in greater transparency and commitment with regards to the services of social work and in the demands for a better framework. Finally this position paper should inspire processes that contribute to the development of quality standards in the field of social work in refugee accommodation centers so that these standards can be more closely oriented towards the needs of the users, i.e. refugees themselves. The standards laid out here concretize the general principles of social work<sup>2</sup> as they apply to the support of refugees in mass accommodation centers.<sup>3</sup> This is necessary because refugees are refused a share in the shared social gains and advancements on legal, institutional, but also interpersonal grounds (for example through paternalism, incapacitation, Othering.)

## **The Professional and Ethical Basis of the Social Work Mandate**

According to the global definition of the International Association of Schools of Social Work / The International Federation of Social Workers, social work aims for the empowerment and liberation of people as well as for social change, social development and social cohesion.<sup>4</sup> Human rights and the principles of social equality, the respect for diversity and the sharing of responsibility form the basis of this work. Social work's professional self-understanding and ethical code implies trust in the strength of individuals to determine their own lives. Social workers understand their mission as one of supporting people in the interests of their self-determination, equal participation and share in social life and to intervene where social structures stand in the way. Social work in its professional practice is based on scientific knowledge as well as on acquired experiential knowledge. In order to actively support social participation, individual autonomy as well as development and education, the discipline has established scientifically developed action plans. Among others, it uses the methods of individual case assistance, group work and community work as well as those of political lobbying and organizational development. In order to fulfill its mandate, social work requires the appropriate resources (of time, personnel, finances, space and materials), a philosophical basis for a field-specific professional self-understanding and a range of methodological concepts.

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<sup>2</sup> Scientific publications as well as praxis-based publications such as the following, are good sources for more information on quality in social work: <http://ifsw.org/policies/global-standards/> (last accessed on 12.03.2016)

<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on refugee accommodation centers as many federal states have defined minimum standards for these which fall short of the minimum standards of social work. Nevertheless many of the formulated standards are relevant not just to regular accommodation centers but also to emergency and initial accommodations for refugees.

<sup>4</sup> <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> (last accessed on 12.03.2016)

## **The Situation in Refugee Accommodation Centers**

The work with refugees is a field replete with human rights violations (in countries of origin, transit and destination), unfulfilled needs and insecurity. De jure and de facto social work with refugees occurs in the most precarious and unregulated conditions. Living in mass accommodations produces manifold psychological, physical, social (for instance, isolation, stigmatization, breaches of trust despite spatial proximity) and organizational problems, indeed partially generating the need for social work. Because of this and other considerations, decentralized accommodation must be the goal. Social work in refugee accommodation centers should be seen as one instance of a broad spectrum of social counselling and support services which are open to every refugee, regardless of their accommodation or housing situation or the type and duration of their residential status. Thus, while support services for refugees need to be extended, the regular support structures also need to open up. Until now support structures have not been adequately developed and continue to be primarily informed by the needs of the majority society.

## **Scarce Material Resources and Overwork as Particularly Striking Problems**

In many refugee accommodation centers the staff to resident ratio is 1:150 or 1:100;<sup>5</sup> elsewhere, counselling or support services by social workers have not been envisaged at all, or their tasks have been so vaguely defined that the time allocated for professional work<sup>6</sup> is minimized through tasks outside their subject area (for example, the distribution of food).<sup>7</sup> Such conditions make an adequate exchange of information or an in-depth one-on-one conversation between a resident and the social worker all but impossible. The required nuanced analysis of the situation or case and the development of professional work relationships for the joint handling of social problems are not possible in these conditions. Here the promotion and the guarantee of the protection of especially vulnerable groups (children, but also other groups mentioned below) is also to be considered. As a result of inadequate personnel, time, space, conceptual and infrastructural resources, social workers moreover struggle to consider the people they work with as individuals with personal histories, needs and desires. It is frequently the case that staff in mass accommodations consider refugees as a single homogeneous group or chiefly in terms of ethnically categorizable subgroups. Thus, the required support is denied and basic rights (such as access to healthcare or of personal development and child welfare) are inadequately covered or ensured.

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<sup>5</sup> In emergency accommodations this staff to resident ratio is not maintained.

