
REFUGEE ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN ONLINE AND OFFLINE ENVIRONMENTS: RESULTS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS / EL ACCESO A LA INFORMACIÓN DE LOS REFUGIADOS EN ENTORNOS DIGITALES Y PRESENCIALES: RESULTADOS A PARTIR DE GRUPOS FOCALES

María Jiménez-Andrés



Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España

María.jimenez.andres@uab.cat

Abstract: In today's migration processes, Information Communication Technologies (ICT) are increasingly important for refugee experiences and mobilities (Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheesman, 2016). In this light, there is a call by institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016a; 2020a) and researchers in the field of refugee integration (AbuJarour et al, 2019) for initiatives employing ICT to cater for refugees' need for information and communication. This article discusses some information seeking practices of asylum seekers and refugees, in online and offline environments. The data was gathered by means of nine focus group discussions with refugee communities in Greece, Italy, and Spain, involving a total of 41 participants of 13 different nationalities. Issues relating to the languages and the accessibility of the information that is available to them are discussed. The results of this research will inform the subsequent phases of REBUILD, a project funded by European Commission whose aim is the creation of a user-centred ICT-tool to promote refugee and migrant integration in Europe.

Keywords: Accessibility; Information seeking practices; Language barriers; Translation and interpreting.

Resumen: En los procesos migratorios actuales, las TIC son cada vez más importantes para las experiencias y movibilidades de los refugiados (Gillespie, Osseiran y Cheesman, 2016). En este sentido, instituciones como el Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (2016a; 2020a) e investigadores en el campo de la integración de los refugiados (AbuJarour *et al.*, 2019) llaman al diseño de iniciativas que empleen las TIC para atender las necesidades de información y comunicación. Este artículo analiza el acceso a la información de los refugiados en entornos *online* y *offline*. Los datos se recopilaron mediante nueve grupos de discusión con comunidades de refugiados en Grecia, Italia y España, en los que participaron un total de 41 participantes de 13 nacionalidades diferentes. Se abordan temas relacionados con los idiomas y la accesibilidad de la información de la que disponen. Los resultados de esta investigación orientarán las siguientes fases de REBUILD, un proyecto financiado por la Comisión Europea cuyo objetivo es la creación de una herramienta TIC para promover la integración de refugiados y migrantes en Europa.

Palabras clave: Accesibilidad; Barreras lingüísticas; Prácticas de información; Traducción e interpretación.

1. Introduction

By the end of 2019, there were 78.9 million displaced people worldwide, of which over 33 million were refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2020b). While the reasons for migration remain constant over the years (i.e. conflict, discrimination, violence, economic and environmental factors), the environment in which migrations take place is changing rapidly due to technological advancements. Information Communication Technology (ICT) has progressively become a key player in international migration work, especially for refugee experiences and mobilities (Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheesman, 2018). In this light, institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016a; 2020a) and researchers in the field of refugee integration (AbuJarour et al., 2019) call for initiatives employing ICT to cater for the refugees' need for information and communication while in transit and in host countries.

In the host countries, NGOs hold a key role in the reception and integration of displaced communities. These organisations provide access to information and services to linguistically and culturally diverse groups; thus, Translation and Interpreting (T&I) is usually required in that provision. Previous studies in T&I in these contexts (O'Brien, 2016; Valero-Garcés and Tipton, 2017; Tesseur, 2018) have mapped the T&I practices in such organisations and showed that these practices remain lacking. Against this background, the aim of this study is to gather some experiences of asylum seekers and refugees regarding their information seeking practices in three European countries: Greece, Italy, and Spain.

The article starts with a presentation of the specialised literature on the process of asylum and integration in host countries, and the role of NGOs, T&I and technology in it. Then, it outlines the methodology adopted. The final sections present and discuss the results of the focus group discussions, concentrating on refugee sources of information in offline and online environments.

2. Research context

This study is framed within the context of the European project REBUILD.¹ This project aims at the development of an accessible ICT tool that supports the integration of refugees in their host communities in Greece, Italy, and Spain. The project is currently ongoing (Jan 2019-Dec 2021).

Prior to the development of the tool, research actions were conducted to understand the needs and requirements of the target users. The project adopted a user-centric approach; that is, involving asylum-seekers and migrants as well as NGOs and other local service providers in the creation of the tool. Through complementary methodologies, the target users identified the system requirements and supported the research team in the design of the tool.

