

Psychosocial support to Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Online counseling provided by Syrian counselors based in Germany



Federal Republic of Germany
Foreign Office



Institut für
Auslandsbeziehungen

ipso

CONTENTS

Editorial	03
Facts and figures	04
The project	06
The partners	10
The beneficiaries	12
Our joint project teams	14

EDITORIAL

Ipsos's mission is to enable human beings across the world to respond to complex social, economic and political challenges in their lives with empathy. Our goal is to empower women and men to affirm their sense of individual and collective worth and responsibility in the face of challenges such as entrenched attitudes or discrimination. Our strategy is to listen and to learn through personal interaction and dialogue. Our work is guided by our commitment to reach out to people in need and to be accessible, accountable and nonjudgmental in our interaction with those facing adversity.

For this purpose, Ipsos has developed the online platform www.ipsos-care.com. It offers the services of well-trained and committed counselors who are not only willing but also able to help people from their own country or cultural background because they speak their own language, are empathetic and professional. This platform offers a safe space to connect those who care with those who seek care.

When refugees came to Germany in 2015 in large numbers, we decided to use our extensive work experience gained in Afghanistan and other countries to include refugees in Germany into our one-year training, so that they would be able to provide support to their fellow countrymen in Germany and elsewhere. We trained 92 counselors from 17 countries, most of them from Syria. They were eager to help people back home and in refugee camps in Lebanon or Jordan. Through their counseling many family conflicts have been solved, and many people have regained hope and control over their lives. Domestic violence, for example, which often is an expression of unsolved problems, could be reduced, dialogues encouraged and a sense of dignity restored through counseling.

It is common for human beings to develop mental health symptoms under stress such as traumatizing experiences, challenging living conditions such as refugee camps, and the lack opportunity to work for a living. Our counseling helped individuals to become aware of their situation and to understand how it affected their feelings and their behavior. In a second step they were empowered to regain influence over some part of their lives, even if it was just a small one. Our counselors encouraged them to reflect on their personal values and to explore solutions for everyday problems, thus restoring their ability to function in a difficult phase of their lives and to regain hope for the future.

Ipsos is extremely grateful to the German Foreign Office and to ifa for their financial support. It enabled us to implement this innovative project in 2017. I also want to thank our partners Nadja Naw International and Lamsat Ward as well as our Syrian counselors in Berlin who supported fellow Syrians living as refugees in Lebanon for their trust and commitment. [Inge Missmahl](#)



FACTS AND FIGURES

THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR) HAS REGISTERED MORE THAN ONE MILLION SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON, A COUNTRY WITH AN ESTIMATED SIX MILLION INHABITANTS.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered more than one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a country with an estimated six million inhabitants. This however, is only the official number of refugees from Syria; the real number is believed to be higher by half a million, not only because the Lebanese government requested UNHCR to suspend registration in 2015, but also because many refugees had been afraid to register, fearing that this may prevent the Syrian government from allowing them to return to Syria in due course. Some refugees are lucky to have found shelter with relatives across the border,

but most scrape a living in informal tented settlements or cramped housing conditions in urban settings. In Lebanon, unlike Jordan and Turkey, the government does not run or condone official camps for Syrian refugees. They therefore have a markedly different status from Palestinian refugees who were displaced during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. The UN established an agency for 700,000 refugees in 1949, the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees* (UNRWA). Currently, 450,000 Palestinians are registered in Lebanon, about half of them living in one of twelve official or unofficial camps.

Being stateless, Palestinian refugees lack rights that other foreigners have. The legal status of Syrian refugees however is also problematic. According to *Human Rights Watch*, new residency policies introduced in 2015 restricted their movement and their ability to work, to access healthcare, and to send their children to school. Many land owners rent out space and tents to refugees, but there is no tenure security because the police and the military can force people to move on at any time.

Some Syrian refugees have found shelter in the Palestinian ghetto of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, which was set up as a refugee camp by the International

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1949 and has become infamous for its cramped living conditions. No-one knows exactly how many people live in Shatila today, which is the more down-trodden and neglected side of the camp, but the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimate that the population has grown from ca 10,000 to 16,000 since the war started in Syria. According to UNHCR, Beirut – a city of two million – hosts about 270,000 Syrian refugees.

