



**GROUND TRUTH  
SOLUTIONS**

MIXED MIGRATION PLATFORM

**REFUGEE, ASYLUM-SEEKER AND  
MIGRANT PERCEPTIONS**

ISTANBUL, GAZIANTEP / TURKEY

– SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS –

18 AUGUST 2017

**MIMP** | MIXED  
MIGRATION  
PLATFORM

# INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of six focus group discussions conducted between 20 and 23 July 2017 with Syrian and Afghan refugees residing in Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey. Thirty-six participants took part in this survey, the second in a series of data collection efforts under the [Mixed Migration Platform](#) (MMP), looking at

how refugees perceive humanitarian support in Turkey. The discussion topics were designed by Ground Truth Solutions to delve deeper into the issues that surfaced in surveys conducted in April and May of this year in [Gaziantep/Kilis](#) and [Istanbul](#).



## READING THIS REPORT

This report presents main findings from the focus group discussions with the main conclusions drawn from each discussion topic. Where relevant, we also include bar charts for questions from the surveys with responses quantified on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. The bar charts show the percentage of respondents who selected each answer option in the survey, with colours ranging from dark red for negative answers to dark green for positive

ones. This report covers six broad themes – access to information and awareness of services and support, priority needs, fairness of support, awareness and fairness of cash transfer programmes, awareness of legal options, and social support and integration. More background and information about the methodology can be found at the end of this report.



## INFORMATION / AWARENESS OF SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Both in the survey (Figure 1) and during the focus group discussions, most participants in Gaziantep and Istanbul said that they lack key information about available services and support. Syrian females in Gaziantep described a situation in which they often become aware of aid agency activities only after they are completed.

One Afghan female in Istanbul says she only knows about available support because her situation as a single woman left her no choice but to directly seek information from aid agencies. Four out of the seven male Syrian participants in Istanbul were aware of the support available to them.

**Do you know what kind of support is available to you from aid agencies?<sup>1</sup>**

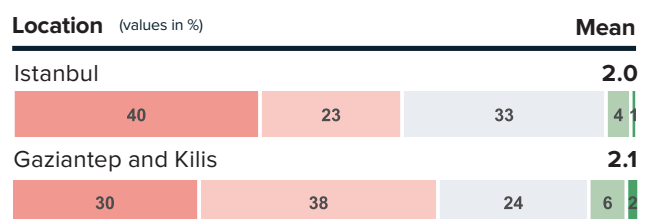
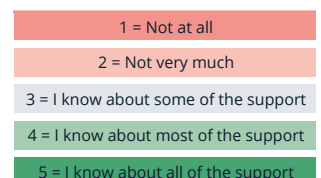


Figure 1: Information on available support

<sup>1</sup>Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 7; "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 7.



What information the participants can find is obtained via social media and word-of-mouth. Syrian participants in Istanbul explained that they must rely on social media or word of mouth for information because there are no official portals such as information centres. Nearly all participants said that while they like the ease of finding information on the Internet, they often question its credibility. Female Syrian participants in Gaziantep also pointed to illiteracy or a lack of access to devices as obstacles to obtaining information through social media.

When asked how aid agencies could best disseminate information, the most commonly suggested method was through special offices or information centres for refugees in Turkey. Face-to-face communication was considered by refugees as the most effective means of ensuring that information not only reaches refugees, but is clearly understood. Other suggestions included education

courses in school, meetings with government officials, and volunteer mobile teams who seek out refugees to communicate important information. This preference for face-to-face information provision differs from the findings of the previous surveys, which suggested a preference for receiving information through SMS, posters, and leaflets in Gaziantep and Kilis<sup>2</sup>, and through SMS, messaging applications, and social media in Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> These channels were touched on in the discussions by Syrian females in Gaziantep who suggested information be disseminated through flyers, brochures, and social media pages run by official sources. Participants also said they would like further information about available services, education and employment opportunities, official papers and registration, finding shelter, and healthcare.



