



UNHCR Europe NGO Consultation 2017 Regional Workshops - Northern Europe

UNHCR Background Document

Strengthening Strategic UNHCR/NGO Cooperation to Facilitate Refugee Inclusion and Family Reunification in Northern Europe

Introduction

Integration and social cohesion is probably one of Europe's biggest challenges today. Successful cohesion among beneficiaries of international protection (BSPs) and nationals is not only the best solution for BSPs, their family and communities, but also the best way to ensure favourable public opinion, to maintain and increase the asylum space (including through new legal pathways), and make any solidarity mechanisms possible in Europe. The question is therefore not whether one should actively engage with integration, but how to do this in the most efficient and consistent way.

Integration of refugees has become a priority for UNHCR. The UNHCR proposal "Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally" launched in December 2016 suggests an EU system for integration that builds upon: a) Increased funding for integration programmes, b) Predictable, harmonized integration services and c) Fostering welcoming communities.

In the framework of RRNE's five year strategy, the office has started to think of how it could engage in the integration area in the long-term, more efficiently and consistently. The process has led to not only mapping the situation in each country (context, challenges, opportunities, partners/stakeholders), but also to look more into UNHCR's role and added value, given RRNE's presence, expertise and capacity in Northern Europe, and the number of bodies and organisations more or less active in this area. The partnership component or how to strengthen/create alliances with traditional or new stakeholders potentially sharing same goals is at the heart of this strategy.

This workshop is not only an opportunity to present the strategy so far to some of RRNE's NGO partners in this region, but also to start implementing it: to identify areas, objectives and processes as to how RRNE and NGOs can work together to ensure that BSPs and their families are not excluded from societies and have equal opportunities.

Due to time restrictions, the main aspects of this strategy are being shared with participants in advance so the workshop can be dedicated to discussion. Further discussions at national level will be organised this year and next.

At the end of this workshop NGOs and RRNE should agree on:

- The main integration priorities and objectives for the coming years in Northern Europe;

- RRNE's role and added value in the field of integration (including support to civil society);
- A number of common areas of work where cooperation between RRNE and NGOs is envisaged, as well as concrete suggestions as to how this collaboration should take place.

In order to keep the discussion focused, the following is a list of guiding questions for the discussion:

- 1) Regardless of organisations' current activities/priorities, do NGOs share the same views with regard to integration priorities and challenges in the region as identified by RRNE in its strategy?
- 2) How do NGOs see RRNE's role and added value in the field of integration, in which specific area (except family reunification), and at what level (national/regional)?
- 3) Are there important areas of the strategy not covered by NGOs?
- 4) On what areas (except family reunification) can we work together, and/or how can we divide the work?
- 5) What forms could this cooperation take, at what level (national, regional), and what type of actions can we envisage?

1 What is the multi-year multi partner strategy (MYMPS)?

In February 2015, the Deputy High Commissioner and the Assistant High Commissioners for Operations and Protection launched a call for interest in piloting multi-year planning. The goal was to facilitate offices' long-term vision and enhance partnerships. This multi-year planning pilot is part of UNHCR's shift towards a comprehensive protection and solutions approach that seeks to advance fulfilment of rights, strengthen self-reliance and promote autonomy so that people of concern can live safe, dignified, and productive lives. The MYMPS approach also embodies the spirit of the New York Declaration and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) acknowledging that a stronger international response to refugee movements requires the engagement of a much broader group of stakeholders (including government authorities, academia, business, civil society actors, host communities and refugees themselves).

RRNE is the first regional office based in Europe to pilot the MYMPS. The office has drafted a five-year strategy that operationalizes the UNHCR proposal "Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally" in line with the GSP, the CRRF and GRC, and is composed of five regional strategic objectives:

- 1. By 2022, all asylum seekers will be given effective access to the territory, and to fair, efficient and lean asylum procedures, as well as high quality reception conditions.*
- 2. By 2022, all beneficiaries of international protection should benefit from policies and practices that promote and facilitate integration.*
- 3. By 2022, standardised child-friendly asylum and migration procedures, ensuring the best interests of each child with respect to access and the identification and implementation of durable solutions, are fully functioning across the region.*
- 4. By 2022, all stateless persons will be identified and be given access to statelessness determination procedures, and all children born stateless children will be automatically*

granted citizenship.

5. By 2022, Northern Europe is engaged beyond its borders to protect, assist and find solutions.

RRNE's vision is for Northern Europe to be or become again a region of excellence in order not only to maintain the asylum space, but to continue to offer a high level of protection to all BSPs (including RST), and be a source of good practices to other countries in Europe and elsewhere.

