



So many questions – too many answers? The transparency of the German asylum and admissions system for refugees

Summary

Refugees are not normally able to prepare themselves for their country of destination. Once they have arrived they quickly need to learn what rules apply, which bodies are responsible for what, as well as what rights and duties they have. Knowing all these things is crucial for them to be able to cooperate with the asylum and admissions process. The more refugees know about the asylum and admissions system, the more empowered they become in their actions. That, in turn, takes the pressure off the support system. Little research has so far been done on how much refugees in Germany know about the asylum and admissions system and what that is contingent on. That is what the SVR Research Unit and the Robert Bosch Stiftung set out to investigate.

As part of a study on the situation of refugees living in Germany, interviews were conducted with 62 asylum seekers who had recently arrived in Germany. The Policy Brief on the transparency of the asylum and admissions system is based on the results of these qualitative interviews. It looks at three aspects: (1) rules, legal bases and criteria; (2) processes and timeframes; and (3) the involved actors and their competences. **The study shows that refugees often know very little about all three.**

One of the reasons for this is that the statutory provisions on which the asylum procedure, admissions process and social participation are based are extremely complex. Even governmental and non-governmental actors sometimes find them hard to fathom. What is more, Germany's federal states (*Länder*) and local authorities tend to interpret federal laws differently, making the rules appear even more inconsistent and incomprehensible for refugees. In addition, refugees see a great many different governmental and non-governmental actors (incl. public authorities, educational institutions, advisory services and civil society organisations). That often makes it hard for them to know who is responsible for what and who their points of contact are.

The answer is not necessarily to simply provide refugees with more options for receiving advice and information, as they still first need to find these sources, decide whether they are trustworthy and then understand the information they are given. **The better the networks of organisations and individuals involved in the process are, the easier it is for refugees to see how the various services and measures are dovetailed.**

The study also found that many actors have in recent years compiled information for refugees which is available in hard copy or online. However, providing written information can be no substitute for personalised advice and must form an integral part of advisory services. Nevertheless, one-to-one counselling interviews can be very demanding for all sides: language barriers make things especially difficult at the start. Advisers need to have both specialist know-how and the relevant communication and intercultural skills. The right training courses



are often still not available, though. Providing good advisory services also takes time, which is often in short supply.

Various measures can help refugees to better understand the asylum and admissions system. The Policy Brief includes the following recommendations for action:

- The federal states and local authorities should use their leeway when it comes to interpreting federal legislation in the refugees' interests and ensure that the regulations they apply are as coherent as possible. They could better coordinate their activities or share best practices in appropriate forums.
- Language barriers should be broken down even more. Refugees should, for instance, have early access to language courses, regardless of their country of origin and residence status. Information leaflets and in-person counselling interviews should be available in all the relevant languages.
- The various governmental and non-governmental actors should cooperate more closely. Wherever possible they should establish single points of contact to make it easier for refugees to access information and services.
- Written information material should be structured and standardised. It must also be regularly updated.
- Finally, the various bodies involved in the asylum and admission process should have the staff, expertise and communication skills they need to be able to provide refugees with appropriate information and advice. Advisory and support services should not be cut too drastically just because fewer refugees are currently arriving in Germany.