

REFUGEE INFO BUS

Impact Measurement:

Over the past three to four years, working alongside refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people on the move in Europe, can seem like walking through treacle. If I am to be completely honest, things have often got worse rather than better, for the people with whom we work. New laws have been introduced that confine people further on the Greek islands, limit refugees movements, keep people detained for longer or face evictions from their homes and even their tents. Therefore measuring our impact can seem painful, when in spite of our efforts, the rights opportunities for displaced on the move continue to be eroded. However, being a small and mobile team means we are able to quickly adapt to changes in circumstances.

When we measure our impact, we must remind ourselves, yes, things are bad, but how much worse would they have been for displaced people on the move without our work. Understanding our impact in clear cut numbers (which we done underneath) is very important, but also limited. We hope that we have planted a seed of tools, that help equip people on their journey to getting papers in Europe, with our info, our videos and facebook messaging, this impact, is difficult to measure. The difficulty in keeping track of people on the move, can complicate things further. For people who we have worked with, who we have messaged, who have read or listened to our resources, we intend that the impact we have, lasts longer than just our encounters, our workshops or our videos and has equipped and emboldened refugees on the move to access the rights that people with European passports take for granted.

That being said, we have written up here, a brief account of our impact so far (that we have been able to measure empirically):

Northern France Impact:

The charity was founded in Calais's "Jungle" in March 2016. Our first Refugee Info Bus began life as an old horse-box, that was purchased, stripped-out, cleaned-up, and converted into a mobile office and Wi-Fi hotspot for refugees and asylum seekers living in northern France. Within a year, we facilitated over **10,000 Wi-Fi logins and delivered more than 1,000 workshops to 3,000+** individuals on the UK and French asylum systems. We also distributed **4,000 multilingual information packs** on claiming asylum in France, the UK, where to get support with your legal case, what to do if your friends are detained, and information on what to expect and your rights, in case of an eviction. This was in response to the final eviction of the Calais "Jungle" Refugee Camp, where over 10,000 displaced people on the move lived between 2015 and 2016. These, we are confident prevented the deportation of many of the camps residents prior to their dispersal to different regions of France, at the hands of the French police.

Wifi and Phone Charging

"When I arrived (in Europe) I had not spoken to my mum for more than two months ... I had no mobile phone, with laptops and Wifi, I could talk to my family in Sudan to let them know I am still alive." - Mudatha

In April 2017, we returned to Calais. Though the "Jungle" camp was destroyed, refugees continued to arrive in the region. With no centralized camp individuals are scattered across the town, finding temporary shelter wherever they can: forests, industrial parks, beneath hedges.

Calais is a port city in Northern France, where refugees try to make it to the UK. It is wet and fairly mild in summer but brutally cold and unforgiving in the winter months. De-industrialisation means that the region has had a

disproportionately high unemployment rate; which helps fuel anti-migrant sentiment. Police and CRS violence is rife, and displaced people have tents and belongings confiscated daily.

There has been and continues to be around 600 displaced people sleeping rough, with a further 400 in Dunkirk. Generally, they are young men, teenage boys, women and children from Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kurdistan, with smaller numbers from various other African, Middle Eastern, Asian and Eastern European countries. All displaced people in the area can access our services.

Hundreds of refugees met with our team every week to understand their rights, discuss their plans, call their family and/or access the internet, our mobile Wifi system takes 100 connections at any time. Living homeless as a refugee is fraught with anxiety, loneliness, and danger. Making contact with parents, partners or children that have been left behind at home, or even stranded in transit countries can relieve this tension slightly. Every day, we see the positive effects that our service has on our beneficiaries wellbeing.

In terms of information sharing in Calais, on a weekly basis, we distribute new arrival guides and Legal Information Pack, in **Tigrinya, Arabic, Oromo, Farsi, French, Pashto and English both ourselves and to our partner organisations in Northern France.** We try to ensure that all newly arrived people on the move, arriving in the Calais region, are given a New Arrival Guide and Legal Information Pack. In the past month, we know that through these packs, 6 men have claimed asylum in France, with the support of a Legal Aid charity in the region, whose details we include in our pack, meanwhile 5 people have started family reunion procedure with partners who are in the UK. Many more have been able to access psychologists, emergency accommodation and food and clothing services. We also run on a weekly basis a series of human rights information workshops for displaced people on the move, these cover topics such as claiming asylum in France or the UK, ways you can protect yourself or prepare if you are at risk of detention, and options for family reunion. These are well attended, with 10+ participants coming to each workshop.

Dunkirk, is a nearby town where there are on average, **400 Sorani speaking Kurdish refugees** on the move live rough and attempt to travel the UK, here we hand out **arrest slips and info packs**, that give people information on their rights, and what they can do if they are stopped by the police and they attempt to detain them. These are very successful and many men have reported being approached by police, but not being taken into detention, following using our arrest slips.

