



MiCT Briefing

#1 6.2016: Information to go

How do refugees from Syria and Iraq find the right information, before, during and after their journeys to Germany?

m'CT

Summary

Between November 2015 and February 2016, MiCT conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with a total of 88 Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Berlin. The central aim of the interviews was to investigate which sources of information refugees were using, before, during and after their transit, in order to find out more about their routes, their risks and their destinations, as well as any other relevant information. The study's results show how refugees rated certain forms of information – that is, how much they trust various sources – as well as which sources of information are used in which stages of their journey to a new land. Additionally the results also show that the majority of the refugees feel that they are well informed on relevant topics, before and during their transit. Above all, the interviewees in this study trusted interpersonal communication. Traditional media played a lesser role. It was only upon arriving in Germany that the refugees began to feel less well informed. Many of the refugees described themselves as confused about life in this new country, thanks to language barriers and limited access to media and other relevant information in Germany.

In 2015, over a million refugees arrived in Germany. The previous year most refugees came to the European Union via a far more dangerous central route over the Mediterranean sea – official numbers suggest that 170,000 people did this. One year later 17 times that many made it to the European Union, or EU, using the eastern route over the Mediterranean. The European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union – more commonly known as *Frontex* – counted 885,000 people, most of whom came in boats from Turkey to the Greek coast, and from there, travelled through the Balkan states into central and northern Europe.¹ Dramatic pictures of rubber dinghies sinking, the corpses of drowned refugees and refugee camps filled to capacity in Greece have generated headlines in Europe for many months now.

Thanks to such headlines, certain questions kept coming up: Were the refugees fully aware of the risks and dangers they were letting themselves, and their families, in for? Additionally, what kind of information did they need

¹ The latest figures available from *Frontex*: <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/migratory-routes-map/>

before and during their voyages in order to make informed decisions? This study tackles these questions. Its aim is to enlighten readers about the communications and information needs of the refugees during their transit. The results of this study can be used as starting points for media development and humanitarian projects inside the refugees' own countries as well as in transit and destination states.

Up until now relatively little known was known about the ways in which refugees from Syria and Iraq communicated before and during, and about, their transits. This is why this study has used a more explorative method. Qualitative, guided, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 88 refugees from Syria and Iraq between November 2015 and February 2016. The interviews took place in Berlin, Germany. The guidelines for the interviews included the gathering of biographical details as well as information on topics such as life before the transit (everyday life during war), the transit itself (the routes taken, the reasons for leaving) and the arrival in Germany (impressions of Germany both before and after the transit, current living conditions). Media usage and information needs were also discussed.

In choosing the participants, researchers were careful to select a wide range of interviewees, so that both sexes were represented as well as various levels of education and income. The interviewees were aged between 17 and 62 and at the time of the interviews, most had not been in Germany for longer than seven months. None of the interviewees had been in Germany for longer than 24 months.

Focus group discussions took three hours and the in-depth interviews lasted between 40 minutes and three hours. Almost all of the interviews and discussions were conducted by, or led by, Arabic native speakers. All of the interviewees were promised anonymity. The most significant results of the interviews and of the discussions will now be presented.

Information before Transit

W

When it came to preparing for a planned transit in their homeland and their access to relevant information regarding this, an astounding number of the interviewees said they felt they were well informed, mostly thanks to networks on social media like *Facebook* and due to personal contact with other refugees.

Traditional media was not a primary source for any of the interviewees and in fact, traditional media was rated badly by interviewees; descriptions included “not believable”, “polarising”, “lies” and “politically biased”.

Which information was missing for you before your transit? “To be honest, there was nothing missing,” said one 30-year-old male interviewee from Damascus. “Basically you can find everything you need just by searching on the words “smuggler” and “Europe” on *Facebook*.”

Of course, this interviewee was well aware that not everything was going to be true or correct. “I always tried to read between the lines,” he explains. “What could be true here? What probably isn’t?”

“My main source before we left was other people,” a 48-year-old male from Hama said. “Of course I used *Facebook* but I didn’t only rely on that.”