This paper was motivated by the first research action in the project, conducted between January and April 2019. The aim was to gain insights into how refugees and asylum seekers – the target users of the tool– use ICT in their daily lives. Given the heterogeneity of the refugee population (WPP, 2017), more information was required beyond standard demographics, i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, legal status, level of education, linguistic skills, digital literacy and media preferences. By means of focus groups with refugees and asylum seekers, the research team gathered valuable information about asylum seekers and refugee information seeking practices as well as the role that ICT plays in the process. The results of the focus groups

¹ The REBUILD project website can be accessed [here](#).

conducted in the three target countries are presented and discussed in this paper. The results of another research action involving NGOs and other local service providers are discussed in Arias-Badia and Jiménez-Andrés (2021). The study examines how organisations supporting refugees bridge the linguistic barriers, their T&I practices and their use of technology to facilitate communication.

3. Literature review

This section provides an overview of the literature on the topic. Specifically, this section discusses the process of asylum, the role that NGOs and translation and interpreting play in it, and the growing role of technology in migration.

3.1 The role of NGOs and Translation and Interpreting in the Reception and Integration systems

NGOs and public bodies are the first contact points of asylum-seekers, and those in charge of the reception programmes in the host countries. The complex Reception and Integration systems of asylum in Europe vary across countries and even within a country, since national regulations change frequently. For example, in Spain, the *Programa de Acogida* is updated regularly, as can be observed in the Migration portal². Furthermore, some responsibilities lie in the central government while others in the regional governments (ibid). The changing environment makes it difficult not only for NGOs supporting asylum-seekers, but also for asylum-seekers to understand and be up to date with the services that they are entitled to provide and receive, as well as with the legal procedures to obtain refugee status.

In addition to the legal complications, linguistic and cultural barriers play a part in information seeking practices. Asylum-seekers are a heterogenous group (WPP, 2017) and hence meeting their linguistic needs is a challenge for NGOs and international organisations supporting them in the host countries. Indeed, a primary concern for these organisations is the communication barrier between the organisation and its beneficiaries (Moreno-Rivero, 2018). To bridge the communication gap, NGOs resort to different practices: some of these involve linguistic professionals and others, volunteers.

Previous studies have looked at these practices, which can take the form of interpreting (Moser-Mercer, Kherbiche and Class, 2014; Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche, 2018); cultural mediation (Rudvin and Tomassini, 2008; Miklavcic and LeBlanc, 2014; Moreno-Rivero, 2018); and volunteer interpreting (Aguilar-Solano, 2015; Al-Shehari, 2020; Cadwell, Bollig and Ried, 2020; Hassemmer, 2020). T&I practices are required at various stages of the reception process, i.e. asylum interviews with police officers, filling the application form for asylum, and the counselling sessions with psychologists.

While there has been an increase in the awareness of the importance of T&I in this context, there is still a lot to be done to meet the linguistic needs of NGO beneficiaries (Hertog, 2010; Tesseur, 2018). These practices are controlled by budget changes and pressures, political contexts, and the changing needs of the recipient population. In the Spanish context, the situation has worsened considerably in the last decade as the budget for T&I has drastically decreased (Valero-Garcés and Tipton, 2017). The current Welcome and Integration Handbook stipulates that only the documents that are needed for the asylum application are to be translated

² Spanish Government Migration Portal: http://extranjeros.inclusion.gob.es/es/Subvenciones/anos_anteriores/area_integracion/index.html

(Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2020). As for interpreting, it should only be offered when “indispensable” (p. 31).

A lack in the provision of linguistic support for asylum seekers has many negative consequences. In addition to misinformation and confusion, it can lead to a drop-out of the use of their services (Arias-Badia and Jiménez-Andrés, 2021), to an accentuation of their current vulnerabilities or to re-traumatisation (Gardiner and Walker, 2019; Miller et al., 2019).