## PRIORITY NEEDS

All participants mentioned some form of livelihood support as their most important need – cash and employment – as well as basic necessities of food and shelter. All of the Syrian females in Gaziantep say they would like to be registered to receive some form of cash assistance, either the WFP/Kizilay e-food card or via the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme, echoing UNHCR’s finding that “[w]omen and children represent more than 70 percent of Turkey’s refugee population, requiring targeted food security and nutritional support.”<sup>4</sup> So far, however, none of the participants have been able to procure the e-food card or register successfully for a multipurpose cash assistance programme. One respondent said that they have applied for cash assistance, but has yet to hear back.

The priority needs for Syrian males in Gaziantep were reported as education, access to employment, language courses, and housing. This supports findings from our quantitative data collected across Gaziantep and Kilis, as outlined in Figure 2. Over 90 percent of Syrians in Turkey reside in host communities, outside of camps where poverty is a prevalent issue, “due to the lack of access to a regular income, and the high cost of living in urban settings.”<sup>5</sup>

### What are your most important unmet needs?<sup>6</sup>

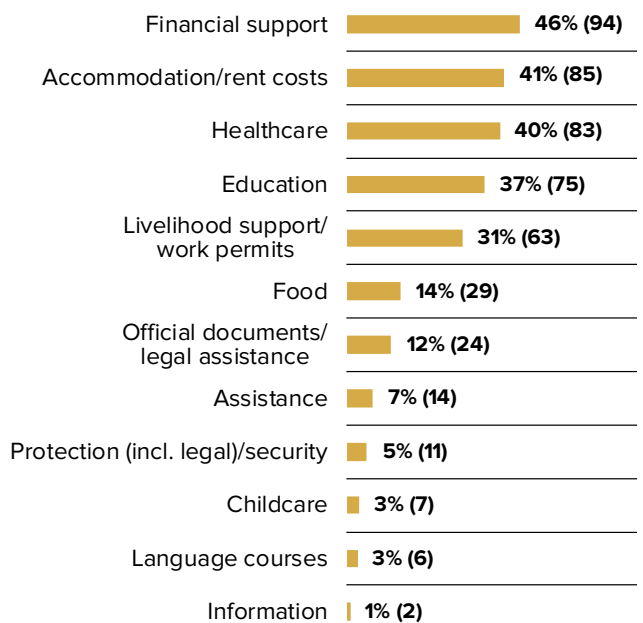


Figure 2: Most important needs not met among refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants in Gaziantep and Kilis.

The chart shows the percentage and frequency of respondents indicating a certain answer to this open-ended question. Percentages do not total 100% because respondents had the option to provide multiple answers.

<sup>2</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 8.

<sup>4</sup> The UN Refugee Agency & United Nations Development Programme, 3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018: Turkey (UNHCR & UNDP, 2017), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> This question was asked to 207 respondents who said that the services and support they receive in Turkey do not meet their most important needs. For more information, see Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 10.



In Istanbul, commonly cited needs among Afghan and Syrian respondents of both genders include jobs, housing, food, and language assistance. Other responses include official documentation pertaining to legal status in Turkey such as residency permits, and assistance in obtaining recognition for certifications or qualifications gained prior to arriving in the country. This supports findings from our quantitative data collected in Istanbul as outlined in Figure 3.

