

# Ask the People

**A consultation with migrants and refugees  
by migrants and refugees in Europe**

**By The European Migrant Advisory Board**

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## Introduction

“Ask the People” is a consultation process organized by the European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB) which involved over 500 newcomers in seven countries, between September and December 2018. EMAB is a self-led group of advisors with immigrant and refugee-background, initiated by the [Partnership](#) on the Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees under the Urban Agenda for the EU. The board works to provide advice to the Partnership, and increase the participation of immigrants and refugees in different policy-making processes affecting immigrants’ access to rights. (Annex 1)

The consultation had eight focus areas: Integration, Labour Market, Housing, Higher Education, Participation, Unaccompanied Minors, Microcredit and the EU Action Plan on Return. These topics were chosen by the board members as the key issues from their first-hand experiences, and also based on the priorities of the Partnership, and an analysis of the [European Agenda on Migration](#).

The geographical focus of the consultation reflects the city and country members of the Partnership, as well as the places where the EMAB members are based: Amsterdam, Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Helsinki, Italy and Portugal.

## Why “Ask The People”?

Since its establishment in March 2018, EMAB has sought to represent and defend the interests of migrants and refugees in Europe, by engaging in with policy makers and relevant stakeholders. EMAB wants to provide systematic input on key policy areas that affect the daily lives of migrants and refugees.

The members of EMAB were selected because they each in their individual capacities engage with refugee and migrant organizations and activism in the places where they live. The board aims to amplify the perspectives of refugees and migrants in policy debate, and contribute to bridging integration policy gaps by providing recommendations from the local and grass-roots level to the policy makers on local, national and European levels. With this consultation they have aimed to get wider inputs for the board’s advocacy with the Partnership and other European institutions.

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## Methodological Approach

The consultation comprised of an online survey with 265 respondents and local focus groups involving 260 people. Each section of questions from the survey and the focus group was designed by a group of members of EMAB, according to the expertise and profile of the members, as well as their first-hand experiences as refugees and migrants. All members implemented the same methodological approach in their local communities, decreasing the possible bias introduced in a survey with multiple facilitators and locations.

The **online survey** was shared through the networks of each board member and their organizations. The focus groups were conducted by the members in the locations where they currently live in. The initial aim was a multi-language survey, but after last minute technical problems, the results included here are only in English, which clearly limits the scope of the respondent base.

There were 265 online respondents, with 26.8% in Germany (mostly Berlin), 24.15% in Finland (mostly Helsinki), 15.4% in the Netherlands, 11.3% in Greece (mostly Athens), 10.6% in Italy, 5.3% in Spain, 1.9% in Portugal (Lisbon) and 15.9% based in other cities in Europe. From this sample, 52.7% have lived in their current location for less than three years, and 47.3% for more than three years. The respondents' come from more than 50 countries of origin including Somali (16.7%), Syria (15.2%), Afghanistan (8%), Iraq (5.1%), Iran (4.4%), Egypt (3.6%) and Sudan with (3.6%).

The board conducted 21 different **focus groups** which involved 260 participants, mostly between the ages of 20 to 45 years old, with migrant or refugee background, and currently living in the focus cities and countries (Greece, Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, Finland, Spain and Germany). Board members were given training in best practice for facilitating focus group meetings. Facilitators tried to get a gender and nationality balance where possible, and while most discussions were in English, there was scope for some translation and indigenous language contributions.

# Recommendations

## Housing

### General recommendations

- Housing should meet minimum standards required for dignified living
- Housing should be close to services and have good transportation links
- Housing allocation should contribute to the social integration of refugees and migrants, which includes mixed neighbourhoods, not migrant and refugee communities.
- Consider providing direct financial support for housing to families, rather than allocating housing, in order to foster dignity, initiative and autonomy

### Recommendations for local governments

- Local authorities should provide additional financial support for migrants and refugees for housing because the cycle of segregation is exacerbated when this group is subject to isolation and distanced from jobs and other services
- Where housing is only available in suburban areas, mobility support is required, including access to affordable public transport
- Address the stigmatization of neighbourhoods with social, cultural and educational activities that can create positive perceptions of the neighbourhood, such as inclusion activities, social marketing campaigns, activities that counter negative stereotypes of refugees and migrants and counter the refugee/migrant labelling
- Expand the criteria considered in house allocation systems to include access to services, transportation, vulnerable groups and interaction with host communities

## Integration policies

### Recommendations for local governments

- Bolster programs that improve interaction between the host community and newcomers
- Prioritise language learning to facilitate social and economic integration, and reduce misunderstandings with host communities
- Actively combat discrimination, including simplified mechanisms to report racist and discriminatory incidents
- Reduce language barriers to accessing public services by providing information in different languages for newcomers. This would allow a better orientation, integration and also compliance with local regulations

- Integration service providers should have more effective monitoring of private sector implementers that provide services such as training. Service providers should only work with those businesses that respect labour rights and do not exploit cheap or free labour of refugees and migrants

#### Recommendations for European Union and national governments

- Prioritize assistance to vulnerable refugees and migrants, particularly those who are living on the streets (in particular Greece and Italy)
- The EU, national and local governments should have clear benchmarks for integration that recognize the need for basic human dignity
- Improve access to asylum application services, including more accessible locations

## Employment

#### General recommendations

- Lower the language requirement for labour market entry, which will accelerate learning and economic independence
- Create new tools to provide a more sophisticated assessment of skills and experience, beyond the limited and flawed equivalency determinations
- Provide additional attention to assessments of women's skills and employment opportunities
- Highlight success stories through role models to inspire and motivate other newcomers
- Consider providing job coaching and vocational training in the language of clients as well as host communities, to facilitate access to labour market
- Simplify financial and technical support for refugees and migrants who want to start a new business
- Improve cooperation and communication between the national and municipal employment services (particularly in Spain)

