Language & Comprehension Barriers in Greece's Migration Crisis

A Study on the Multitude of Languages and Comprehension of Material Provided to Refugees and Migrants in Greece

JUNE 2017

TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Save the Children

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ABOUT TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Translators without Borders (TWB) envisions a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. The US-based non-profit provides people access to vital knowledge in their language by connecting non-profit organizations with a professional community of translators, building local language translation capacity, and raising awareness of language barriers. Originally founded in 1993 in France (as Traducteurs sans Frontières), TWB translates millions of words of life-saving and life-changing information a year. In 2013, TWB created the first-ever crisis relief translation service, Words of Relief, which has responded to crises every year since. The organization started responding to the European refugee crisis in 2015, providing much-expanded language services, including rapid translations for partners working in the response; training humanitarians, translators and interpreters (professional and aspiring); setting up a language working group; establishing a humanitarian interpreters' roster; and, conducting research on language and information. TWB's Words of Relief service continues to operate in Greece today. For more information and to volunteer or donate, please visit **http://www.translatorswithoutborders.org** or follow on Twitter at **@TranslatorsWB** or on Facebook: **https://www.facebook.com/translatorswithoutborders**.

ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. In Greece and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach. We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

Acknowledgements

Translators without Borders would like to thank all research participants for sharing their time, thoughts, and stories with us. Without their voices, this report would not have been possible.

We are grateful to the staff members of **Save the Children**, as well as the staff members and volunteers of **Internews**, **Solidarity Now**, **Khora Community Center**, and **Orange House**, who facilitated and supported our access to refugee and migrant communities in Greece. We are also thankful to the volunteers and staff of **Translators without Borders** who provided support on research, translation, and interpreting, as well as feedback on earlier drafts of the report.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EU	European Union
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory
RAP	Rapid Assessment Process
TWB	Translators without Borders
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Definitions

Asylum seeker   A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on their application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.[1]

Migrant   A person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his or her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.[2]

Refugee   A person who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and unable to return there owing to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order.[3]

[1] IOM, 'Key Migration Terms.' Available at: https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms
[2] Ibid.
[3] UNHCR (2016), 'UNHCR Resettlement Handbook,' December, pp. 81. Available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/4a2ccf4c6/unhcr-resettlement-handbook-country-chapters.html

Executive Summary

This study analyzes the language and communication barriers that exist in the context of the ongoing humanitarian migration crisis in Greece. It explores whether the information provided to refugees and migrants in Greece is effective when measured against four key criteria: accessibility, readability, comprehensibility, and usefulness. This research also documents the wide range of languages and ethnicities involved and reports on language and communication preferences amongst the refugee and migrant population.

This study was conducted in April 2017 at 11 sites in Greece, and combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. The findings are based on 202 surveys with refugees and migrants, and 22 interviews with humanitarian aid workers. The surveys and interviews were conducted in Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Greek and English.

Summary of findings

The language in which information is provided is of critical importance. The vast majority of respondents (88 percent) would prefer to receive information in their mother tongue; English is not seen as an adequate alternative in most cases. Speakers of "minority" languages such as Sorani, Baluchi, and Lingala do not receive sufficient information in Greece, as there are not enough interpreters or cultural mediators for these languages.

Findings show that comprehension testing can aid communication by clarifying levels of understanding between some of the main languages of refugees and migrants in Greece. Interviews and background research conducted for this study highlighted that a significant number of Farsi and Dari speakers can understand each other, although Farsi speakers might understand less Dari. Native speakers of the Kurdish dialects Kurmanji and Sorani are less likely to understand each other's languages, but more likely to understand a third language, such as Arabic. Some Kurmanji and Sorani speakers would prefer to receive written information in Arabic, as they were not taught to read or write in their mother tongue. This information had not previously been available to the majority of the humanitarian aid workers interviewed.

Literacy and education levels, which vary across the refugee and migrant population, are a significant factor in comprehension. Of the 202 participants interviewed, 24 percent had received no schooling at all; 47 percent had some schooling, but no diploma and 29 percent had obtained a high school diploma or more. Ninety-three percent of the respondents claimed to understand written information

in their language; but only 44 percent of them were able to answer basic questions on the information they were given. This implies that written information in the right language is comprehended by fewer than half of the target audience; to reach the majority, verbal, graphic and audio-visual content is needed.

Almost two-thirds of refugees and migrants surveyed wanted more information than they were currently receiving, with a strong preference for written documents (even given literacy challenges). This finding is in contrast to the fact that most information within the surveyed sites is shared by word of mouth. Furthermore, 64 percent of respondents voiced a need for more information on a range of topics, including general information about their stay in Greece, asylum procedures, medical and healthcare, housing options outside camps, education for children, language lessons for both children and adults, and family reunification procedures. The one-third of respondents who did not want more information also often reported feeling a lack of trust towards aid organizations and government authorities.

Issues identified by humanitarian aid workers interviewed indicate that language presents one of the main obstacles to effectiveness in their work with refugees and migrants. Humanitarian aid workers rely heavily on the assistance of an interpreter or cultural mediator to communicate with refugees and migrants, yet they frequently lack a trained language professional with the right language combination to support them in their daily work and at times fall back on asking a child to interpret. Moreover, the majority of the humanitarian aid workers interviewed were not sufficiently informed about the origin of and the nuances between certain languages, limiting their ability to seek the appropriate support for communicating with the refugees and migrants, they aim to assist.

Key recommendations

Language barriers impact communication with refugees and migrants. In Greece, these issues should receive higher priority and increased resourcing in order to ensure effectiveness in information dissemination, dialogue, and service provision. To that end:

Information on the languages of the affected population must be available to responders.

- Data on mother tongue and literacy levels should be collected within wider demographic assessments and made publicly available.

- Staff members of humanitarian organizations and government authorities who interact with refugees and migrants should be better informed about the various languages people speak, their origin and issues in mutual comprehension, for instance through language factsheets. https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/

To be effective, information dissemination must be accessible, readable, comprehensible, useful and trustworthy for the target population.

- Content should be provided in the languages that will reach the highest proportion of the target audience, at an appropriate level of complexity.

- More information should be made available in "minority" languages

- Information should be published in a place where people can have access to it.

- Information provided should be consistent and trustworthy.

- Content should be relevant and useful to the intended audience.

- Interpreters and cultural mediators should be selected based on the language and the dialect in which they must interpret into and from.

- Care should be taken to ensure that the interpreter or cultural mediator selected is not from an ethnic group toward which the refugee or migrant might feel hostility or distrust.

- Capacity building, including terminology support and training in the practice and ethics of intercultural communication with potentially vulnerable individuals, should be provided for interpreters, cultural mediators, translators and their supervisors within government services and humanitarian organizations.

Introduction

1.1. Language and the migration crisis in Greece

From 2015 to 2017, Greece has been the gateway to Europe for hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants fleeing war, persecution, violence, and poverty. In 2015, approximately one million people arrived in Greece with the aim of continuing their journey to Western and Northern Europe. The number of arrivals since has fallen as a result of regional political developments such as the closure of the 'Balkan route' and the agreement the European Union signed with Turkey to stem migration and refugee flows to Greece[4]. In 2016, the total number of arrivals in Greece was 176,906 (a 79 percent decrease from the previous year).[5]

Yet despite the dangers and the uncertainty of the outcome, people continued to arrive and many remain in Greece. As of March 2017, over 62,000 asylum seekers and other migrants are stranded in Greece,[6] an estimated 20,300 of them children.[7] The majority live in approximately 50 camps on the islands and the mainland, and the remainder in other types of temporary accommodation sites, ranging from hotels to squats. A host of service providers endeavor to meet their needs, ranging from local and national authorities to Greek and international humanitarian organizations and volunteer groups.

A striking feature of this humanitarian crisis is the wide range of languages and ethnicities involved. Approximately 95 percent of the refugees and migrants who arrived in Greece in 2015 and 2016 came from seven countries: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Algeria.[8] They reflect the diversity of ethnic groups in those countries and speak an array of languages and dialects - which might be Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Dari, Farsi, French, Lingala, Baluchi, Urdu or Pashto, among others. To consult an asylum seeker on his or her needs and concerns, service providers need to communicate in his or her language, as well as take account of accents, dialects, and levels of literacy.

