Brief situational analysis

Protracted conflict, instability and underdevelopment has perpetrated longstanding displacement and migration flows out of Afghanistan toward Europe. Irregular migrants from Afghanistan generally take one of two routes to Western Europe, namely the Eastern Mediterranean or the Western Balkans Route. Both of these frequently used routes expose migrants to protection risks ranging from death to physical assault to theft, perpetrated not only by irregular actors such as smugglers, but also by border forces.

Brief summary of objectives and methodology

It can be challenging for migrants to access services along the route; many arrived migrants indicate that they had almost no access to services for long stretches while travelling. The reasons for poor access to services along the route are not well understood. This study aims to improve understanding of factors affecting access to services for Afghan migrants and refugees travelling along the Eastern Mediterranean Route and the western Balkans routes. It is part of a larger effort by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) to develop a social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) campaign to support potential Afghan migrants and refugees to adopt behaviours that maximize safety and avoid protection risks. The findings are based on the results of a literature review and primary data collection: 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrants and service providers across Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria and Serbia.

Summary of key findings

What services are available and in which locations?

Access to services varies strongly according to country, so no generalisations can be made about the route as a whole.

In Iran, Afghans requiring support must be enrolled in a government system (Amayesh) to receive services. For those who are documented, access to health, accommodation and education is possible; access to GBV services is poor. For undocumented migrants, access to education and accommodation is good, but access to health, legal and protection support is poor. The NGO footprint in Iran is small and those who are present are highly regulated. Migrants generally rely on the large community of Afghans resident in Iran for access.

In Turkey, migrants can apply for international protection with the Directorate of Migration Management; in case migrants do apply for protection, they must live in satellite cities rather than major urban centres. For those who are documented, access to primary health and legal services is good, though access to secondary health is poor. For those who are undocumented, almost no services are accessible. The gap in services is particularly noticeable in Van, located across the border from Iran, which is the first stopping point for most migrants. The lack of available services for Afghans is particularly acute because most of the humanitarian presence in Turkey is geared toward Syrians, and there is no central referral system.

In Bulgaria, registration is a prerequisite for access to government services, but the government actively deters asylum seekers. If registered, Afghans must live in transit centres; those who live outside forfeit their right to services. Conditions are poor, and separate centres for unaccompanied and separated children are not available. There are information centres to support migrants at key points along the route, although there is no central referral system.

In Serbia, services for migrants and refugees are managed and coordinated by the Republic of Serbia (ROS) through five Asylum and 11 Reception/Transit Centres; two centres are for children. Approximately, 80% of migrants and refugees attempting to pass through Serbia register and gain access to a centre; the centres provide basic services to a reasonable standard. Access to secondary services usually requires the support of NGOs. There is a centralised referral system and a one-stop-shop approach which is well known to migrants and appears reasonably effective. Translation services and PSS services are both however in need of improvement.

What affects perception of need among actors?

Understanding of migrant issues and needs is very low, not only among service providers, but also among migrants themselves. At an overall level, this study finds that there is a critical mismatch between the services requested by migrants and those that civil society is able to provide. The mismatch revolves around three factors:

- Immediate needs, medium term services. Interviewees spoke almost exclusively about needs for food, water, shelter and security during border crossings, and need for emergency health services to recover from injuries sustained during the border crossing. On the other hand, service providers tend to focus on medium and long term services, and to place emphasis on providing shelter, translation, and information. These services are not perceived as critical when migrants face immediate, short term issues.

- Desire for support in irregular travel, capacity to support integration. Migrants and refugees perceive that their primary need is to reach their destination and as such the service that is in greatest demand is help to travel and continue along their irregular route. Service providers, on the other hand, want to support regularisation and integration. They want migrants to access psychosocial support, legal aid, education, employment and language lessons aimed at facilitating integration and recovery.

- Border areas vs transit hubs. Migrants and refugees would like to have access to emergency services during the crossing. However, there is a trend away from services being available in the border areas, and towards them being available at transit hubs. This is due to the militarisation of borders, and policy measures undertaken by host governments.

What affects access to services?

Governments

Governments play a key role in structuring services and controlling access for migrants. They set the rules and govern the environment in which services are provided. Government policies can reflect attitudes of host communities.