Both social media and personal contacts took precedence over traditional media.

“We live in the 21st century,” added a 50-year-old electrician from Aleppo, who had already been in Germany for two years at the time of this interview. “It’s easy to learn about things that are happening all over the world. I believed that I had all of the information I needed before I left.”

There did not appear to be any significant connection between the interviewees’ needs for information and their media repertoire. The interviewees who had access to traditional media and the Internet in Syria, and who used it regularly, did not appear to be better informed than those who generally avoided media (and this referred to Syrian media in particular).

“I didn’t use the Internet or watch television. I found out about the risks of the journey from other people,” says a 32-year-old male from Suweida. “In Syria, I had no interest in the news and media. I only listened to *Sham FM* every now and then, and only for the music. All the information I needed, I got from personal contacts.”

Even the Syrian refugees who had what is best described as a broad repertoire of media at their disposal mainly used personal contacts and social media to prepare for their journey.

Two examples follow. As one 27-year-old housewife noted: “We had everything in Syria – the Internet, all of the TV stations. I regularly watched *Halab Today*, *Addounia*, *Al-Jazeera* and *Sama*. I didn’t listen to the radio. Some of the time I would only find information about, for instance, Kobane, where I lived, on *Facebook*.”

But when it came to questions about leaving home, “I spoke with my relatives online and they told me what their lives were like in Denmark, Sweden and Norway,” she explained.

Another Syrian, a 30-year-old man originally from Damascus, said: “I read the newspaper, *Al-Khabar*, and sometimes *Qassioun* und *Baladna* too. I didn’t watch as much TV, sometimes *Future TV*, the local news, and the news channel, *Al-Jadeed TV*. I could get so many channels at home that I didn’t get the chance to watch them all.” But when it came to information about leaving his homeland, he too preferred information from *Facebook* or other online platforms, before any other sources.

Besides the fact that the interviewees did not put much faith in traditional media, there were other reasons as to why they turned to social media networks and interpersonal communication for refugee-relevant information. The information that they required to make this journey – for example, how one could find a reliable people smuggler, which routes were safest and what sort of gear one needed to make this trip – were not available through traditional media anyway. Helping refugees find their way to Europe was seen as illegal, was not in line with the political interests of the destination countries or was not a priority for media outlets.

The interviewees were only too well aware of the risks and dangers they faced – in particular, the risk of drowning in the Mediterranean or becoming victims of violence, fraud or theft. “I knew all that - but I had no choice,” says a 20-year-old student from Damascus, who was conscripted into the Syrian army and chose to leave before being forced to join up. “Because my life was in danger.”

“I saw the dead people in the Mediterranean on TV,” adds a 25-year-old man from Suweida. Other information he had, had come from, “*YouTube* videos and the stories other refugees told, who had gone to Germany and Holland”.

Not all of those who made the trip were aware of the rules of the Dublin III agreement which states that refugees must seek asylum in the first European country they arrive at, registering themselves with their fingerprints upon arrival.

But anyone who didn't know about this rule soon found out about it, during their journey, from other refugees. This explains why the interviewees tended to feel well informed, even if that feeling was subjective: They received the right information at the right time, as shown by the fact that many avoided giving their fingerprints to anyone in a country that they didn't consider a final destination.

This means that any questions asking which information was missing – information that would have allowed the refugees to make a properly informed decision – must be framed by the fact that the refugees “felt” well informed for most of their transit, regardless of any disillusionment they experienced upon arriving in Europe. (see below for more on this).

Before their transit the interviewees felt as though they had all of the relevant information they needed. So the more important question in this pre-migration phase appears to be: What information would have helped the refugees to remain safely at home and which information helped them to protect themselves before the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean?

The most commonly given explanation for leaving home was security, or lack thereof. Some of the interviewees had experienced truly terrible events, which had motivated them to leave their homes. A 29-year-old civil servant from the Syrian city of Raqqa, which is now controlled by the extremist group known as the Islamic State, had grave concerns for his son; the boy had been brought to the local mosque by the Islamic State, or IS, fighters, who were trying to convince him to fight for them. Many of the men interviewed, and particularly those aged between 20 and 40, feared that they would be conscripted to fight. Many of the interviewees witnessed bombings and had seen wounded and dead from within their own family or circle of acquaintances.