Language is an important component of identity that gives a sense of belonging. It takes on particular significance when people are uprooted from their homes, families, and communities. It is also of immense importance for survival in an unfamiliar land, determining what information and services

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[4] On March 19, 2016, the European Union and Turkey signed an agreement that called for the deportation back to Turkey of all the people who entered the Greek borders illegally after March 20, 2016, as long as Turkey is considered a "safe third country" or "a first country of asylum" for each individual case. For more information see: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2016/3/40802210113_en.pdf

[5] IOM, Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: 2016 Overview, 24 January 2017. Available at: http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016_Flows_to_Europe_Overview.pdf

[6] IOM, Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview, March 2017. Available at: http://migration.iom.int/docs/Q1_2017_statistical_Overview.pdf

[7] UNICEF, Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece - by Region, March 2017. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55913

[8] UNHCR (2016), Men, Women and Children - Trends of Arrivals in Greece, June 2015 - 16 January 2016. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/46726
IOM, Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: 2016 Overview, 24 January 2017. Available at: http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016_Flows_to_Europe_Overview.pdf

a person can access and whether they are able to communicate their needs effectively. In order to be accessible and effective, assistance must first be understood by the affected population, yet this research suggests much information is not getting through even to speakers of the more prevalent languages among the refugee and migrant population. Any response to the needs of refugees and migrants in Greece, as in other parts of Europe, should take into account the way in which language barriers affect the people concerned. A failure to do so will have implications for the welfare of those affected and the effectiveness of the response.

1.2. Research aims

Since the start of the migration crisis in Greece, aid organizations, and government authorities have developed a plethora of information for refugees and migrants, some written, some verbal (relayed by loudspeaker or radio, for instance), and some audio-visual or graphic. Some, but not all, have been translated into some of the languages of the affected population. How far have refugees and migrants understood that content?

The primary objective of this research is to explore whether information provided to refugees and migrants in Greece is effective, measured against four key criteria: accessibility, readability, comprehensibility and usefulness.

1	**Accessible information** is easily available by everyone it is intended for.
2	**Readable information** is in a format in which it can be 'read' by everyone to whom it is directed (e.g. including any non-literate members of the intended audience).
3	**Comprehensible information** is presented and communicated in a way that is understandable for everyone to whom it is directed (e.g. at an appropriate level of complexity).
4	**Useful information** is written in a way that is useful and can be acted upon by those to whom it is directed.

1.3. Research methodology

Research methods

For this research, TWB used a Rapid Assessment Process (RAP)[9] methodology. Within the RAP framework, the study team combined qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to acquire multi-layered insights into linguistic phenomena, and increase the credibility and validity of the results through triangulation. Data was collected between February and April 2017, in the Attica region, northern Greece and on Lesvos island.[10]

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[9] According to the Encyclopedia of Social Measurement, RAP is defined as "an intensive, team-based qualitative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider's perspective." Available at: http://csoc.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2000_rapid_assessment_process.pdf

Introduction

A thorough literature review on sociolinguistics, language politics and migration has informed the research. Researchers also gathered information on the migration crisis and refugee policy, including data factsheets and statistical reports published regularly by international aid organizations and the Greek authorities.

This was complemented by field observations, comprehension surveys, and semi-structured interviews with key informants (refugees and migrants) and stakeholders (humanitarian aid workers). Primary data was gathered from comprehension studies carried out with 202 refugees and migrants, and semi-structured interviews with 22 humanitarian aid workers (Save the Children staff members) based in the field.

As interviews with refugees and migrants in all sites in Greece were beyond the scope of the present study, TWB recruited participants using the haphazard[11] and snowball sampling methods.[12] The first method identified refugees and migrants from various language groups to approach directly. The second brought researchers into contact with other refugees and migrants linked to the initial sample that was contacted. The research team used the same sampling methods were used for interviews with humanitarian aid workers.

The comprehension study tool[13] designed for this research includes a series of demographic questions, close-ended Likert-scale questions, a short testing component for verifying comprehension and a series of open-ended questions to better understand perceptions and preferences with regard to receiving information. This tool has allowed comparison of comprehension levels between languages, dialect groups, ethnicities, and information formats.

Two information materials were used to test comprehension. The first was a leaflet published and distributed by the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. The document is entitled The Information on Access to Education for Refugee Children,[14] and provides information on who is eligible for formal education in Greece, the procedure and requirements and contact details for further information, if needed. The document was available in English, Greek, Arabic, Farsi, Kurmanji, Sorani, and Urdu (translated by the Ministry).

However, as the transition to formal education is not yet applicable in all of Greece, the information in this document was not relevant to all refugees and migrants. For this reason, a second information document was chosen for surveys conducted in locations where the first document did not apply,

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[10] In Attica, TWB conducted comprehension surveys in Schisto camp, Elefsina camp, Orange House, Khora Community Centre, Theoxenia Hotel and Soho Hotel. On Lesvos, surveys were conducted in the camps of Kara Tepe, Moria, and Olive Grove. In Northern Greece, the surveys were carried out at the Softex camp and the Nea Kavala camp. The interviews with humanitarian aid workers were conducted either in these sites, or in their office (e.g. Save the Children office in Athens).

[11] Haphazard (or non-probability) sampling is a sampling method that does not follow any systematic way of selecting participants (Bryman 2008, 183).

[12] Snowball or 'network' sampling is used "to obtain a sample when there is no adequate list to use as a sampling frame. It is a method for obtaining samples of numerically small groups, such as members of minority ethnic groups" (Gilbert 2008, 179).

[13] The comprehension survey that TWB designed for this study is available at: https://ee.kobotoolbox.org/preview/::YzzL

[14] Greek Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs (2017), The Information on Access to Education for Refugee Children. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/56002

[15] Internews (2017), Rumors & Answers: Legal Special Issue. Issue number 54. Available at: https://newsthatmoves.org/en/rumours-54-legal-special/

such as Lesvos. This was Internews' Rumors & Answers Legal Special Issue (issue 54),[15] which contains information on asylum, relocation and reunification. The document was available in English, Greek, Farsi and Arabic, and is distributed among the refugee and migrant population throughout Greece. For the purposes of this study, Translators without Borders (TWB) also translated the document into Kurmanji and Sorani.

Some survey participants also took part in qualitative interviews intended to explore certain issues which arose during the comprehension testing in more depth.

To understand the communication challenges and experiences of humanitarian aid workers who are interacting with refugees and migrants on a daily basis, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 members of Save the Children staff who held a range of positions within the organization. All had almost daily interactions with refugees and migrants.

Profile of survey participants

A total of 202 refugees and migrants participated in the comprehension study, 145 of them men and 57 women.
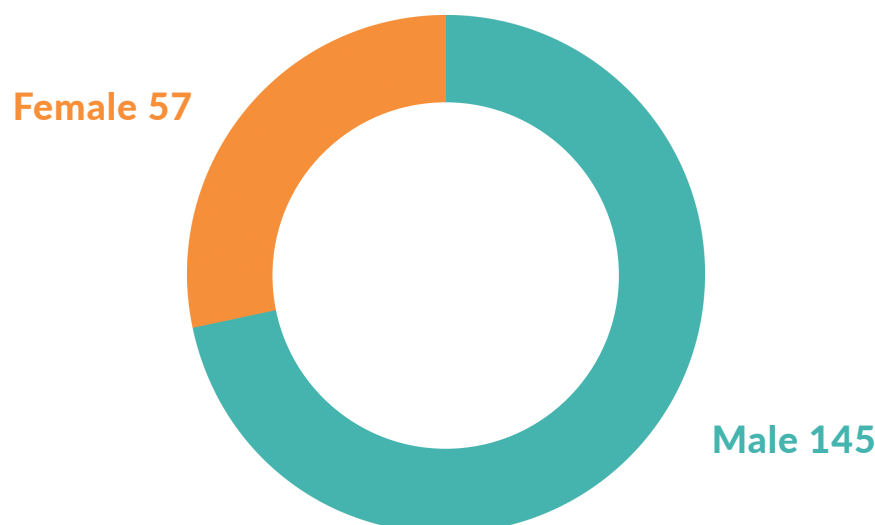
Female 57

Male 145

Figure 1.1: Gender of Participants

The majority of the participants came from Afghanistan (72), Syria (55), and Iraq (32), the main countries of origin of refugees and migrants in Greece. Others were from Iran (17), Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) (6), DRC (5), Morocco (4), Algeria (3), Egypt (4), Pakistan (Balochistan region) (3), and Sudan (1).
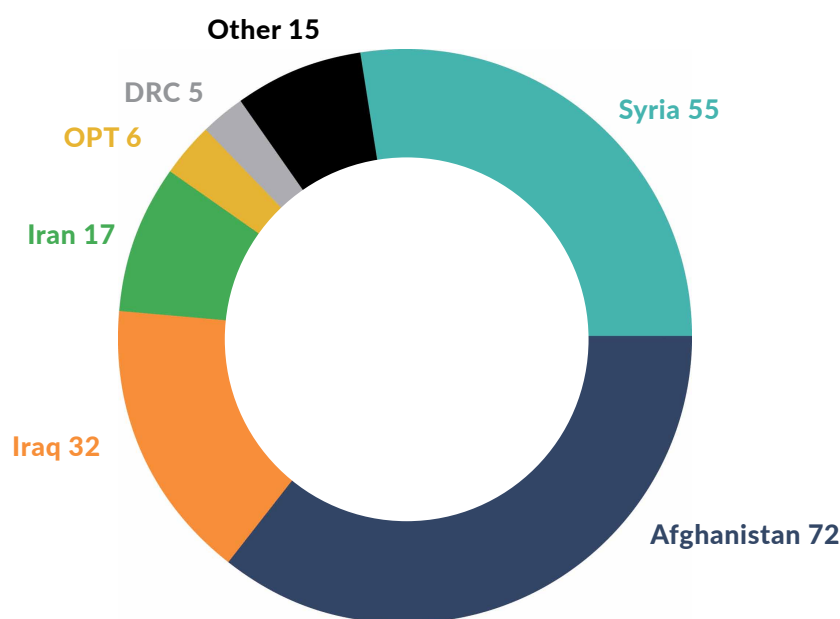
Syria 55
Other 15
DRC 5
OPT 6
Iran 17
Iraq 32
Afghanistan 72

Figure 1.2: Countries of Origin of Participants

1.4. Research limitations

The research faced a number of limitations. One was 'survey fatigue' among refugees and migrants as a result of recurrent information requests from media and aid organizations, leaving refugees and migrants reluctant to be interviewed again. This limited the quality of responses researchers could obtain.