**What are your most important unmet needs?<sup>7</sup>**

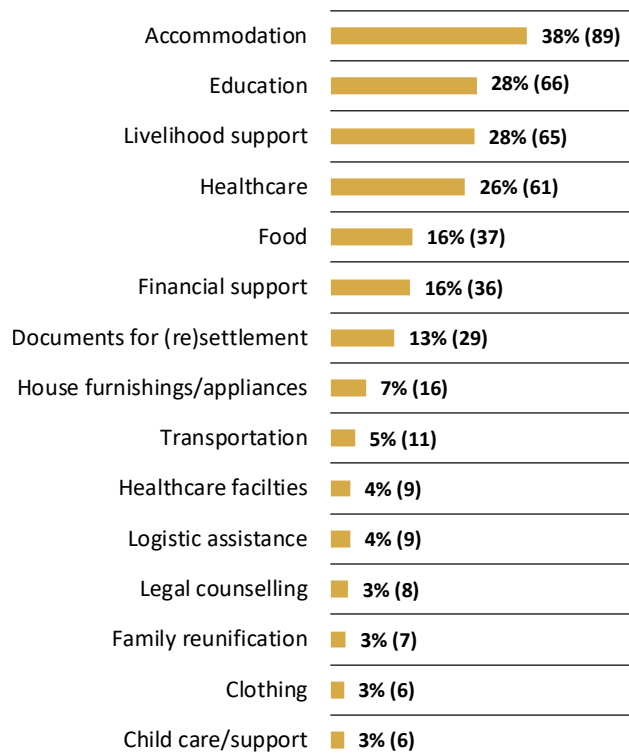


Figure 3: Most important needs not met among refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants in Istanbul.

The chart shows the percentage and frequency of respondents indicating a certain answer to this open-ended question. Percentages do not total 100% because respondents had the option to provide multiple answers.

Across groups in both cities, respondents said that they find it difficult to get by on the small salaries they are able to obtain, as well as from money sent by friends and relatives abroad. Syrian female and male participants in Istanbul explain that they often struggle with official paperwork permitting them to work legally in Turkey. Even after the adoption of the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners Under Temporary Protection in January 2016, access to the labour market remains cut off to most Syrian refugees, “considering the limited number of work permits

granted so far, the limited job opportunities available and the overlap in skill sets between Syrian refugees and members of impact communities.”<sup>8</sup> This has led many to seek irregular work that do not afford them social protections from workplace abuses. The participants described situations in which they work long hours and are paid much less than their Turkish counterparts for the same work. A recent Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report confirms these results as it reveals the main livelihood challenges faced by refugees in Turkey to be “uncertainty regarding their status as refugees (notably work permits and citizenship), poor working conditions (low pay, informal, insecure jobs and harassment, particularly of women), and discrimination.”<sup>9</sup> Syrian men in Istanbul expressed frustration that their education or other credentials do not carry over to Turkey – one participant was an engineer in Syria, and another a veterinarian. “Although some skilled workers have found employers who will apply for work permits, most refugees could not transfer their skills because of legal constraints on employment,” according to the ODI report.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from a lack of recognition of credentials, most of the Afghan male respondents and one Syrian female in Istanbul say that language or the lack of documents such as the *kimlik*<sup>11</sup> for Syrians and the residence permit for all other nationals are the primary obstacles to gaining employment. Suggestions from the focus group discussions for actions to be taken by aid agencies and local authorities include: work permission for refugees, regulation of work environments, special protections for female workers, the creation of more job opportunities, and language and skills classes.

Participants had mixed experiences finding accommodation in Turkey. Syrian participants in Istanbul generally reported few problems, though some said that certain Turkish landlords refuse to rent to Syrians and that the rents are quite high. However, Afghan participants seem to have much more difficulty finding housing. Many of the Afghan participants of both genders in Istanbul said they sleep in parks with their families, and others said they share apartments with other families, which is a strain on them and their children. The Afghan participants in Istanbul said they predominantly find housing via help from family and friends, while Syrian participants seem to be able to search for housing directly from landlords, though at a high price.

<sup>7</sup> This question was asked to 192 respondents who said that the services and support they receive in Turkey do not meet their most important needs. For more information, see Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 10.

<sup>8</sup> The UN Refugee Agency & United Nations Development Programme, *3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018: Turkey* (UNHCR & UNDP, 2017), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Bellamy et al., *The Lives and Livelihoods of Syrian Refugees* (ODI, 2017), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> A *kimlik* is a temporary protection identity card provided to refugees and asylum-seekers that have been registered and verified with the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM).



Participants suggested that agencies and authorities could help with the housing situation by providing free accommodation, assisting in paying rent, regulating the housing market, and providing counselling for refugees seeking shelter. Two women in Istanbul, one Afghan, the other Syrian, both recommended establishing centres specifically for single mothers and young singles, respectively.