3.2 Technology for the dissemination of information

In light of the above, NGOs could take advantage of new technologies to compensate for the lack of financial and human resources. Indeed, researchers in the field of T&I in these contexts encourage the adoption of technologies to support multilingual communication processes (Federici and O’Brien, 2020). Yet, most of these organisations have not yet gone digital. A recent report by Caceres et al. (2019) has brought to the fore the deficient digital practices of NGOs, with only younger charities being more digitally active. For displaced communities, studies and practice show that ICT plays a fundamental role in the process of migration. Refugees *en route* or settling in host countries can sometimes prioritise ICT over food or shelter to communicate with family and friends, get assistance during their journey, and obtain information about the route or services in the area (Brunwasser, 2015; Barros, 2017). Furthermore, ICTs have been identified as useful tools for the integration of refugees and migrants into host countries (Frouws et al., 2016; UNHCR, 2016a; WPP, 2017). As a result, studies on ICT adoption by refugee communities have started to emerge, demonstrating the potential of ICT for integration (Frouws et al., 2016; Mason and Buchmann, 2016; GSMA, 2017; Marić, 2017; AbuJarour et al., 2019). In addition to research studies, there have been multiple initiatives fostering the integration of refugees by means of ICT. Some successful examples are Ankommen (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2018), Apps4Refs (Fundació Acsar, 2018), and RefAid (RefAid, 2019). These tools are still available across Europe.

Governments also make the asylum regulations publicly available through official websites. Because the language and information contained is often very complex, the UNHCR has developed a comprehensive, multilingual help page with information on the asylum regulations per country³. Not all countries have provided this information to the UNHCR and each country is in charge of providing this information in other languages. For example, Greece has its information in eight languages (Arabic, English, French, Greek, Kurdish, Turkish, Persian and Urdu); Spain, in four (Arabic, English, Spanish and French); whereas Italy does not have a help page on this website.

Despite their many advantages, online environments pose new challenges due to the inaccessibility of digital content and interfaces (United Nations, 2020). Accessibility is herein understood in its universalistic account (Greco, 2018), concerning the elimination of barriers that hinder the access to information, be they linguistic, educational or cognitive. O’Brien et al. (2018) distinguish two levels of accessibility of information: (i) if it is translated into languages that the recipient can read or hear, and (ii) if people with special needs can actually consume that information. The above-mentioned report of Caceres et al. (2019) indicates that only 51% of charities in the UK have accessibility procedures built into their websites. Making information accessible and redundant, that is, in various languages and formats, is a requirement to ensure that information is usable by linguistically and functionally diverse communities (UNHCR, 2018; Rodríguez-Vázquez and Torres-del-Rey, 2020).

³ See <https://help.unhcr.org/>.

4. Methodology

The data used for this study has been gathered from nine focus group discussions conducted for the REBUILD project. The focus group discussions consisted of a list of guiding questions that enquired on their views on technology for integration, their use of ICT, their current sources of information, and their recommendations on the design of apps for refugees. The questions included in the interview can be found in Appendix 1.

The study was approved by the ethical committee at the researchers' university and followed ethical recommendations as described in Orero et al. (2018). Furthermore, special considerations were taken in the planning and execution of the focus group discussions due to the vulnerable situation in which asylum-seekers and refugees find themselves (Gibbs, 2007; Eklöf et al., 2017; Sandvik et al., 2017). These considerations were mindful of cultural differences, of the 'do no harm' imperative in humanitarian actions and of the dramatic experiences that participants have lived. These included: anonymisation, data minimisation (the principle of limiting data collection to only what is required to fulfil a specific purpose and to observe EU Directive GRDP2018), the thorough explanation of the purpose of the study, and the nature and implications of their participation in the study. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and their participation in it. Participants were informed of the ethical issues and the safe environment in which the discussion was taking place. Participation in the study was voluntary and consent forms were signed. Consent forms were available in various languages and were also orally translated to some participants.

Seven focus groups discussions were conducted face-to-face in Italy, Greece and Spain in April and May 2019 in four cities: Bologna (Italy), Kilkis (Greece), Barcelona and Palma de Majorca (Spain), the cities where the project partners are based. Two additional sessions were conducted online with participants residing in Rome and Rimini, Italy. The sessions had an average duration of 2 hours. In total, 41 participants took part in the focus groups discussions. Participants were distributed across focus groups by their spoken languages and current places of residence. Details on the nationality and number of participants in each focus group can be found in Table 1.