Five main languages spoken among refugees and migrants supported by TWB's partner organization Save the Children were selected as the focus of the study: Farsi, Dari, Kurmanji, Sorani, and Arabic. These were also languages in which particular communication difficulties were initially observed by Save the Children in Greece. Owing to a lack of information on the numbers and geographical distribution of speakers of any given language, language selection could not be based on objective statistical prevalence. However, the majority of the people interviewed were native Arabic and Dari speakers, while samples in other languages were smaller, and hence less statistically significant.

The sample resulted in a higher percentage of male (72 percent) over female (28 percent) participants. Since the beginning of the migration crisis in Greece, the percentage of male refugee and migrants in the total number of arrivals has always outnumbered the percentage of female and children.[16] While the sample is biased in terms of gender balance, it is representative of the gender characteristics of the adult refugee and migrant population.

Many of the camps in Greece are increasingly difficult to access, owing to the strict rules and regulations of the site management authorities. For this reason, research was also conducted in other types of sites, such as urban shelters, community centers, and hotels.

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[16] UNCHR Data Portal - Refugee Situation in Greece. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/search?sv_id=11&geo_id=640&type%5B0%5D=document

In view of the limitations outlined above, this report does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the language barriers and no generalizations can be made. However, the research findings pinpoint a number of important language and communication practices that are of importance for the handling of the humanitarian situation as a whole. This report aims to inform efforts to provide people with access to vital knowledge in their own languages.

Languages and Communication Preferences

Knowing in which languages and formats people prefer to receive information is critical to ensuring that the information is readable and understood. The comprehension survey gathered valuable data on languages and communication preferences amongst the refugee and migrant population in Greece.

2.1 Language Preferences

Participants were first asked to name their "mother tongue." Arabic was the most common, followed by Dari, Farsi, Kurmanji, Sorani, Lingala, Baluchi, Turkish, and Pashto (see Figure 2.1). **The vast majority of participants (88 percent, 178 participants) said they prefer to receive information in their mother tongue.** The other 12 percent (24 participants) were mostly Kurds who preferred to receive information either in Arabic (Kurds that lived in Arab countries) or Farsi (Kurds that lived in Iran), and Congolese who preferred to receive information in French.
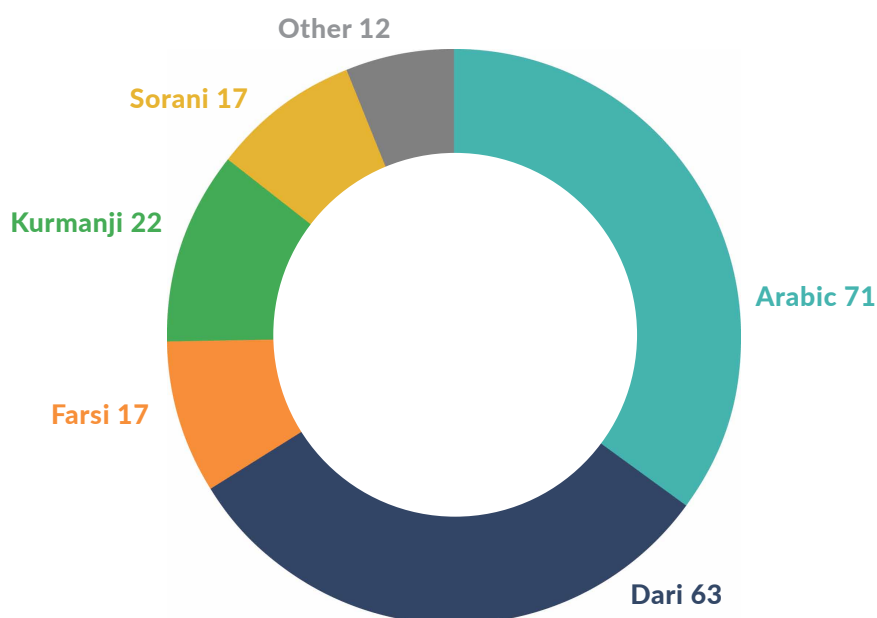

Other 12
Sorani 17
Kurmanji 22
Farsi 17
Arabic 71
Dari 63

Figure 2.1: Mother tongue (and number of participants)

“ 88% of the participants said they prefer to receive information in their mother tongue. ”

Participants were then asked to rate their understanding of spoken and written English, Greek, and other languages, including their mother tongue (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2). It is important to note that this is a self-reported rating and does not reflect objective levels of comprehension in these languages - as the results of the comprehension test presented in the following chapter attest.

Of the 202 participants interviewed, **87 percent (177 participants) had no or only limited understanding of spoken English, and 90 percent (182 participants) had no or only limited understanding of written English**. Information provided in English will quite likely not be understood by a large majority of refugees and migrants.

Table 2.1: Understanding of spoken languages (total of 202 participants)										
	English	**Greek**	**French**	**Arabic**	**Farsi**	**Dari**	**Kurmanji**	**Sorani**	**Urdu**	**Pashto**	**Turkish**
Fluent	3%	0%	3%	47%	39%	39%	13%	10%	3%	6%	2%
Good	10%	1%	2%	3%	6%	2%	1%	0%	1%	1%	3%
Limited	22%	3%	1%	4%	0%	0%	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%
None	65%	96%	94%	46%	55%	59%	84%	88%	95%	91%	93%

| Table 2.2: Understanding of written languages (total of 202 participants)										
	English	**Greek**	**French**	**Arabic**	**Farsi**	**Dari**	**Kurmanji**	**Sorani**	**Urdu**	**Pashto**	**Turkish**
Excellent	2%	0%	3%	39%	35%	34%	5%	7%	1%	4%	1%
Good	8%	0%	1%	4%	4%	2%	4%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Limited	10%	2%	1%	3%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%
None	80%	98%	95%	54%	60%	63%	90%	91%	98%	94%	97%

Dari and Farsi

The responses of Dari and Farsi speakers offered an interesting comparison (Graphs 2.1 and 2.2). Dari is a dialect of Farsi, so the two are very similar, but certain words and accents can differ depending on geographical location. Would information be equally well understood in either language? The vast majority (94 percent, 54 participants) of respondents who identified Dari as their mother tongue claimed to have an excellent or good understanding of spoken Farsi, while a lower proportion (76 percent, 13 participants) of mother-tongue Farsi speakers claimed an equivalent understanding of spoken Dari. In other words, a majority of the sample of Farsi and Dari speakers interviewed claim to be able to able to understand each other, but fewer Farsi speakers might understand Dari.[17]

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[17] TWB has developed a language factsheet for Farsi and Dari that explains the nuances between them and offers recommendations on how to improve communication with Farsi and Dari speakers. It is available here: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/.

Graph 2.1: Self-identified comprehension of spoken and written languages in populations identifying Dari as their mother tongue.

