



GROUND TRUTH
SOLUTIONS

MIXED MIGRATION PLATFORM

**REFUGEE, ASYLUM SEEKER &
MIGRANT PERCEPTIONS**

VIENNA / AUSTRIA

– SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS –
AUGUST 11, 2017

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PLATFORM

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of four focus group discussions conducted with refugees and asylum seekers in Vienna, predominantly from Afghanistan and Syria. Two discussions were held with male participants and two with female participants, totalling 21 people, with ages ranging from 19 to 66. This is the second in a series of data collection rounds looking at refugee perceptions of humanitarian assistance in Austria under the [Mixed](#)

[Migration Platform](#) (MMP). The discussion topics were designed by Ground Truth Solutions based on the findings of perceptual [quantitative surveys](#) conducted in March 2017. The aim is to delve deeper into the issues that surfaced in the survey. More background and information on the methodology can be found at the end of this report.

READING THIS REPORT

This report presents the main findings from the focus group discussions with the main conclusions drawn from each discussion topic. Where relevant, we also include bar charts for questions from the first round of quantitative data collection with responses quantified on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. The charts show the distribution (in %) of answer options chosen for each question – with colours ranging from dark red for negative answers to dark green for positive ones. The mean or average score

is also shown on a scale of 1 to 5. For open questions, the bar charts indicate the percentage and frequency of respondents with answers pertaining to a particular theme.

This report covers five broad themes – information; priority needs; legal counselling; feedback and complaints mechanisms; and social support, integration, and the future. Overall recommendations are included at the end.



INFORMATION

Participants from all groups feel that there is a fundamental lack of information about services. They do not know how to find information – some felt they were being sent from one place to the next, while others felt that social workers simply did not have the time to provide them with sufficient information. Female Arabic speakers said they mainly receive information from other refugees, as opposed to official sources. They pointed out that language barriers make it very difficult for them to understand the information provided, citing the Austrian dialect of counsellors as a problem. Participants said that as a result of this, they often need to hire interpreters to accompany them to their appointments, which can be costly. Female participants from Afghanistan feel that information is more readily available in Arabic than in Dari, and that more counsellors speak Arabic than Dari. Male participants in the Arabic discussion feel that social services are too slow in relaying important information, and that they rarely have capable interpreters. They suggested that information be provided in a systematic way upon arrival in Vienna to help facilitate the transition.

Participants have limited access to information about housing, employment, education, and German courses. They also want to know more about their rights in Austria, asylum procedures, and the legal system in general. To aid their search for employment, male Afghans suggested that a list of employment opportunities with respect to individual legal statuses would be helpful. Male and female participants from Afghanistan want more information about continuing their studies and whether previous diplomas or certificates would be recognised in Austria. Afghan females want more information about their children's education, such as school registration procedures and maternity leave – several were concerned that access to German courses would be suspended during maternity leave. One Syrian female in her late 60s expressed frustration at not being eligible for courses due to her age. Females from Syria wanted more information on public transportation, travelling outside of Austria with their current documents, and access to healthcare, particularly relating to European health cards and insurance.



Most participants want to receive information face-to-face in their own language, particularly from experts at counselling centres or groups that encourage information exchange. This confirms the findings of the March 2017 survey, where most said they would prefer to get information at counselling centres.¹ Male participants are more comfortable with social media, while female participants, especially those from Afghanistan, said that women were less active on platforms such as Facebook.

Some, including males from Afghanistan and females from Syria, felt a leaflet with information about rights and legal statuses would be useful. Arabic-speaking males proposed text messages as a useful way to receive important information, since the [Public Employment Service Austria \(AMS\)](#) is already in possession of their telephone numbers. They also suggested that parent-teacher meetings could be used to relay information for those with children in schools.