Focus group identifier	Location	Participants	Countries of origin of participants
FG1	Kilkis	9	Afghanistan
FG2	Bologna	6	Cuba, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia
FG3	Online (participants residing in Rome)	3	Afghanistan, Cameroon and Somalia
FG4	Kilkis	6	Iran
FG5	Kilkis	5	Iraq and Syria (Kurdish)
FG6	Barcelona	6	Iran, Iraq and Syria
FG7	Palma	1	Nigeria
FG8	Online (participants residing in Rimini)	1	Nigeria
FG9	Bologna	4	Cameroon, Benin and Gambia
Total	9	41	13 countries

Table 1. Focus group details. Source: Own elaboration

Focus groups discussions were led by the principal researcher in Spain and online, and by experienced staff working in two NGOs: OMNES⁴ in Greece, and CIDAS⁵ in Italy. In each

⁴ <http://www.omnes.gr/>.

⁵ <https://www.cidas.coop/>.

session there was one moderator and one notetaker and, when necessary, cultural mediators and/or interpreters. All three moderators worked regularly with refugee communities and two worked with the community of participants that they interviewed. In most cases, the sessions were multilingual, as participants were encouraged to be free in how they expressed themselves and in the languages that they felt more comfortable. Translanguaging (Vogel and García, 2017) was a defining feature of FG6 and FG7, in which participants and moderator spoke English, Spanish and Catalan, depending on the topic of conversation or if they were quoting someone who spoke a certain language. Table 2 summarises the languages spoken in each focus group.

Focus group identifier	Language(s)	Interpreters
FG1	English	Dari ↔ English
FG2	English, French, Italian, Spanish	No
FG3	English and French	No
FG4	English	English ↔Farsi
FG5	English	English ↔Kurmanji
FG6	Catalan, English, Spanish	No
FG7	Catalan, English, Spanish	No
FG8	English	No
FG9	English, Italian and French	No

Table 2. Languages of the focus groups. Source Own elaboration

Three focus groups were audio recorded with the permission of participants. In the other six, notes were taken by notetakers and the moderators. The principal researcher provided guidelines to moderators for the notetaking to ensure consistency. The notes were anonymised, and participants were identified by colours. The resulting notes and transcripts were in four languages –English, Spanish, Italian, and Greek–, and the moderators and notetakers translated the notes into English for the principal researcher.

Interview notes were coded and manually analysed by the principal researcher using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The approach to coding was inductive as the codes derived from the data (Saldanha and O'Brien, 2014). The researcher engaged with the entire data set and coded interesting features of the data set systematically. Codes were checked against each other and back to the original data set until they were coherent, consistent and distinctive. The different codes were sorted into potential themes. The themes were reviewed to ensure they formed a coherent pattern.

4.1 Focus group participants

Participants were contacted and recruited via three project partners: CIDAS, OMNES and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona⁶(UAB). The objective was to have a heterogeneous sample in terms of gender, origin, age, educational background and presumed ICT use. In terms of their administrative situation at the time of the study, the majority of participants were asylum-seekers, refugees and a small number were refugees on a student visa. Participants completed a short, anonymous, demographic questionnaire in order to obtain more details on their socio-biographical background. The results of this questionnaire are displayed in Table 3.

⁶ Recruitment was facilitated by [Fundació Autònoma Solidària](#) at UAB.

The heterogeneity of participants reflected the diversity and complexity of the refugee communities in Europe, with participants from 13 countries. The most represented countries were Afghanistan and Syria. As for their host country, half of the participants resided in Greece and the other half in Spain and Italy at the time of the study.

Other data collected were age, level of formal education, and time spent in the host country. In terms of their age, two thirds of participants were below 34 years old. Regarding the self-reported gender of participants, 23 were male and 18 female. 30 participants had completed high school or above, and 13 held a university degree. The majority had lived in the country for less than three years.

Parameters	No. Of participants	Parameters	No. Of participants
Host country		Gender	
Greece	20	Female	18
Italy	13	Male	23
Spain	7	Nationality	
Ages		Afghanistan	9
18-24	13	Benin	1
25-34	13	Cameroon	2
35-44	10	Cuba	1
45-54	3	Gambia	2
No answer	1	Ghana	1
Level of formal education		Iran	7
Secondary school or below	28	Iraq	4
University degree	13	Ivory Coast	1
Time in host country		Morocco	1
<1 year	7	Nigeria	3
2-3 years	14	Somalia	2
4-6 years	4	Syria	6
+6 years	3	Somalia	2
No answer	1	Syria	6

Table 3. Demographic data of participants n=41. Source: Own elaboration.