Understanding of spoken languages

Understanding of written languages
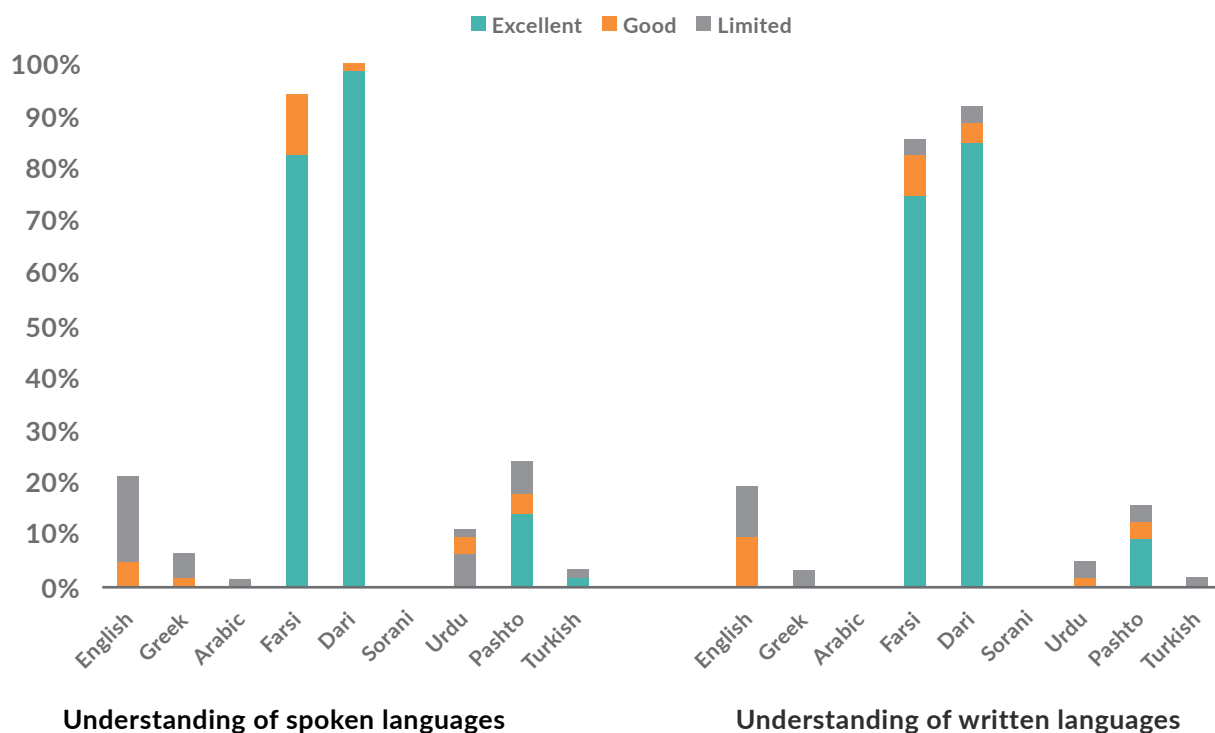
Graph 2.2: Self-identified comprehension of spoken and written languages in populations identifying Farsi as their mother tongue.

Understanding of spoken languages

Understanding of written languages
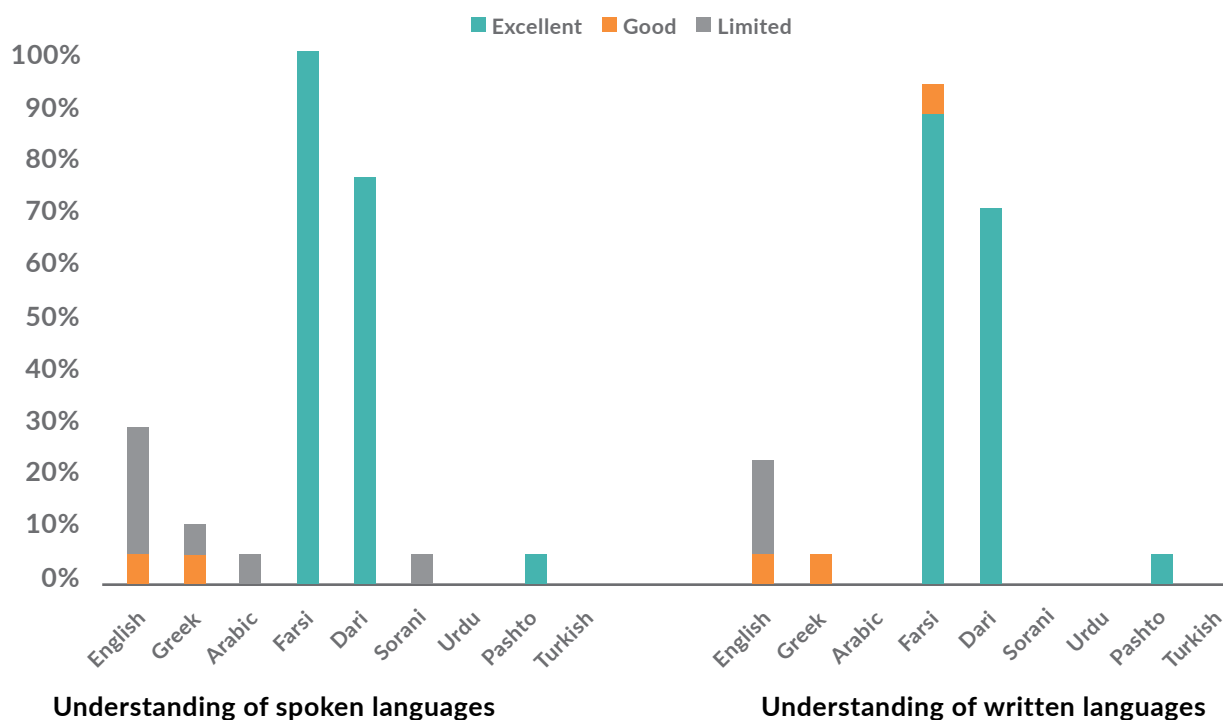
Kurmanji and Sorani

Kurmanji and Sorani are the main two Kurdish dialects but use different scripts, vocabulary, and grammar rules and are therefore not mutually intelligible. Interviews with humanitarian aid workers revealed a common misconception that there is one Kurdish language and that all Kurds can understand each other.[18] It was therefore interesting to examine how Kurdish speakers rate their understanding of spoken and written Kurmanji and Sorani. From the 22 Kurmanji speakers interviewed, only three claimed to understand spoken Sorani, and one written Sorani. By contrast, 21 of the 22 claimed to understand spoken Arabic, and 13 written Arabic (see Graph 2.3). Of the 17 Sorani speakers interviewed, only four claimed to understand spoken Kurmanji, and two written Kurmanji. By contrast, eight of the 17 claimed to understand spoken Arabic, and seven claimed comprehension of written Arabic (see Graph 2.4).

The reason for self-reporting of Arabic comprehension is that most Kurds interviewed were from Syria and Iraq, where the official language is Arabic. Moreover, the Kurdish dialects have been proscribed in public life for long periods of time in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, not taught in schools, not used in public services and the media, and without their own published literature. For this reason, many Kurds who identify a Kurdish dialect as their mother tongue, cannot read or write the language. This quite likely explains the fact that the few participants who said they preferred to receive information in a language other than their mother tongue were Kurds; they preferred Arabic as the language they can read most readily.

" At home, I speak Kurmanji, but I never learned how to write or read it. "

Female Kurdish refugee from Afrin, Syria.

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[18] TWB has developed a language factsheet for Kurdish languages that explains the nuances between these languages, and offers recommendations on how to improve communication with Kurdish speakers. It is available here: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/.

Graph 2.3: Self-identified comprehension of spoken and written languages in populations identifying Kurmanji as their mother tongue.

Understanding of spoken languages   Understanding of written languages
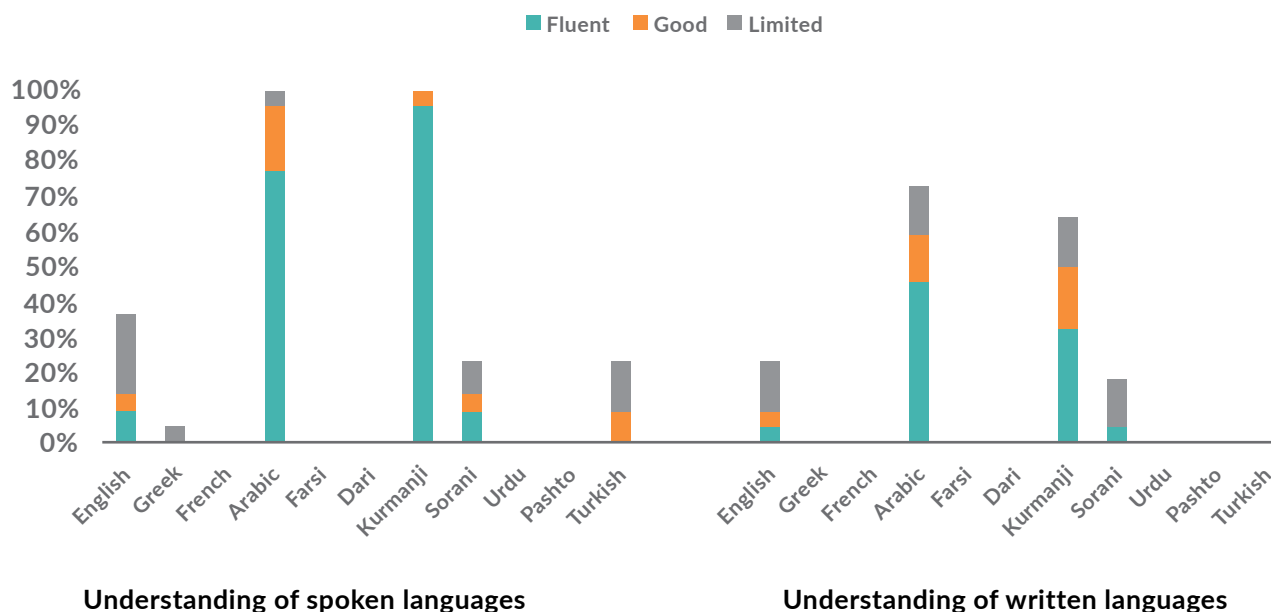
Graph 2.4: Self-identified comprehension of spoken and written languages in populations identifying Sorani as their mother tongue.