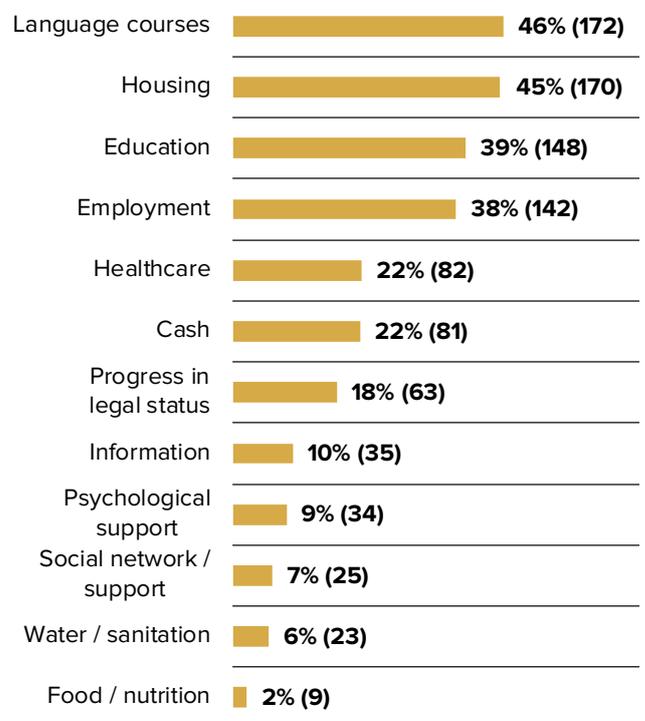
PRIORITY NEEDS

Respondents cited learning the local language, employment and housing as their most important needs. These needs are linked, as it is challenging to find a job without knowledge of German, while renting an apartment can be difficult without proof of employment. These results are in line with the findings from the quantitative survey (Figure 1).

Speaking German is seen as the biggest hurdle when settling into Vienna. Participants described feeling helpless due to language barriers and being unable to interact with Austrians, particularly in the public sphere. Female Syrians said that in some circumstances hiring an interpreter, at around 10 Euros an hour, was their only option. There seems to be a shortage of German courses but also of opportunities to practice speaking German outside of the classes.

All participants identified access to the labour market as a priority, a challenge that is complicated by language barriers. Male participants from Afghanistan described a frustrating catch-22: their work experience outside of Austria is not recognised, and often work experience in Austria is required, making it exceedingly difficult to get a job. Arabic-speaking males feel there is insufficient information for job seekers, particularly regarding the value of vocational training and requirements for starting a business. They would ideally like to work while also studying German, as it would allow them to practice the language.

What are your most important needs?



The graph shows the most common responses and how frequently they were mentioned. The percentages do not total 100% because respondents could give multiple answers.

Figure 1: Priority needs

¹Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, "Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Perceptions - Vienna, Austria," (Vienna: Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017). p.7



Regarding the welfare system, both Dari- and Arabic-speaking male participants suggested that benefits could be linked to achievement, either in language courses or employment, as opposed to being given unconditionally. Several were concerned about becoming dependent on support, and said they preferred to work in order to support themselves. Female participants from both Afghanistan and Syria said they too would want to work – as teachers, pharmacists, nurses, dental assistants, and in retail – once they felt more comfortable with German. Afghan females said that steady employment would make them feel more independent.

Respondents spoke of the challenges of renting an apartment without a job, since income statements are required to prove tenants can pay the rent. Many said that homeowners rejected their applications after discovering that they were refugees. They therefore resorted to using intermediaries, who often exploit refugees by charging large fees for substandard or overcrowded housing. Participants described having to borrow money to pay deposits and commissions. Several Arabic-speaking males described how people shared small spaces, with rooms

and beds being auctioned off to the highest bidders. They suggested that a specialised housing association for asylum seekers could improve things. Unfortunately, most are forced to rely on unreliable intermediaries to secure private housing, as accommodation provided by NGOs is limited, and most refugees do not yet qualify for council housing. In April 2017, the “Wohndrehscheibe” of [Volkshilfe Wien](#), responsible for helping people find and rent private accommodation, started offering housing workshops for refugees, covering basic legal information and guidance to protect against fraud and exploitation.²

Several participants also cited education and continuing studies as priorities. Male Afghans suggested holding discussion groups where refugees could exchange information with others who had navigated the same challenges they face. This idea was successfully implemented in Austria by the EU CORE project,³ through which the first peer mentoring programme, where refugees discussed avenues toward education and integration amongst other challenges, was completed in July 2017.⁴



LEGAL ADVICE

Many participants said they never received professional legal advice about their asylum procedure – in March 2017, almost half of the respondents surveyed also gave this answer (Figure 2). The majority said this was because they did not know where, or from whom, to seek advice. This sentiment was echoed in the focus group discussions, in which several said they did not know where to go for advice, while others believed it would be too expensive. A few participants sought advice from private lawyers to better understand their situation or prepare for their asylum interview.