<sup>6</sup> An overview of professional duties can be found here: [http://www.fluechtlingsrat-mv.de/wp-content/uploads/Unterbringung/AG\\_MASF\\_Aufgabenfelder\\_der\\_Fluechtlingssozialarbeit.pdf](http://www.fluechtlingsrat-mv.de/wp-content/uploads/Unterbringung/AG_MASF_Aufgabenfelder_der_Fluechtlingssozialarbeit.pdf). (only available in German.) This extensive job description does not necessarily apply in its entirety to a concrete field, but practitioners can refer to it while negotiating what their responsibilities are.

<sup>7</sup> Mass accommodation centers require other staff as well: leadership positions and a facility manager. Planning security is required for long term staff development. The calculation of the staffing ratio should be based on the number of refugees and not be based on an attendance check.

## **Mandate Contradicting Expectations of Social Workers in Refugee Accommodation Centers**

In many instances, social workers in refugee accommodation centers are involved in activities that are contrary to their mandate. They are expected to provide administrative assistance to the police, provide details regarding people's countries of origin, report absences in the accommodations, pass on the addresses of residents who have gone underground, or assist in procedures to establish someone's age. Further, they are expected to perform tasks that do not correspond to their profession. This includes progress reports, control and security related tasks, commercial and administrative tasks. These tasks not only reduce the time allocated for their actual work,<sup>8</sup> far more problematic is the fact that such security related tasks or such cooperation with police contradict the professional ethos of social work. The same applies to assistance provided during deportations. This contradicts the professional ethos and self-understanding of social work.<sup>9</sup> In the face of impending measures for terminating residence, social workers should advise the people affected about all possible courses of action, so that they can take an informed decision.

## **Goals and Tasks of Social Work (not only) with Refugees**

The goal of social work is to counsel, assist and support people in accessing healthcare services and education, in securing livelihood, work, housing and social participation, as well as to facilitate personal development. In order to achieve the goal of full inclusion of people in all aspects of social life, the empowerment of individuals and groups plays a major part.<sup>10</sup> The following general goals of the tasks of social work apply just as much to social work with refugees.

1. Recognition: Full recognition of the individual, irrespective of their legal status
2. Material wellbeing: The achievement of their full social participation, security, development, equal access to the housing-, job- and consumer market, self-determined accommodation, access to social support, comprehensive and unconditional healthcare from the first day onwards
3. Individual development: Promotion of education, training, advanced training, recognition of life experience and existing competence, promotion of employment
4. Social proximity: The reduction of social distance to surroundings, support in the use of neighbourhood services as well as access to communities of shared experience and interests
5. Participation and Engagement: Promotion of opportunities to take decisions which impact one, promotion of engagement and networks
6. Transformation of relations of power: (Self-)critical engagement with relations of power (racism, racialization and discrimination among others) at all levels of action.

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<sup>8</sup> See the statement released by the IFSW on 05.09.2015 "Statement on the refugee crisis" <http://ifsw.org/news/statement-on-the-refugee-crisis/> (last accessed on 12.3.2016)

<sup>9</sup> See Paragraph 5.2. of the International Code of Ethics, according to which "social workers should not allow their skills to be misused for inhuman purposes" (IASSW/IFSW 2014) [http://www.iassw-aiets.org/uploads/file/20130506\\_Ethics%20in%20Social%20Work,%20Statement,%20IFSW,%20IASSW,%202004.pdf](http://www.iassw-aiets.org/uploads/file/20130506_Ethics%20in%20Social%20Work,%20Statement,%20IFSW,%20IASSW,%202004.pdf) (last accessed on 12.3.2016)

<sup>10</sup> See IASSW/IFSW 2014, Global Definition Social Work <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/> (last accessed on 12.03,2016)

In order to realize these goals, social workers must have the chance to support people not only in direct interaction, but also to participate conceptually and structurally, to publicize and lobby against, for instance, the suspension of the legally codified restrictions on participation. The mandate of social work encompasses support in the figuration of the relationship of the individual to the state (advocacy with regards to the guarantee and extension of granted rights), to the market (qualification and access) and to the surroundings (the neighbourhood, access to institutions, coordination and promotion of volunteer work, anti-discrimination work, protection against violence inside and outside the accommodation facilities, particularly against racially motivated attacks.) Besides this, social work also encompasses the support of individuals and social groups in the process of making complaints. This work requires principles. These are developed in the following section.

