



UNHCR Europe NGO Consultation 2017 - Regional Workshops 16th October 2017

Self-reliance of beneficiaries of international protection in Southern Europe

UNHCR Background Paper

Inclusion is one of the most pressing gaps in **Southern Europe**. Improvement in this area is crucial in supporting Southern European countries to shift from transit countries to becoming receiving countries that can provide a durable solution to persons in need of international protection. Achieving **self-reliance** is a landmark along the path to full integration and social inclusion. However, for many beneficiaries of international protection living in Southern Europe, accessing post-recognition support and/or employment is a serious challenge. This session aims to explore the nature of these challenges and develop concrete and innovative responses, both in terms of policy-related advocacy and projects that could be implemented by NGOs and/or UNHCR, or other actors. In order to provide background for this discussion, some of the main challenges related to integration and self-reliance in each Southern European country are described below.

Cyprus:

In **Cyprus**, the Refugee Law expressly guarantees refugees the right to receive the same treatment as that accorded to citizens under the relevant laws and regulations relating to public allowance. Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection can apply for Guaranteed Minimum Income support. Nevertheless, beneficiaries of international protection have limited or no access to other social cohesion programmes, such as public housing schemes, student grants, disability schemes and micro-credit loans, typically available to Cypriot and EU nationals.

Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have the same employment rights as nationals. However, employers are often not aware of their rights and often confuse them with migrants whose employment is subject to additional restrictions. However, asylum-seekers may currently access employment nine months after the submission of an asylum application. Employment opportunities are however limited to permitted sectors; namely, agriculture, livestock, and fisheries. There is no active policy to assist asylum-seekers to gain access to employment and no skills development programmes specific for refugees. Recognition of foreign diplomas is also a problem. As a result, many remain unemployed for years, leading to frustration and de-moralization. Where referrals are made by the labour office, this is only for employment that is not generally suitable (maybe requires separation from family) and asylum-seekers risk losing welfare should they be determined to be 'willfully unemployed'.

Greece:

In Greece, improvements (i.e. enhanced Asylum Service capacity) in the processing of asylum applications have led to an acceleration of positive decisions produced. In the first eight months of 2017, the Greek Asylum Service granted status to a total of 5,939 individuals (5,461 received refugee status and 478 subsidiary protection), whereas in the entire 2016, a total of 2,712 individuals were recognized (2,467 as refugees and 245 as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection).

In terms of UNHCR support to the Greek authorities to respond to the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece, a total of 42,685 persons¹ (of whom 2,929 persons granted international protection status) are included in the Cash Based Interventions programme managed by UNHCR and 12,642 persons² (of whom 1,445 granted international protection status) are placed in the UNHCR-managed accommodation scheme and receive the accompanying support services. Greek authorities, a number of municipalities, and several national and international NGOs are part of implementation modalities of those two projects funded by the EU Commission.

Those granted status need to transit from support and assistance schemes designed to benefit asylum-seekers (such as the CBI programme, the accommodation scheme, reception facilities, and temporary accommodation sites directly managed by the Greek authorities) to national schemes from which they are eligible to benefit under the same terms and conditions as Greek nationals.

In the participatory assessment completed in March 2017, refugees and asylum-seekers in Greece ranked self-reliance and local integration to be among their top concerns, especially after status is granted. They all acknowledged the positive impact on their daily life of the accommodation and cash projects, but also expressed their concern over their dependency on those schemes due to the limited opportunities to be self-reliant, as well as the lack of sufficiently clear information and guidance as to how to have effective access to national social protection schemes.

Self-reliance for recognized beneficiaries of protection in Greece is influenced by three different yet inextricably linked factors: (i) the lack of a State-promoted comprehensive local integration model for beneficiaries of protection; (ii) the situation of the national economy and labour market; and (iii) a prevailing narrative, (which is largely put forward by smugglers' networks and diaspora groups settled in central and northern European countries), that self-reliance and thus local integration is far easier and more attractive in specific EU member states.

The need for a national local integration model.