#### Recommendations for local governments

- Ensure that integration officials work with clients to help to create a comprehensive and clear plan and timeline for skills development and access to internships or employment possibilities.
- Create an employment app and/or database which would enable newcomers to identify organizations that can provide assistance

## Unaccompanied minors

### General recommendations

- Ensure the transfer of unaccompanied minors to child reception centres upon arrival
- Ensure that minors are accompanied by a tutor or guardian during the age assessment in order to avoid any abusive situations, and investigate allegations of abuse
- Avoid relying only on the subjective assessment of one official to make age determinations
- Provide unaccompanied minors with guaranteed residency in the EU country in which they seek protection

### Recommendations for local governments

- Anticipate reception requirements for unaccompanied minors in planning and preparation since ad hoc responses can exacerbate vulnerability

### Recommendations for national governments

- Ensure that unaccompanied minors are provided upon arrival all necessary information regarding asylum processes, including how they can apply for family reunification
- Protect unaccompanied minors from arrest based on the legal status of their parents
- Strengthen policies regarding the protection rights of unaccompanied minors, in particular preventing them from being arrested at airports
- Accelerate the fair processing of cases of unaccompanied minors
- Improve communication between unaccompanied minors and authorities, including adequate interpretation

## Microcredit

### General recommendations

- Disseminate information on microcredit, through media, financial institutions and other networks, in multiple languages
- Simplify processes for obtaining a loan and requirements for guarantors

### Recommendations for local governments and civil society

- Ensure that training is provided to support migrants and refugees during the different stages of accessing microcredit (e.g. application, implementation and evaluation). Share information about such trainings with organizations providing entrepreneurship development services to migrants and refugees, as they would be in a position to provide appropriate support.

- Inform and support newcomers to access microcredit by providing workshops, sharing information and testimonies, etc.
- Ensure potential applicants have legal advice and support, including reassurance about negative impacts of a business failure (no effect on housing, asylum process, etc.)

## Higher education

### General recommendations

- Ensure information is available in multiple languages about education opportunities and requirements, ideally in places where they spend time and receive other support. Educational institutions should provide clear information about rules and technical issues students may face
- Improve access to language courses and consider free support for the most vulnerable groups
- Increase scholarships to refugee and migrant students as well as diversifying the programs
- Improve qualification recognition and equivalence processes in order to ensure that previous skills and competences are being taken into consideration. This would be particularly relevant for those with higher education from their home countries, who have access to certificates
- Expand tutor programs in universities so that each student can benefit from a supervisor
- Develop better support mechanisms for language tests (e.g. TOEFL).

### Recommendations for local governments

- Develop more programs for accelerated and short trainings. This will support the people who just need a refresher course in the desired field

### Recommendations for NGOs and civil society organisations

- Develop programs to allow learning through volunteer work, internships etc.

## Participation

### General recommendations

- Enhance the support provided by national and local governments and civil society to migrant/refugee's representative bodies and refugee-led organizations
- Encourage and facilitate women to seek greater involvement in political participation at all levels
- Carry out regular consultations with migrants and refugees and community organizations in order to inform policy-makers, especially prior to amending policies affecting their legal status or well-being

- Develop strategies and platforms to engage host communities and refugee groups in order to promote social cohesion and diversity
- Promote diversity and equal opportunities by nominating more women and young candidates from refugee backgrounds to positions in all levels in national and local governments, as well as civil society organizations ‘representing’ but not currently led by refugees and migrants
- Facilitate the establishment of platforms for refugees to make their voices heard in their host communities, especially on issues that matter to them such as basic services, education, health, and civil and political participation

## EU Action Plan on Return

### General recommendations

- Detention centres should be closed as this system is seen as a mechanism of oppression towards the refugees and migrants (in the words of participants the centres are “a weapon to scare people”);

### Recommendations for the EU and member states

- The EU and national governments should make greater diplomatic efforts to reduce and end conflicts in the country of origin;
- The EU should allocate more investment in integration than in forced return.

(See also concluding comments)

## Focus Group and Online Survey Results

This section provides detailed comments from the focus groups in each location, as well as a breakdown of online survey results by thematic issue.

### 1. Housing

There are very different housing conditions in the survey cities, though in terms of the critical impact of housing on newcomers' lives policies having wider ramifications on employment, mental health and livelihoods.

#### Online Survey Results

- 20.3% said they don't feel comfortable or dignified in their current place of residence
- 23.2% said that they were living far from jobs or other services needed for daily life
- Only 45.1% expressed having no fear of discrimination or racism in their current place of residence

#### Focus Group Results

In **Finland** the group expressed their satisfaction with their living conditions, but all were concerned with the high cost of rent which limits the ability to relocate and drains limited family savings. Respondents said that landlords could be reluctant to accept migrants and refugees as tenants, fearing complaints from neighbours or failure to manage rent payment. Some were concerned about the negative impact on integration prospects of being housed in a neighbourhood with many migrants and refugees (learning Finnish, interacting with locals), though others felt that it was helpful to be near people that speak their own language to help them integrate and access information that they all agree is otherwise hard to get in such neighbourhoods.

The general housing situation in **Germany** has a particular impact on the integration of refugees and migrants, allocating them to places outside of the city centre and therefore more distant from essential services. The reality for those living in camps shows a difficult balance between people from different cultural backgrounds and most people consulted have perceived or faced discrimination and/or racism since they are in this country.

In **Greece** levels of dissatisfaction was high, with respondents observing that it took up to 6 months to be allocated housing by the local authority, and that the housing assigned is usually far from services. The perception of discrimination in public services is very high.