## **Standards for Social Work in Refugee Accommodation Centers**

Professional standards for social work in refugee accommodation centers can be derived from the mandate and goals of social work in general. Keeping in mind the mostly inadequate conditions, the following will deal with the implications with regard to conceptual and structural requirements. Then the conditions of employment and the required skills and competencies of the personnel working in mass accommodations in order to meet the mandate of social work will be discussed.

## **Conceptual Requirements, Professional Qualifications and Required Equipment**

- 1. Conceptual Requirements:** The providers of refugee accommodation centers should develop scientifically based professional concepts of accommodation and care. The conceptualization should be based on established concepts around support, counselling and protection from violence and should adequately consider the needs of particularly vulnerable groups (for example people with disabilities, LGBTI persons, the elderly, women, children and young adults). A critical monitoring of the conditions of the accommodation and services based on the code of ethics of social work should be ensured. Staff must receive a corresponding job description. This is to ensure that social workers do not become involved in tasks which will hinder them in their professional duties or contradict the principle of confidentiality. In the case of critical events, social workers must be able to get in touch with outside parties. A regular exchange between colleagues as well as between staff and management should take place and should be documented.
- 2. Accessibility:** An adequate counselling service implies an initial conversation on arrival, subsequent transfer to other social services, availability for counselling and support (office hours, organization chart indicating responsible persons, quality management), as well as qualified counselling on social rights and residence permits. Services both within the accommodation center and in the community should be accessible at reasonable hours and easily reachable. For activities within the accommodation center, office, counselling and event spaces should be adequately equipped (with desk, telephone, answering machine, fax machine, internet, printer, photocopier etc.)
- 3. Cooperation:** The providers of mass accommodation centers should cooperate with other providers in the same field, with social service providers (including the educational and healthcare systems) as well as with civil society (lobby-) organizations such as refugee self-organizations,

refugee councils and citizens' initiatives. This requires a guarantee from the provider that cooperating partners will have access to the accommodation center as well as a conceptual plan regarding civil engagement.

4. **Participation:** In order to work participatory, established procedures concerning the participation of the concerned parties (empowerment concepts and complaint management as per § 45 SGB VIII<sup>11</sup>) should be developed and implemented. The self-determination of residents should be ensured through reasonable and effective complaint mechanisms which are to be offered by an independent agency acting as a local or regional regulatory authority.
5. **Qualification:** Social work with refugees requires many socio-pedagogical core competencies in assistance, counselling and cooperation. This makes a degree in social work or social pedagogy (BA, MA, diploma) and the skills and knowledge taught in the corresponding degree courses the basic qualification for employment.<sup>12</sup>
6. **Staffing:** In order to provide adequate support and counselling, a minimum staff ratio of 1:50 for social work with adult refugees, 1:20 in the case of particularly vulnerable persons and 1:10 in the case of children should be ensured.<sup>13</sup> In the recruitment of staff, the provider should aim to reflect the diversity of the accommodation center and of society in the team. Time for further training, conceptualization, reflection, networking and formulating stances should be guaranteed: adequate trainings in the face of new challenges, the development of concepts and professional reflection all require time. Cooperation and collegial exchange with people in other services and opportunities to take a stand on professional questions related to the work are part of this. In order to ensure that there is time for this, the teams should be sufficiently large.
7. **The Professional Autonomy of the Social Workers:** This is also to be guaranteed, for instance, by ensuring that social workers are accountable to a supervisory board which has pedagogical qualifications or by establishing a multi-site pedagogically trained management.<sup>14</sup> To enable communication and an exchange of information, social workers should have the assistance of translators or should be given a list of cooperating translator services.

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<sup>11</sup> Code of Social Law in Germany

<sup>12</sup> For non-social work tasks pertaining to administration, security, facility management, cleaning etc., the required staff must be hired.

<sup>13</sup> The EU Directive 2013/33 on laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection formulates absolute and detailed standards for accommodation and support (see EuGH Rs. 152/84 Slg. 1986, 723f Marshall and EuGH, verb. Rs. C-6 u. C-9/90, Slg. 1991, I-5357, Rn 12 – Francovich.) It also requires that appropriate measures be taken so that gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and assault are prevented (see Art. 18. 4 of the EU directive 2013/33). Over and above the duties that generally arise in the work with refugees, there are additional responsibilities which arise from the needs of persons who are especially vulnerable, for instance children. Experts estimate that at least half of all refugees are especially vulnerable, thus increasing considerably the duties of social workers in accommodation centers. As translating between languages is also very time intensive, more time needs to be factored in. Even if mandatory staff ratios have not yet been established, staff ratios from other fields of social work can provide pointers: for instance in the case of especially vulnerable persons (as surveilling guarantors in institutions for people with disabilities, for unaccompanied minors, in shelters for women) staff to resident ratios of 1:28, 1:6, 1:12 and in particular cases 1:1 are considered reasonable. We thank Prof. Dr. Claus Richter, TH Cologne and Alexander Wegner, ver.di for their assistance on this subject.