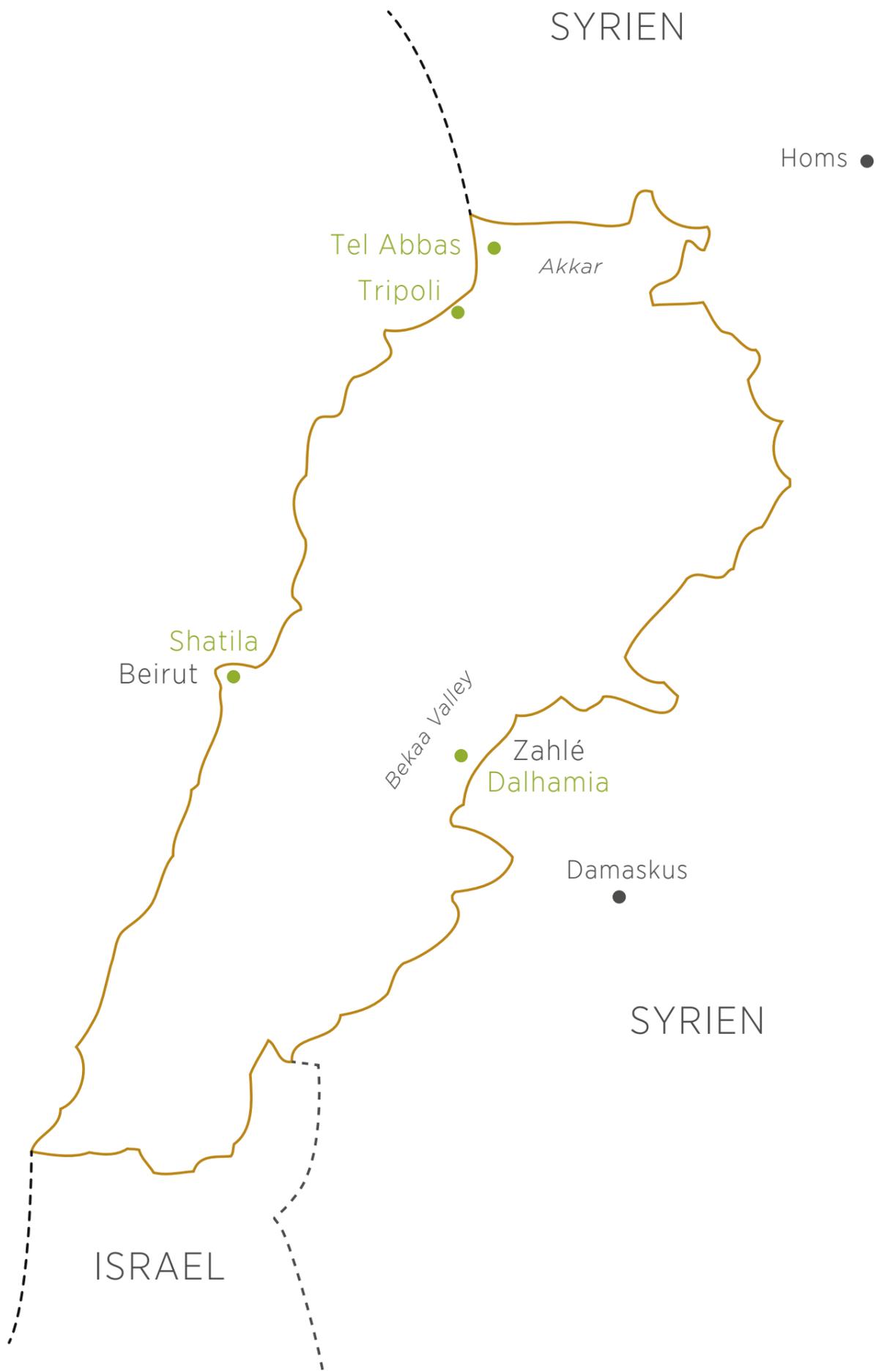
For a country that is bursting at the seams, Lebanon has been coping surprisingly well. Hosts and refugees speaking the same language and shar-

ing many cultural traits have certainly helped. This does not mean however, that Syrians have been unanimously welcomed in Lebanon. Most Lebanese remember the Syrian occupation of their country that ended as recently as 2005, and many have hard feelings about it. In addition to this, there are the same fears as in Europe: pressure on the job market, on the housing market, and changes to traditional ways of life caused by newcomers.

