

Germans Abroad

Expatriates in Hong Kong and Thailand

Introduction

Emigration of German citizens

The number of German citizens moving away from Germany has nearly tripled over the last three decades. While in the 1970s there was an annual average of some 50,000 Germans moving away from then West-Germany, this figure continuously went up in the years to follow. It reached its all-time high in 2008 with some 175,000 recorded movements from unified Germany,¹ and amounted to 140,132 cases in 2011.² In 2005, Germany experienced its first net loss in a long time in terms of German citizens moving back into the country and those moving away from it. This initially small loss was reported to have quadrupled to a minus of some 66,000 in only three years until 2008.³ Most-recent data indicates that this loss has eased to a minus of around 24,000 in 2011.⁴

Focus and outline of this policy brief

This policy brief is related to the above outlined developments. It analyzes aspects of concern of German citizens living abroad with regard to their security and well-being. The article has the following structure:

The first part deals with estimates concerning the number of Germans living abroad. Then, the term “expatriate” or “expat” is defined. This is followed by an exemplary look at characteristics of German expats in China’s Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (hereafter, Hong Kong) and Thailand as well as at their concerns and needs. In this context, the concept of human security is introduced which provides a useful framework to discuss the concerns and needs of Germans abroad. The final section tries to shortly answer the question why the German government should deal with the concerns of German citizens living abroad.

The article draws on this author’s research on German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand (please refer to the very end of this article for some more detailed notes on the research method). Both locales, Hong Kong and Thailand, are part of a wider geopolitical unit known as the Asia-Pacific which has evolved to become one of the world’s currently most-attractive regions⁵ because of its

increasing economic importance. It holds enormous market potential for German companies. At the same time, the region attracts so-called lifestyle migrants who settle there in the hope of a better quality of life. It is thus not surprising that the number of Germans moving to this region has almost quadrupled over the last two decades—from some 4,000 in 1990 to nearly 16,000 in 2010.⁶

Germans Abroad

A major problem with determining the extent of Germany’s population abroad (and that of any other state) is the conceptualization of this population and the fundamental question of who exactly should be considered being part of it. For example, should this conceptualization only include persons who have actually experienced moving away from Germany, or should it also seek to include persons of subsequent generations of Germans who have never moved away from the foreign locales they were born in? And, what about Germans who have taken on an additional nationality, so-called dual citizens, and those who have replaced their original German citizenship with an entirely new one? These are important questions which are an implicit issue in any discussion about how to capture a state’s population abroad.

Who is an expatriate? An attempt at a definition

...in the narrower sense

The term expatriate (or, expat) is generally used to denote a group of particularly qualified and skilled workers “whose stay abroad is often occupationally motivated, generally limited to one to five years, and [typically] occurs in an organizational framework and highly institutionalized context”.⁷ In this sense, the definition of an expatriate is limited to professionals and executives who are - on a temporary basis - sent to a foreign country by a German company or organization in order to manage its activities there as well as to ensure the transfer and ex-

change of knowledge and information between headquarters and subsidiaries.⁸ Currently, around 60,000 of these mobile employees are working in the worldwide subsidiaries of the one hundred largest German enterprises.⁹

...in the broader sense

The original Latin meaning of the word, however, is much broader. It regards the duration of, and reasons for, such ventures as not relevant and simply refers to an expat as a person who lives outside his or her native country. Following this understanding, the concept recently has gained increasing application as “an umbrella for a heterogeneous group”¹¹ whose members reside outside their country of citizenship for various reasons and periods of time.¹²

Such an expat conceptualization provides a useful perspective since it allows the reflection of a complex and diverse reality in terms of a state’s population abroad. For example, it allows the inclusion of all those subsequent generations of Germans into Germany’s population abroad who are legitimate citizens of Germany but do not fall into the definition of a migrant—a notion which sees the change of one person’s country of residence as a conditional criterion.

How many Germans live abroad? Some estimates

Attempts to determine a state’s total population abroad suffer from the existence of different conceptualizations and related measurement methods that vary across countries. Thus, national statistics on people flows are not a suitable source for the generation of an international portrayal of migration flows. This is especially due to the fact that states use different time thresholds to classify such movements.¹³ Hence, there are only a few tentative figures available that allow for an estimation of what is defined here as Germany’s overall expatriate population. These figures range from 1 million to 10-15 million, depending on the source and the concept utilized for measuring.