Although Greek legislation is largely in compliance with standards set in the 1951 Convention and EU legislation in force, there is no systematic State-offered post recognition support or counselling/orientation to beneficiaries of protection regarding State-promoted pathways to self-reliance and integration. Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are expected to act on their own initiative and means in order to benefit from existing State or privately funded support and assistance programmes for vulnerable groups (which include beneficiaries of protection). In the vast majority of cases, they lack both the language skills (all interaction with the Greek administration, including the completion of administrative procedures, has to be in Greek) and the understanding of how institutions, public administration, and civic life are organized in Greece. Support funded by the EU and offered through UNHCR and its implementing partners to benefit asylum-seekers (accommodation, monthly cash assistance) does not include beneficiaries of protection except for a limited period of time (currently for a maximum of six months subject to an individualised needs assessment of beneficiaries).

The design of a comprehensive integration strategy that will facilitate and support the transition from support schemes designed to benefit asylum-seekers to self-reliance and integration has

¹ As per data available on 22 August 2017.

² As per data available on 19 September 2017.

been announced by the Greek Deputy Prime Minister to be an immediate planning priority for the Greek Government. Elements of this strategy are already in place when it comes to safety-net coverage of certain basic needs. Despite some challenges in the implementation by certain governmental services, the recently adopted Social Solidarity Income, free-of-charge full medical and pharmaceutical coverage, and registration as an unemployed person are by law open to beneficiaries of international protection under the same conditions as for Greek nationals. Housing is a stand-alone challenge as there are currently no long-term social housing programmes in Greece, either for Greek nationals or for beneficiaries of protection.

The biggest gaps in Greece are in relation to (the lack of) measures which are in the logic of 'affirmative action', i.e. State-funded programmes to facilitate the initiation of the integration process and the full enjoyment of rights foreseen in legislation. Mandatory Greek language courses for adults, cultural orientation sessions, simplification of transactions with public administration, the design of an individualized integration plan for beneficiaries of protection and predictable support to pursue it are some of the initiatives that could be promoted in this regard. Competent Greek authorities are currently working to conceptualize and organize the implementation of an ambitious programme for the registration of educational and academic qualification as well as professional skills and competencies for all asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece.

Situation in the economy and the labour market

In so much as self-reliance for beneficiaries of international protection is related to the overall situation of the national economy and the labour market, there is space for limited optimism in Greece. Although the Greek economy started to grow in late 2016 and is projected to continue growing over the next two years, overall unemployment rates stood at 21.2% in June 2017. The age groups of 15-24 (43.3% unemployment rate) and 25-34 (26.8% unemployment rate) are the most affected. The Greek labour market is also far below the OECD average in terms of its inclusiveness vis-à-vis non-natives and other potentially disadvantaged groups, as per the OECD employment outlook issued in June 2017.³ In spite of recent reforms and significant progress achieved, heavy regulation makes entry into the labour market (be it as a salaried employee or self-employed person) an extremely complicated process, especially for persons who are not Greek.

Against this background, it is rather challenging to imagine how self-reliance and integration could be achieved without enough jobs being available or without enough quality (level of pay, labour market security, working environment) in the available jobs. As economic development and reduction of unemployment rates are a top priority for Greece, it is now, more than at any moment in the last 25 years in Greece, the time to revisit the effective inclusion of beneficiaries of international protection in the overall design of policies aimed at job creation and employment access, along with alleviating the social impact of protracted unemployment.

The prevailing narrative

Self-reliance and integration are often presumed by beneficiaries of international protection to be easier and much more attractive in certain countries (some of which are EU Member States) and out of the question in some others (including in Greece). This narrative is widely reproduced, to the extent that it has become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, by refugee and migrant diasporas, smuggling networks, and also the public discourse of some politicians and academics. Assertions such as 'Greece has never been a destination country for refugees and migrants', 'no-one wants to stay in Greece anyway,' or 'even the Greeks are leaving Greece to find a better life' only reflect part of the truth and ignore another aspect. This other aspect is perhaps the bigger of the two, namely that self-reliance and integration constitute a two-way dynamic process. On the one side, there is the host state and its society and on the other side the individual (his/her personality, strengths and needs, personal wishes, life-plan, skills and

³ See: <http://www.oecd.org/greece/Employment-Outlook-Greece-EN.pdf>.

qualifications). There is enough scientific evidence to suggest that the outcome of this two-way process is only partially determined by the strength of a national economy or the opportunities in the labour market. Social and cultural factors, inclusiveness of the host society, and State policies also influence the process.