5. Results

This section presents and discusses the results of the focus group discussions with asylum-seekers and refugees. For the purposes of this paper, the analysis has focused on the data regarding their access to information and the linguistic matters affecting their access to information. In the presentation of the findings, a selection of participants' quotes is provided for two reasons: first, to grant refugee's voices a prominent role in the paper; second, to account for the refugee's 'plurality of voices' (Jones, 2019, p. 8). The quotes have been taken verbatim from the focus groups notes. Linguistic inaccuracies in the quotes have not been corrected and they are regarded as a natural feature of multilingual research.

5.1. Offline contexts: Information through NGOs and peers

Staff in the organisations in charge of refugee reception systems were identified as one of the most significant informants. In addition to NGO staff, participants often resorted to peers for information. The following examples of participants' accounts confirmed this practice:

Red Cross tells me everything (Participant in FG7).

I am not using websites. I am getting informed by experienced friends and NGO personal (Participant in FG4).

As soon as I arrived, I trusted the cooperative where I was welcomed, I asked the operators everything and I didn't need to look for information on my smartphone. For example, when I had to go for the first time to a place, I was accompanied so I didn't worry about figuring out where it was (Participant in FG9)

Most of us get informed from others who have been here longer [...] You would only use technology when there is nobody else to check with (Participant in FG8).

Some participants admitted preferring accessing information in person due to a lack of experience using ICT:

I am not experienced [with ICT]. I was living in Iran and I was using a simple Nokia, I had no experience of devices. Now I started using them. (Participant in FG1).

We don't know how to use technologies. (Participant in FG1).

There were only three instances in which participants mentioned interpreters during the focus groups. These were all gathered in the Greek focus groups, while in the Spanish and Italian focus groups there was no mention of interpreters. These accounts acknowledge the presence and role of the interpreters in the Greek context and could be an indication of a lack thereof in the Spanish and Italian contexts.

With the phone credits, I only phone the interpreters or other organizations for support. I use the EMO and the Messenger app for communicating with my family (Participant in FG1).

When Interpreter read the consent form to us, we understood (Participant in FG5).

[I think organisations should] use the elder refugees as interpreters, we should connect with all information, we cannot trust sites etc. They share different explanations and information (Participant in FG4).

5.2. Online contexts: the internet as a source of information and the accessibility of technology

For most participants, the internet was a crucial source of information, either by Google searches, social media groups, and government or refugee websites. Other activities that participants reported carrying out by means of their phone was consuming media content (on free platforms), engaging in social media, learning languages and, above all, talking to friends and family through apps such as WhatsApp and EMO. Mobile phones were seen as a fundamental tool in the everyday lives of participants in their host countries, but also to access information regarding their asylum applications:

As a refugee, as a foreigner here, your phone is your window to the world (Participant in FG6).

Email is useful, for example, I got my asylum decision through an e-mail. This was a good point. I use technology not for services like Facebook, but for the UNHCR website (Participant in FG1).

Some participants shared their precautions when retrieving online information, as they recognised that online information is not always reliable. Hacking was also raised as a problem for them in online environments. These two issues were seen as a downside of the use of ICT.

It is better to search information in governmental sites. I do not trust other websites or fake channels (Participant in FG4).

We are trying many websites but a lot of lies (Participant in FG4).

Websites are not trustful. I consult pages on Facebook, I am sure they are 100% reliable. They are managed by volunteers and non-profit. I trust the groups because they want to do good things (Participant in FG5).

If there are no hackers, [technology] is good (Participant in FG4).

Furthermore, some participants preferred accessing information and services online to access them in person. These participants claimed to have received different treatment from the part of NGOs. These participants trusted that ICTs could offer them trustworthy, non-discriminatory information and services.

[I am informed by] my peers. But that is not official information. I may get misinformed. I actually have. I am a refugee. The system is not well-established. The organisations don't give the same solutions to all refugees. The organisation that is supporting my case, for example, is not well-established. They give one thing to one refugee and then another thing to the other. And it is the same case (other participants agree) (Participant in FG6).