<sup>14</sup> Providers should be non-profit organizations or charity organizations; an independently operated organization at state level would also be conceivable in order to achieve a greater independence from the regional administration.

## Conditions of Employment of Social Workers in Refugee Accommodation Centers

- 1. Salary level classification and duration of contract:** Instead of temporary or project-based contracts, permanent and tariff-based contracts with short probationary periods should be the basis of the employment relationship. Currently in Germany,<sup>15</sup> this implies a minimum salary as per the TVöD SuE, pay grade 11b, minimum experience level 2 (between 3.049,78 € and 4.022,50 € before tax) or as per the TvöD (regional level), pay grade E 9, minimum experience level 2 (between 2.857,36 € and 3.931,43 € before tax) as well as compensation for overtime.<sup>16</sup> Labor protection should be guaranteed through regular health and safety inspections.
- 2. Supervision/coaching and peer consulting:** Every social profession requires the support of a competent supervisor (financed by the employer and occurring during working hours). This is especially important in a field where employees are regularly confronted with very burdensome subjects (such as deportation, a lack of prospects, trauma etc.) Supervision every four weeks (ideally every two weeks) is recommended, which would enable a discussion of both individual cases, team structures as well as the organizational and social conditions in which social workers do their work. For the period between supervision sessions, structural arrangements are necessary to enable a need-based peer consulting. Supervision and peer counselling ensure the quality of the work. They are indispensable for the psychological well-being of the social workers.
- 3. Team and Networking:** Collegial counselling and a regional as well as national exchange should be possible, and if necessary, an international exchange as well. This is particularly important, as the teams are usually very small in size and supporting measures have not yet been fully developed.
- 4. Continuing and further education:** The possibility of continuing and further education (financed by the provider and during working hours), tailored to the needs of the social workers which would insure the required expertise in this field should be recognized. This is necessary, not in the least, to ensure that social workers are aware of the latest changes and updates in the field in order to adequately react to the need of refugees.

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<sup>15</sup> These numbers are based on the remuneration rates for 2015.

<sup>16</sup> For managerial positions the appropriate tariff would be higher.



## Professional Skills for Social Work in Refugee Accommodation Centers

Qualifications and expertise acquired in the course of a university program are necessary for a professional and reflected practice:

1. Knowledge of the professional foundations of social work, that will enable reflection on, for instance, the goals, tasks and functions of social work, ongoing problems, social and organizational frameworks, questions of professionalism and methodological approaches
2. Communication skills and counselling expertise, among other things a reflective perspective on individuality, social bonds, trauma, values, biographies, one's current and previous living circumstances as well as those of clients, pedagogic skills for dealing with trauma, an orientation towards respect and a critique of discrimination
3. An awareness of discrimination, 'racism' and 'culturalization'<sup>17</sup> and the capability to deal with them
4. Knowledge of the social legislation that refugees are subjected to (for example, Asylum Seekers Benefits Act), ability to act in the face of racism and discrimination especially at the local and district level
5. Basic knowledge of the international (Geneva Convention on Refugees, UN-CRC), European (Dublin Regulation, EU Asylum Directives) and German Immigration law (especially the Asylum Law and the Residence Act)
6. Social-scientific knowledge in the field of asylum and migration, of the experiences and challenges that refugees face, such as previous and present experiences of trauma
7. The ability to recognize specific needs and specific vulnerabilities such as those faced by children, traumatized persons and those who have experienced racism; knowledge of methodological approaches and of support structures for such situations
8. Ethical and professional reflection, a human rights orientation in the conceptualization of the social work mandate, pedagogical knowledge, an orientation towards individual's life situation and living conditions, an ability to deal with conflict, an informed and reflected partiality
9. Capability for professional conceptualization, evaluation and documentation
10. Competencies in participative, empowerment and inclusion-based work
11. Knowledge of practical social work methods and approaches, skills in counselling, supporting and community work, ability to coordinate and cooperate
12. In addition to the acquired skills and expertise in academic social work programs, other skills can be extremely useful, such as multilingualism. Here one should note, however, that multilingual social workers are not translators, just as translators are not social workers.