*“There are thousands of people living on the streets or in squats in inhumane conditions as asylum services are very hard to reach”.*

In **Italy** the focus group explained that their options were staying with a family or going to a reception centre. Recent newcomers said that their current house is very far from services, which creates considerable difficulties in their daily life. There is active support from social housing projects and voluntary efforts, but financial conditions limit options. Affordable houses tend to be long distances from services which creates barriers to access education and health services. As consequence of location challenges or living in a reception centre, socialization and integration is limited to closer neighbours.

In the **Netherlands**, finding a house can take many months, given the limited affordable supply. Housing is arranged by the government, so respondents felt that their opinions and interests are not considered. There are more favourable allocations for certain categories, such as students and people with serious health problems. The allocation system means that many migrants and refugees are housed in neighbourhoods with few Dutch families, confining newcomers to socializing only with different diasporas, and limiting the possibility of integration into Dutch society. This can lead to feelings of not being welcome, and stereotypes of belonging to a certain neighbourhood (seen as “low social housing”) compound a sense of segregation and isolation. Respondents noted discriminatory comments, particularly when there are symbols of religious difference. It has a material impact on the ability to seek or accept certain jobs given the constraints of distance and expense of public transport. Language is pivotal for integration, with language learning impeded by the de facto housing segregation described above.

In **Portugal**, there are many challenges in housing for refugees. They are allocated free housing for 18 months, but many respondents said basic conditions were often lacking, including electricity and water supply, as well housing being located in areas with poor transport links or long distances from employment zones. There are also problems with social integration and security in the allocated areas. After 18 months refugees have to find another house and cover all their costs, which is extremely challenging, particularly when they've faced considerable hurdles to employment and social integration.

In **Spain** the group pointed to the difficulty of finding a house because of discriminatory attitudes and high prices. The cheapest flats are outside the city centre; therefore, immigration zones have been created making integration difficult. All participants know that it is important to have a network of contacts from their home country in order have a flat share, because the city centre is too expensive to live in without flat sharing. Housing location also plays a role in finding a job, not only because of the distance but also because of negative biases in job interviews when someone comes from a neighbourhood with many migrants and refugees.

*“Lately I’ve seen adverts of the landlords saying that rent is only available to Spanish people.” (34, man, migrant).*

*“I am convinced that migrants and refugees have problems in accessing housing”*

*“If you don’t have a good place to live and you have to move out of the apartment, it is always in an area where there is a lot of migration and when you do a job interview, they ask you where you live” (woman, 29, migrant).*

## 2. Integration

While all of the issues considered relate to integration, in this area people were asked general questions about their ability to integrate, including experiences of discrimination. In this overview one sees clearly that the language, the job integration and housing are key conditions for a successful integration.

### Online Survey Results

- 71% of the respondents are strongly dissatisfied with the integration services
- 81% want to see improvements in the quality of language courses with tailor made services
- 73% say the quality of skills assessment services for refugees and migrants is inadequate
- 63% believe improvements are needed in the quality and access to vocational and job training

### Focus Group Results

In **Finland**, the majority of those in the focus groups felt supported and given a chance to explain what they wanted. However, some said that they felt they couldn’t change their individual integration plan or felt that there was no flexibility in the government’s integration policies, or that they were afraid to question it (migrants and refugees often feel that they have no say in their integration process, especially in their first year after entering the new country). Some said the system made them feel that they could continue practicing their profession, others found the barriers to recognizing foreign education was too difficult and complicated. The requirement of a high Finnish language level made it almost impossible to apply to for work when they first arrive, or access education. Almost all highlighted the importance of receiving clear information about the integration system from government officials, given the chances of misinformation by fellow refugees and migrants. Overall participants seemed to be relatively satisfied with the city’s integration services.

In the focus group in **Germany (Berlin)** respondents said access to information is very scarce and only provided after some time living in the country, and also that it is given in only a few languages. The possibility of choosing language courses and choosing one’s own housing location contributes directly to the integration process (in a particularly negative way when migrants and refugees don’t socialize with locals and live very far from services and integration possibilities). The exchange and communication opportunities between migrants, refugees and locals is greater when living in the same community, allowing both “sides” to understand each other and easily integrate.

In **Greece**, the group expressed the feelings of being neglected and discriminated against in terms of the job market, social integration and particularly political participation. Almost all participants said that there

are no or very few integration courses available for their participation and all respondents believe that the first two or three years of support in terms of housing, language courses, vocational trainings and finally political rights and participation are necessary conditions for the integration of migrants and refugees.

In **Italy**, participants raised concerns about the promotion of assimilation as an integration, because integration can be successful whether or not it entails “assimilating” Most participants said that they still do not feel integrated, and find it hard to imagine that scenario, because they face frequent discrimination, making it hard to feel respected and therefore included in society. Access to information and support with integration services was evaluated as very poor. Employment integration is mentioned as a key factor to enable the financial autonomy of migrants and refugees which would lead to better recognition, less dependency, which would also reduce sources of conflict. Respondents made very strong expressions of sadness, humiliation and dissatisfaction when asked about discrimination:

*"Discrimination is a daily experience for me and for my fellow migrants and refugees whether in schools, hospitals, on the streets, in trains, buses... in my neighborhood people will be looking at me and start whispering. Sometimes they verbally attack me, saying 'why can't I remove this headscarf and be part of the human race,' and this makes me feel bad in a way I can't even express."*

In the **Netherlands**, all participants agreed that their integration experience varies by the service in question, their location, and the age category of the respondent. For people aged 18-27, you can have direct assistance from the municipality, where the person can ask questions about study, work, and language centres. For those who are older than 27, getting information or access to services is harder, because there is less access to assistance from municipal workers. All participants agreed that their municipality should provide information in their native language, especially in the first year of their arrival. At the moment, newcomers in the Netherlands receive official letters from the municipality about integration only in Dutch. Participants pointed out that integration is not only about learning language or adopting the Dutch culture but also access to dignified employment opportunities.