We have other organisations here (Cruz Roja, ACCEM, CEAR), each person has a different organisation and it is going to affect the quality of the life that they have. For example, I was with Red Cross and I know another person that was with ACCEM, they gave him home (accommodation) but I didn't get it. How should I handle that? I was three months on the streets. Government is supporting you, but I was on the streets (Participant in FG6).

For ICT development purposes, participants were asked how they would prefer to have the information provided, i.e. written or spoken form, the latter in video or audio format. The majority favoured spoken, specifically in video format, as they considered it would make it available to a wider audience i.e. literates and non-literates, and it would be easier to understand. Participants also suggested incorporating voice recognition software, so that users with low literacy skills can find information easily on the app. Participants had not downloaded any apps specifically designed for refugees, and only two participants (in FG2 and FG7) had used a website that supported refugees in finding accommodation, namely Refugees Welcome.

5.3. Misinformation

Many of the participants' narrations revealed their difficulties to access reliable, official information. The most recurrent struggle was finding information online about asylum processes, regulations and the status of their application. Participants also raised the need to have information on children's rights, access to health services and legal issues. The quotes below exemplify these points:

We need something like a website or an app to explain to migrants how to get for example *Tarjeta Roja*⁷, because nothing is explained. And refugees are doing groups on Facebook in Germany and Holland to tell you how to do something, but that does not exist officially. We need trustworthy information [...] Nobody knows anything (Participant in FG6).

⁷ *Tarjeta Roja* ('Red Card') is the common name for the identification card issued to those who seek asylum in Spain.

The organisation monitoring my case has lawyers and informed me that my interview is in one year. My friend visited a private lawyer instead and his interview is in five months. How is that possible? We need information about legal issues (Participant in FG4).

5.4. Linguistic issues in the access of information

It became apparent from participants' accounts that much of the information available was inaccessible to them. Indeed, the linguistic barrier was consistently reported across all communities as one of the main obstacles for integration, for the search and reception of information and for ICT use.

The problem is always the language (Participant in FG2).

For me the main problem when I came here was the language (Participant in FG6).

There was an emphasis on how little information on asylum processes is available in other languages. For example, websites are available only in the local languages (Spanish, Catalan, Italian and Greek), which are usually not understood by refugees. The information on regulations and requirements also includes specialised terminology. One participant explained that he was unable to communicate with civil servants working in the public administrations:

This problem [not having information] can be solved if you go to the government to ask for a paperwork but here in Spain, especially in Spain, nobody speaks English so there is no way to get anything official (Participant in FG6).

In addition, participants complained that even when some websites were translated, they were only partially translated and key information was missing. In Spain, this deficiency is widespread and not limited to information on immigration procedures, as it can be observed by checking governmental websites. For speakers of minority languages, this issue is not limited to official websites, but applies also to other information sources.

Not many applications are offering translations into Kurdish. We need it (Participant in FG5).

Another dominant message coming from research participants was that illiteracy can also be a barrier to accessing information online:

I am a Kurdish-Kurmanji speaker. I am not from Syria and so I had no rights to education there, so I do not know how to read and write in Kurmanji either (Participant in FG5).

I cannot use anything because I am illiterate. Since I was in Afghanistan, I didn't have the opportunity to study due to culture and location issues (Participant in FG1).

6. Discussion and recommendations

In this paper, the focus has been on how refugees and asylum seekers access information in the host countries. The results indicate that the internet is one of the main sources of information. However, asylum regulations and the services provided change often and suddenly, but online websites are not updated and translated at the same speed (Ghandour-Demiri, 2017). Accessibility issues as well as the complex and often unofficial nature of the information provided complicate their access to up-to-date, factual information.

In addition, participants consistently felt misinformed and they did not always trust the information that they found online. Linguistic barriers as well as lack of digital skills have been

identified as obstacles in the access of information online, especially for speakers of minority languages. These results are in line with previous studies on the area (Hannides et al. 2016; WPP, 2017). Further, they support Piller (2017) claims on the seeming legitimacy of linguistic discrimination, as opposed to religious (or other types of discrimination) which are widely prohibited.