The way forward

It is incontestable that there are countries with strong administrative capacities, advanced social support and welfare systems and robust economies offering self-reliance and integration opportunities which are more (in terms of availability) and better (in terms of quality). However, refugee integration cannot be *a priori* excluded in any country, especially in any EU Member State. On the other hand, numbers do matter.

No single country or national economy, even the richest ones in the EU, has an open-ended capacity to integrate infinite numbers of beneficiaries of protection. International solidarity should go hand in hand with national efforts to enable persons of concern to become self-reliant and pursue their integration not only in the Member State hosting them but also the entire European economic and social 'areas'. Some steps in this direction have already been completed, including amendments (in 2011) to the relevant Directive making it possible for refugees and subsidiary protection holders to benefit from the long-term resident's status and subsequently (in 2013), the introduction of favourable provisions in relation to calculating the five-year period required for acquiring the said status. Further steps to enhance legal mobility, within and outside the EU, of those granted international protection status might be necessary in order to enhance self-reliance and integration prospects as part of a broader EU responsibility-sharing framework that will also include beneficiaries of international protection.

Recently announced plans by the Greek authorities (and corresponding implementation actions under preparation) point in a positive direction. These initiatives including offering language courses (in Greek and another EU language as selected by the beneficiaries themselves); using the EU skills toolkit for third country nationals in order to identify skills and qualifications of asylum-seekers and refugees; and further facilitating access to education (standard national curriculum) for all asylum-seeking and refugee children. These initiatives aim to successfully initiate self-reliance and integration processes in Greece, but also to equip beneficiaries to benefit from EU mobility as and when this is made possible by EU and national legislation in force.

Italy:

In Italy, integration of beneficiaries of international protection remains one of the most problematic areas of the Italian asylum system due to the high level of unemployment, the economic crisis, and the absence of specific measures for promoting the integration of beneficiaries of international protection. Beneficiaries of international protection have the right to work. Due to tighter controls at northern land borders, Italy is increasingly becoming a destination country for asylum-seekers.

Many beneficiaries of international protection continue to live in destitute conditions in metropolitan areas of Rome, Milan, Florence, and Turin. Despite some positive signals in terms of economic growth, integration measures tailored to beneficiaries of international protections remain limited due to funding cuts in the welfare system and limited post-recognition support.

According to the focus group on integration report published by UNHCR in April 2017,⁴ refugees living in Italy consider reaching self-reliance as the main priority in their integration process. There is no automatic access to post-recognition support for most beneficiaries of international protection. Only refugees hosted in the ordinary reception centres under the SPRAR system are guaranteed accommodation for 6 months after their recognition. On the other hand, asylum-seekers hosted in the extraordinary reception centres (currently the majority) must leave the

⁴ See: https://www.unhcr.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/UNHCR_Report_ENG_web.pdf.

centre following the recognition. Municipalities are in charge of social assistance and the exact rules, the available funds, and their capacity to manage social services differ widely depending on the local context.

In Italy, there is a high level of unemployment. However, in most cases, unemployed persons receive financial assistance only if they lost a job ('disoccupato') and not if they are looking for a first job ('inoccupato'), making most refugees ineligible for any assistance. Currently the funds for sustaining public housing policies are very poor. Therefore, although refugees have the same rights as Italians to access social housing, the actual chance of obtaining such housing is very limited.

Malta:

In **Malta**, people granted protection in Malta enjoy freedom of movement and access to the labour market, education and health services. Nevertheless, local settlement and integration prospects remain problematic for many. This is due to destitution, limited social support, as well as restrictive family reunification and citizenship opportunities. During focus group discussions with beneficiaries of international protection in Malta, the central role of the refugee community in the individual's integration process was emphasized. More than half of those employed found their job through a friend.