RRNE's partners were involved in the initial brainstorming in November 2016, and their views will continue to be incorporated through a consultative process this year and over the next few years.

2 Integration challenges and opportunities in Northern Europe

Countries in the region offer quite a diverse picture when it comes to integration policies and practices. Integration is a key part of the Nordic countries' legal immigration policy. Standards as regards existing frontloaded integration policies, anti-discrimination and cohesion policies, and integration support (such as language courses, civic orientation, employment support programs, and education for children) are amongst the highest in Europe. These countries are often looked upon as important laboratories in Europe given the available data (including policy evaluation) enabling us to understand what works and does not work on this field.

However, determination in many countries in the region to curb the number of arrivals through downgrading protection standards has paved the way for the development of competing policies floating between deterrence and inclusion.

Finland and Iceland are rather new to integration, and the rise of asylum applications in 2015 led these countries to undertake a series of reforms to develop an integration framework.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are slowly on their way to transforming themselves from countries of transit to countries of asylum. The asylum frameworks, procedures, practice, and reception arrangements are improving thanks to the adoption of laws more aligned to international and EU standards. However, the low level of support to persons of concern, the lack of long-term integration prospects combined with existing xenophobia and racism despite an improvement in public attitudes (particularly amongst young people) continue to cause secondary movements towards other countries, which undermine both governmental efforts and integration prospects for beneficiaries of international protection.

Beyond the diversity of national contexts in Northern Europe and, despite the negative change in the asylum environment since 2015-2016 in most countries, the commitment authorities are showing in the region with regard to the integration of beneficiaries of international protection is probably the most positive trend observed in the region, and constitutes an opportunity to significantly improve the lives of all BSPs. Furthermore, the ownership taken by a number of citizens, and other stakeholders (local authorities, academia, the private sector, etc.) in welcoming and accompanying newcomers in all countries at different levels is certainly to be welcomed and further supported.

As part of its MYMPS, RRNE has identified a number of pressing challenges that need to be addressed in the coming years:

1 Public attitude towards persons of concern

The rise of xenophobia and negative political and media rhetoric in the region have created an increasingly hostile environment for refugees. Surveys and reports show that while

support for openness and inclusion is increasing over time, many foreigners are witnessing a more hate-filled social environment. Additionally, hate crimes are not systematically registered, investigated and prosecuted, and little funding is made available for initiatives preparing host societies and local authorities. Political discussions on asylum are increasingly shaped by security issues, and the heated public debate on extremism and 'failed-integration' that exists in all countries to a varying degree questions the very idea of asylum, undermining any efforts to extend the asylum space and open other legal pathways. All countries have anti-immigrant parties in parliaments and some in Government, while far-right parties are on the rise in Sweden and Denmark, and could also appear in the Baltic countries. Asylum and migration issues will remain high on the political agenda, particularly during the upcoming elections in 2018 and 2019.

2 Long-term integration strategies

It is now widely acknowledged that successful integration requires long-term strategies in order to reduce the gaps between BSPs and nationals in various domains (e.g. housing, health, education, labour market situation). Most countries in the region are in the process of adopting or implementing long-term strategies that address BSPs' needs. Finland is currently piloting its strategy through the Social Impact Bond model. Lithuania will hopefully adopt an integration strategy in 2017, and approved amendments for aligning the social rights of BSP with the ones for Convention refugees.

Sweden, Denmark and Norway are in the process of adjusting their integration policies to the significant number of children and youth among the beneficiaries of international protection population, as well as adults in need of basic education or with skills inadequate to Nordic labour markets. The durable inclusion of low-skilled beneficiaries of international protection, and in particular women, will depend on the efficiency of recent measures, as well as the degree of involvement of relevant national and local stakeholders (including municipalities and the private sector) in the coming years. While doing so, Sweden, Denmark, Norway have also adopted a number of restrictive policies undermining integration efforts, including the growing distinction between Convention refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, application of cessation clauses, restrictive FRU policies, cuts in social benefits and obstacles to long-term residence permits. The impact these measures will have on BSPs' inclusion needs still to be monitored.

Long-term strategies on integration are still lacking in Iceland, Estonia and Latvia, and while the Baltic countries provide in general for a number of activities to ensure the adequate reception and integration of BSPs (including for activities aimed at social and economic inclusion through the provision of language courses, labour market assistance and individualized social mentoring for refugees and asylum-seekers), these countries have failed to take into consideration the principles of substantive equality and non-discrimination and of the 'progressive realization' of social and economic rights.

Additionally, none of the countries in the region have fully established or institutionalized procedures for consulting people of concern, and empowering them to contribute to planning and implementation.