All male Arabic-speaking participants received basic advice and said that the [Austrian Integration Fund \(ÖIF\)](#) conducted helpful sessions on integration. Female participants from Syria said they want more information about their rights, particularly regarding leaving the country. One respondent said she wanted to go to Turkey for a few days to see her family, but was concerned her social support would be withdrawn if she left the country. Another had a job for a month but was never paid, as she did not know how to get a work permit. Respondents suggested that the city council’s office for social security and health legislation ([MA40](#)) should provide information about legal advice in their native language.

Have you received professional advice about your asylum procedure?

(values in %)



Figure 2: Legal advice

² Volkshilfe Wien, “Neues Service der Wohndrehscheibe: “Workshop Wohnen” für Wohnungssuchende,” Date accessed: April 2017. <http://www.volkshilfe-wien.at/neues-service-der-wohndrehscheibe-workshop-wohnen-fuer-wohnungssuchende/>

³ Urban Innovative Actions, “Well on Track: Mentoring Program for Refugee Peers,” Date accessed: June 2017. <http://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/well-track-mentoring-program-refugee-peers>

⁴ Hilfe Für Flüchtlinge In Wien, “Flüchtlinge Beraten Flüchtlinge: Erstes „Peer Mentoring“-Programm Erfolgreich Abgeschlossen,” Date accessed: July 2017. <https://fluechtlinge.wien.gv.at/site/news/2017/07/03/fluechtlinge-beraten-fluechtlinge-erstes-peer-mentoring-programm-erfolgreich-abgeschlossen/#more-1779>





FEEDBACK & COMPLAINTS MECHANISMS

Participants generally do not know how or where to make suggestions or complaints about the services they receive from NGOs or authorities. This backs up the quantitative survey, in which 59% of respondents said they did not know how to make suggestions or lodge complaints (Figure 3). Female participants from Afghanistan were surprised at being able to make complaints at all, explaining that this was not a part of their culture in Afghanistan. They argued that they would not feel comfortable making a complaint, but would make suggestions about the services if they knew how to. In the event of physical harassment or abuse, female Afghans said they would report it to the police. However, they would not report verbal harassment as they thought going to the police might hinder their asylum application. Male participants from Afghanistan shared this concern – one described how he complained to the police about a counsellor and was subsequently evicted from the asylum home. Another Afghan said he wanted to make a complaint about his medical treatment – he felt the doctors had abused his vulnerable situation, treated him disrespectfully and prescribed the wrong medication.

Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the support you received?



Figure 3: Feedback mechanisms

Arabic-speaking male participants said they generally did not know how to make suggestions or complaints. The only mechanism they knew about was [Interface](#), an organisation in Vienna dedicated to helping newcomers integrate through education, information, and counselling. Female participants from Syria said they would not feel comfortable making complaints because they feel like visitors who are worth less than Austrians, and did not believe anyone would help even if they were to complain.



SOCIAL SUPPORT, INTEGRATION & THE FUTURE

All participants agreed that language is the most crucial element for integration. The current strategy of the Austrian government seems to align with this: as of July 2017, there are 10,000 new places on German courses for asylum seekers. Echoing the views expressed by the participants of the focus group discussions, the city's councillor for education and integration commented on the expansion of German course offerings: "First and foremost, concrete measures need to be taken for integration. Language is a significant basis for all other steps towards integration."⁵

In addition to German courses, participants want more opportunities to spend time with locals and practice the language. Some suggested excursions or events where refugees and Austrians can explore the city together. Several Syrians mentioned their involvement with the [Social Kitchen Club](#), where locals and refugees cook together, allowing them to practice German and feel supported.

⁵ Hilfe für Flüchtlingen in Wien, "Neue Deutschkurse für Integration ab Tag eins," Date accessed: July 2017. <https://fluechtlinge.wien.gv.at/site/news/2017/07/24/neue-deutschkurse/#more-1801>



Female participants from both Afghanistan and Syria described feeling stigmatised for wearing headscarves, which they thought would be less of an issue if refugees and locals interacted more and learned about each other's cultures. Arabic-speaking men said that working with Austrians would encourage good relations, as would sport and other joint events. The quantitative survey showed that Afghans in Vienna feel less socially supported than Syrians – 66% of Afghans said they did not have a support system (Figure 4). In general, respondents of the quantitative survey identified learning German and having more contact with locals as means to feeling more socially connected in Austria.