For the focus group in **Portugal**, most of the participants shared the same opinion that the access and quality of the integration process for migrants and refugees are not satisfactory despite some efforts. One problem is bureaucracy and the delay of acquiring legal documents like the resident card, and a social security number (refugees faced more difficulties than migrants in this particular process). Most of the refugees from the focus group and acquaintances of the group didn't have access to Portuguese classes (access to useful information is hard), which for many meant 18 months Similarly respondents described not yet having accessed health support including access to the hospitals.

In **Spain**, all participants said they feel integrated, but they expressed frustration that they always have to answer uncomfortable questions in their schools and to neighbours regarding their origin. They believe that there are differences in the integration of people who have documentation versus those who do not have documentation. They also believe that there is no integration in the labour market, because they believe that immigrants always do the same jobs, and that the media should encourage multiculturalism

in the city. For part of the group consulted in Catalonia, their integration was easy because they came to Barcelona at the age of study, so they had to learn Catalan, and there are centres for immigrants to learn. Another part of the respondents commented that their integration was not good because they could not get qualified work. They value the integration and reception courses positively because they say that migrants and refugees have an idea of Barcelona or think it is easy, but when they arrived in the city, they realize that the most difficult challenge is to find a job and a place to live.

*“Barcelona is a multicultural city, there are many people who come from different places countries, but when I go to the bank, I do not see any women with hijabs, I only see them cleaning stairs or in the kitchen in Arab restaurants, that is not an inclusive city.”* (Woman, 30, migrant).

### 3. Employment

The labour market plays an essential role for those consulted in terms of dignity, financial autonomy, social integration and the overall process of integration in the host country. Learning the language and the process of recognition of qualifications is identified by the interviewees as two major conditions for a better process of job integration.

#### Online Survey Results

- 80.8% of the respondents have work permits and 65.8% are in employment.
- 54% of the people consulted were not aware of labour market programs for refugees and migrants and of those who were aware, 63% found it hard to access and/or understand.
- 65% are not satisfied with vocational training courses
- 71% are also not satisfied with the job coaching provided.
- For those out of work, 55% said they couldn't find any job and 63% couldn't find a job that matches their qualifications
- 50% found it difficult to find suitable work in their area of residence.

#### Focus Group Results

In **Finland**, all those who participated in the focus group have a job or are in a work orientation program. Regarding the people who work, only one expressed satisfaction with the job, while the others were not happy with the salary due to the high cost of living in the country. Regarding the labour market programs, participants feel quite satisfied, especially with those provided by the city government. The majority considered that the national employment service is not efficient as the local programs. Regarding the question about the need to find an adequate job, the participants consider that it is very important to learn the language, but at the same time, they commented that the required level is too high which often limits access to better jobs. Finally, one aspect to highlight from the focus group in Finland is that they felt negative stereotypes of immigrants reduced their prospects for employment.

In **Germany (Berlin)**, almost half of the consulted group had no work permit which prevented them to access any job integration program (with a small part of the group not knowing the existence of such programs). A parallel challenge in the perspective of the group is the language which is stated by participants as a complicated learning process that needs more time than the learning courses offer, especially for those with language barriers.

More interaction with locals and free support for language learning were highlighted by participants as benefitting integration in the labour market.

In the case of **Greece and Italy**, participants shared very similar experiences, with participants in the focus group working long hours (12-14 hours a day), with low salaries, leaving no space for social integration and other activities. The employment sectors where they were able to find work were low skilled jobs such as cleaning, washing cars and delivery. The people who participated in the focus group who do not have work commented that it is difficult to live, and the others who work do it in informal jobs and without security (such as social security or insurance). When asked about work orientation programs, most had not experienced such courses, which were seen as providing access to what one respondent described as “jobs that the Italians don’t want to do”. Another important aspect in labour market access is the language and the group suggested it would be helpful to create centres of skills recognition and abilities, which would help them find jobs more suited to their skills and previous work experiences. Along with language barriers, they felt that it is important that the environment is not discriminatory or racist. The majority agree that there should be career guidance programs where there is a relationship between job offers with skills and competencies of each person.

In the **Netherlands**, one third of the people who participated in the focus group are working part-time, but they emphasized that these jobs do not correspond to their professional experience. Some also pointed out that the job search process in the Netherlands is slow, in comparison with their countries of origin, because they need a network of social and employment contacts to look for work. Another important aspect is that there is a lack of motivation among the participants, because they feel that the job search process is not focused on the recognition of their skills and abilities, but rather focuses on ending social assistance and ensuring financial independence. Economically, this means that they are forced to take low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Finally, and with respect to the people with low educational qualifications, they said they cannot access the job search courses because they are not adapted to their needs and they need more time, which the municipality cannot offer.

*“Integration is not only about learning a language or adapting yourself to the Dutch culture, it is about getting the right economic opportunities.”*

In **Portugal** refugees have problems finding jobs, mainly because the administrative situation makes them “lose” one year by requiring them to get the residence card before they can legally work. Adding to this problem, language is another difficulty, with a need for more language courses in order to facilitate their integration into the labour market. Some participants said they didn’t know about the language courses

or job orientation centres or programs, which means they do not know where to look for work and where they can leave their CV, which decreases their chances of getting a job. The jobs they can access are generally low skill and with low salaries with hard conditions in their contract, so some of them expressed that it was through informal avenues (friends and NGOs) that they managed to find a job, especially in Lisbon.

In the focus group in **Spain (Barcelona)**, participants had short-term contracts only, in low skilled and low salary sectors (for example working in hotels as cleaning staff), which is becoming more competitive. “In cleaning there are always Dominicans, the immigrants do that work, we are many, and the competition is strong” (38-year-old woman). Participants stated the importance of learning Catalan to find a job, but that this was not sufficient to get better conditions. In general, the participants don’t feel content with their jobs, but they need a job to get documents. *“I am not happy, but I have a job and I can pay for my flat”* (29-year-old man).