3 RRNE's integration objectives for the next five years

RRNE is building its strategy on the assumption that integration will remain an important issue in the region, and that the authorities will continue to dedicate thought and resources to this issue. RRNE will also the implementation of durable integration strategies in the region that maintain high standards through advocacy, cross-fertilization, capacity building, and judicial engagement in relevant areas. Based on country analysis and consultations with a number of partners and stakeholders, RRNE has identified five key integration areas from which a number of milestones and objectives have been drawn up for each country.

Each objective implies coordination with a number of partners and stakeholders some of whom are new to UNHCR (e.g. OECD, the Nordic Council, ministries of employment, social partners, the private sector and social start-ups, academia, networks of cities, etc.). The strategy will therefore be adjusted to opportunities as they develop, and RRNE sees its role as a convener and facilitator to ensure coherence and synergies between all the relevant stakeholders.

RRNE's approach for the coming years will be to intensify efforts in the Baltic countries in order to ensure all persons of concern have durable integration prospects, and a chance to remain in the country. This implies ensuring consistent long-term integration strategies are adopted and implemented (including that the main obstacles are removed), adequate funding (EU/national) is made available in the long-term, relevant stakeholders and service providers are fully supported, and communities (nationals, local authorities and persons of concern) are prepared. Given the low numbers, the uneven distribution of BSPs on the territories, and the socio-economic priorities in these countries, RRNE does not foresee the development of refugee specific integration policies. Therefore, the challenge is and will be to create strategic alliances and use momentum to ensure BSPs' issues are addressed at different levels.

In the Nordic countries, RRNE will mainly focus on strengthening family reunification through advocacy, litigation and operationalization in order to mitigate the impact of recent legislation restrictions (e.g. security of residence) and facilitate family reunion in targeted countries. This implies an operational role for UNHCR. While UNHCR's role in family reunification has historically been limited, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (NYD) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 September 2016, affirm UNHCR's responsibility to support family reunification of refugees.

Labour market inclusion is another area where RRNE intends to become more active in the region. The strategy here is to form alliances with stakeholders and other expert in this field (e.g. OECD, UNHCR Private Sector Partnerships) in order to reach out to private companies and the relevant authorities.

Finally, RRNE will strengthen its communication on integration through regional cooperation agreed with partners, strategic relationship with key journalists, showcasing impact and practices at local level.

Key areas and objectives for the region

1 Promotion of a conducive environment

- Anti-discrimination national legislation in place in all countries;
- Hate crimes systematically registered and processed;
- Civil society initiatives, including refugee driven, for conducive environment are fully supported by authorities;
- Journalists are capacitated;
- Refugees' voices are given a platform;
- Municipalities and cities are fully supported by the authorities to receive and integrate refugees in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

2 Social and economic integration is realized

- All countries have adopted and implemented long-term integration strategies that address the main needs, remove legal and practical obstacles, and provide appropriate funding.
- Relevant reservations to the 51 Convention are withdrawn;

- The principle of substantive equality is achieved in all countries;
- Participatory approaches are institutionalized in order to take into account BSPs' voices;
- Proposals funded by AMIF and ESF cover identified gaps, and are complementary;
- Civil society, including refugee groups, and municipalities are fully involved in policy design and supported by the authorities.

3 Ensure effective and swift access to family reunification

- Provide support for the procedure and reunification of families through increased operationalization;
- Remove the main practical and legal obstacles through strategic advocacy and litigation together with partners and networks of lawyers;
- Form alliances to extend the network of advocates (e.g. cities, civil society, private companies, etc.);
- Additional legal pathways for extended family members are piloted.

4 Ensure security of residence

- Ensure that BSPs are granted a minimum of five-year residence permit;
- Review of status only on a case by case basis in line with Art 1C and the family unity principle;
- BSPs who have the means to be self-reliant are permitted to establish themselves in another EU country after 6 months.

5 Durable labour market inclusion

- Ensure that all BSPs have durable employment prospects through the implementation of adapted programmes and support;
- Form alliances with the private sector, and facilitate the links between the private sector, authorities and civil society;
- The language requirement for employment for BIPs is lifted or reduced, and language courses are provided in the work place and outside in EST, LVA, LTU.

Each objective outlined above require the close collaboration with partners to be achievable and RRNE needs more information on the partners' analysis of the existing challenges and opportunities, and how RRNE's role is understood, to be in a position to implement the strategy successfully.

Input and feedback on the questions and topics listed in the beginning of this document is crucial as a first step to fine tune the strategy or adjust the strategy as necessary.