The scholar Bleek, for example, processed data from the late 1980s and assessed that there were some 10-15 million persons residing outside of Germany who were capable of speaking German—and/or would avow themselves to German cultural heritage (“Volkstum”).¹⁴ Given the expat definition developed above, this statement certainly is an overestimation as it does not only include the qualifying citizenship-holders but basically all persons who feel some identification with their German ancestry.

In addition, the global people origin database as provided by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty (Migration DRC) at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom reported that the total number of legal residents in its 226 reference countries and state entities holding German citizenship accounted for some 1 million around the year 2000. This, on the other hand, is an underestimation, considering that it excludes data for a number of states that are also important destinations for Germans, such as the US, for example—and that it also does not recognize all Germans abroad as official residents of the respec-

tive countries. For example, it was noted in the database that the total number of persons born in Germany and residing abroad was much higher—around 3.4 million.¹⁵

Keeping these different numbers in mind, it may be a fair compromise to assume that there are at least 1 million German expats worldwide but that their overall number most likely is much higher—possibly around those 3.3-3.4 million cited by the Migration DRC and in an OECD-database, respectively. This would be an equivalent to some 4 percent of Germany’s in-country population, currently estimated at 81.8 million.¹⁷ This author’s own research indicates that, of these persons, there may be some 2,500 and 11,000 undertaking ventures in Hong Kong and Thailand, respectively.¹⁸

Characteristics of German Expatriates in Hong Kong and Thailand

Assigned employees

In Hong Kong and Thailand there are four characteristic groups of German expats. The biggest group consists of people who match the narrow definition of an expatriate provided above. They are professionals and executives who are sent to Thailand or Hong Kong by the company or organization that they work for in Germany for a certain period of time. These expatriates are in the majority men who are between 26 and 35 years old. Important motivations for them to venture abroad are better employment opportunities and, especially, the prospect of assuming a position with more executive power than in Germany. By going abroad they hope to promote their professional career.

Localized employees

In addition to assigned employees there are so-called localized employees. They were sent abroad for a limited period of time by their German employers but have decided to change their temporary assignment contract to a more open-ended but financially less rewarding employment arrangement. A reason for this decision is often that they are married to, or in a relationship with, a local partner. The group of localized employees is dominated by men. They are predominantly middle-aged and tend to hold medium to higher positions of management. There are some women, especially in Thailand, who also fall into this group. They often have followed their partner back to his country of birth after residing together in Germany for a certain time. A fair number of them undertake technical or operative work in German state-related institutions, such as schools.

Self-employees and freelancers

Self-employees and freelancers are also present in Hong Kong and Thailand. They either have their own business or are deployed by a German or other company. The business-friendly environment of Hong Kong certainly is appealing for some, as is the prospect of a better stan-

dard of living in Thailand for those whose jobs are not too rewarding financially and do not tie them to Germany. Businesses and activities are manifold and range from consultancy or food service to medical professions, such as therapists or midwives, or various retailing operations—and further include areas like publishing, journalism, photography, computing or architecture.

Pensioners and retirees

This group is particularly present in Thailand. It seems to be dominated by single men but also extends to couples, including multi-national marriages or partnerships. Their primary motivation is lifestyle advancement which includes climate and related health considerations as well as the notion of improved life quality resulting from cost-benefit calculations regarding the scope of annuity payments and overall living costs.

Many expatriates have been living in Hong Kong or Thailand for more than five years. Yet, this does not mean that they will never return to Germany.

The described groups of expats have many needs and concerns that stem from their specific situation in

Hong Kong and Thailand. Before discussing some of these issues in detail they will be theoretically framed by a brief presentation of the concept of human security.

Human Security

In Germany, as elsewhere, security conventionally has focused on the state and the protection of its territory and people from the intentional harmful actions of other countries or individuals. However, over the years, such a definition increasingly seemed too narrow to adequately address the threats to humanity. Amongst others, this was highlighted in the 1994 *Human Development Report* (HDR) by the United Nations (UN) which argued that the concept of security needed to place greater emphasis on the security of individuals and their protection from threats other than those related to the force of arms and the state—including matters such as environmental degradation, the spread of diseases or issues related to the labor market. In the report it was stated that:

For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states

Figure 1: Selected and condensed statistical data regarding German expatriates in Hong Kong and Thailand (as based on this author's fieldwork data)

