External Evaluation
2014-2018 Special Support Plan for Cyprus

FINAL REPORT
SUMMARY

March 2019

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Commissioned by Planning & Evaluation Unit, EASO

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This report includes non-validated operational data provided to the evaluators during data collection. Some data may differ from those presented in other reports because such data may have been updated through subsequent internal data reviews or validation exercises.

This report may include provisional data available at the time of production of the report. Some data may therefore differ from those in validated and official statistics subsequently submitted to Eurostat (in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2020/851 amending Regulation (EC) 862/2007) and published on the Eurostat website https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/asylum.

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Executive Summary

EASO support activities to Cyprus started in July 2014 after signing the SSP, which was amended in the following three years by four amendments. This is the first (external) evaluation of the SSP to Cyprus assessing the level of success in implementing the (nine) measures which were partly or fully operating since July 2014. Based on the assessment of relevant data, this evaluation report finds that over the past four years, EASO's interventions have mostly been relevant in addressing both the urgent and more long-term needs of relevant Cyprus authorities, and measures have largely been effective in contributing to the broadly stated objectives even though lack of indicators and relevant data does not allow a very fine-grained assessment. In 2017 and 2018, EASO's measures have become much more targeted on the most severe bottlenecks in the Cyprus Asylum Service, namely the support activities on the improvement of reception conditions, and the management of a backlog of first instance applications, and recently, also in the Alien and Immigration Unit (AIU) in the case of registrations.

With the third amendment signed in February 2017, the EASO budget allocated for the SSP to Cyprus has increased significantly, partly driven by a significant decline in Member State nominations, and consequently, the need to deploy interim experts for backlog management and at Kofinou reception centre. This upscaling and improved targeting on key activities has shown that EASO is in the position to respond to changing demands and needs of the member state authorities. In 2018, with a significantly larger budget at hand, EASO further consolidated and targeted its support activities on three remaining (though cost-intensive) measures of backlog management, reception conditions and registration, all contributing to a significant – though not measurable – effect in the targeted areas.

Overall, this evaluation finds for most operating measures foreseen by the SSP good to very good performance on relevance and effectiveness. In particular more recent activities on reception and registration, but also the management of the first instance backlog, indicate that EASO's engagement in Cyprus is well-targeted and mostly effective in contributing to the broadly stated objectives of the SSP. The wider impact of most EASO activities is, however, mostly due to the relatively small scale of the EASO engagement in Cyprus, hard to identify but presumably non-negligible. Sustainability of most EASO interventions is even harder to assess as relevant information on durability of measure outcomes is not available. It turns out that without a sound data management and monitoring system, including a systematic data collection and clearly specified measure output/outcome indicators, a more rigorous (and objective) assessment of the EASO interventions is not possible.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

*R*1: Providing support in improving inter-departmentally coordinated databases and data management systems and implementing a joint M&E system of Cyprus asylum and reception system

*R*2: Enhancing support in managing (reducing) backlog at first instance (Asylum Service), and increasingly important, the backlog at the second instance determination (appeal) stage

*R*3: Supporting Alien and Immigration Unit by providing personnel and training both to EASO caseworkers and AIU staff for ensuring effective registration processes

*R*4: Supporting camp management and administration of Kofinou reception centre in the transition to an information and training facility

*R*5: Permanent EASO representative for coordinating field operations, liaising with stakeholders, and engaging in advocacy

*R*6: Providing mentoring programmes for permanent staff (Asylum Service, Reception centre, Administrative/Asylum Court) and on-the-job training and supervision for incoming temporary staff

*R*7: Providing crosscutting support for vulnerability identification, assessment and procedures across various Cypriot stakeholders

*R*8: Developing measure-specific, and ultimately, a comprehensive exit strategy of EASO support.

1. Introduction and Methodology

Objectives

This evaluation provides stakeholders with evidence and analytical indications about the performance, good practices and lessons learned of EASO Special Support Plan to Cyprus and its four amendments covering the period between July 2014 and December 2018. This evaluation is part of a continuous knowledge building effort to enhance the effectiveness of future EASO operations. The evaluation has been focusing on questions related to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact of the entire EASO Special Support Plan (SSP). This evaluation exercise shall also identify and highlight good practices, lessons learnt and recommendations emerging from the SSP implementation.

Background

Cyprus has received 7761 asylum requests in 2018, which was a 74% increase compared to numbers in 2017 when about 4600 applied for asylum, a figure itself 56% higher than that for 2016. In 2014, when the SSP was first implemented, Cyprus received about 1700 asylum applications, i.e. less than a quarter of the number in 2018 (Figure 1).

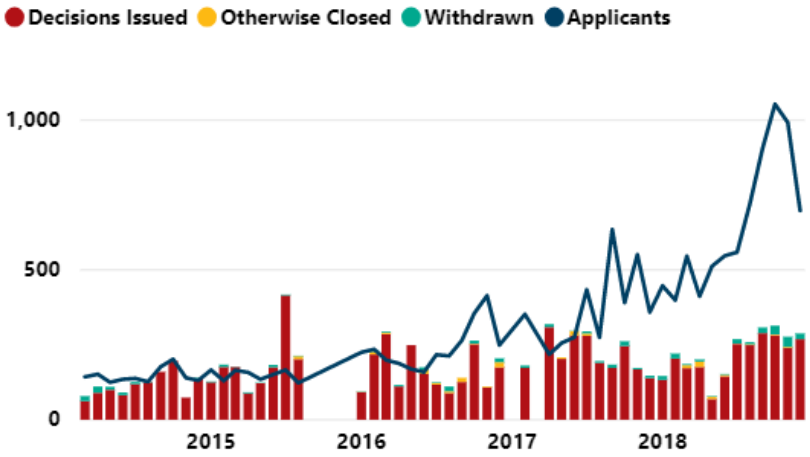

Figure 1 Asylum applications and decisions per month, 2014-2018

Source: *EASO, Annual Operational Analysis – Cyprus 2018, p.2*

As a consequence, a significant backlog of pending cases has built up and consolidated at high levels which indicate to the limited capacity of the Cypriot asylum system in processing asylum applications (Figure 2).