*“The contact persons at the municipality often do not provide enough information about trainings that help access jobs. There is not enough attention paid to skills, experiences and wishes. Often an attempt is made to link people to work to get out of the social benefits. This means that talent and skills are lost.”*

*“We (refugees) are integrated when we get the job opportunities. For jobs, the most important thing is ‘networking.’ The more we meet with people and build up our network, the more job opportunities we can avail. In Netherlands you get the job with references that you make during networking.”*

## 4. Unaccompanied minors

### Online Survey Results

- 21.9% of participants arrived as a minor to their current city
- 62% of participants disagree or strongly disagree that they are protected and enjoying the same rights as EU minors.
- 35% of participants disagree or strongly disagree that they were provided with all the necessary information through a qualified cultural mediator during the process of age assessment.
- 43% of the participants experienced discrimination or racism while awaiting or during the age assessment.
- 52% of participants agree or strongly agree that they were accommodated in a place where adults are lodged while awaiting and during the age assessment.
- 37% of the participants were exposed to some risks while awaiting and during the age assessment.

### Focus Group Results

For the group from **Finland**, all the participants agreed that their experience was fearful because of the lack of family support and not knowing the new country. Some stated that they also felt excited about the “new world”. One participant said he came during winter time and was crying and afraid but felt excited about the snow and enjoyed playing outside because that way he could for a second feel “free of pain”. All said that there wasn’t an age assessment at the time they came to Finland. However, one participant said he did hear that now age assessments are done by authorities.

In **Italy**, the group said there was a long waiting time from the moment they arrived until they turned 18, while waiting in a reception centre to get the documents for an asylum application. The age assessment was described as an invasive body check without the presence of a translator.

*"When I arrived at the hospital the doctor told the interpreter to stay outside and then did the exam on my wrist and later told me to undress. I took my shirt off, but he told me to take off everything, even my underwear, and started touching my private parts. Then later he told me to get dressed and go outside, and he told the interpreter that the result will be sent to the reception center when it is ready. I felt terrible."*

In the **Netherlands**, some participants shared that the age was identified by documents, while others shared that the age assessment was done by a calculated guess. In some cases, participants were arrested at the airport until they were able to clarify their ages because they didn’t have any documents. Some participants said they felt that Syrians and Eritreans got on the ‘priority list’, and that refugees from other nationalities like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and others were scrutinized and were assessed more harshly. Seven out of eight participants said that interviewers lacked empathy towards the unaccompanied minors and lacked an understanding of how the experience of travelling alone through continents might have affected these children. Participants shared that once the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) officials makes a (subjective) judgement about an individual’s age, and that it becomes almost impossible to change the initial interview assessment about the age of the minor. If the assessment is not accurate, it can be problematic later. Five out of eight participants said that this method is based on ‘*guesstimation*’. Participants felt that sometimes when minors get a permit, IND deliberately delays their case until they become ‘adults’, so cannot invite their families to reunite. Seven out of eight participants said that while the system really takes care of minors as far as accommodation and education is concerned, the emotional well-being of the minors is not taken into account. All participants agreed that female children are the most vulnerable as they are a minority and at risk of trafficking, prostitution and harassment.

## 5. Microcredit

### Online Survey Results

- 11.6 % have heard about the availability of microcredit (small loans) for refugees & migrants.
- 33.4 of those who have heard about microcredit think that the information is enough and easy to access and understand

- 5,6 % of those who have heard about microcredit did apply for it.
- 69 % are interested to know more about microcredit.

### Focus Group Results

Microcredit is not a visible option for refugees and migrants consulted, as over 70% of those consulted in all focus groups were not aware of the existence of such an instrument. The microcredit programs known by a small percentage of the group are the general national programs of microcredit that have no specific conditions for a vulnerable community. Only in the case of Finland were respondents aware of employment services providing information about start-up businesses and its benefits.

In order to access microcredit and business kick-off it is necessary to have business partners and guarantors, which is challenging for refugees and migrants who have reduced networks (or a network mainly composed by migrants) and low economic strength in their networks and limited visibility of the migrant's past experiences, which leads to a lack of trust in their capacities.

Participants also spoke of the role of self-limitation and negative perceptions about their own capacities in the context of a new country where migrants and refugees are still not oriented, informed and respected. This reduces prospects of them having the required motivation to take on an initiative with potential risks. In the case of the group in Netherlands, they didn't see themselves as an eligible group for these programs.

In this situation of vulnerability and low self-confidence, reduced access to information, limited finances and weak social networks, combined with the fact that tax rates for microcredit have no special conditions for migrants and refugees, one can understand that effective conditions for accessing microcredit and starting a business are almost non-existent. Only 2% of those consulted online referred to a business venture. Only 11% of the participants were aware of the availability of the micro-credits as an option.

## 6. Higher education

### Online Survey Result

- 40 % have completed higher education at home country (bachelor, master or PhD).
- 38.9% who applied for qualification recognition received complete recognition of their previous qualifications.
- 29.3% experienced discrimination from other students, 29.2% from professors, 37.5% from university administrators
- 53.5% experienced language difficulties, and 34.9% faced challenges related to costs associated with studies.

## Focus Group Results

In **Portugal**, it was stated by several respondents that the integration in university depends on the professor and the course itself. If the professor wants to collaborate, things would be easy and simple, but sometimes lack of communication due to language barriers made the process of information and the integration harder than it should be. The challenge for this group was access to university, including finding scholarships, language courses, and the equivalence process (qualification document recognition).