In 2017, 76% of registered refugee households lived below the poverty line of 3.84 US dollars per person per day. Twenty-eight percent of household incomes came from the

World Food Programme of the United Nations, and 5% from humanitarian organisations. Most Syrians who can find employment work either in the construction or the agricultural sector. The desperation of the Syrian workforce however allows for exploitation. Syrian men able to find work earn 206 US dollars per month on average and women 158 US dollars. A visit to one of the usual coffee shop chains in Beirut's main shopping street costs as much as it does in Europe.

Birte Bruggmann and Zena Takieddine



THE PROJECT

Ipsos (International Psychosocial Organisation), a non-profit organization based in Germany and Afghanistan, has developed strong specialized resources and infrastructure for culturally sensitive psychosocial care and support in conflict and post-conflict environments. The counselling approach was originally developed in 2004 for Afghanistan by Ipsos founder Inge Missmahl and provides individual support to adolescents and adults. Ipsos's training methods and quality standards were integrated into Afghanistan's Public Health Care System and have become obligatory. Since then, Ipsos has continuously improved the training for psychosocial counselors, has adapted it to other cultural contexts and has trained 92 psychosocial counselors from 17 countries.

The training is divided into two phases, the first consisting of three months of full-time intensive training. It is focused on a transfer of knowledge and skills combined with increased self-awareness enabling trainees to internalise a counselling approach based on empathetic understanding and best practices. Morning sessions cover psychological, psychopathological and socio-cultural issues and intervention techniques. In the afternoons, participants form smaller groups and are given the opportunity to relate the contents of the morning sessions to their own lives, raising their self-awareness. This unique element of the training enables participants to develop a non-judgmental attitude towards others based on empathy. A written exam at the end of the three-month period tests knowledge, and an oral exam tests attitudes and practical skills.



Trainees who pass these exams move on to nine months of full-time on-the-job training during which they are closely supervised and receive follow-up trainings. The trainings deepen knowledge and improve skills obtained in the first three months, train participants in case documentation and management, and provide them with opportunities to deal with personal challenges. Supervision includes face-to-face or online sessions on a weekly basis and monitor progress, identify challenges and provide support to the trainees. Final exams consist of a

written and an oral exam as well as the documentation of a case discussed in a colloquium.

As an additional component for providing psychosocial services and mental health care to people in remote locations, Ipso has set-up an online psychosocial counselling service (www.ipso-care.com). It is available in 14 languages and offers a safe space for personal and confidential tele-video sessions. Beneficiaries are given access to counselors who speak the same language and are of the same gender.

After their first session, beneficiaries can book follow-up sessions with 'their' counselor.

The project *Psychosocial support to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon provided online by Syrian Refugees in Germany* was funded by the *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V. (ifa)* and offered online psychosocial counselling to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Ipso implemented this project in partnership with two local organisations, both run by Syrian refugees. This partnership was important because the service

needed to be facilitated by local organisations that have access to potential beneficiaries as well as their trust. Both Najda Now International (NNI) and Lamsat Ward are run by grassroots organizations. That these organizations are themselves run by Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees added to the 'self-help' aspect of the project, which is already emphasized by the fact that Syrian refugees in Berlin counseled their fellow refugees in Lebanon. As social dispersal, displacement and loss among family units and core community groups has been one of the main

impacts the war in Syria has had on its people, creating a counselling service that was offered by Syrians for Syrians and that could overcome geographic distances was extremely valuable.

One access point for online counselling was located in Shatila in Beirut, and a second to the west of Beirut in the Bekaa valley known for tented settlements housing more than 300,000 refugees. The service was also available in the northern part of the country, in Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, and further north, in the in the

province of Akkar, a farmland of Arab Christian villages which has been generally neglected by the government and does not receive as much support as the southern areas do. The Ipso counselors supporting refugees in these locations were from places like Damascus, Latakia and Qamishli in Syria and included a Palestinian who lived in Lebanon most of his life. Their personal experiences allowed the counsellors to relate well to the stories they heard.