Anxiety and depression were topics that were brought up repeatedly during the interviews. The majority of interviewees could not imagine a future for themselves or their families back in their homeland.

Better information about safe areas and emergency accommodation would appear to be as vital as improved psychological care. Before contemplating the journey to Europe, most of the interviewees had already tried to relocate inside their own country several times, in order to escape the fighting. Some had also tried to emigrate to neighbouring countries.

“We moved from Aleppo to Kobane because of the war. We stayed there for two years but then the Islamic State

came,” says a 27-year-old housewife, who is originally from Aleppo. “We couldn't leave the house any more. We were very scared. Only men were allowed on the streets. We hoped that it might get better but in fact, it got worse.”

One 30-year-old man from the Damascene suburbs first went to the United Arab Emirates legally. “Even though I had a job offer there I was not granted a residency permit,” he explains. “I was shocked – no Syrians were being given residency permits or work permits anymore. Then I went to Egypt where I worked as an accountant first, and then in a copy shop.” When he lost the latter job, he moved on to Turkey. “There I was advised to go to Europe. At first I didn't take that idea seriously. But when I lost my job yet again, I decided to leave.”

This comment leads us to another important topic for the refugees: After fears about security, the second-most important subject was often the lack of job prospects. Many of the interviewees had lost their jobs and had to keep their heads, and their families', above water by doing odd jobs. “When my contract with the UNHCR finished, I couldn't find a new job,” reported one man from Damascus, who had a degree in finance and accounting and an impeccable CV.

A 25-year-old female architect without children or ties wanted a better future above all. “I worked as an assistant in an architectural studio but it was very badly paid,” she says. “So I left Syria two months after I finished studying. I actually wanted to keep studying. But at the moment there is nothing going on in Syria – and certainly no jobs for architects.”

Many of the interviewees also spoke about the high cost of living in Syria, the unemployment and the never ending search for the next casual job. Just like many of the other interviewees, a 32-year-old dancer, unmarried and childless, from Suweida said he was dreaming of a better life in Europe. “For me it was always important I finish studying dance,” he notes. He tried his luck in Lebanon first. “First of all I slept on the streets in Beirut and got work every now and then as a dancer at weddings. Then I was offered a show and I earned some good money, which I used to pay for my journey to Turkey,” he explains.

The dancer looked for work there too but to no avail. “Then finally I was offered a show in Qatar. So I went there. But they only paid me US\$60,” he complains. So he came back to Turkey and with all options exhausted, decided to try and get to Germany.

A 33-year-old civil servant from Daraa believes that many Syrians would far rather stay in Turkey if they could,

if there were job opportunities there. "In Turkey you are closer to Syria and the society there is more similar to ours," he says. "The religion, the warmth of the people and so on. I think that 90 percent of those over 30 would stay there if they could. It's obviously going to be different for younger people though," he suggests.

Interpreting The Results:

The refugees were able to obtain relevant information through direct contact with other migrants in Europe (via *WhatsApp*, *Viber*, *Skype* or other VoIP services and over social media networks) as well as pages on *Facebook* and channels on *YouTube* that they considered trustworthy – if not always totally reliable. These sources satisfied many of their needs for information.

At this point it is worth noting the discrepancy between feeling informed, subjectively, and actually having the facts about the living conditions of refugees in Europe. This is a discrepancy that only became clear to the refugees after they arrived in Germany. This was particularly true of the participants in the focus groups, the majority of whom said they were disappointed about their new lives in Germany (please see the last section for more on this). A lot of the refugees spent a lot of time seeking out relevant information – for example, the rules around family reunification in the destination countries – but often they didn't have all the knowledge around immigration (for example, about language barriers, intercultural issues, problems with bureaucracy and so forth).