Expat demographic data		Hong Kong	Thailand
Occupation			
	Employee	55%	43%
	Self-employee	19%	15%
	Pensioner/Retiree	5%	25%
	Other (spouses, trainees, students, etc.)	21%	17%
Gender			
	Male	51%	73%
	Female	49%	27%
Marital status			
	Single	24%	21%
	Married/Partnership	76%	79%
Age groupings			
	< 25 years	4%	2%
	26-35 years	28%	9%
	36-45 years	35%	27%
	46-66 years	31%	43%
	> 67 years	3%	20%
Duration of stay			
	< 1 year	13%	9%
	1-4 years	45%	40%
	5-15 years	32%	36%
	> 16 years	10%	16%

Sample size: 78 interviewees in Hong Kong and 132 interviewees in Thailand

[and] has been equated with the threats to a country's borders. ... [However], [f]or most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime—these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world.¹⁹

These aspects relate to the concept of human security which is rooted in the political science and international relations disciplines. As the Commission on Human Security has noted:

Human security in its broadest sense embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, *good governance*, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfill his or her own potential.²⁰

In the sense of the concept of human security state security is improved by protecting people from a range of non-military threats that could also be sources of conflict and thus threaten the wider security of the state itself.²¹ Through its focus on the well-being and the dignity of human beings the concept provides a useful framework to assess a state's policies towards its citizens, expats included. Figure 2 gives an overview of the different dimensions of the human security concept. Some of these are a reflection of the concerns and needs of German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Concerns of German Expatriates in Hong Kong and Thailand

German expatriates in Hong Kong and Thailand have many concerns and needs with regard to their security which derive from the very specific situation in which they live. These matters can mainly be categorized as relating to communication and access to information, the protection of their physical well-being, external voting and political representation, the provision of pensions and health insurance, taxation, schooling and education, and repatriation. As German citizens expats demand of the German state to deal with these needs and issues of concern. Some of these issues of concern will be presented in the following. In this context, the above outlined concept of human security serves at a point of reference in order to classify these concerns.

Communication, access to information, and the protection of physical well-being

Related to notions of communal, political and personal security are the concerns of German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand about difficulties in obtaining access to information regarding their matters of interest as expats. An illustrative statement of this view from Hong Kong reads:

It would be quite nice if there was a bit of [German government] advice on ... where one can access certain information which are of relevance [to us German expats] ... in the Internet ... [and] I think

Figure 2: The conventional/traditional and the new/human conceptualization of security

	Traditional national security	Human security
Security for whom (referent object)	Primarily states	Primarily individuals
Values at stake (security of what values)	Territorial integrity and national independence	Personal safety and individual freedom
Security from what (threats and risks)	Traditional threats (military threats, violence by countries...)	Non-traditional and also traditional threats
Security by what means	Force as the primary instrument of security, to be used unilaterally for a state's own safety	Force as a secondary instrument, to be used primarily for cosmopolitan ends and collectively; sanctions, human development, and humane governance as key instruments of individual-centered security
Assessment of power	Balance of power is important; power is equated with military capabilities.	Balance of power is of limited utility; soft power is increasingly important.
Significance of inter-state cooperation	Cooperation between states is tenuous beyond alliance relations.	Cooperation between states, international organizations and NGOs can be effective and sustained.

Source: Prezelj 2008 (this author's replication)

Figure 3: The dimensions of human security and their specifics

Economic security	A sense of security that can be derived from access to work, a fairly stable employment situation and a guaranteed basic income, either through that employment or public welfare.
Food security	A sense of security that can be gained from the opportunity to have access to an adequate amount and range of food that is required to cover the basic needs of people in this regard.
Health security	A sense of security that refers to being protected from the infection of diseases and to the opportunity to access professional medical treatment in cases needed.
Environmental security	A sense of security that relates to the non-exposure to hazards of the “natural” living environment of people, including sudden threats like earthquakes, cyclones or floods and more long-term dangers such as air pollution and desertification.
Personal security	A sense of security that refers to being protected from any form of violence directed to harm the physical and psychological integrity of people.
Community security	A sense of security that can be gained from the awareness of being part of a greater group of people sharing similar views and attitudes.
Political security	A sense of security that can be derived from membership in a non-repressive society in which “basic human rights” are respected by its organizing authorities.