Inge Missmahl and Birte Brugmann



NAJDA NOW INTERNATIONAL

Najda Now International (NNI) is a not-for-profit organization based in Beirut and ran two access points for psycho-social counselling, one in Shatila in Beirut, and one in Dalhamia on the outskirts of Zahlé in the Bekaa valley, 8km from the Syrian border. The access point in Shatila was based in a community centre NNI uses as a school for children and as a cultural centre that offers film, photo and puppet theatre workshops to children and young adults. In Dalhamia, NNI facilitated the service in a building that serves surrounding tented settlements as a school for children and as a community centre that offers computer, tailoring and carpentry classes as well as other activities.

Ipsos' psychosocial support was offered to NNI's clientele in addition to ongoing activities, creating synergies in particular in regard to the parents of children that were being taught at the community centre as well as workshop participants and their families. The center has earned the trust of the community of Syrian refugees in different settlements around the region, since it is a well-run school directed by efficient and dedicated management with many years of training in social work. The additional service strength-

ened the profile of NNI as an organization that strives to support all members of a family, children as much as adults.

LAMSAT WARD

Lamsat Ward is an NGO that is solely dedicated to psychosocial support. Its leadership had been involved in refugee aid work inside Syria, working with The Red Crescent and helping Iraqi refugees in 2003 and 2004. With the eruption of the Civil War, these young Syrians had to adapt their skills quickly and efficiently, having become themselves refugees, and after working on the ground since 2011, were able to register an official organization in 2012. Their focus is in Tripoli and the north, while also remaining active in Beirut. Lamsat Ward runs a cultural centre in Tripoli funded by the *European Endowment for Democracy* and a community centre for tented settlements in Tel Abbas in the northern province of Akkar, 6km away from the Syrian border. Lamsat Ward had intermittently worked with psychotherapists on a voluntary basis in the past but in 2016 lacked the resources to offer more than group activities. The Ipsos project enabled Lamsat Ward to add individual psychosocial support to its services.

The staff members of these two organisations played a crucial role in the

project because they spread knowledge about the service, vouched for its trustworthiness, provided the space, the technical equipment and the know-how for those who were not familiar with computers. Staff were most successful if they were already well-respected in the community they served and when they could combine their role as social mobilisers with an activity that put them in contact with potential beneficiaries, such the director of a school or a teacher who is involved not only with students but also with their parents. Most of them were Syrians, but not all, such as Lina Hassid, manager of the community centre in Dalhamia. She had worked with children with special needs in Beirut before she took over the centre in Dalhamia:

"The project added a new dimension to my work. In the camps they know me because their children go to school in our centre, and even those who don't send children to us know me because they have heard about the school. Offering education to children is one thing, offering psycho-social counselling for adults is something else. At first I wasn't sure how it would all go, but then a young woman came into my office after her first talk with a counselor. She was still crying and she could

not stop thanking me for my help. I was touched by how effective and needed this service seemed to be! It made me convinced to continue."

Abdallah Al Fahel, NNI's project coordinator from Damascus also admitted to initial doubts:

"At first, I wasn't sure that it would work. I arranged a session with a counselor and pretended to be someone else to test him, but the conversation became real and meaningful. I hadn't thought that was possible, and it convinced me that this project would make a difference."

Bassam Al Salloum was from Aleppo and an Arabic teacher at Dalhamia. When he went to the camps of his pupils, the children were excited to see him and he was welcome in the tents of their parents. He appreciates the training he had received from Ipsos as a part-time social mobiliser:

"I learned to speak with people in a respectful way, which was important. But the stories you hear in this line of work can weigh you down. It was important that the training also taught us how to cope with this burden."

Nojoud Abdullah from Homs, part of the Lamsat Ward team, had the same experience as a social mobiliser in

Akkar. At the age of 21, her previous work experience had been with exclusively with children, and at first, she felt intimidated about the prospects of working with adults and learning how to speak as an adult with people of her parents' age:

"I learned to be firm and respectful. I learned how to empathize, without getting carried away. We can be very emotional and deeply stressed, but also keep a space to just listen and be truthful, without offering false promises and without turning away. It was important that the training taught me how to separate their story from my story. The beauty of the project was that it was about individuals and about respect for individuals. Becoming refugees has turned people into beggars. This project reminded them of who they are, their dignity."