This research also found that, before their journey, some of the interviewees tended to pass over information that contradicted their idealised vision of the destination country. Social scientists recognize this behaviour as a person's attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance, which allows him or her to continue to function well in stressful or complex situations.

This begs the question: How does one get the right information to people who already feel themselves well-informed? Would they believe official announcements about refugees in Europe, if they were disseminated over social media networks – despite the fact that usually these kinds of announcements are not considered trustworthy and that in fact, the refugees tend to gather information from a variety of different sources?

This study has focused on refugees who actually succeeded in getting to Germany. But could traditional media actually play a part for the undecided back in their homeland?

Because anyone who decided to stay at home after seeing all the pictures of, and reports on, the refugees who have drowned could clearly not be interviewed for this study; they were still at home. To gather this kind of information it would be necessary to conduct a study in the refugees' homelands. Up until now previous research is confirmed by this briefing: That personal reports of personal experiences (via interpersonal communication or social media networks) are considered more trustworthy and important.²

One possible idea arising from this study says that, rather than trying to make better information available about the conditions in Germany, it may well be advisable to deploy more resources to fighting the reasons for the refugees' flight from their homes in the first place.

The important points: On one hand, an improvement in the security situation and on the other hand, an improvement in employment opportunities. The majority of the interviewees named unemployment and diminishing career prospects as a reason for their leaving home. So better information could include news about local labour markets. A study by the Global Media Forum for Development (GFMD) that looked at Syrians' information needs³ showed that job opportunities and offers were one of the first things many mentioned when talking about deficits in media information. Over half – 54 percent – of the interviewees in this study said that they could find virtually no information on this subject. Around a further third – 27 percent – noted that there was very little or little of this kind of information available to them. The second biggest lack expressed was in regard to the topic, "access to secure accommodation and safe zones". This lay far further down the list of interviewees' needs (32 percent said they found no information about this subject and 38 percent said they could only find a little information).

2 As an example see the study by Newell, Bryce C.; Gomez, Ricardo; Guajardo, Verónica E. (2016): Information Seeking, Technology Use, and Vulnerability Among Migrants at the United States-Mexico Border. *The Information Society* 32 (3), 176-191. DOI:10.1080/01972243.2016.1153013.

3 This study was published in summer 2016, supported by, among others, *Free Press Unlimited*, *Media in Cooperation and Transition* and *International Media Support*. 1,708 Syrians in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, Tartus and other Syrian cities were surveyed.

Information Needs During Transit

A

Almost all of the interviewees had to prepare themselves for the journey by organising sufficient funding – they had to sell jewellery, furnishings or other valuable belongings in order to raise money. “My parents sold a piece of land,” says the 25-year-old architect from Damascus. “It was all we had. We split the money between my brother and myself and the rest I loaned from my aunt. Altogether my journey cost €3,000.”

A 48-year-old man from Hama paid more than this: “We sold the car and we spent all of our money getting to Germany,” he said. “I think it was between €8,000 and €10,000.”

All of the interviewees said they were prepared for a long, arduous journey on foot and they only took the most necessary items with them. “I packed dates, water and bread,” says the 20-year-old student from Damascus. “When I got to Turkey I bought clothing, a life vest and two pairs of shoes, in case something happened.” “Medication, a jacket and underwear,” a 25-year-old from Suweida listed the components of his luggage.

But even more important than clothing were consumer electronics: A mobile phone or a smartphone, as well as an external charger were standard equipment for all. One bartender from Latakia brought, “two phones, USB chargers and an external battery”. A 30-year-old from Damascus says he bought an extra smartphone for US\$200 for the journey. “I had GPS on that,” he explains. “That was important so that we could find our way over the borders. I installed a lot of apps and maps that I could use while the phone was offline too.”

Only a few of the interviewees came to Europe using the dangerous north African route. One of the interviewees used a counterfeit passport to fly from Italy to Germany but most travelled via the Balkan route to the European Union – using boats to go from Turkey to Greece and from there, by foot, automobile or train through the Balkans, to Hungary, Austria or Germany. The interviewees said that although they had been warned by other refugees via *Facebook* or other social media networks, they were still shocked at the cold-blooded way the people smugglers worked. Many of them crossed the sea in small, overcrowded vessels and had serious concerns that they might not survive.