In the **Netherlands**, focus groups felt that refugees and migrants have to start from scratch, which is demotivating and fails to capitalise on prior experiences and knowledge. The majority of participants agreed that the education system is based on the standard courses where newcomers have to stick to a method which does not always work for them. However, some schools are trying to make it more welcoming for newcomers. One female participant was upset that the process of moving from asylum centres to the assigned accommodation in a municipality can take years, and that refugees can't start an education properly during this period, which is a huge waste of time. Other participants seconded her. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the degree equivalency system, which is overly complicated. Some certificates are not recognized by the Dutch education system and another mechanism is needed to evaluate the skills and experience level of the refugees.

In **Italy** the group felt that information about higher education was accessible, nevertheless, language and transportation are daily obstacles to overcome. There were some concerns expressed about discriminatory attitudes in the education system.

In **Finland**, those who finished their degree studies said the information and integration to their universities were quite "smooth". They also said that "tutor" system in universities is helpful for new students to have all necessary information about how the system works. They are satisfied with their university or school system as they liked the autonomy of students in terms of the time they have to finish their studies as well the number of optional courses. There was no perception of discrimination in the school system in the group consulted from Finland.

In **Spain** (Catalonia), there was a general expression of satisfaction, but some respondents expressed disappointment in the challenges of getting recognition for their university degrees. The biggest challenge was to combine study and work, as public university is expensive.

In **Germany** (Berlin) most of participants expressed willingness to proceed with their studies but said the lack of access to information or support were obstacles to overcome. Especially for wheelchair users, the lack of necessary facilities was an extra obstacle.

## 7. Participation

### Focus Group Results

In **Finland**, some suggested that primary schools should encourage participation from an early age. It was proposed that specific target groups such as migrant young women there could be a training course on “Participation and political literacy” which would allow migrants to become more active and access the existing mechanisms of participation in their cities. The group also agreed that different local institutions should give practical training to young migrants on political participation. A significant number of participants believed that political discussion in their host country is quite negative especially if the discussion is related to migration and integration. It was suggested that discussions about integration policy and refugees should include those who have lived experienced. A participant mentioned that he often participated in a monthly group discussion organized by a local migrant led organization, in which each month a local or national politician is invited to discuss policies with the migrants. Some of the participants felt the interest of politicians was more focused on votes than on what really concerns people, and this limits their motivation to improve participation.

Some of the participants said that migrants’ involvement in political arena is meaningless because they are not taken seriously. Other participants rejected this view, noting that Helsinki City Council has four migrant representatives in council and a Vice Mayor with a migrant background. However, the group agreed that the political parties could include representatives of migrants and refugees in each party section. The group specifically agreed that this could work for the political parties that identify themselves as defenders of “equality of all”.

*“Political parties are only interested in migrants only when the party believes they can get votes.”*

In **Greece**, almost all participants agreed that political rights such as voting, and nomination rights should be guaranteed, as in Greece no matter how long refugees or migrants have lived in the country, they do not have the right to vote.

In **Germany (Berlin)**, the majority in the group repeated the view that access to information and training are fundamental resources that allow a safe space and less disadvantaged opportunities for migrants and refugees to participate. Also, in Berlin, the group mentioned that local parliaments, political parties and civil society should connect with young people to know their needs and organize study visits and/or trainings that take these interests into consideration to support the creation of projects where young people can practice and improve their skills and self-confidence to participate.

In **Italy**, respondents felt that migrants and refugees should be given more opportunities to participate in public debates especially on topics that concerns them and that it is important to build capacity and communication skills that support a participation with more impact.

In the **Netherlands (Amsterdam)**, the group agreed that people of all educational and cultural background and from diverse age groups and experiences should be included in the decision-making process about newcomers. All participants acknowledge that there are thousands of refugees/migrants and all of them cannot be involved in decision making, but a representative group of refugees and migrant must be chosen to represent the issues.

In **Portugal** respondents said that refugees and migrants were not represented in public events such as conferences and lectures about migrants and refugees, or that they were included only in a “decorative” role. They also expressed the difficulty for a young person to find support from an NGO or the government to start any activity, and that gender equality is also not assured.

In **Spain (Barcelona)**, everyone in the group agreed that it is very important to identify people with migrant backgrounds by the various political parties in order to understand their possible role and motivations to take part and be included in political processes. It was also observed that it is difficult for any young people to participate, even if they aren’t a migrant or refugee. Therefore, the group points out the importance of political parties connecting with young people’s interest and problems to encourage greater participation.

General comments about **gender equality and women empowerment under the topic of Participation** by the focus groups express the importance that education for diversity plays in order to understand the complexity instead of using stereotypes to describe the situation and this way many conflicts based on misinformation could be prevented. Participants identify in the host countries the common stereotype that Arabs don't respect women’s rights, especially in Middle East, and that people do not understand the nuances of certain cultural behaviours. The importance of building bridges is a priority that would allow communication and serious addressing gender equality and implementing actions that can bring improvements. Female participants also express feelings of being overlooked and ignored when it comes their preferences for learning the language and jobs, especially for women aged 40 to 50 years old, and that through socialization and involvement in activities that they are skilled in would allow them to slowly learn the language and become more integrated and active in decision making in their communities.

## 8. EU Action Plan on Return

While return policies are not strictly related to integration, which is the focus of this study, it is of growing significance as more member states increase forced returns, a changing climate which clearly overshadows newcomers’ attempts to integrate. The consultation did therefore include some discussion of return, and the subject was included in the online survey. The results are provided here.