All participants from Afghanistan were anxious about the uncertainty of their future and the possibility of being deported. Unsurprisingly, Arabic-speakers, mainly Syrians, feel less concerned about the possibility of deportation. In 2017, 90% of asylum applications made by Syrian nationals were accepted, granting asylum status, subsidiary protection, or residence on humanitarian grounds, while the number of successful applications among Afghans was only 48%.⁶ Arabic-speaking males feel optimistic about their future, saying they already feel more comfortable and are getting better at navigating the city. Their main concern is accommodation. Female participants from Syria feel they are being discriminated against based on ethnicity, again pointing to their headscarves as an issue – one even said she was not allowed to interview for a job because of it. They said they are being treated as illiterate and feel increasingly restless as they wait for progress. One young woman said: “What you do in your own country in one year, you do here in ten years.”



Figure 4: Social Support



OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for local actors and authorities based on findings from the focus group discussions:

- ✓ Ensure better access to information, particularly on housing, education, employment, and language courses;
- ✓ Offer opportunities for feedback and complaints;
- ✓ If suggestions are given or complaints are made, try to address issues and close the feedback loop;
- ✓ Encourage locals and refugees to interact, practice the local language, and learn about each other's cultures;
- ✓ Provide access to legal advice to improve understanding of the asylum procedure;
- ✓ Support peer-mentoring initiatives for refugees to share their experiences of navigating life in Austria;
- ✓ Where possible provide interpreters to ensure that important issues, particularly around legal matters and healthcare, are fully understood.

⁶ Fonds Soziales Wien, “Flüchtlinge, Asyl und Grundversorgung – Grafiken und Daten zu Wien, Österreich und der EU,” Date accessed: June 2017. <https://fluechtlinge.wien.gv.at/site/files/2017/06/FSW-Fakten-Fluechtlinge-2017-6.pdf>



NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Background

Ground Truth Solutions is one of seven partners that jointly provide analytical services as part of the [Mixed Migration Platform](#) (MMP). The other partners are [ACAPS](#), [Danish Refugee Council](#), [Internews](#), [INTERSOS](#), [REACH](#), and [Translators without Borders](#). The goal of MMP, which was launched in October 2016, is to provide information related to mixed migration for policy, programming, and advocacy work as well as providing information to people on the move in the Middle East and Europe. Ground Truth Solutions' contribution to the platform involves the collection and analysis of feedback on the perceptions of people in different stages of displacement – in the borderlands, transit countries, and countries of final destination.

Survey development

Ground Truth Solutions designed these focus group discussions to gather feedback from refugees and asylum-seekers about the provision of humanitarian assistance in Vienna. The aim is to help guide NGOs and authorities in creating more effective and responsive aid programmes. Focus group discussions are designed to delve deeper into some of the issues that surfaced in the first perceptual survey conducted in March 2017.

Sample size

A total of 21 people participated in the focus group discussions, 10 in the two female discussions and 11 in the two male discussions.

Sampling methodology

Male participants were approached at Verein Ute Bock, one of the sites for the first round of data collection. Female participants for the Dari-speaking discussion were approached at Caritas Vienna, and invited to come to the Ground Truth Solutions office at a later date. The Arabic-speaking female participants were invited to the office through contacts who are active with refugees or are refugees themselves. All Dari-speaking participants were from Afghanistan, all female Arabic-speaking participants were from Syria, and the male Arabic-speaking group was composed of an Iraqi, a Somali and four Syrian refugees. The ages of participants ranged from 19 to 66.

Language of the survey

The focus group discussions were conducted in Arabic and Dari.

Data collection

Focus group discussions were conducted until all issues had been discussed. There was no need to have uniform agreement on any one topic, and the enumerators encouraged each participant to voice their own thoughts. Participants who took part in the discussions at Verein Ute Bock were not given incentives for participation, while those who came to the Ground Truth Solutions office were compensated fairly for the travel and their time. Female participants were more difficult to recruit, in part because of parental commitments. Data was collected between 12 and 24 July 2017 by Ground Truth Solutions staff and interpreters trained by them.

For more information about Ground Truth surveys in Austria, please contact Michael Sarnitz (Programme Manager – michael@groundtruthsolutions.org) or Rebecca Hetzer (Programme Analyst – rebecca@groundtruthsolutions.org).



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