It was difficult for participants to identify any one group that does not receive the aid they need. Many said that all refugees struggle to meet their needs. Male Syrian participants in Gaziantep and female Syrian participants in Istanbul said that those without a kimlik are left out. However, one of the Syrian female participants in Istanbul pointed out that she has a kimlik and still does not receive aid.

Participants also suggested that recent arrivals, Afghan refugees, and those with small families are unable to get the aid they need. Syrian females in Istanbul were especially vocal about how aid agencies and authorities could better help people meet their needs. Refugees hope for better coordination across agencies, more efficient application processes, special counselling for refugees, and for field staff to work harder to help those in need. Syrian females in Gaziantep suggested that agencies and authorities deploy mobile teams to assess needs and assist those refugees most in need. For many, even registered refugees, it remains difficult to access public services such as education and healthcare because of problems related to registering with local authorities and language barriers.<sup>12</sup>



## FAIRNESS & DISCRIMINATION

Both Afghan and Syrian participants tended to report that their respective nationalities face more difficulties in Turkey gaining access to social benefits, financial assistance, and medical treatment. Some consider all refugees to have an equally difficult situation. A male Syrian participant in Gaziantep explained that the temporary protection status given to Syrians means that Syrians are treated neither “as refugees nor guests,” which often leads to confusion among refugees regarding their status. Another Syrian participant in Gaziantep told the story of how she had to claim to be Palestinian in order to be granted access to a UNHCR office and be able to register. One Syrian participant in Istanbul suggested that the treatment of Syrians could vary by region in Turkey, as she heard that some asylum-seekers of other nationalities pose as Syrians in order to expedite their claims.

A common suggestion among participants was that agencies and authorities should work to clarify and ease difficulties regarding legal procedures for refugees, including registration and the application for a kimlik. Other recommendations focused on assimilation and harmony between Turkish people and refugees. Female Syrian participants in Gaziantep, for example, suggested that the Turkish government or aid organisations provide

Arabic lessons for Turkish people who are generally quite interested in learning Arabic. These lessons could help strengthen the relationship between refugees and Turkish citizens, they said.

Most of the participants noted that the situation for refugees in Turkey is difficult for everyone, but that women may have a more difficult time than men. Afghan female participants in Istanbul remarked that women have more responsibilities and require more protection than men – for example, men can sleep anywhere with fewer concerns about personal safety. This unfortunately supports our findings from the survey conducted in Istanbul where some women report that they feel unsafe because of instances of assault and harassment directed specifically at women and single mothers.<sup>13</sup> Female Afghan participants in Istanbul said that the pressures put on women in the workplace are especially difficult, and many of them have not even attempted to search for work because they do not think they will be able to cope. Though this was in Gaziantep, female respondents interviewed in April and May 2017 report that some of them are unable to take Turkish lessons due to a lack of time, which for some is largely because they are responsible for taking care of their children at home.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, *ECHO Factsheet – Turkey—July 2017* (ECHO, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 19.





## AWARENESS AND FAIRNESS OF CASH ASSISTANCE

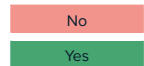
Of all 36 participants in the focus group discussions, only one woman reported receiving cash assistance, saying it “is a small amount of money, like pocket money. But less is better than nothing. If they raise the amount, it would be better.” One other participant said that he receives money to help him pay his university fees, but he did not say the source of the scholarship. Several of the female Syrian participants in Gaziantep mentioned applying for cash cards distributed by the Turkish Red Crescent Society, but none of them receive cash assistance at this time.

“[CASH ASSISTANCE] IS A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY, IT’S LIKE POCKET MONEY. BUT LESS IS BETTER THAN NOTHING. IF THEY RAISE THE AMOUNT IT WOULD BE BETTER. EVERYONE HAS [THEIR] OWN EXPENSES”

Findings from the surveys in April/May 2017 showed mixed awareness of cash transfer programmes, with fewer refugees in Gaziantep and Kilis knowing about cash-based assistance to refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants than in Istanbul (Figure 4). In the focus group discussions, of those who said they are aware, the distribution of cash transfers was deemed to be unfair. Female Syrian participants in Gaziantep explained that aid organisations tend to target poor neighbourhoods and

areas, rather than individuals. One participant told a story in which she was forced to leave a poor neighbourhood out of concern for the safety of her daughters in a rough area, but then was unable to continue receiving aid despite her need.