Refugees also rely on NGOs to find out information about the services that they are entitled to, and to receive updates on their asylum applications. This fact makes social workers gatekeepers of information and in the provision of social services, with the implications that arise from this circumstance: gatekeepers can either be facilitators or controllers of the access to services. Indeed, gatekeepers have been reported to provide different services to migrants in similar circumstances in Spain (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012) and to maintain control over access in Germany (Rolke, Wenner and Razum, 2019). Having official information accessible in ICT could be a way to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers can obtain information through other channels.

Receiving information from peers was another recurrent practice. Peers are considered a valuable asset for educating, protecting and empowering refugees (UNHCR, 2016b). However, peer-to-peer information is an informal and ad-hoc practice at present. A recommendation is that NGOs or public administrations oversee and support these practices to ensure that the information provided is accurate and promotes integration. Actually, one participant favoured the involvement of refugees who have been in the country longer. NGOs and public administration could adapt the increasingly prevalent mentorship⁸ that match locals with newly arrived communities, by matching already integrated refugees with asylum-seekers.

For ICT development purposes, the study revealed that for the information to be accessible, the provision of information should be multimodal and multilingual. When asked what their preferred format was, the majority favoured spoken, specifically audio-visual content with subtitles, as they considered it would make it available to a wider audience. In contrast, written format was preferred by some, who then reported using Google Translate to read the information in their language. This confirms previous research that states that refugees prefer having information in written, even low-literates, as it allows them to refer back to the information when needed and can be presented to government authorities (Ghandour-Demiri, 2017). In light of this, the use of easy-to-read language could prove beneficial in these contexts. Previous studies have shown that not only people with disabilities can benefit from easy-to-read language, but also migrants, people with low levels of formal education, people with severe social problems, and the elderly (Matausch, Peböck and Pühretmair, 2012) as well as persons with reading and learning difficulties (Caro and Orero, 2019), which applies to speakers of other languages.

7. Conclusions

This study has analysed the information seeking practices in online and offline environments by asylum seekers and refugees in three European countries: Greece, Italy, and Spain. The internet, NGOs staff and peers have been identified as the main sources of information. This study also suggests that asylum seekers and refugees struggle to find official, comprehensive information on their rights and asylum regulations.

⁸ For more information on mentorship programmes, see <http://mentoriasocial.org/>.

Participants consistently shared their difficulties in finding official, accessible information online on which they could rely. This resulted in a dependency on NGOs to access services, which can perpetuate the role of NGOs as gatekeepers. Despite the potential of ICT to facilitate communication with linguistically and functionally diverse communities, these technologies could further accentuate inequalities if accessibility is not brought into focus. According to users' feedback, the design of ICT tools for refugees should: (1) include official, comprehensive information on asylum processes by country; (2) be accessible, that is, available in different languages and formats, i.e. written, video with subtitles and visual, through images and pictograms; (3) ensure that it is designed to avoid discrimination and the stereotyping of refugees.

The results from this study will be used for the development of an ICT-tool to support the integration process of refugees in Italy, Greece and Spain. In line with user-centred key principles (Gulliksen et al, 2003), the findings can be used as a resource to help inform developers of the target-user profiles, their needs and communication practices with the home and host society. Furthermore, the insights gathered open up bigger questions about how the current asylum programmes operate, and on whether they are perpetuating the vulnerability of refugee communities due to the complex and changing nature of asylum regulations in European countries. It is hoped that this article can contribute to raise awareness on the information needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in European countries, and on the importance of language, translation, interpreting and accessibility in the provision of that information.

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Glossary

Asylum seeker – An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum-seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which the claim is submitted. Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum-seeker (UNHCR, 2005)

ICT – Information Communication Technologies

Refugee – A person who meets the eligibility criteria under the applicable refugee definition, as provided for by international or regional instruments, under UNHCR's mandate, and/or in national legislation (UNHCR, 2005)

T&I – Translation and Interpreting

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Appendix 1. Focus group questions

- a. How would you see technology supporting you (refugees and migrants) in the integration process?
- b. Can you tell us about how and for what purposes do you and other members of your community use your phone?
- c. What use do you make of apps and websites?
- d. How do you find information about the services that you need? If you do so online, how do you use and trust that information?
- e. We are working to create an app or platform that will provide information about services and support for migrants and refugees, what are your thoughts and recommendations on these?
- f. We are going to show you now an app that has been designed for refugees and migrants. Can you navigate through it and tell us what you think about it?

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