Understanding of spoken languages   Understanding of written languages
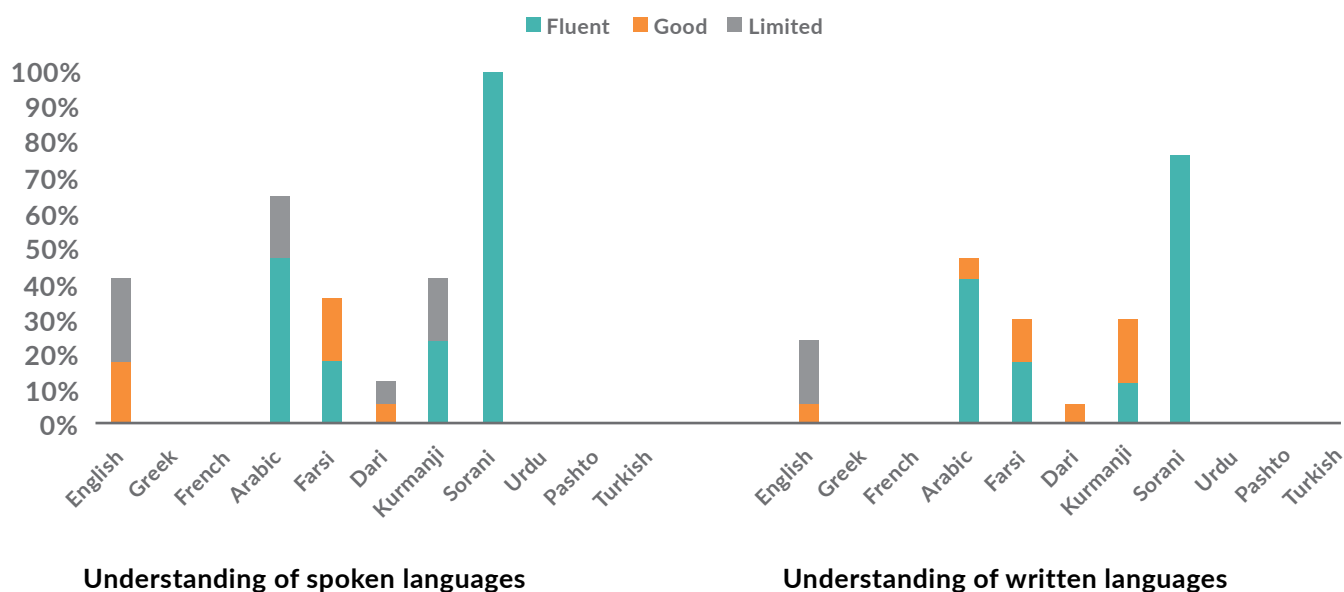
Arabic dialects

Most of the Arabic speakers interviewed are from Syria and Iraq; other Arabic speakers came from Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan. While Arabic is used across a wide geographical area (from North Africa, all the way to the Gulf States), its dialects differ so greatly (especially in verbal communication) that some Arabic speakers might not understand each other. For example, a Moroccan might struggle to understand the Kuwaiti dialect and vice versa. For this reason, the Arabic speakers interviewed preferred to receive information (especially when spoken) in their own dialect.[19]

"
Sometimes I can't understand the interpreters well because they come from another Arabic-speaking country and speak a different dialect.
"

Female Moroccan refugee in Northern Greece.

Lingala and French

Since the last quarter of 2016 a growing number of refugees and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), began arriving in Greece. Researchers interviewed five Congolese refugees whose mother tongue was Lingala (a Bantu creole language of Central Africa) but who claimed to understand spoken and written French, the official language of DRC. While they preferred to receive information in Lingala, French was their second preferred language. French is a new language need, observed on the ground during this research, which many aid organizations have just started to try to cover.

Baluchi and Urdu

Three refugees from the Balochistan province in Pakistan were interviewed and gave their mother tongue as Baluchi. Balochistan is a region that includes parts of southern Afghanistan, south-eastern Iran and western Pakistan. It is a region where language is bound up with a struggle for independence. While the interviewees could all understand spoken Urdu (Pakistan's official language), only two could understand its written form and all preferred to receive information in Baluchi.

While Baluchi is a minority language within the refugee population in Greece, the treatment of Baluchi speakers' communication needs highlights the importance of providing information and interpreting in the right language. As Balochistan is not recognized as a state, Baluchi refugees are registered by the Greek authorities as originating from Pakistan.

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[19] TWB has developed a language factsheet for Arabic dialects that explains the nuances and offers recommendations on how to improve communication with Arabic speakers. It is available here: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/.

Therefore, during the interview for their asylum application, Pakistani interpreters who speak Urdu were present to assist them. However, because of the political tensions between Baluchis and the Pakistani state, the refugees interviewed said they did not trust the interpreter. As a result, they did not tell the Greek authorities their reasons for fleeing the country, for fear that the interpreter might work for the Pakistani intelligence services and their families in Balochistan might suffer. They felt that this played a role in their applications being rejected at the first round. They have requested a new interpreter, either a Baluchi speaker or an Urdu speaker from India or Bangladesh, but must now wait at least eight months for another interview.

2.2. Communication Preferences

Sixty percent of the participants receive information by word of mouth. But when asked which format they preferred as a means of receiving information in general, **37 percent (72 participants) said they preferred it in a written document**, 27 percent (52 participants) in posters, 16 percent (31 participants) in verbal communication, 7 percent (13 participants) in audio-visual format and 5 percent (10 participants) through social media.

" Spoken words fly away, written words remain. "

Male Congolese refugee, in Northern Greece

The main reasons given for preferring information in written format were:

●	Ease of reference to the document
●	Opportunity to study the information more carefully
●	Greater credibility of a written document

Those who preferred verbal communication stated the following reasons:

●	They could not read
●	A paper might get lost or thrown away
●	Preference for face-to-face interaction

" **We learn all the important information in the women's bathroom, where we have time to meet and chat.** "

Female Afghan refugee, in Elefsina

The number of people that prefer to receive information through social media and social networking platforms is markedly low. While social media are used extensively by refugees and migrants, they are primarily used as a means of communication with families and friends, to follow news in their home country and for entertainment. However, it seems that social media are not their preferred means to receive information on their situation in Greece. The most popular social networking platforms among the survey participants are WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram. Researchers were told that certain refugee communities have established groups on some of these media to share information. For example, some Iranian refugees have created a Telegram group, where their community representative collects information and shares it with the rest of the group. Community representatives are often older people, respected by the community, who can speak and write English and can therefore communicate more easily with the Greek authorities, aid organizations, the media, and others.

" **When I want to know accurate information about asylum procedures, I ask my aunt in Germany. I do not trust what the organizations tell us here (in Greece).** "

Male Iraqi refugee, in Athens

The survey participants were asked what information is lacking in communications they receive (see Graph 2.5). It was striking to note that 36 percent (70 participants) of the respondents answered that they do not need any further information. There may be various explanations for this. One factor may be that some respondents had been in a camp for a long period of time, and were familiar with the services available on site and outside, legal procedures, etc. (Survey participants had been in Greece for an average of nine months.) Another factor is that a need for information may be linked to a sense of insecurity: respondents who reported feeling fairly safe at their current site were less likely to express a need for more information. A third factor is that many of those who claimed not to need any additional information, said they do not trust the NGOs and authorities. Specifically, several refugees and migrants interviewed suggested that the information they are being provided with is untrue or inconsistent.

These findings indicate that the need for information is closely linked, on the one hand, to the situation in which people live, and related to that, their sense of (in)security, and on the other hand linked to the degree of trust in the source of the information.