### Online Survey Results:

- More than 50% said they never heard of the EU Action Plan on Return

- More than 55% said they are not considering returning to their country of origin;
- Nearly 60% said they would not consider voluntarily moving to a third country;
- Necessary conditions for return were:
  - Safety of myself and immediate family is ensured 34%
  - Political situation improves 38.4%
  - Job opportunity 27%

### Focus Group Results

Refugees and migrants who participated in this consultation plan were not aware of the EU Action Plan on Return. When the subject of return was introduced in the focus groups participants expressed extreme sadness as it brings up many negative feelings and even fear of losing their dignity and life, which reflects the tension, fear and extreme vulnerability of refugees and migrants in Europe, especially those coming from war zones or political unstable regimes. Many viewed the prospect of return with great pain because it would be starting again their process of integration, after investing so much to integrate, learn a new language and thrive in a European country. When considering return, participants said that the necessary conditions included safety, political stability, freedom of speech, equal opportunities and economic opportunities as essential, and that without any of those, return would not be an option. Some participants described the detention centre (which many returnees pass through) as being similar to a jail which is a major deterrent to return if it is used as a staging post. The majority of participants in the focus groups would rather see investment in integration than return.

*"We always feel bad about it whenever the topic is discussed... you can't just pick up someone and throw him or her back to her country just like that"*

## Conclusion

The conclusions and recommendations of this “Ask the People” report demonstrate that the expertise exists among migrant and refugee representatives to provide well-informed, valuable and to-the-point contributions to key EU debates. In order for EU and Member States authorities to implement these recommendations, the EU must deepen the consultation and involvement migrant and refugee organizations and leaders.

The EU is at a critical crossroads for integration. Since 2015/6, authorities have created so many initiatives and networks that may or may not continue in the future. The EU's Integration Action Plan must be updated for the new Commission and the Urban Agenda Partnership continued beyond 2019. Nearly all EU migration and asylum laws have been reopened for debate. Plus, the current negotiations of the EU's 2021-2027 budget will set the priorities for the next decade. Many of these proposals will be influenced by the European elections and decided by the new European Parliament. Migrant and refugee leaders must be involved in all the processes listed below:

- Follow-up of the EU Integration Action Plan
- Reform and implementation of Common European Asylum System
- EU budget's partnership principle to design, monitor and evaluate funding programmes in close consultation with civil society, both in Member States implementing national AMIF and ESF+ programmes and on EU level concerning funding lines directly managed by the Commission
- EU networks on migrant integration, from education, employment to entrepreneurship
- European membership organizations working with migrant pupils, migrant women, minority groups, refugees, undocumented migrants, etc.

Migrant and refugee organizations and leaders have unique expertise on these policies and unique networks to those affected by these policies on the ground. Currently, experts with migrant and minority backgrounds are severely under-represented in EU institutions and events. Going beyond the current structure of the European Migration Forum, all European institutions and agencies must make an extra targeted effort to consult and involve migrant and refugee leaders who are experts in their fields.

## Annex 1: The European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB)

### What is EMAB?

The European Migrant Advisory Board “EMAB” is one of the actions of the Partnership that started in March 2018, comprising of a group of advisors with immigrant and refugee-background. EMAB works to increase the participation of immigrants and refugees in different policy-making processes affecting immigrants’ access to rights. EMAB works with the Partnership to ensure and promote social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in Europe.

The establishment of the Advisory Board is one of the actions of the Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees. EMAB receives financial support from the Open Society Foundations. Civic & Co provides capacity building, facilitation, and strategic advice to EMAB. Civic & Co is consulting company that designs innovative learning solutions for sustainable change. The Open Society Foundations support groups that work on a broad range of issues affecting the dignity, safety and well-being of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

### EMAB Objectives:

- To represent immigrants and refugees’ interest in Europe as an advisory body through participation in policy debates and processes on local, national and European levels
- To promote immigrants and refugees’ access to rights in their communities in Europe;
- To contribute to building a positive and empowering narrative about immigration and asylum;
- To provide advice on immigration and refugee-related policies to the partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees.

### EMAB stands for:

- Universal human rights;
- Equality and equity for all groups;
- Meaningful participation;
- Anti-discrimination of all forms;
- Critical thinking approach;
- Holistic approach to social inclusion.

## European Migrant Advisory Board Members

### **AMSTERDAM:** Anila Noor

Anila Noor is a [human rights activist](#) and a researcher, and an Open City Fellow, hosted by the City of Amsterdam. Noor has been based Netherlands since 2013 working as an independent researcher. She holds two Masters Degrees; an M.A. in Conflict and Peace Studies from Erasmus University in the Netherlands and an MSc from Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan specializing in Gender and Women Studies. She worked for more than 12 years in research institutions and NGOs in Pakistan with two focus

areas: women's rights and forced migration and integration policies. She has presented working papers at Oxford University and Bristol University in the UK and was part of a Summer School on "Forced Migration and Displacement" at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. She is an [Emancipation Ambassador of EP- Nuffic](#) (Netherlands) and alumni of "World Class – The Hague". She is also a member of [Kaldor Centre of Emerging Scholars Network Australia](#). Noor is currently working on the subject of Receiving Refugees in Urban Settings: Narratives from the Netherlands. She became involved in the subject of forced migration and identity crises after going through the same experience.

**ATHENS: Asef Farjam**

Asef Farjam is a sociologist and intercultural mediator with a refugee background from Afghanistan, who has been living in Greece since 2007. He is an Open City Fellow, hosted in the City of Athens, and previously worked for Doctors of the World as an intercultural mediator. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Sociology in 2015 from Panteion University of Athens and currently is an MA student in Sustainable Development at the Xarokopio University of Athens. Earlier in 2005 he accomplished an MCSE (Microsoft Networking Administration) course at Debagarane Tehran Technical Institute Shiraz, Iran. In September of 2013 he was nominated by the US ambassador of Athens Daniel Smith, as an IVLP (international visitor leadership program). Asef Farjam's mother tongue Dari, but he is also fluent in English, Greek, Pashto, Farsi and Urdu. Since 2009 Farjam has worked to support refugees, migrants and other minority groups as well as volunteering with the UNHCR, the Hellenic Red Cross, MDM and the Orange House project. His life has been shaped by his personal experience and his strong belief in human dignity, universal values and sense of responsibility to find effective solutions in a challenging time. He is dedicated to the empowerment refugees and migrants to integrate and build a new life in their new host societies because he strongly believes that integration benefits both refugees and the host communities.

