

VOICES OF REFUGEES

Information and communication needs of refugees in Greece and Germany

RESEARCH REPORT | JULY 2016

Executive summary

Since 2015 more than a million women, men and children have undertaken perilous journeys to reach northern European countries, using unofficial migration routes across the Mediterranean Sea and south-east Europe.¹ Not all of them have reached their preferred destination, and many have died or gone missing on the way.

These people reflect diverse nationalities, languages and levels of literacy, income, social status and access to technology. But they have one overwhelming aspect in common – they require information to make decisions about their next steps, to remain safe and meet their minimum survival needs. And yet, even in this age of digital technology, they often cannot get the reliable information they need due to a lack of online or mobile connectivity and limited consistent information that they trust.

This study provides a snapshot of refugees' experiences regarding communication and information at different points on their journey. It examines the communication behaviours and priority information needs of refugees² in three areas: on their journey, in "transit" camps in Greece, and in Germany, for those who have reached this key destination country for refugees. The research consists of interviews with refugees and with humanitarian agency officials in Greece and Germany. The study examines how refugees access and use information, and presents the concerns and challenges faced by humanitarian agencies in addressing their needs.

The findings from this research highlight refugees' overarching need for critical information about their current and future situation, as well as their broader communication needs:

- Refugees need to be listened to
- Refugees need to be able to tell their stories
- Refugees need to participate in dialogue that provides them with physical, social and psychosocial support
- Many refugees also need trauma counselling

The research

A total of 66 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq participated in the qualitative study in formal and informal camps in Greece. An additional 13 interviews took place in Germany – capturing the voices of those who had completed their journey. A total of 16 focus group discussions were also conducted. Participants were asked to tell the story of their journey so far, focusing particularly on the information and communication they needed and used at different stages.

In-depth interviews with 41 humanitarian actors in Greece and four in Germany captured their understanding of refugees' communication needs. In April 2016, humanitarian agency staff in Greece reviewed the research findings. They discussed possible ways to better meet refugees' current information and communication needs.

It is important to note that the situation of refugees in Europe is a dynamic one. Until March 2016 refugees could pass through the Western Balkans and receive humanitarian assistance at key points along the route from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other agencies. Since 2015 more than a million people have attempted to reach northern European countries using unofficial migration routes. According to UNHCR, 70% of these displaced people come from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan. Governments started to impose border restrictions from August 2015,³ culminating in the Western Balkans route being declared shut by early March 2016 and leaving more than 46,000 people stranded in camps in Greece.⁴

1. UNHCR (2016) *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean* [online]. Available from: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> [Accessed 11 May 2016].

2. The term "refugee" is used in this report since almost all of those who took part in the research said they had left their countries "for reasons relating to fear of being persecuted and were unable to gain protection in their own country" (1951 refugee convention; see: <http://www.unhcr.org/3d58e13b4.pdf>). The report focused on those from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq since that is where 70% of arrivals in Europe come from according to UNHCR figures.

Research for this report was carried out in April 2016 in this shifting, highly uncertain climate. Most refugee research participants were stranded in challenging living conditions in Greece, with communication needs that reflected their static and uncertain status. Despite being stuck, almost all of the refugee participants considered themselves to be still on a journey – either back to their country of origin or on their way to their destination country – and believed that things would change at any moment.

The research found that these refugees had one overriding communication requirement: timely and reliable information on how to get to their next destination safely, quickly and without being detained – a need that humanitarian actors were often not able to fulfil.

Despite determined work by agencies on the ground, refugees interviewed in Greece tended to be confused about their status and legal rights – not knowing what point they had reached in the asylum process, and frustrated by perceptions that the application process was unfair. Some said their journey to Europe and experience in the camps was worse than living in war, since at least then they knew where they were and had a home, even if their lives were at risk. Refugees living in shelters in Germany, for whom life was often much harder than anticipated, had no official rights to live or work in Germany, no knowledge of whether they would be allowed to stay, and were confused about their rights and asylum status. These people wanted to know: what was next for them?

Aside from this, exhausted refugees in Greece described how they needed basic information about the logistics of daily living, including how to stay safe and where to find healthcare, but often had no common language to communicate with service providers. They voiced concerns about a lack of translators – especially Farsi/Dari speakers – to liaise between them and agencies, and also expressed mistrust of translators used in asylum interviews.

Who could refugees trust for information? Often they did not have a choice, and had to put their “trust” in whoever could supply relevant information when they needed it most. Faced with an information vacuum or low confidence in sources that they perceived to be unreliable, they often sought information from people smugglers.

The analysis shows that refugees who stay in regular contact with other refugees and who have wide communication networks of family members and friends (via mobile networks and social networking sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp) were likely to be more resilient than those who were less connected. The latter, particularly Afghan refugees, tended to rely more heavily on smugglers and their travel group for information on their journey and were often cut off from contact with family and friends.

In interviews, humanitarian staff revealed major challenges in meeting refugees’ information and communication needs. Chief among these was that they did not know when and whether borders

would open to allow the refugees to continue their journey. While they wanted to share helpful, accurate information, these agencies knew that the situation could quickly change and was outside their control. With multiple actors working in this space, and a rapidly changing situation, providing accurate, consistent information was, and remains, extremely challenging.

What refugees said they need

Refugees who participated in this research said that they particularly needed information about:

- Whether borders were open or closed
- What was going to happen to them next
- How the asylum process worked
- Their options
- Where to access psychosocial support and other health services
- How to report poor services and communicate their needs

Suggestions from refugees on how their information and communication needs could be met:

1. Have **focal points** within the camps who speak the right languages, can communicate people’s needs and concerns to agencies, and provide answers to their questions.
“We need someone to translate for us, to communicate our needs and give us answers to our questions.”
2. Have more **legal advisers** in the camps (with translators), who can consider people’s individual cases and advise them on their options.
“We need one-to-one appointments with legal advisers, to help us understand our rights and our options.”
3. Hold **regular meetings** within the camps to update refugees on the current situation, preferably led by EU/government officials.
“They could gather everyone together in meetings to share important updates.”
4. Although free wi-fi is available in some camps, all camps need it to enable people to be **connected to the internet**, so they are also connected to their families and other sources of information.
“We need access to the internet to find information and communicate with our family at home.”

3. Lyman, R. (2015) Bulgaria Puts Up a New Wall, but This One Keeps People Out. *The New York Times*, 15 April [online]. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/world/europe/bulgaria-puts-up-a-new-wall-but-this-one-keeps-people-out.html> [Accessed 23 May 2016].
4. As of 11 April 2016: Amnesty International (2016) *Trapped in Greece: an avoidable refugee crisis* [online]. Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur25/3778/2016/en/> [Accessed 19 May 2016].