Source: this author’s own illustration (as based on UNDP 1994b, pp. 25-33)

it [is not too much to ask] to seek such information without [complicatedly] searching for them.²²

Germany provides electronic information to its expats through a wide range of departments and agencies. Yet, such a tangled web of data bases makes it very difficult for seekers of advice to gain access to the information they want. Recognizing a certain responsibility of individual persons to seek information, it nevertheless can be expected from governments that their agencies not only provide such information, but do so in a way that is accessible and comprehensible. Considering the Australian case, for example, one can see that the government there maintains specifically-designed web portals (see Figure 4) for the country’s social groups which should allow easy access to online government information and services—and without users having to know which agency to contact.²³

Another issue of concern specifically shared by German expats in Thailand is the way in which information and advice is communicated to expats in times of political crisis. Germany, as part of its consular service, provides an alert system to its expats aimed at giving fast and effective assistance in crisis or emergency situations. A key tool in this system—which is primarily administered by the various local German missions and based on voluntary online subscriptions by expats—is the sending of security-alerts in the form of electronic messages (emails).²⁴ While this provision was indeed recognized by some German expats in Thailand as an important means in Germany’s efforts to protect its expats from harm to their physical well-being, it was nevertheless criticized for its one-sided dependence on the Internet—which was deemed to be still too slow for fast-track alerts and potentially unavailable in the respective crisis situations. For this reason, it was suggested that, in the future, the German government should strongly consider the supplementary inclusion of a Short Message Service (SMS) into the alert system to overcome the difficulties associated with emails.

External voting and political representation

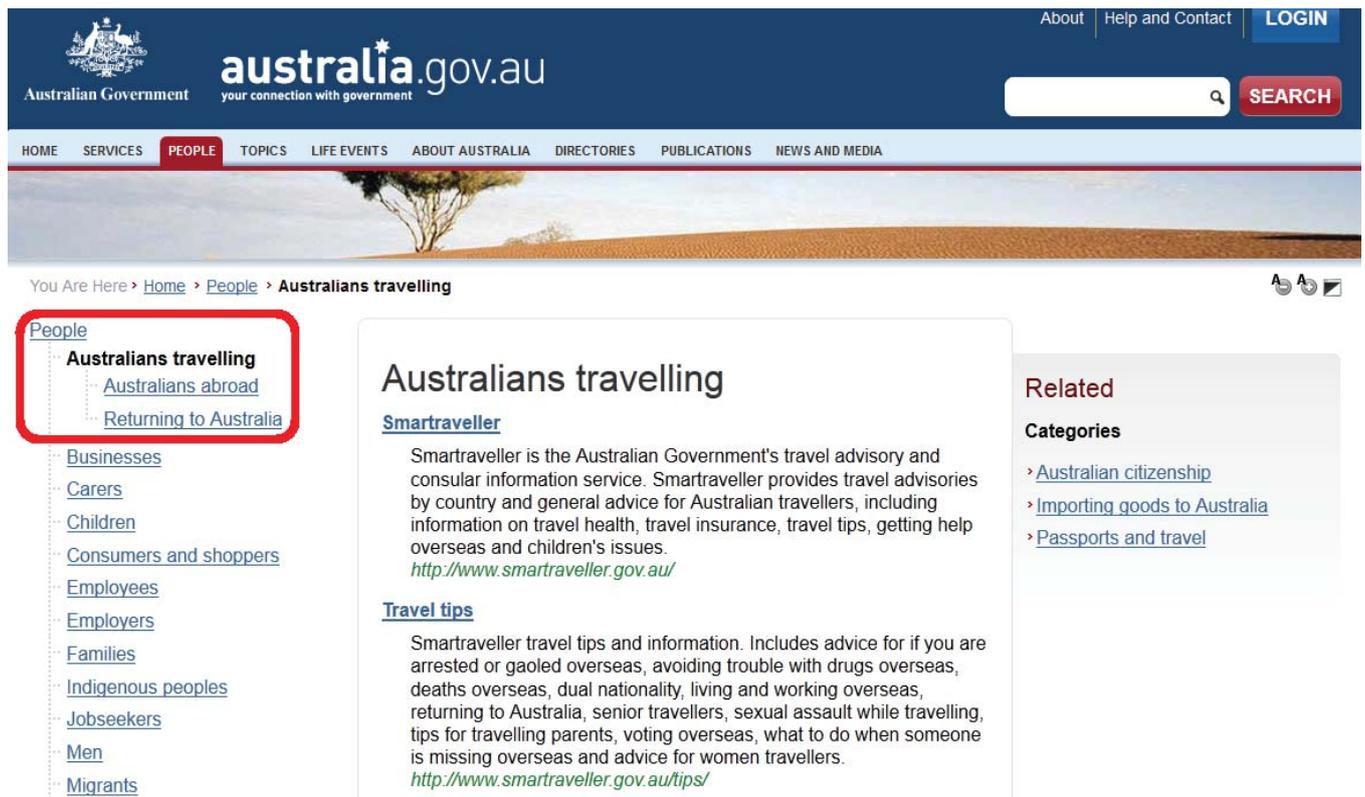
Another recurrent theme of concern for German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand—embodying notions of communal and political security—was that the process of voting from a distance (external voting) was too complicated and too troublesome, and—in fact—somewhat contradictory to the basic right to democratically-elected representation of interest. Specifically, it was argued, this was because there was no special constituency for Germans abroad and that, therefore, Germans abroad—whose votes scatter among the various electoral districts—were unable to elect a designated representative for their own interests.