Graph 2.5: Areas in which survey participants requested more information
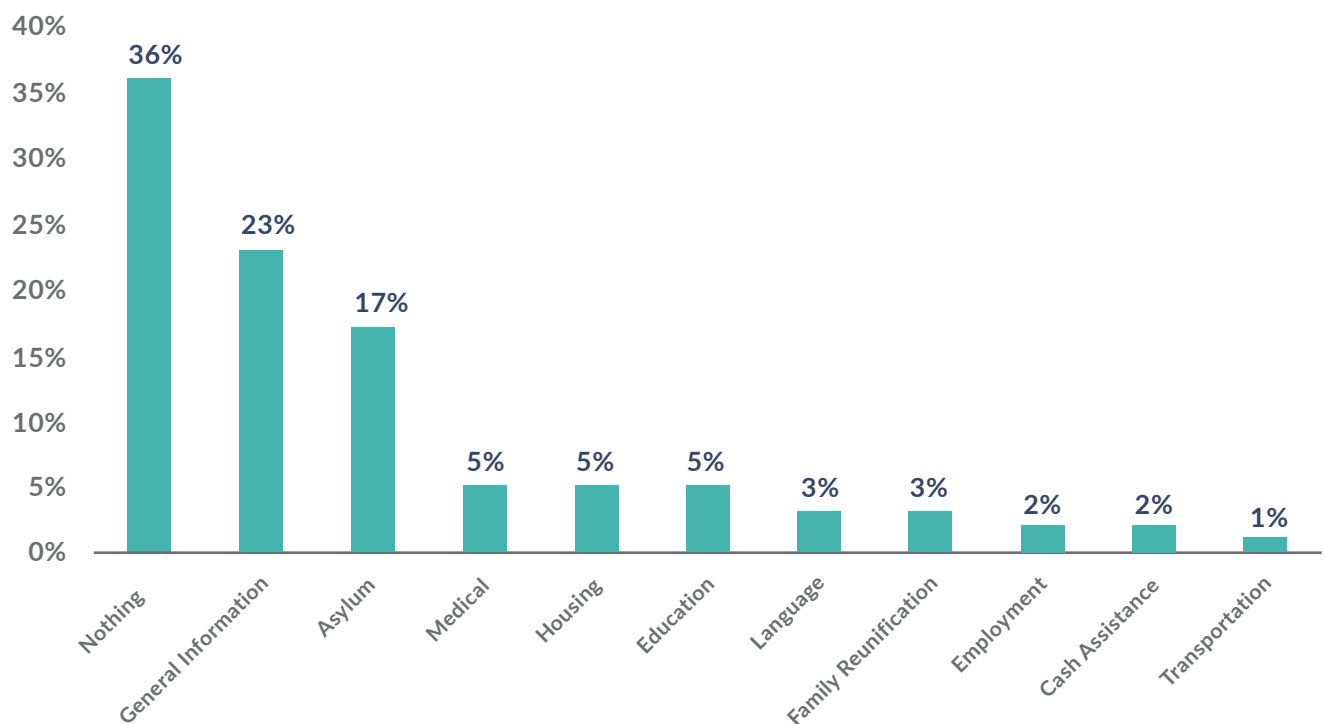
Comprehension Study

An individual's ability to comprehend reading material can be influenced by his or her degree of literacy. As no published data is available on literacy levels among refugees and migrants in Greece, TWB asked research participants about their level of education (see Figure 3.1). Out of 202 participants, 24 percent (48 participants) had never received any schooling, 47 percent (94 participants) had received some schooling, but no diploma, and 29 percent (59 participants) had obtained a high school diploma or higher.
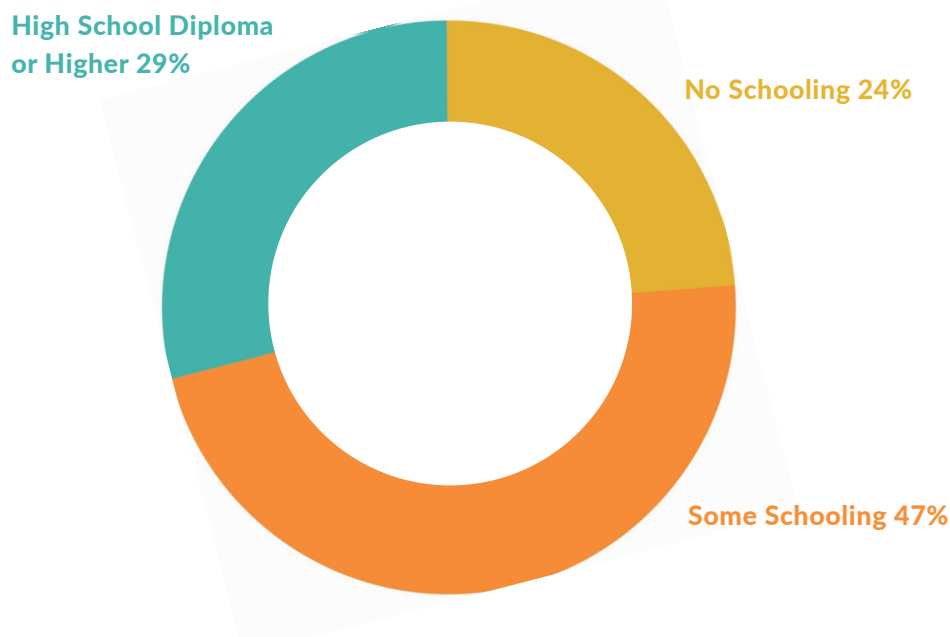

High School Diploma or Higher 29%

No Schooling 24%

Some Schooling 47%

Figure 3.1: Education levels of participants

A comparison of education levels between female and male participants found a higher proportion of women than men in the sample had received no schooling at all (30 percent of women against 22 percent of men) and a lower proportion of women had progressed to a high school diploma or beyond (25 percent of women compared with 31 percent of men). The share of both sexes having received some education, below diploma level, was 45 percent for women and 47 percent for men (see Graph 3.1). Overall, these responses suggest that just under a quarter of the sample may never have learned to read, and seven out of ten may have difficulties reading; the proportions will be higher for women.

Graph 3.1: Education levels by gender
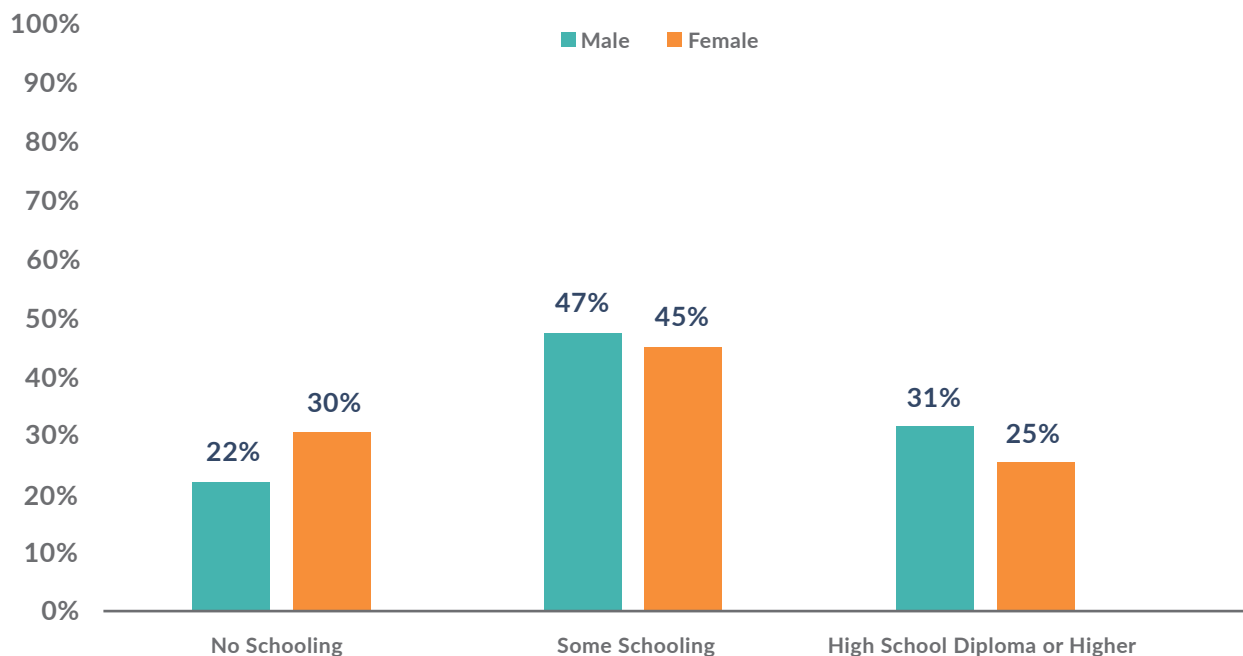
One of the main objectives of the survey was to assess whether reading a written document in someone's mother tongue or a language they claim to understand enabled them to understand the content. The participants were shown the information material in their mother tongue or their second preferred language and given a few minutes to read it.