**BARCELONA: Ana Lucía Olivos Pairazamán**

Ana Lucía Olivos Pairazamán was born in Lima (Perú) and she has been living in Barcelona for 27 years. She is currently an Open City Fellow. She graduated in Political Sciences at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and has two master degrees in International Cooperation from University of Valencia (UV) and in Immigration Management from Pompeu Fabra University. She has experience in international migration projects as a result of her participation as Peer Advisor in a project led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Besides this, Ana Lucia works with many organizations and NGO's with a focus on Migration in Barcelona. She has worked as a job counsellor for migrants and refugees to support their labour market integration. In her free time, she participates in different activities and projects to raise awareness and to promote interculturality in the city of Barcelona.

**BAMBERG: Shaza Rihawi**

Shaza Rihawi is a Syrian refugee resident in Bamberg, Germany who is deeply involved in human rights issues and has first-hand experience in dealing with refugees and women's crisis. She is a founding member of the Network for Refugee Voices (NRV), a founding member of International Wave. She is currently working on a five-year research project at the LifBi Institute as a research assistant for culture aspects, conducting Longitudinal Research on Refugees in the German Educational System. Previously, Shaza worked as a senior community service assistant for 8 years, with the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in Damascus. Prior to that, she worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the Centre for Strategic Studies in Syria. Shaza hold a Bachelor's degree and a post-graduate degree in sociology and a Masters in psychosocial work, in addition to a political science from Maxwell School-Syracuse University.

**BERLIN: Namarig Abkr**

Namarig Abkr is an Open City Fellow with Migrationsrat Berlin-Brandenburg in Berlin. She is a political and human rights activist born in South Darfur, Sudan. She studied water and environmental engineering in Sudan university for Science and Technology. Namarig worked with displaced women and youth in Darfur and she was a part of a youth movement against the Sudanese government. In Berlin she is a football coach for a self-led group of refugee women. She also continues her own education on theoretical topics such as social change, gender equality and feminist tools for social change.

**BERLIN: Sinthujan Varatharajah**

Sinthujan Varatharajah is a Berlin-based essayist and researcher and currently an Open City Fellow hosted at Migrationsrat Berlin-Brandenburg . They hold a MSc in Human Rights (Honours) from the University of Roehampton, and a MSc in Race, Ethnicity and Postcolonial Studies from the London School of Economics. They are currently a PhD Candidate in Political Geography at University College London. Sinthujan has worked for the legal defense of asylum seekers as well as towards providing alternative housing solutions for refugees in London and Berlin.

**HELSINKI: Abdirizak Hagi**

Abdirizak Hagi is a Finnish-Somali career consultant at the City of Helsinki. He has several years of experience in career counseling and social mobilization. In 2011 he successfully ran for the executive board membership of the Finnish Somali League. His primary task was to mobilize the Finnish-Somali youth to become active members of the greater Finnish society. His passion to work for the greater good of the community led him to study law at the Tallinn University, School of Law. In 2016 he graduated with a bachelor degree in law, specializing in Transitional Justice, furthering his interest in the challenges of transitional justice efforts to restore peace, security, stability and good governance in his native country. In 2016 Abdirizak started to work as a career consultant at the Helsinki Skills Center, which helps immigrants over 17 years old who have been granted a residence permit in Helsinki to access education or find employment. Abdirizak Hagi helps his clients to explore their purpose and uncover their "dream job". He is excellent in assisting clients to find long lasting and cost-effective solutions. In his spare time Abdirizak volunteers to help people of immigrant background with legal issues.

**ITALY: Lamin Fadera**

Lamin is a Gambian refugee and a migration advocate who is currently based in northern Italy. He has an Advanced Diploma in Financial Accounting and Entrepreneurship and Micro-Finance from The Gambia Technical Training Institute. He spent seven years working in government, including the Immigration Department, where among others things he oversaw registration of refugees from neighbouring countries. He later fell out with the former authoritarian regime, leading to his exile in November 2013. He crossed the Mediterranean along with many other refugees to Italy to seek protection and later on acquired a legal status. In Italy he completed a Junior School Certificate in 2015 and a professional course in Intercultural Mediation. He is a social worker with one of the biggest cooperatives in his area, working as a mediator, counsellor and an interpreter. In March 2016 he worked with a group of migrants to form

Migr Action, with the objective of providing migrants with accurate information about asylum processes and their rights to protection amongst others

**LISBON: Nour Machlah**

Nour Machlah is an architecture master's student, public speaker and policy advisor based in Lisbon. After the Syrian war, he moved to Lebanon, then to Turkey, and since 2014 he has been studying in Portugal completing his master's degree in architecture. He has taken part in conferences all over Portugal and Europe, on integration, human rights, peace and war, as well as the dialogue between cultures and religions. In 2016 he was a speaker at the [European Parliament in Strasbourg](#) and in 2017 he represented the European Youth Forum in one of the debates at the European parliament in Brussels being an ideas giver regarding to the new common European asylum system. In November 2017 he presented a [TEDx talk](#) at TEDx Porto on the topic of Stereotyping. Since 2016 he was involved in the integration process for migrant and refugees in Portugal as an advisor on social inclusion. He is very passionate about architecture, but also extremely keen to continue his path within public speaking and advocacy because he believes in the power of words.



**The European Migrant Advisory Board**

(Clockwise, from back right: **Abdulrizak Hagi, Nour Machlah, Namarig Abkr, Asef Farjam, Lamin Fadera, Adam Elsod (facilitator), Sinthujan Varatharajah, Ana Lucía Olivos Pairazamán, Anila Noor, Shaza Rihawi**)