“There were more than 50 people on board,” a 25-year-old from Damascus noted. “Far too many people for the small boat. The smugglers also forced us to throw our bags away.”

“All the rumours about the people smugglers are true,” says the 48-year-old from Hama. “They try to tell you that the sea crossing is child’s play. And then you see the boat and you realise just how dangerous this is. But the people were forced to get on the boat. The smugglers threatened us with guns.”

A 21-year-old sociology student from Suweida recalled how the motor on her boat stopped intermittently while on the open sea. “It was only then that we found out that the guy steering the boat had never been on a boat before! He was just another refugee like all of us. The people smugglers gave him a discount for driving us to Greece. They gave him some training briefly and then they gave him responsibility for 56 people.” The student was a member of the Druze sect, which is not a Muslim sect, and she feared that the other refugees, who were mainly Muslim, would hurt her. She thought they might throw her off the boat if they found out that she was “an unbeliever”.

Despite all of this though most of the interviewees said that they did not feel as though there were any parts of the journey during which they noticed “information bottlenecks”.

“I did not really look for information during my journey,” says a 33-year-old civil servant from Daraa. “I found out about the Dublin agreement from other refugees while I was in Greece. Because there was really no way back home for me anyway, nothing else mattered except surviving this journey.” Many of the interviewees used *WhatsApp* to remain in contact with refugees who were a few kilometres ahead of them. A few of the interviewees said that they had used various locations to connect to *WhatsApp*, places like hotels with wireless Internet, Wi-Fi spots on trains or in other places where one could access the Internet publicly.

“We all had mobile phones but only one of the people in my group had Internet access because this was very expensive,” says the 20-year-old student from Damascus. “So he led us.”

The sociology student from Suweida tells a similar story. “A friend who was two steps ahead of me along the whole way updated me as to what was happening,” she says.

And this was how a system that circulated information developed during the months of summer and autumn in 2015: The refugees who had already made it to their desired destination informed those in transit who were heading there, as well as those back home who were thinking about making the journey. The refugees in transit informed those of their country people who were en-route behind them, as well as the migrants who were already in Europe, who

then disseminated this information further inside their own networks. Those who had been the recipients of information before their journey became the purveyors of information during the journey, sending useful information and news out via social media networks, Instant Messenger and through face-to-face contact.

While they were travelling the interviewees reported that they bought SIM cards (which were often overpriced) from sellers who set up shop in prime spots, such as just after a border or at the entrance to certain towns and cities that were known waypoints. "These people knew that we needed SIM cards and that we had to communicate," explains a 30-year-old from Damascus. "They built temporary stands on the streets and also sold us food, tea and coffee, day and night."

"I bought a new SIM card in every country and checked *Facebook*," says a 29-year-old male history teacher from Hama. "But only for a short time – maybe five to ten minutes per day."

If a refugee's money ran out it was possible to get help from friends and acquaintances via Instant Messenger. Mobile phones were recharged with solar-powered chargers and at emergency accommodation that had been set up by aid organisations along the refugees' routes. Some of the information that was circulating on social media networks was not accurate; additionally the situation could change quickly, from place to place and from hour to hour. This is why fresh information from other refugees and from online sources was vital for travel, when it came to assessing things like closed borders or people smugglers. A 25-year-old from Suweida named the website, *Migration to Europe in 20 days*, that "regularly posted information about getting to Europe on a boat". The information that the refugees really needed during their journey toward Europe, and which was most relevant to them, was not available via traditional media; as it was, they had little or no access to traditional media during their voyage anyway. The necessary information included, above all, routes, access to emergency accommodation, information about crossing borders and verification as to which smugglers were most trustworthy.