Are you aware of cash transfers provided to refugees and asylum-seekers?<sup>15</sup>



Location (values in %)



Figure 4: Awareness of cash transfers

Combined with this criticism is that aid agencies are out of touch with those in the most need of assistance and therefore it often tends to go to less needy individuals or families while some who meet the eligibility requirements are left out. Suggestions for improving aid distribution included: better organisation to ensure fair provision of assistance on the basis of need, regularly conducting needs assessments, improving coordination across geographic locations, and coordination between organisations.



## AWARENESS OF LEGAL OPTIONS

Participants have mixed responses about whether they feel informed about resettlement options in a third country or staying in Turkey. Some of the female Syrian participants in Istanbul say they have heard that resettlement is an option but they are not sure of the requirements or how to apply. Afghan men and women in Istanbul said they were told about resettlement as an option, but that processing takes a long time. Two female Syrian participants in Gaziantep say they have applied for resettlement and are awaiting a response.

Afghan men and women in Istanbul were the only respondents who indicated that they have sufficient information about their refugee status or temporary protection standing. All of the Syrian participants discussed their confusion about their status. One woman in Istanbul explained that constantly changing laws make the situation for refugees unclear and unstable. The divide in understanding legal options was also evident in the survey data, where Afghans in Istanbul feel they have a better understanding of their resettlement options or staying in Turkey than Syrians (Figure 5).

<sup>15</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 12; “Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey” (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 12.



**Do you understand your options to stay in Turkey or apply for resettlement in another country?<sup>16</sup>**

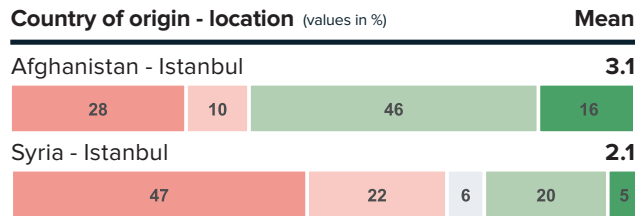


Figure 5: Information about settlement or further movement

As with information about available services, participants predominantly seek information about settlement and status from social media and word-of-mouth, but question the credibility of these sources. Some Syrian males in Gaziantep said that they also get information from brokers, or third-party/black market service providers. Again, participants voiced their frustration over the lack of official sources of trustworthy information. Suggested information channels include face-to-face counselling, information centres, and text messages.



## SOCIAL SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION

Some participants described feeling welcome in Turkey, while others did not. Findings from the April/May survey were generally positive (Figure 6). All female Syrians and two males in Gaziantep feel that Syrians are not welcome in Turkey, despite their efforts to assimilate. Several say they are often ridiculed in public.

**Do you feel welcomed by Turkish people in your neighbourhood?<sup>17</sup>**

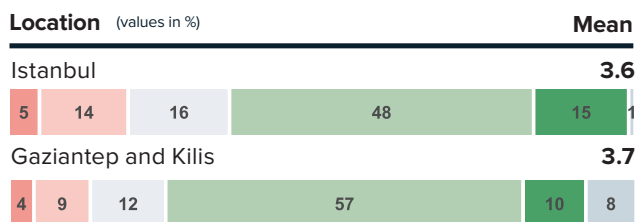


Figure 6: Relationship with host community

public transportation gave them hateful looks or seemed to discriminate against them. Many participants also talked about workplace discrimination, in which they are made to work harder and for less pay than their Turkish counterparts. Sometimes, their employers even withhold their salaries because they know there is no legal recourse for them without a *kimlik*.

Participants in Gaziantep recommended setting up centres for holding joint activities among Syrians and Turks, which could double as a resource centre that would offer Turkish courses for refugees and Arabic lessons for Turks. In both locations, many also suggest kickstarting awareness campaigns that would promote a more positive relationship between Turkish people and refugees, highlighting the similarities between their cultures and opening a dialogue about the difficulties each party experiences in order to promote empathy. These campaigns are also said to be needed to quash falsehoods being spread about refugees and highlight the potential benefits that they can bring to Turkish society.