[I]t is fact that, if we had a separate constituency for Germans abroad, the person who would represent them had to foster a policy that is in line with their interests. Certainly, [given the current electoral structure, however], not any Member of Parliament is fostering [such] a policy. Therefore, the interests of Germans abroad [clearly] “go overboard”.²⁵

Currently, under German federal electoral law, it is the personal responsibility of all Germans abroad, who have not maintained residence status in Germany and intend to vote in any German election, to apply for enrollment in the voting register so as to be able to cast their ballot from a distance. In addition, it is a general requirement for all Germans abroad to request—in response to a written polling notification—that the responsible electoral office issues a polling card and sends it to the registered address abroad. This polling card must then be posted back early enough by the voter. As for the mobile population within Germany, it also applies to Germans outside Germany that they cast their ballot through the electoral division of their latest address in Germany.²⁶

As a means to overcome their senses of exclusion and insecurity, as derived from external voting and related issues, the wish was expressed that the German govern-

Figure 4: The Australian government’s group-focused Internet framework



Source: <http://australia.gov.au/people> (as modified by this author)

ment should step up its technical research efforts into electronic voting procedures so as to ease this process and to allow for a better exercise of citizen rights from a distance. In addition, a separate constituency for Germans abroad was suggested to be established.

The provision of pensions and health insurance

Especially for many German expats in Thailand, the provision of pensions and health insurance is an important issue—a circumstance that can be mainly seen as a reflection of these persons’ concerns about their economic or, more precisely, financial and health security. Specifically, the argument was that, even though pension payments in Germany generally were not too low, overall living there remained too expensive to afford a reasonable lifestyle—something that was better possible in lower cost countries such as Thailand.

However, many German pensioners who reside in Thailand do not maintain any valid health insurance. It was argued amongst other reasons that this circumstance was due to the coverage of the German statutory health insurance scheme not applying to persons who are located in states that are outside the reach of Germany’s specific social security agreements, such as Thailand, even though formally eligible.

It was suggested that a possible solution to the health insurance issue could be that Germany seeks further social security agreements with countries beyond Eu-

rope, thereby ensuring a spatial extension of the statutory health insurance scheme. Supporting this view, there was a feeling expressed by retirees and affected family members that it was only fair for persons, who had made their contributions to the German economy and welfare system during their working years in Germany, that they are granted full access to these subsidies later—and irrespective of their place of residence.

Taxation

Germany and Hong Kong have not concluded a so-called double taxation agreement. Therefore, the income of German expats is taxed not only in Hong Kong but also in Germany. Some of the interviewees complained that this would lead to notable financial burdens. Concern over financial burdens was not only expressed by assigned employees but also by some freelance professionals working in Hong Kong, such as architects, who noted that they not only had to raise funds for their social security arrangements on-site but also had to continue making contributions into an occupational-specific pension scheme in Germany if they wanted to retain their accreditations — and hence the opportunity to once again work in their principal fields of occupation in Germany in case of return. Concerns with regard to taxation are linked to the dimensions of economic and communal security.

Schooling and education

A number of German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand raised the high school fees of German schools abroad as an issue of concern due to feelings that they were unable to grant their children the desired education. However, German parents' concerns were also related to the fact that the local Thai and Chinese languages were not valued enough in the curricula to allow better opportunities for children to engage with local communities. It should be noted here that the German government currently provides some 30 percent of its overseas schools' budgets. The remaining 70 percent must be raised by private means, including through the imposition of tuition fees.²⁷