Interpreting the Results:

During the transit phase refugees were relatively helpless in the face of everything from unfavourable weather conditions to people smugglers and thieves. Overcrowded, unsanitary

tent cities, cold and heat, a lack of clothing, hunger and thirst, anxiety and depression, thieves or other dangers and that perennial and overriding concern, that they could not know what their futures would hold: These were some of the major worries that the interviewees talked about.

Psychological and security-related needs were a firm focus during the refugees' transit. Listening to the interviewees in this study, it also became clear that in order to satisfy their basic needs – such as food, security and housing – the right information was essential. The survival of individuals and families was dependent upon their access to, and membership of, the aforementioned cycle of relevant information. This is why the provision of communications equipment and ongoing access to information during transit was described as a "meta-need" and one that was prioritised above other needs. Smartphones, batteries and SIM cards were some of the most important things that interviewees owned, during their transit.

At the same time this study also indicated that the system providing the refugees with information while they were travelling, actually worked fairly well. The refugees formed themselves into a community that demonstrated considerable solidarity, in which members gave, and took, information as they had it or needed it, and without any overarching management or leadership. Instant Messenger and applications like *WhatsApp* helped the refugees organise themselves into groups online. Some aid organisations also prepared further applications for the refugees to assist navigation through transit countries.⁴

It is also important to note that the information situation for refugees, who ended up staying longer periods in a refugee camp or in a transit country, could be very different.⁵ The interviewees in this study were mainly those who had been able to reach Germany. The high prices for the voyage also show why not every Iraqi or Syrian was able to afford the journey to Europe.

4 As written about by Jess McHugh in the *International Business Times*: <http://www.ibtimes.com/refugee-crisis-europe-2015-how-syrians-are-using-smartphones-travel-through-western-2152496>

5 See the study by Wall et al. on "information precarity" among Syrian refugees in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. They suffer from not only limited access to media but information from within their personal contacts is also hard to come by: Wall, Melissa; Campbell, Madeline O.; Janbek, Dana (2015): Syrian refugees and Information Precarity. *New Media & Society*. Online First. DOI:10.1177/1461444815591967, 1–15.

Information Needs in Germany

It was not until they arrived in Germany that most of the interviewees realised that they were missing some information. The interviewees had researched topics like the rules around family reunions and how to seek asylum but had not often gone much deeper into topics around long-term migration. Two of the interviewees said they had informed themselves about life in Germany using *Deutsche Welle* (one of them had even downloaded the *DW's* mobile phone app). But these two were the exceptions.

Before they left home, all of the interviewees said that they had a positive impression of Germany. "I had heard that it was the best country in Europe," says a 49-year-old man from Syria's Kurdish region. Once again, the personal experiences of other refugees were important. "I had two choices: Germany or Sweden," says a 30-year-old man from Damascus. "I chose Germany because the weather is better there and the country offered a more pragmatic solution for refugees. There was also another reason. I was told that the asylum procedures in Sweden took a very long time and that I would not be able to bring my family over immediately."

One of the interviewees from Hama liked the idea of Germany, "for its industry but also for its humanist side". However when he got here he says he was disappointed and surprised at the chaos, the bureaucratic hurdles and the long waiting times at the social welfare offices – he had not reckoned with any of that. This was a common sentiment among the interviewees, whose idealised vision of Germany did not meet their expectations. The majority had hoped for a job and to be able to bring the family they had left behind safely to Germany. Some of the interviewees had even expected an apartment and were shocked to have to live in a refugee camp. Many complained about the long waiting times in all official situations, which was something they were not at all prepared for.

"I was so disappointed," says the dancer, who still finds Berlin a "great" city. "I never expected to be pushed around, from one refugee centre to another. The houses were so dirty and so full of illness. I have been waiting for 20 days already to get an appointment from the social welfare office and I can't move away because if I do, I'll lose my place in the line."

The comments from those in the focus groups were similar. "Why were we invited to come here if we're just going to be treated like this?" Or: "We would never have come if we'd known it was going to be like this". Judging by comments like this, one might imagine that the refugees were actually misinformed.