Abed Al Aziz Aidy, NNI's general manager, who is both German and Palestinian as well as Syrian by origin, has ample experience with humanitarian projects in Lebanon and has his own explanation for the project being a success:

"Two things are important: Firstly, talking to a counselor is not the same as talking to a psychotherapist. People don't want to be seen to need the help of a shrink and risk being called

crazy. A counselor who speaks to you at eye level is a different matter. And secondly, it helps that the counselors were in Germany and not part of our tightknit community. As outsiders, they saw things from a different angle, and talking to them gave us breathing space we don't normally get."

Kenaana and Rawan Abdulmajeed, who have a Syrian and Palestinian background, were part-time teachers in Shatila. Both had previous trainings and work experience in psychosocial support before they took on the role of part-time mobilisers. The fact that they were school teachers and had good rapport with the children also gave them access to the families, as the parents are more likely to feel welcome and safe. This was an important aspect to keep in mind since, for many adult refugees, it was more challenging for them to leave the camp. Parents who expressed interest in receiving psychosocial support could reach out easily to Ipsos mobilisers in their role also as teachers. They found that the notion of online psychosocial support being offered without hierarchical boundaries but, rather, at eye level, did break stereotypes.

Birte Brugmann and Zena Takieddine

THE PARTNERS

THE BENEFICIARIES

Ipsos's psychosocial counselors have supported refugees in Lebanon and Germany, as well as Syrians who have stayed in their home country, and are familiar with a wide range of challenges. In Germany, basic needs such as food and shelter are taken care of, and the rule of law ensures access to human rights. There is however the issue of coping with life in a foreign land, with homesickness and difficult relationships with family members left behind. Counselling Syrians caught up in the war in Syria is demanding because death and destruction are ongoing and traumas are fresh and the economic sanctions are squeezing people's livelihoods indiscriminately. Lebanon forms a challenge in its own right because, after more than six years of life in tented settlements or cramped conditions in urban settings, with few opportunities to scrape a living and widespread dependency on international aid organisations, there is a general feeling of being

hopelessly stuck and terribly unwanted. All these external stressors are expressed in the private spaces and in relationships. Poverty, domestic violence and discrimination feature in many counselling sessions.

Within Lebanon, there are marked differences in the challenges which rural and urban environments provide. Most tented settlements in rural areas are inhabited by extended families whose members cling to each other for support. These communities tend to draw strength from their own cultural traditions but also to develop symptoms of 'cabin fever', feeling isolated and afraid to venture out into a hostile environment. Families in urban environments, however, are even more strained and isolated. They lack a social network and they need to negotiate their economic survival and their lifestyles with strangers who are often aggressive or exploitative. Parents worrying about losing control over their children and

the need for women to find work outside the house puts a strain on many families.

Anonymous data collected in the course of the project activity and analysed for statistical purposes showed that the most common psychosocial stressors among beneficiaries were family tensions created by poverty, discrimination and aggressive behavior of locals towards refugees, and a lack of opportunities for having children schooled. The counselling enabled especially male beneficiaries to regain self-esteem. Men and women became aware of personal strengths and scope for action, allowing them to approach problems in new ways. The data is likely to reflect a social environment that can make it difficult for men to gain or keep their traditional social role of being a family provider while women tend to struggle with additional responsibilities.

Birte Brugmann and Zena Takieddine

Some beneficiaries were happy to talk about their experience, while others preferred to make use of their right to privacy. A mother who agreed to an interview explained:

"My son is very sick, and I know the counselor cannot give me money or treat him, but no-one else understands my pain."

Others were quite practical about the online aspect, including the head of a camp community who endorsed the service:

"Sometimes you speak to people face-to-face, but their minds are elsewhere. I lead a stressful life, and I suffer from chest pain. What use is a doctor to me who does not listen and just gives me a pill?"

Some people who used the service preferred even more privacy than that and kept the camera switched off:

"It is like speaking to yourself, but someone is listening."

The same young man also offered an interesting insight, saying that he found nothing unusual or peculiar in receiving counselling sessions online:

"I speak to the ones I love most online. Why would I mind being counselled online?"



A young man who had suffered from depression after his fiancée had moved to Germany with her family was keen to explain:

"I was feeling awful and I had lost all my energy. The counselor made me realise that I had gotten caught up in a conflict between my love for my fiancée and my obligation to my parents who need me here. I still want to go to Germany, but I have learned to see the choices I am making and to be patient, and I am much happier now."