Skype Phone Service

Being able to provide people with the opportunity to call home is something we really believe in. Every two weeks our Skype phone makes **65 calls to 7 different countries.** This is particularly important for many people whose families may not have access to the internet, or a smartphone, in order to communicate over whatsapp.

On Christmas day, 2018, one child managed to get in touch with his mother for the first time in two years on Christmas day. At the moment roughly twelve to fifteen calls are being made per week to Eritrea, Afghanistan, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Greece Impact

“I met the Refugee Info Bus on Chios and I already had two rejections, I felt hopeless and alone. No NGOs or governments respected us. I knew nothing about the EU-Turkey Deal, or what to say in my interview ... I was ready to give up hope as I had been stuck on the island for 4 months. I thought I would never leave my tent.

Then I met the Info Bus team who told me not to give up. They helped me submit documented that helped me pass my admissibility interview, When I saw the information that they were giving out, I knew that I would have passed my interview straight away if I had been given the interview before” - Muhammed is now in Holland, he applied for family reunion and his family have now joined him from Syria, they are in school and doing well, and him and his wife are planning to open a Syrian restaurant.

In March 2017, we expanded our operations to Greece. Despite working on the ground for over a year in Calais, we were little prepared for the horrendous precarity and terrible conditions in which families are living on the Greek Islands. Unable to access the basic documents needed for meaningful survival in the Greek system - a Greek ID, travel documents etc - individuals are condemned to a seemingly endless purgatory, every day living under the threat of being returned to Turkey. The fear of this eventuality haunts the camps, the spectre only becoming more terrifying as the human rights situation there deteriorates. Reports of arbitrary detention, political repression, forced returns and the violent aerial bombardment of Syria continue to terrorise many of the people with whom we work.

In Greece, by providing legal information and advice, we helped refugees navigate the complex and ever changing asylum process in what is one of Europe's major points of entry. Operating in camps across the mainland and islands, including the Lavrio, Ritsona, Elefsina, Scaramangas, Souda and Vial camps, we did this work using both handouts, and audio and video materials. Refugees were also able to meet daily with our team of legal caseworkers, who speak Farsi, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, Kurmanji and Sorani and have personal experience of the asylum process in Greece. **Every week we met with 30 - 40 families and individuals**, to help them through their paperwork to apply for asylum, to reunite with their family members and to get their cases moved from the Greek Islands. **In total, we assisted 15 families be reunited with in Germany, France, Sweden, Austria and the UK, while assisting 10 families in having their asylum case moved from the Greek Islands under the EU Turkey deal. With other families we ran asylum interview preparation workshops. We also carried out individual casework for around 10 individuals who were travelling on their own. On Chios, through our interview preparation workshops we assisted 35 individuals in getting their case transferred off the islands.** We also run on a weekly basis, a series of human rights information workshops for displaced people on the move, these cover topics such as claiming asylum in France or the UK, ways you can protect yourself or prepare if you are at risk of detention, and options for family reunion. These are well attended, with 10+ participants coming to each workshop.

During our 2017 trial period, we realised that the lack of relevant services was startling, with the combination of poor legal aid, logistical obstacles including language barriers and an overwhelmed court system preventing NGOs from reaching the majority of the 67,100+ individuals spread across approximately 50 different sites. Many organisations were forced to admit defeat in such a context, focusing their efforts on appeals alone, hoping at least to catch the most difficult of cases. The result is a situation in which thousands are facing the rejection of their asylum claim primarily due to a lack of relevant and accurate information.

The Refugee Info Bus has sought to overcome these limitations through our legal information video series, **co-opting visual media as a strategic tool to empower refugees**. Launched in October 2017, Refugee Info Bus's multilingual videos provide clear and accessible explanations of the complex asylum system. Uploaded to our Facebook accounts, these videos are able to reach audiences far greater than those encountered via our mobile van.

Multilingual Legal Information Video Series + Facebook Messaging Service

"I had recently arrived in Greece via the land border that crosses the Evros river. I had heard that Greek police detain people and send us back to Turkey, this is very dangerous for me. I am a political activist in Afghanistan and I knew that if I was handed over to the Turkish authorities, I would be imprisoned and deported back. Having watched the video on Facebook created by the Refugee Info Bus, I prepared myself in the case of detention.

When the police found me and detained me, I explained what my rights were, that I had already messaged the Refugee Info Bus with a photo of myself on Greek territory and that I had the right to claim asylum as my life is in danger in Afghanistan. I was therefore not returned to Turkey and I am now in Athens waiting for the decision on my asylum application, I have a place in an apartment and access to a cash card."

- Javid, political activist from Afghanistan, who the Refugee Info Bus team met up with after he arrived in Athens. He watched our facebook video, receiving help and support from our team, after he found himself stranded in the Evros region of North West Greece.