Those who had relatives who had already been living in Germany or other parts of Europe for a longer time had an advantage here (as was the case for several of the interviewees). Also advantaged were the refugees who had been in Europe in the past (this was the smallest group however). These individuals knew at least a little bit more about what awaited them in Europe.

"It was clear to me that I would have to work hard," says the 25-year-old from Damascus. "I didn't believe any of the rumours. It's only logical that we're not simply going to be presented with houses and money."

"My friends and my sister, who were already in Germany, warned me," says another 30-year-old Damascene. "I knew exactly what it was like here and my preconceptions were mostly proved true."

Further problems arose thanks to the limited access to mainstream media in their new countries, due to language barriers and the lack of appropriate technology in the refugee homes. The majority of interviewees had to go back to their smartphones to access *Facebook* and online Arabic-language news portals in order to ascertain what was going on in Germany or to find out what happening back home.

"Unfortunately I was unable to get much out of the German media because I don't have a strong enough command of the language," said a 23-year-old student of interior design from Damascus. "So in that way nothing much changed. My main sources of information were *Facebook* and the friends that I met in the evenings, in a café or a bar."

Thanks to the fact that the refugees had now become asylum seekers, a whole raft of other information needs became apparent and these were mentioned often during the interviews and focus groups. Upon arriving in Berlin, there was no information available on processes and procedures for seeking asylum. Many of the interviewees said they wished for clearer information about how to navigate through the dense bureaucratic jungle they encountered in Germany. This includes advice on rules around family reunifications, studying here and apprenticeships. At first the refugees didn't know what they should do but eventually they gathered this information together successfully, thanks to other refugees. Waiting months for the completion of procedures they thought might never end, and worrying that other cases might be given precedence over their own for some unknown reason, took a heavy toll. And due to the lack of information, some of the interviewees

even said that they suspected that Germans working in the social welfare offices were being bribed.

Additionally a lot of the interviewees said there was a lack of information about the labour market and potential jobs. The refugees could not properly assess any employment contracts because they were not sure what was standard in Germany. It was also unclear to some of the interviewees which taxes were due and when one should pay them. And once again the refugees believed that not all of them were being treated equally at the local employment office.

During the interviews and focus groups the refugees often repeated a desire to be able to understand the German culture better. "I want to know everything about Germany," said one Palestinian-Syrian from Damascus. "What days are holidays? That would help me understand more about traditions and customs. I want to know everything about the government and local politics and how we can integrate into this country."

Many of the interviewees were anxious to begin learning German and said they would be happy to have more information on this topic too.

The interviewees were only too well aware that all of Germany was debating the "refugee crisis" and they really wanted to understand the discussion going on in local media. All of them said they would welcome the translation of any German news around this topic and it does appear that there are some smaller initiatives beginning, working in this direction.

A 44-year-old Arabic teacher from Idlib spoke about a *Facebook* page called "*Der syrische Flüchtling in Deutschland*" (in English, the Syrian refugee in Germany) where members posted German media reports that had been translated into Arabic.

"Five or six members of the page are doing incredible work," he explained. "Sometimes they translate news items or legal texts. Yesterday, for example, they translated Merkel's speech into Arabic. But these are just a couple of good examples – there's not much else that's very helpful."

A 64-year-old soil analyst from Aleppo talked about another *Facebook* page where one could occasionally find translated items. "It's called *Almania Al-Arabia*," he noted. "Because I don't speak any German there's nothing else I can use. Sometimes the security staff at the refugee home will translate the TV news for us. For example, when the Paris terrorist attacks happened."

Even if most of the interviewees had hoped for a better life in Germany they still maintained loftier aspirations for the future: Peace in their homeland, a good education and good perspectives for their children. "I'm just so sad about what has happened to my country," says a 33-year-old from Daraa. "I only hope the war in Syria will end soon. I want to go home."

It was mostly those who were particularly disillusioned with Europe and the older interviewees who expressed a desire to return home as quickly as possible. The majority of the younger interviewees without family ties hoped to be able to build a better future for themselves in Germany.