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<sup>17</sup> This entails the conviction that social work with refugees must follow the same standards as social work with other groups.

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 Prof. Dr. Susanne Spindler (Hochschule Darmstadt)  
 Prof. Dr. Silvia Staub-Bernasconi  
 Prof. Dr. Barbara Stauber (Universität Tübingen)

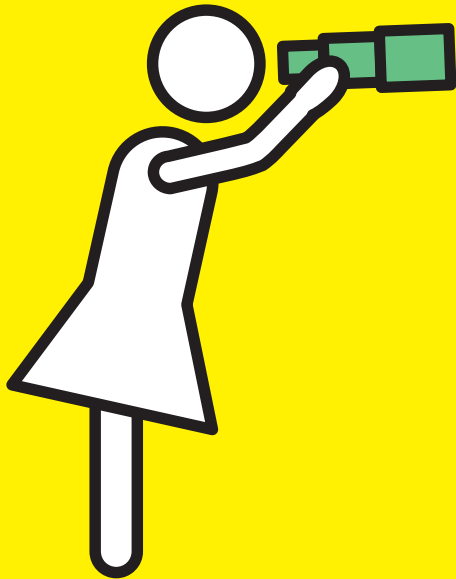
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 Prof. Dr. Claudia Steckelberg (Hochschule Neubrandenburg)  
 Prof. Dr. Beate Steinhilber (Ev. Hochschule Freiburg)  
 Prof. Dr. Wolfram Stender (Hochschule Hannover)  
 Prof. Dr. Brigitte Stolz-Willig (UAS Frankfurt)  
 Prof. Dr. Claudia Streblow (FH Dortmund)  
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 Prof. Irmgard Teske (Hochschule Ravensburg-Weingarten)  
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 Prof. Dr. Barbara Thiessen (Hochschule Landshut)  
 Prof. Dr. Andreas Thimmel (TH Köln)  
 Prof. Dr. Werner Thole (Universität Kassel)  
 Prof. Dr. Stefan Timmermanns (Frankfurt UAS)  
 Prof. Dr. Monika Treber (Berlin)  
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 Prof. Dr. Maria do Mar Castro Varela (Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin)  
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 Prof. Dr. Klaus Weber (Hochschule München)  
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 Prof. Dr. Carla Wesselmann (Hochschule Emden-Leer)  
 Prof. Dr. Brigitte Wießmeier (EHB-INIB)  
 Prof. Dr. Jens Wurtzbacher (KHSB Berlin)  
 Prof. Dr. Ulrike Zöllner (HTW Saar)

#### Organisations and Representatives of Organisations#

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit (DGSA)  
 (Wissenschaftlicher Fachverband)  
 Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (Berlin)  
 AMYNA e.V. (Verein zur Abschaffung von sexuellem Missbrauch  
 und sexueller Gewalt München)  
 agisra e.V., Informations- und Beratungsstelle für  
 Migrantinnen und Flüchtling (agisra e.V.)  
 Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Ausländer-, Migranten- und  
 Integrationsbeiräte Bayerns (AGABY e.V.)  
 Stéphane Beuchat, Avenir Social  
 (Schweizer Berufsverband der Sozialen Arbeit)  
 Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat  
 Bundesverband unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge (BumF e.V.)  
 Michael Leinenbach (Vorsitzender DBSH)  
 Flüchtlingsrat Thüringen e.V.  
 Klaus Kühne (IFSW Main Representative at the UN in Geneva)  
 MigrAr - gewerkschaftliche Anlaufstelle für MigrantInnen in prekären  
 Arbeitsverhältnissen mit und ohne Papiere  
 Claus-Ulrich Pröbß (Geschäftsführer, Kölner Flüchtlingsrat e.V.)  
 Letitia Matarea Türk (Projekt Faire Mobilität beim DGB Bundesvorstand)

#### Further signatories:

<http://fluechtlingssozialarbeit.de>



**Future?**

www.migrantas.org | eine visuelle Sprache der Migration, pictogram by Migrantas - developed from drawings made by migrants during workshops held in Berlin