The series, which over the past 18 months has included over 45 videos and has reached over 750k people, is devised and produced by our video team based in Athens, with refugee team members taking on research, production, and presenting roles. Speaking to an audience of whom they have been part, Refugee Info Bus team members are able to effectively reach their peers, dispelling some of the complexities and frustrations that characterise the ever-changing goal posts of the Greek and European asylum system.

Videos are filmed in front of a green screen, with the audio-visual format to the information provided allowing those who speak a number of different languages and possess varying levels of literacy to find out what they need to know to make an informed decision about their future. Currently presenters speak in Arabic and Farsi, with English subtitles overlaid so that these videos might also act as a resource for English-speaking friends, supporters and NGO workers.

The topics addressed in the videos are decided upon in reaction to the issues and problems most commonly encountered by individuals in transit. Thus far videos have covered issues including: special cases; leaving Greece; the EU-Turkey deal; leaving the islands; your rights are if you cross the land border between Greece and Turkey; family reunion from Greece to elsewhere in the European Union; and applying for asylum upon reaching the Greek Islands, targeting specifically, people from Afghanistan.

Evros Border Region between Greece and Turkey:

“When my 20 year old son arrived in Greece, instead of being able to claim asylum, he was arrested by police, he had with him our family’s savings, 7,000 euros, and his Syrian passport — all were stolen from him. He so badly beaten — he was hospitalised for a week.”

These are the words by a distraught Syrian father of a young son, who has refugee status in Germany. Refugee Info Bus spoke with him on the phone, he told us that he was unable to do family reunion with his child. His 19 year old son was now alone, in an Istanbul hospital, without money, his phone, or any documents. He was beaten so badly he couldn’t be discharged from hospital for a week, in a country he was trying to claim asylum in. According to the UNHCR, just over 18,000 refugees and migrants reached Greece via its land border with Turkey last year, up from 6,500 in 2017.

In February 2018, we received repeated distress calls from families who had family members hiding inside the Evros border region of Greece. Many have experienced extreme violence at the hands of officials working inside Greece’s Evros region — these have included the Greek army but also international military representatives, from Germany and elsewhere in Europe, as part of the EU’s Frontex operation, as well as groups of masked, armed men, who are described as not having badges.

Among these, people have been arrested by police and army trying to catch a train from a local station, or even walking in the region, as far as 150 km away from the Turkish border. Every group had their phones, documents and money stolen and were badly beaten.

We met with a group of Palestinian men, one of whom had their legs broken, another beaten, stripped, and forced to walk back across the river naked. They also described how one woman was sexually assaulted in front of her husband, by officials patrolling the region. They have become so traumatised by their experience, that and have decided to stay in Turkey.

In response we made a video, in Farsi and in Arabic - **which was viewed 86,000 times and had over 250 shares in Farsi and with 47,000 views and 86 shares in Arabic.** Here we warned people about the risks of making the Evros crossing, covered ways that you could protect yourself if you were making the journey, how to claim for asylum, we warned against travelling with large amounts of cash, making sure people understood and knew the importance of having data on your phone and tracking your movements and sharing these with friends and family in Europe.

Although the border is technically a military zone, these days border police patrol the frontier as well as personnel from the EU border control agency, Frontex. People who reached out to us, spoke about being beaten by Greek police, army and also people with balaclavas. Since it takes place outside of the public eye, it is difficult to understand who is responsible. **We shared our data and findings with the Greek Refugee Council, the Helsinki Human Rights Monitor, Amnesty International and made a complaint to the EU Ombudsman. The Greek Council for Refugees, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have since written a series of damning reports which has sparked an investigation by the Council of Europe and Greek Prosecutor.** We hope this work means that the additional visibility of these abuses leads to actual change, whereby our police, army, and Frontex are no longer able to commit these horrific violations of power in the shadows of our borders.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

As a UK registered charity, we have a 'Constitution' that states the aims of our organisation. From this, we develop an annual Strategic and Operational Plan, individual country plans and project plans. Both teams follow monthly work plans that have been built from the individual country plans. Progress is assessed at a weekly Skype meeting that is structured by the Trustees. In these meetings, each team reports against a set list of goals.

By way of specific project evaluation, we will track Facebook analytics pertaining to the reach of video content, as well as recording the rate of questions asked and answered via our Facebook messaging tool and on our page in relation to our videos. We seek always to solicit and incorporate the critical feedback of our service users, as well as partner NGOs, both domestic and international. We have also signed up to be one of the first organisations to receive feedback through Re:viewed, which is a pilot project that proposes service user feedback transparency as a way to strengthen humanitarian accountability efforts. Re:viewed is currently focused on the multiple benefits of transparent feedback – increasing accountability, shifting power dynamics, improving services, but also how this can tie into localisation efforts by supporting grassroots exposure and citizen donor engagement.

Going Forward:

In Calais, and in Greece, our project has been piloted and proven to be successful, while working with a small team of volunteers. Further investment and support would enable us to scale up our efforts.