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OVERVIEW

# Asylum Seekers in the European Union:

## Building Evidence to Inform Policy Making



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## Overview

### The need to build evidence

Policy needs to be informed by facts: the more that is known about those who may be affected, the more realistic and achievable a policy's goals will be. However, while there have been massive movements of people across borders in recent years, many entering the European Union (EU), there is little systematic data about them available. Most of the evidence that is available is anecdotal and journalistic; it deals primarily with the tragedies of migrants in transit rather than providing hard data on which policy-makers can base policies.

In 2015 and 2016, migrant flows into the EU surged, with Greece and Italy the main entry points. Many of the migrants applied for international protection in Europe, becoming asylum seekers. This spike in EU asylum seekers, as well as the increasing numbers of those granted refugee status, brought a need for information on who they are—their sociodemographic characteristics; their education and work experience; their experience on the journey to Italy and Greece; and what it cost them not only financially but also physically and emotionally to get there.

This study took a rigorous approach to ensure that it produced hard data to support policy decisions—decisions made not only in receiving countries but also in countries of origin and transit. The first step, in early 2017, was to survey adults in asylum centers in Greece and Italy, to learn more details about them and about their experience on the journey. The study made two novel contributions:

an assessment of skills through a computer-based literacy test comparable to the OECD adult literacy test, and an evaluation of the respondents' symptoms of anxiety and depression. The skills assessment complements the self-reported educational attainment data. The screening of anxiety and depression has implications for how asylum seekers can be helped to adapt to new situations.

### Who are the asylum seekers?

The asylum seekers in Greece are different from those in Italy. Those in Greece mostly came as families from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, and Afghanistan and, based on past EU recognition rates, are more likely to be granted international protection status. Those in Italy were mainly single young men, a large share from West Africa, with many facing a low probability of being granted any legal status in Europe.

The journey to the EU followed a few main routes: through Niger for West Africans or Sudan for East Africans on their way to Libya to make the sea crossing to Italy; or through Turkey, passing through Iran for Afghans, to make the sea crossing to Greece. The journey was much longer for those in Italy, who spent about a month and a half in each of about three main transit points, compared to over a week in each for those in Greece. Particularly on the routes towards Italy, asylum seekers encountered violence in transit—that happened to nearly half of those in Italy, even before the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean in inflatable boats.

Where there are data for comparison, it appears that many of the asylum seekers surveyed were wealthier than those who stayed at home and did not migrate—a finding that is perhaps not surprising considering that for Sub-Saharan Africans the average cost of the journey was about three years of income for a person living in extreme poverty.

However, not all moved directly from their country of origin to the EU. Some had previously settled in third countries, such as Libya and Iran, before embarking on a second migration journey. For example, one in five asylum seekers in Italy was one of these “secondary movers.” Of those, 43 percent were Sub-Saharan Africans who had been living in Libya and departed when Libya itself erupted in conflict. For many Sub-Saharan Africans, the conflict likely turned Libya from a destination into a transit country. Among those in Greece, about one in four were secondary movers, mostly Afghans who had been living in Iran (of whom about a third had been born there) and Syrians who had been living in Turkey.

Asylum seekers in Greece and Italy had on average low levels of education—only 32 percent of those in Italy and 29 percent in Greece had completed secondary school or above. In most cases, this reflects the education levels in their countries of origin.

Many asylum seekers speak a European language, usually English; 80 percent of those in Italy and 45 percent in Greece speak at least one. Many Sub-Saharan Africans, of course, come from countries where English, French, or Portuguese are official languages. The literacy test, administered in official languages by country of origin, found that in general asylum seekers have limited proficiency in the designated language. Not surprisingly, the better-educated did better in the literacy assessment. It is worth noting that the literacy profiles of asylum seekers do not differ from those of other migrants who have settled in Europe for the past

five years. In other words, they were similar to recent migrants already living in Europe.

A large share of asylum seekers in Italy, about 62 percent, had work experience. Among those who had held a job, most had worked in basic occupations, like construction and agriculture, before arriving in Italy and nearly 70 percent did some work in transit. Many West Africans worked without pay during the journey. Among those in Greece, work experience was minimal, partly because of gender gaps in employment: the population of asylum seekers there is more balanced between men and women, and about 70 percent of the women from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, and Afghanistan had no work experience. Overall, younger asylum seekers (18–25) are less likely to have ever had a job, possibly because they have only recently entered the labor market.

Anxiety and depression can affect the ability of asylum seekers to exploit their abilities. Instances of mental distress were widespread, possibly caused by a combination of stresses back home, during their journey, and in waiting for a decision in asylum centers. About 70 percent of the asylum seekers in Greece and almost 50 percent of those in Italy showed elevated levels of severe mental distress.

## Insights into Policy

While a comprehensive policy agenda on migration and forced displacement is beyond the scope of this report, the evidence presented here—based on a large representative sample of adult asylum seekers in Italy and Greece in 2017—can help inform policymaking:

- A response to the European influx of migrants needs to combine humanitarian with development approaches, particularly when there is a context of protracted conflict in countries

of origin. But the same can be said for those not coming from conflict settings: despite the financial, physical, and emotional difficulties of their journey, many still make the journey. It is important to thoroughly understand and tackle the vulnerabilities that had confronted people in their countries of origin or where they had initially settled. This is critical in efforts to find sustainable resolutions of migration flows. In other words, whether or not they come from countries in conflict, asylum seekers tend to come from circumstances where, from their point of view, despite the costs and dangers of the journey to Europe, the opportunities to be attained were worth the risk.

- The design of interventions to help these people lead productive lives—either in Europe for the many who will be granted protection or in their countries of origin for those who will return—can be informed by findings on education and skills. Delivery of schooling or training and promotion of their engagement in the labor market as part of EU integration policies, for example, need to be adapted to their initial skills and, importantly, to the needs of the labor market that is expected to absorb them.
- The support that these asylum seekers need goes beyond traditional interventions. The anxiety and depression findings, which provide an important policy-relevant dimension, make it clear that the mental health of many in the groups studied is compromised. The asylum process can offer a unique opportunity for early identification and intervention; certainly, those in asylum centers could benefit directly from targeted psychological support.

This report, then, contributes to knowledge of aspects of migration and forced displacement, but much more has yet to be learned.

First, the response by Governments, civil society, development partners, and other stakeholders will require reinforcement of the evidence base, so that the response can be adapted to changes in the situation and to support more effective interventions. The difficulties of collecting the information needed to support policies that affect transient and vulnerable populations are obvious—among them resolving methodological and ethical considerations—and they apply in many countries worldwide that have had to deal with large migrant populations and forced displacement. Efforts to collect data and build evidence need to be sustained, both by systematic collection of administrative data and by survey work that also profiles host communities.

Second, additional data collection and analysis would be valuable for (1) comparing EU host community data with refugee, asylum seeker, or other migrant data to analyze impacts on host communities and attitudes toward migrants of all types; (2) profiling asylum seekers and refugees in other EU countries with special attention to vulnerable groups and on countries where earlier there were large influxes of migrants; (3) exploring how to capitalize on current data collection efforts, particularly administrative, to capture more timely policy-relevant information; and (4) evaluating the cost-effectiveness of policies as they are being considered and after they are adopted, such as integration policies, transit country measures to curb the flows, and roll-out of voluntary return packages.