Others had never used a computer before and were discovering a new world. One young woman described her experience:

"It was strange at first, but nice. In my camp, you have to be careful what you say because everyone knows everyone else. There is no privacy. In the counselling session, there was someone out there who did not know me but was willing to listen. I could speak freely and without fear."

There was a wide range of symptoms that caused people to seek help. Sleep disorders, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression were common. A counselor who is willing to listen and to emphasize, and who can help a client to get a clearer understanding of what troubles him or her, creates space for new approaches. The aim is not to lecture but to empower. As some beneficiaries put it:

"I could feel myself again..."

"It took a rock off my chest..."

"...she made me feel stronger."

"I have changed the way I am dealing with my family..."

"... I don't spank the children so much now."

OUR JOINT PROJECT TEAMS

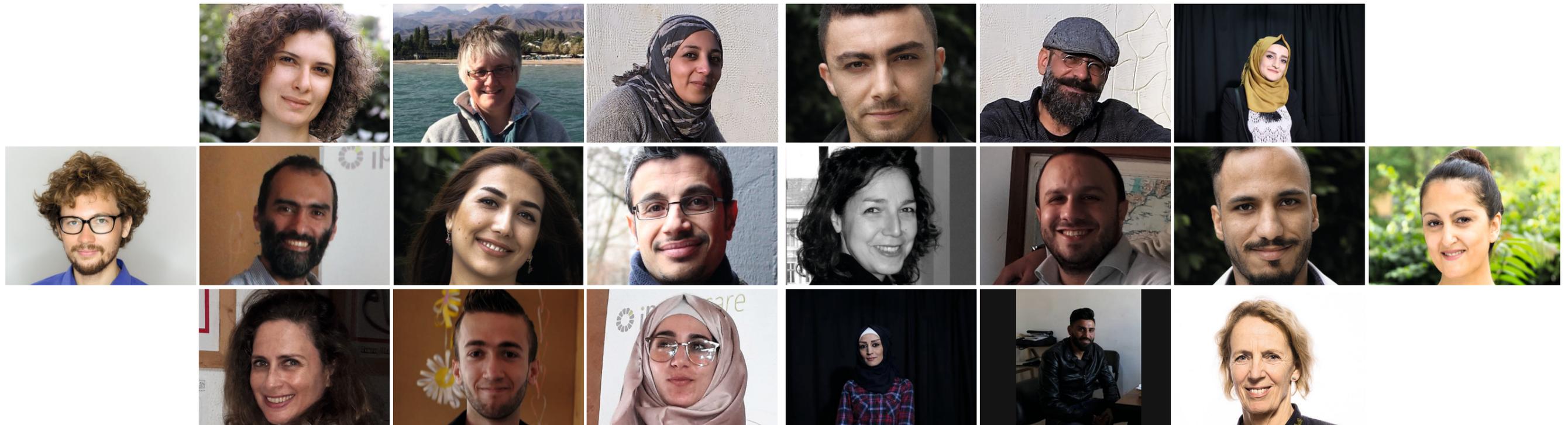
"The smartest thing Ipsos has done was to train people of the same culture."

"You learn not to judge. If a woman is not very educated, you need to learn how to speak to her in language that she understands, her religion, for example."

"In our training, you learn to see things from different angles, and you learn to really see people, to not categorise them."

"It was hard at the beginning, too dark. But the supervision we get from Ipsos is great because it helps us to deal with this part of our work. And it is worth it."

"There was this teenager who stopped beating up his younger siblings, and he told me 'My mother includes you in her prayers'. Being included in a mother's prayer is an honour, and it is humbling. Everyone should be allowed to feel such a moment."



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Purpose:

Ipsos is specialized in the field of mental health and psychosocial care, in developing locally adapted concepts, delivering trainings for psychosocial counsellors, medical doctors, nurses and community health workers for treating mental health-related problems including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress following war, insecurity and challenging living conditions.

Furthermore, it aims at strengthening the cultural identity of war-torn societies through cultural programmes, which is a precondition for peace and reconciliation, and the rebuilding of civil society in the aftermath of a civil war and natural catastrophes.

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