Interpreting the Results:

The final phase of the refugees' journey – arrival in Germany – can be described as disappointing and disillusioning. A lack of information on certain topics was a large part of this. When can I bring my family here? How long will it take to process my application for asylum? Why have other people's applications been processed more quickly? Why is everything taking so long? When can I move into an apartment and start working?

But that does not mean that the political class should be absolved of responsibility; nor is this meant to be a criticism of the refugees and their potentially mistaken expectations. Instead it is more useful to ask the question: Which groups have organised the most effective channels of information in Germany and which methods have they used? These ideas could be picked up and made available to those refugees who need them. As has been noted, there are a lot of smaller initiatives that open doors to larger solutions. One option would be to look at participatory initiatives, that have come from the asylum seekers and refugees themselves. An example might be the newspaper, *Abwad*, which was started by Syrians in Germany. In every case, the refugee community should be supported as a community and at the same time, self-help and self-starters should be promoted.

The results of this research also make it clear that many of the refugees who arrive in Europe only realise at the moment they arrive, that the status symbols and the ways they self-identified from their former lives – such as their job, income or family status – seem to lose almost all meaning in the destination country. Information about living conditions and the perspectives for refugees in Germany

should be shared at an earlier time, preferably before the refugees begin to even consider leaving home. However as the results of this research also show, many of the refugees felt they were well informed before their journey – which begs the question, how could one reach these individuals anyway?

One Iraqi interviewee who took part in a focus group that was organised by MiCT in January 2016 told how the people smugglers promote the sea crossing to Europe with well-made *YouTube* videos and *Facebook* clips. In these clips, the inflatable boats become cruise ships and alleged “refugees” give testimonials about their successful ocean crossing as well as the many opportunities that Germany offers, including jobs, apartments and wealth. Last but not least the decision to leave one’s homeland and become a refugee is also determined by a wide variety of external factors, that one can hardly have any impact on.⁶

Alongside trying to combat the root causes of these decisions to leave home, it is also clear that the processes for seeking asylum and other migration procedures need to be made more transparent, so that refugees understand their rights and their limitations, even though often these may be more dependent on the political will of governments in destination countries.⁷

It is also obvious that these kinds of messages must somehow be introduced into the cycle of interpersonal communications that refugees have with friends and relatives in their homelands, if they are to have any impact on refugees’ decision-making – because interpersonal messages are the kinds of communications that are most trusted and valued. It is also important to consider that behind those needs for information lie the hidden demands of integration, which must be addressed in order to encourage participation.

The oft-repeated comment in the focus groups about how the refugees are shut out of German media discourse moves toward this. Thanks to a lack of access to German

public discourse, refugees and migrants were not just left confused, they also lost any possible opportunity to react to it in social situations. This feeling of powerlessness increased frustration and made integration even more difficult. The interviewees were not complaining about the fact that they were victims and as such, that they were not heard – even though this is definitely the case. Instead they were more concerned because, as actors within a civil society, they wanted to understand the discourse and to take part in it. Here too there are examples of media projects for refugees that could be expanded, given the right means, that offer the refugees a better connection to German public life.⁸

⁶ See the text by Bakewell and Jolivet on “broadcast feedback” during migration; Bakewell, Oliver; Jolivet Bakewell, Oliver; Jolivet, Dominique (2015): *Broadcast Feedback as Causal Mechanisms for Migration*. Oxford: University of Oxford.

⁷ According to Saltsman many of the countries receiving the refugees have concerns that the refugees are embroidering their origin stories with extra hardships so they will be seen as a more urgent case for assistance; Saltsman, Adam (2010): Rumor versus Information, *Forced Migration Review* 36.

⁸ The online radio network *Refugee Radio Network*, <http://www.refugeeradio-network.net/> is an example.

m'CT

Contact:

Media in Cooperation and
Transition gGmbH
Brunnenstraße 9
10119 Berlin
dingel@mict-international.org

This study was produced with
funding from the German Federal
Foreign Office.

Concept und Production:
Anke Fiedler, Anja Wollenberg,
Kai Sachse
Supervision: Eva Dingel
Design: Gunnar Bauer