First, participants were asked if the meaning of the document was clear (see Figure 3.2). Seventy-seven percent (139 participants) said it was clear and 16 percent (29 participants) 'kind of clear.' Only 7 percent (13 participants) replied that the meaning was not clear to them.
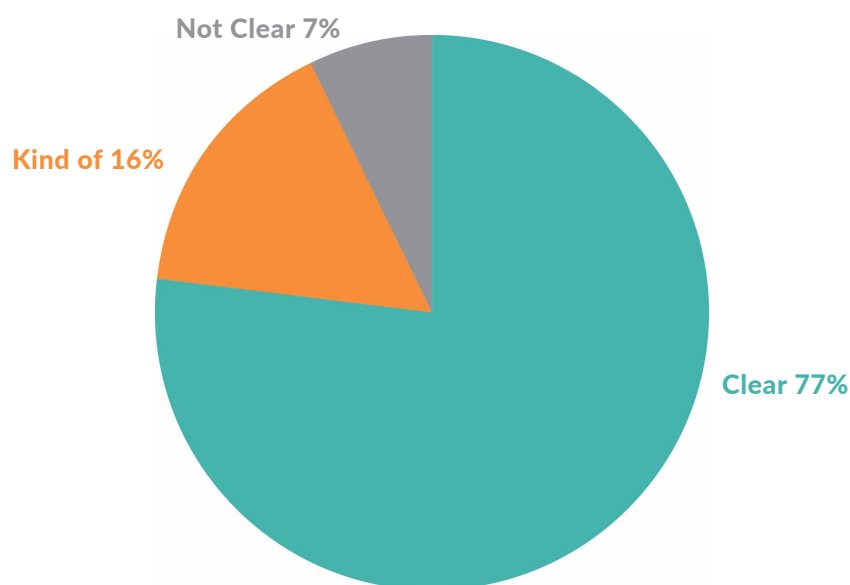

**Figure 3.2: Number of responses for the question
"Was the meaning of the information material clear to you?"**

To verify actual comprehension of the content, researchers then asked participants specific questions for each document.

The following questions were asked on the document The Information on Access to Education for Refugee Children,[20] which provided information on who is eligible for formal education in Greece, procedure and requirements, and contact details for further information if needed:

> **Q1: Children of what age are eligible for the Ministry's programme on formal education?**
>
> Correct answer: 4-15 years old

> **Q2: What is the unique condition for children to attend school?**
>
> Correct answer: vaccination

> **Q3: Where can you find more information about the access to education for refugee children?**
>
> Correct answer: For more information, refer to http://www.minedu.gov.gr/ekpaideusi/refug-educ and contact info-refugees-education@minedu.gov.gr

For the second document, Internews' Rumors & Answers Legal Special Issue (issue 54),[21] providing information on asylum, relocation, and reunification, the following two questions were asked on the infographic at the back of the document:

> **Q4: Who is eligible for family reunification?**
>
> Correct answer: If you are an adult, you can ask to live with your spouse or your child. If you are under 18 years old, and traveling without your parents or a legal guardian, you can ask to be brought to your mother/father, sister/brother, aunt/uncle, or grandmother/grandfather.

> **Q5: What happens if your reunification application gets rejected?**
>
> Correct answer: You are able to remain in Greece while your asylum application is examined in Greece.

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[20] Greek Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs (2017), The Information on Access to Education for Refugee Children. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/56002

[21] Internews (2017), Rumors & Answers: Legal Special Issue. Issue number 54. Available at: https://newsthatmoves.org/en/rumours-54-legal-special/

The enumerator rated the responses "correct", "partially correct" or "incorrect." As the answers were not always straightforward, for the analysis the correct and partially correct answers were aggregated. Of a total of 188 respondents who claimed they could read and were shown the documents in their mother tongue or their second preferred language, 44 percent (83 participants) answered correctly or partially correctly, and 56 percent (105 participants) incorrectly (see Figure 3.3). The slightly higher proportion of incorrect responses also applied to the answers for each document separately.
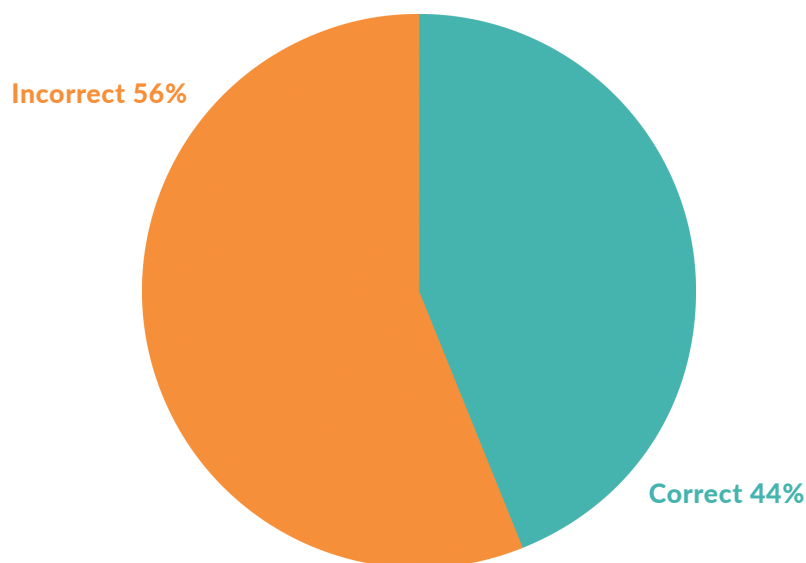
Incorrect 56%

Correct 44%

Figure 3.3: Number of incorrect and correct responses in total

These results demonstrate that while a high proportion of respondents (93 percent) perceived the meaning of the content as clear or fairly clear, only 44 percent actually understood it and answered the questions correctly. Out of those 44 percent (83 participants) who understood the information, 23 percent (19 participants) had no schooling, 41 percent (34 participants) had some schooling, and 35 percent (29 participants) had a high school diploma or higher.[22] Therefore, while education is a significant factor in comprehension, it is not necessarily an appropriate indicator of written comprehension.

The 56 percent who responded incorrectly either said they did not understand the content or could not read it (for example because they were illiterate, or they had a visual impairment, or the font size of the text was too small even for someone not visually impaired), or explained that the information was unclear in its presentation, or the text was too dense and long.

Despite the relatively low level of comprehension, a majority of participants (82 percent, 143 participants) said that they found the information in both documents useful. This suggests that such information about access to education and family reunification is considered important and useful for refugees and migrants.

[22] One of the 83 participants chose not to answer the question on education.

A comparison of comprehension levels between women and men found that the results were almost identical for both groups (see Graph 3.2), despite gender differences in educational levels. While the sample contained a higher percentage of male than female participants, 44 percent of men and 43 percent of women were able to comprehend the information material. Of those who did not comprehend the information, 56 percent were men and 57 percent were women.

However, women were more likely to find the information useful (73 percent compared with 61 percent of men). This can perhaps be explained by the fact that more women had children with them in Greece (84 percent against 44 percent of men) and were, therefore, more interested in the information material on formal education for their children.

Graph 3.2: Comprehension results by gender
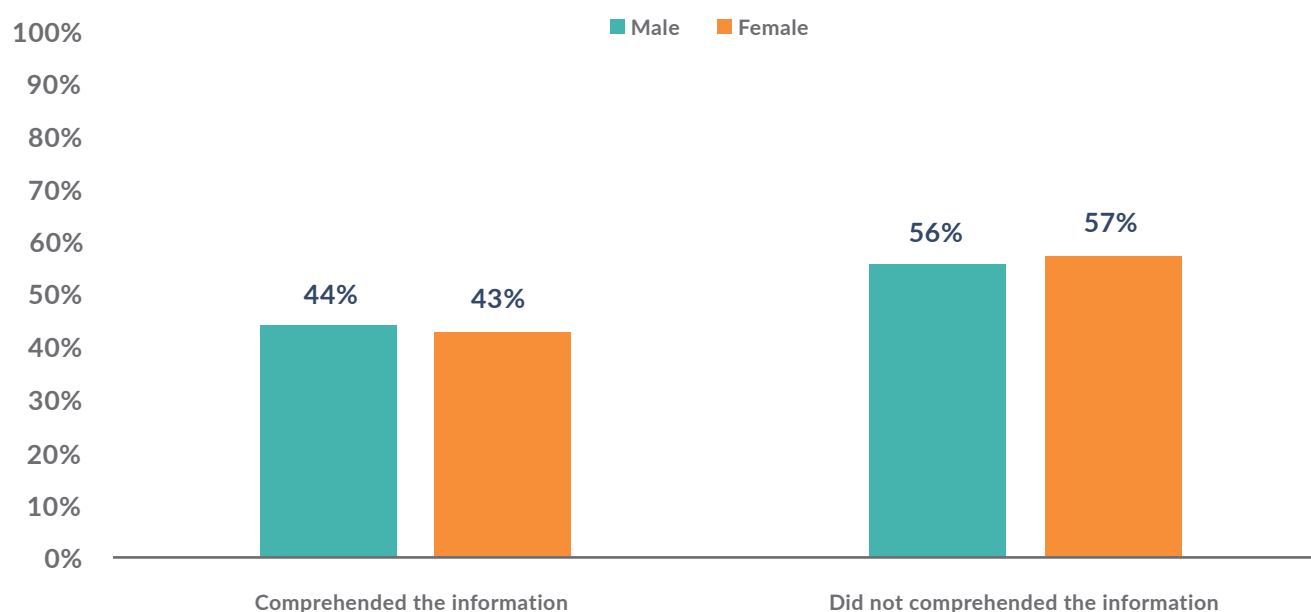
Comprehension levels were also compared by language group. A proportion of participants who claimed to have an excellent or good knowledge of their first language in written form nonetheless failed to answer the questions correctly. This was true in all language groups, but the proportion was far higher for speakers of some languages than of others (see Graph 3.3). This finding indicates that asking if someone can read or write in a given language is often not an accurate indicator of written comprehension.