Focus groups conducted in Istanbul produced more mixed results. Those who do feel welcome say this is because of the kindness of the Turkish people with whom they have interacted. Some participants give examples of Turkish neighbours supplying home goods and food. One Afghan female participant in Istanbul said that her neighbours hire her to clean their apartment because they know she is in need of work, and that they are kind to her. Those in Istanbul who do not feel welcome mainly cite incidents in which Turkish people in shops or on

Participants were split over whether the relationship between Turkish people and refugees has changed in recent years. Some said it has stayed the same, while others insisted it has deteriorated; no one indicated an improvement in the relationship. Those who say the relationship has deteriorated explained that tensions have increased in Turkey as refugees remain in the country longer and as more refugees arrive. One Syrian female in Gaziantep says that relations with refugees have soured in recent years due to competition for jobs.

<sup>16</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 14; "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ground Truth Solutions and Mixed Migration Platform, "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Istanbul, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 20; "Refugee, Asylum-Seeker and Migrant Perceptions in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey" (Ground Truth Solutions, June 2017), 18.



“THERE WAS SOME SYMPATHY FOR SYRIANS FOUR YEARS AGO, BUT THAT HAS NOW CHANGED.”

Some participants also pointed to the problem of sensational media that features a few individual refugees who commit crimes, which could cause Turkish people to wrongly generalise about refugees as a group.



## OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for humanitarian agencies and authorities based on findings from the focus group discussions:

- ✓ Ensure better access to information, particularly on housing, employment, language courses, and cash support preferably through information centres and face-to-face consultations;
- ✓ Provide tailored counselling for refugees seeking work or accommodation, and possibly short-term free housing for vulnerable individuals like single and young mothers;
- ✓ Provide access to legal advice to improve understanding of the asylum procedure and application process for documents like the *kimlik*;
- ✓ Review the targeting of in-kind support and cash assistance in consultation with refugees;
- ✓ Encourage locals and refugees to interact, practice the local language, and learn about each other’s cultures;
- ✓ Kickstart awareness campaigns to promote more positive relationships among locals and refugees.

## NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

### Background

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

### Development of survey and focus group instruments

Ground Truth Solutions designed these focus group discussions to gather feedback from refugees and asylum-seekers about the provision of humanitarian aid in Turkey. The aim is to help guide humanitarian agencies and local authorities in creating more effective and responsive aid programmes. Focus group discussions were designed to delve deeper into some of the issues that surfaced in the surveys conducted in April and May 2017.

### Sample size

A total of 36 people took part in the focus group discussions in Istanbul and Gaziantep.

### Sampling methodology

Six focus group discussions were conducted; three with only male participants, and three with only female

participants. Focus groups conducted with Syrian female and male participants in Gaziantep were conducted at a youth community centre. The Syrian males interviewed in Gaziantep were recruited through a volunteer group where they all work. Afghan male and female participants in Istanbul were randomly selected by enumerators as they walked along the seaside through parks and in cafes. Discussions were held in these public spaces. Interviews with male and female Syrians in Istanbul were held in private spaces – a participant’s back garden or a facilitator’s apartment. These individuals were contacted through the enumerators’ existing networks.

### Language of the surveys

The focus group discussions were conducted in Arabic and Dari, depending on the country of origin of the participants.

### Data collection

Focus group discussions were conducted until all issues had been discussed. Participants were made aware of their choices to not participate or skip questions that were difficult or uncomfortable to answer. No financial incentives were given for participation. Data was collected between 20 and 23 July 2017 by an independent data collection company contracted by Ground Truth Solutions.

**For more information about Ground Truth Solutions surveys in Turkey, please contact Elias Sagmeister (Programme Manager – [elias@groundtruthsolutions.org](mailto:elias@groundtruthsolutions.org)) or Andrew Hassan (Programme Analyst – [andrew@groundtruthsolutions.org](mailto:andrew@groundtruthsolutions.org)).**





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