Repatriation

A major issue of concern within the area communal and political security especially raised by German expats in Thailand who have local partners, wives or husbands, is related to the German language proficiency test that is a mandatory part of Germany's visa requirements for most non-German applicants, including those from Thailand. Specifically, there was the concern that this language test was too difficult for persons from such developing countries as Thailand (especially women) and in fact that this would violate German basic law and the protection of marriage in particular. The story of one German expat intending to return to Germany with his Thai wife after then 17 years of marriage may be cited to illustrate these issues:

Using integration as a camouflage, some bureaucrat [now has invented] this language proficiency test: "Well, that's just easy", they say. But, for someone like my wife [it certainly is not because she only] went to school for three and a half years. ... [So], my marriage is being destroyed.²⁸

Today, there is an increased political debate developing about this issue in Germany, also involving legal complaints taken to highest levels of judicature.²⁹

Conclusions: Why the German State Should Deal with the Concerns of its Citizens Who Live Abroad

Having discussed the various issues of concern of German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand, this concluding section devotes itself to address the important question of why governments, like that of Germany, should even care about the needs of their populations abroad and develop respective policies and capacities.

Good governance includes the protection of a state's citizens no matter if they live within the boundaries of this state's territory or abroad. In addition, a state's engagement in the lives of its expats is in fact contributing positively to the overall security of the state. For example, it has been noted in the special context of migration that expats can be effective ambassadors of their countries of origin,³⁰ and

that, as such, they may be able to enhance their state's soft power in international relations³¹—that is, the ability of a state to obtain desired outcomes in world politics "because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, and aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it".³² Furthermore, in the literature, emphasis is given to the potential of German (and other) expats to connect "domestic business with international sources of trade, investment and knowledge".³³ Expats therefore contribute to the global integration of national economies.

In a nutshell: In addition to the strive of a state's government for good governance it is the combined reasons of advancing human well-being and a state's prosperity and security that should compel governments, like that of Germany, to engage with the lives and concerns of their people abroad.

Notes

- ¹ Ette/Sauer (2010a), p. 7.
- ² Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (2013), p. 2.
- ³ Ette/Sauer (2010b), p. 11.
- ⁴ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (2013), p. 2.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Ali (2008); also Steans/Pettiford (2005), p. 3.
- ⁶ See statistical yearbook for the Federal Republic of Germany, various editions since 1990. Available: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/StatistischesJahrbuch/StatistischesJahrbuch_AeltereAusgaben.html (accessed 2-5-2012).
- ⁷ Kreuzer/Roth (2006), p. 12 (this author's own translation from the German language).
- ⁸ Ganter (2009), p. 3.
- ⁹ Ganter (2009).
- ¹⁰ Soanes/Stevenson (2006), p. 501.
- ¹¹ Fechter (2007), p. 56.
- ¹² McMillen (2007), p. 7.
- ¹³ Lemaître (2005), pp. 3-5.
- ¹⁴ Bleek (2003).
- ¹⁵ Migration DRC (2007).
- ¹⁶ Dumont/Lemaître (2005).
- ¹⁷ Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland (2012), p. 26.
- ¹⁸ Nieberg (2012), pp. 128-130.
- ¹⁹ UNDP (1994a), p. 3.
- ²⁰ Commission on Human Security (2003), p. 4, *italics added*.
- ²¹ Hayes (2010), pp. 91-92.
- ²² Nieberg, interviews in Thailand, 11 May 2010.
- ²³ Legal and Constitutional References Committee (2005), pp. 28-30.
- ²⁴ Auswärtiges Amt (2011a).
- ²⁵ Nieberg, interviews in Thailand, 16 November 2010.
- ²⁶ Bundeswahlleiter (2012).
- ²⁷ Auswärtiges Amt (2011b), (2011c).
- ²⁸ Nieberg, interviews in Thailand, 21 October 2010, 15 November 2010.
- ²⁹ *Tageszeitung* (2011).
- ³⁰ Legal and Constitutional References Committee (2005), p. 119.
- ³¹ Fullilove (2008), p. 64.
- ³² Nye (2004), cited from Fullilove (2008), p. 64.
- ³³ Legal and Constitutional References Committee (2005), p. 119; see also Bürgelt et. al. (2009), p. 309.

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Notes on the research method

The processed data regarding German expats in Hong Kong and Thailand underlying most of this policy brief's discussion was generated by this author's own fieldwork research in the respective locales—conducted throughout 2010—and later merged into his dissertation for the degree of doctor, which was awarded to him in 2012. Specifically, the fieldwork research combined a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods and generated information based on a total of 227 survey questionnaires and 66 individual interviews with both expats as well as experts and representatives of relevant state and non-state organizations.

About the author

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