Graph 3.3 self-identified and measured comprehension per language group
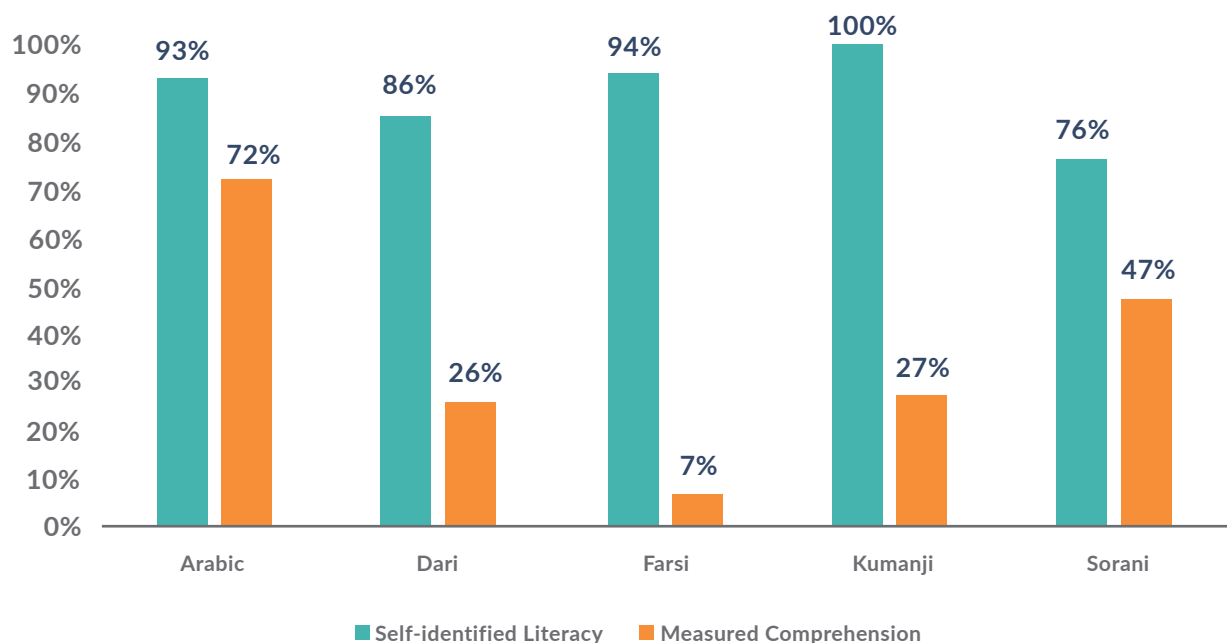
Graph 3.3 shows the level of self-identified literacy against the level of measured comprehension per language group. While in all language groups the self-identified literacy was higher than the measured comprehension, the Arabic speakers in the sample understood the documents far better than the Farsi and Dari speakers. There might be various explanations for these variations between language groups. One possible explanation is that it is easier to find Arabic translators in Greece, so there is a better chance that the documents are well translated and thus more comprehensible. A major factor in the low comprehension scores for Farsi and Dari speakers was that the document they were shown in Farsi[23] contained many translation errors and the meaning was unclear. This was compounded for native Dari speakers by the fact that in the Farsi translation of the documents no Dari words were used for specific terms that have a different terminology in these two similar dialects, hence the content was not as clear for them. However, the low comprehension result for Farsi speakers is quite likely due to a small sample of speakers who identified Farsi as their mother tongue relative to Dari.

One group of 19 Dari-speaking participants read and answered questions on both documents. Only 26 percent of this group could correctly answer questions on the document on education, which was long, complex, in small print and contained translation errors. In contrast, the infographic on asylum issues, which used less text and deliberately simplified textual content supplemented by graphics and was accurately translated, was understood by 74 percent of this sample. Despite the small sample size, the findings nonetheless point to the impact of simple content, accurate translation, and graphics-heavy presentation in aiding comprehension.

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[23] The documents were translated only into Farsi, and hence Dari speakers were also shown the Farsi translation.

Communication Challenges Experienced by Humanitarian Aid Workers

In the context of the migration crisis in Greece, language, and communication barriers are a challenge both for the refugees and migrants recently arrived in the country, and for the local residents and humanitarian aid workers who interact with them. Therefore, understanding the language barriers experienced by the latter is important for efforts to bridge the communication gap between the two sides.

> " Language is something we really struggle with. "
>
> Female humanitarian worker, Athens

To better understand the communication challenges faced by humanitarian aid workers on the ground, researchers interviewed 22 staff members of Save the Children who interact on a daily basis with refugees and migrants. The majority do not speak any of the latter group's mother tongues, and work primarily in English and Greek. They thus rely on the assistance of an interpreter or cultural mediator to communicate with the majority of refugees and migrants who do not speak one of these two languages.

From the interviews with humanitarian aid workers in Greece, the following key findings stand out:

- Owing to a shortage of available interpreters and cultural mediators, humanitarian aid workers often need to "borrow" an interpreter from another team or organization, particularly in an emergency, or ask the help of an English-speaking refugee or migrant (who may be a child).

- Humanitarian aid workers, while specialized in their own fields, are often insufficiently informed about the origin of and the nuances between certain languages to seek the appropriate support for their communication with refugees and migrants. For example, of the 22 humanitarian aid workers interviewed, 12 thought that there was one Kurdish language and that therefore all Kurds could understand each other.

> " It is utopian to believe that people who don't speak the main languages will get the information. Even if half the population gets the information in the right language we consider it as a success. "
>
> Female humanitarian worker, Northern Greece

"**Language is a big issue, and it affects the quality of our work.**"

Humanitarian worker, Athens

- In the sites visited for this research, the majority of the written information for refugees and migrants in Greece that has been translated, is available only in Arabic and Farsi. All the humanitarian aid workers interviewed observed that these two languages are not spoken by all refugees and migrants, and that therefore minority language groups lack access to vital knowledge.

- Sometimes the information that is disseminated changes often and suddenly (e.g. asylum procedures, cash assistance, etc.) and is, therefore, difficult to keep translating all documents in all relevant languages. This is especially a burden when not enough translators or interpreters are available.

- Communication challenges might differ from one program to another. For example, one of the communication challenges expressed by humanitarian aid workers working in the education sector was teaching a language different from their mother tongue (e.g. Greek teacher teaching English) to a child that speaks another language at home (e.g. Afghan child whose mother tongue is Dari). Educators also noted that one of their main communication difficulties (when an interpreter is not present) is in addressing bad behavior and disputes between children.

- Sometimes the information is accessible, readable and understood, but some refugees and migrants do not take action or use the information that humanitarian aid workers supply them. The main reasons that mentioned by humanitarian aid workers were the following:
  - Lack of trust
  - Different priorities
  - Indifference
  - "Rejection" of any written documentation
  - Disagreement with the information provided

Conclusion

Meeting the language needs generated by what has developed into the biggest refugee and migrant crisis in Europe since World War II is one of the most challenging humanitarian tasks facing aid organizations and government authorities in Greece. The wide range of languages, accents and literacy levels involved in this crisis has impacted the way vital information is provided to the affected population.

This study demonstrates that refugees and migrants in Greece do not always receive information in a language or format they can understand. This phenomenon creates serious language and communication barriers, which can generate feelings of insecurity and have detrimental effects on people's lives. Language matters.

To meet the needs of the individuals and families caught up in this crisis, service providers should be able to communicate with those affected in a language and a manner that is accessible, comprehensible and useful. Ensuring aid organizations and public services are adequately equipped and supported to communicate better with affected communities should be a greater focus of the response than it has been to date.

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