Refugees have access to the Maltese social welfare system. If they are unemployed, they are also entitled to approximately €340/month when registering for unemployment benefits (the same as Maltese citizens). They are not required to be registered at the open centres to receive assistance, but must sign in at an employment office 3 times per week. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection who reside in Open Centres (or are assessed to still remain registered with the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum-Seekers) receive financial assistance of around €130 a month, if they are not working. To receive assistance, they must sign in 3 times per week at the Open Centre. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection who are not working and are living in the community, are not entitled to unemployment benefits but are now able to register with the Social Welfare unit and provided they supply necessary documentation and sign regularly at the office, they receive social assistance of around €340/month.

Portugal:

In **Portugal**, integration is a challenge, due to the economic situation, the lack of a comprehensive national integration strategy and because refugees often do not intend to remain in Portugal. Persons granted refugee status or subsidiary protection are subject to the legal provisions related to the social security system and receive social allowances through this system. Persons granted refugee status or subsidiary protection are also permitted to access the labour market and vocational training. Post-recognition integration support and social allowances are managed by central government entities: namely Employment and Vocational Training and Social Security, respectively. The 2012 6-Party Agreement covers issues of integration for spontaneous asylum-seekers who are admitted to the second eligibility stage of the RSD procedure and entitled to work. The Agreement establishes the dispersal policy for the these admitted asylum-seekers, recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. However, barriers to employment, such as poor language skills and the lack of adequate professional skills combined with the unemployment rate,⁵ can lead to serious problems for refugees as social allowance rates are low and often not sufficient to meet basic needs.

Spain:

In **Spain**, integration remains challenging due to the general economic situation, including the high unemployment rate, the impact of austerity measures, and reduced social support. Asylum-seekers are mainly of Syrian, Palestinian, Ukrainian and Venezuelan origin with diverse

⁵ Currently just under 10%.

educational backgrounds (including highly qualified professionals) facing great challenges with regard to labour integration due to high unemployment rates among youth and over 45 year old and language barriers. Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have the right to work in Spain, on the same basis as nationals.

The reception and integration programme established by the Ministry of Employment and Social Security (MEYSS) is 3 phased, providing support for asylum-seekers for 18 months (up to 24 for vulnerable cases). This programme continues for 18 months, even if international protection is granted at some point during the 18-month time period.⁶ It includes literacy and language courses, labour training, support for housing and access to the labour market, psycho- social support and financial aid. Phase 1 includes initial accommodation in state run reception centres or accommodation provided by specialized NGOs funded under the MEYSS' program (6 months). Phase 2 entails support for integration through NGOs including financial aid covering housing and daily allowance (6 months). Phase 3 is a self-sufficiency phase supported through specific and targeted financial aid programmes (6 months). Further support is channelled through mainstream local and/ or regional services. Regional governments (Autonomous Communities) and municipalities are competent for employment, education, health, housing and social services to a great extent, all highly relevant for integration.

The programme was originally designed for other profiles (Latin American refugees) and a very different economic situation. It has not been adapted to evolving needs. There is no effective quality control or evaluation and resource allocation is insufficient or late. Although the reception and integration system has grown exponentially in the last year and a half in terms of both number of places⁷ and human resources, meaningful investment in post-recognition support is still needed. Beneficiaries of international protection may be left without support post-recognition, depending on how long the RSD procedure took. UNHCR recommends that Spain ensure a "post-recognition" assistance phase for beneficiaries of international protection for a minimum period of six months after recognition, in order to avoid destitution and increase self-reliance and sustainable integration prospects.

⁶ The Spanish reception and integration programme does not make distinctions based on status, meaning that both applicants and beneficiaries of protection have access to the programme for 18/24 months. For example, someone lodging an application in Spain remains in the system for 18 months regardless of having a positive decision after 6 months (they will stay until the 18 months are completed) and a resettled refugee that arrives already with a protection status in Spain will be also entitled to the same support under the same programme.

⁷ From 500 to 5000 and expected to reach 8,300 at year's end.