- **Status**. Having some form of documentation is essential to gain adequate access to services in all the focus countries. With the exception of Iran, there is a registration system in all countries that is theoretically open to all asylum seekers, but in practice, there are often efforts made by state authorities to deter Afghans seeking to register. The fear of arrest linked to their irregular status places migrants and refugees in a paradoxical situation that increases their vulnerabilities. They are too scared to approach authorities, which greatly reduces their knowledge about their rights and how to access them.

- **Host Government and Donor Priorities**. Host government and donor priorities heavily impact the locations and type of services available to Afghans. Host government policies govern access to services for migrants and refugees along the route; donors (both individuals and countries) determine the funding available to service providers to provide activities.

Service providers

Service providers catering to migrants often also play a role in supporting access to services. In many situations, service providers are structured to provide services in large scale responses, and find it difficult to tailor their modes of delivery to small-scale flows of vulnerable migrants.

- **Vulnerability criteria**. Vulnerability criteria typically privilege certain groups like single women, single parents, large family, people with disabilities, and the elderly. The use of vulnerability criteria effectively excludes single men from any material support in Iran and Turkey. The ways in which these criteria work are not broadly understood by migrants, and can engender distrust.

- **Complexity**. Afghan migrants and refugee respondents reported being easily discouraged by difficult or negative interactions with service providers, especially women. Paradoxically, the more services exist, the harder it is for migrants and refugees to navigate the system effectively. The three things that migrants and refugees successfully used to address this issue were engaging with referral services, service centres, and hotlines.

- **Language**. Language difficulties can lead to refugees being turned away from services, resulted in miscommunication and misunderstanding of their needs, and lack of appropriate follow up. lack of appropriate translation and interpretation services is reported by migrants and service providers to be a major barrier to accessing services.

Individual

Individual migrant characteristics and experiences may also affect access to services. Migrants are not all the same: they have differential access to funds and information, experiences along the route, and demographic factors.

- **Trauma**. The protection risks facing Afghans travelling irregularly and the resulting trauma are well-documented. The impact of psychological trauma manifests in two key ways: avoidance behaviours and distrust of others. Trauma compounds access challenges, including additional difficulties navigating services, distrust of service providers and interpreters, and more complex medical conditions

- **Money**. In any country, if there are no bureaucratic or legal obstacles, money buys access to services; whether through the ability to bribe public officials or to pay for private services. Those with the means have the expectation that they will be able to purchase services en route.

- **Nationality and ethnicity**. Discriminatory access to services happens both as a side effect of practices designed to frustrate migrants and refugees attempts to seek asylum, as well as through lack of appropriate outreach and accessibility services.

- **Information**. The level of knowledge among respondents about how services work and their rights as refugees or asylum seekers is staggeringly low. Retrospectively, those that had reached Europe or were stranded for a long period, reported that it would have been good to have this information pre-departure. However, at the start of their journey the majority do not think they will need to access services because their smuggler has promised a quick, safe trip.

Who influences migrant opinions?

The question of who is able to influence migrants and refugees to change their behaviour and how they achieve it, is a complex one. It is not simply a matter of making accurate information available. However, it is rather a question of whether the information is able reach them through a trusted source, and if they have the agency or resources to act on it.

- **Family, friends and other migrants**. For both Afghan men and women, the most trusted sources of information about migration are friends and family in other countries and Afghanistan, as well as returned migrants. Family and peers are influential to the extent that they are the main information source, but migrants and refugees demonstrated that they did realise that the information was often not correct.

- **Smugglers**. Migrants and refugees demonstrate an initial high degree of trust in their smuggler, and this can be quite hard to shift. However, most interviewees lost trust in smugglers after their first or second border crossing, with many saying that the denial of promised services such as food, water, shelter and protection was a key factor.

- **Service Providers**. There is a clear link between migrant and refugee trust in a service provider and their willingness to access the service. As discussed previously, migrants and refugees favour word-of-mouth communication and information received through family and peers. Therefore, service providers are best able to influence the attitudes of migrant and refugees towards their services by ensuring that those who do come in contact with them have a positive experience, including making sure that they understand aspects like selection criteria.

- **Host Community**. Host communities can have a significant influence through their support of political decisions and public policies that impact access, and through their ability to create a safe and welcoming environment. Unfortunately, there is evidence of negative trends for both. In all locations, interviewees reported negative interactions with members of host communities.