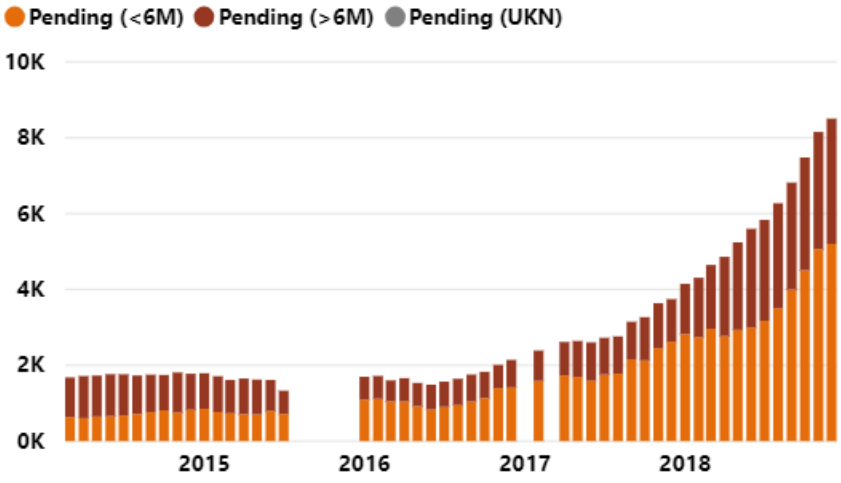

Figure 2 Number of pending cases (first-instance) per month, 2014-2018

Source: *EASO, Annual Operational Analysis – Cyprus 2018, p.2*.

Furthermore, as a consequence of rising numbers of arriving applicants for international protection, reception conditions have further deteriorated in 2017 and early 2018, both in communities hosting asylum seekers but also within the only reception centre located near the remote village of Kofinou, where currently about 260 asylum seekers are residing in partly insufficient living conditions.
EASO support activities to Cyprus actually started in July 2014 with eight measures of which some operated only for a brief period. In February 2017, amendment no. 3 was established with two additional operational measures, focusing on the support to Cypriot authorities in managing a growing for backlog of pending cases of application for international protection and the establishment of contingency assistance in case of mass arrivals. In April 2017, EASO also consolidated institutionally by opening its operational office in Nicosia, headed by a (semi-resident) field coordinator/union contact point. In line with the latest amendment (no. 4) to the SSP in December 2017, only three measures remained operating. In 2018, EASO provided targeted operational support to the Cyprus Asylum Service (CAS) in managing the backlog of pending asylum applications (first instance), enhancing the capacity of the national reception system with a special focus on the reception centre in Kofinou, and under the new measure CY 9, providing assistance to the Aliens and Immigration Unit (AIU) of the Police, Ministry of Justice and Public Order in the registration of applications for international protection in three of the five registration offices of the country (Figure 3).

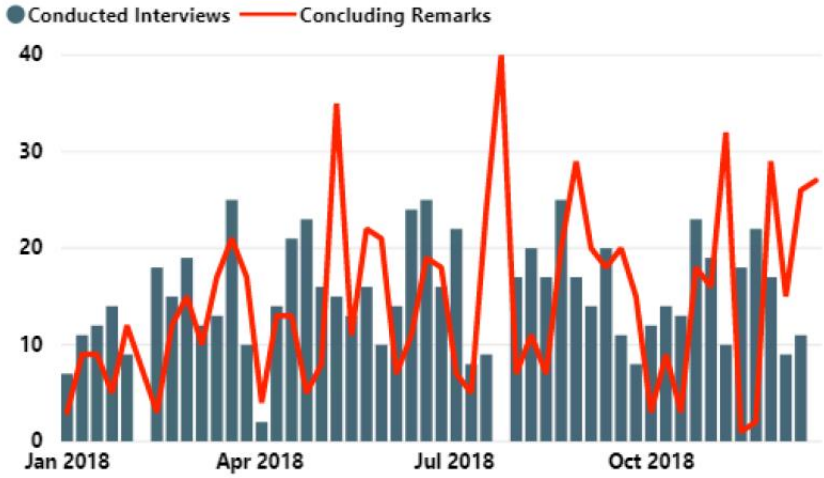

Figure 3 Conducted interviews and concluding remarks by EASO caseworkers in 2018

Source: *EASO, Annual Operational Analysis – Cyprus 2018, p.1*

Amendment No. 4 to the SSP to Cyprus provided for activities to continue until the end of 2018 and is replaced by the recently signed EASO Operating Plan kicking off in January 2019.
Since June 2014, when the initial SSP was signed, some measures of the initial measures were terminated, modified, or new measures had been introduced during this period:

- *Measure CY 1*: Support the Cypriot Data Collection and Analytical Capacity; amended (in July 2015)
- *Measure CY 2*: EASO tailor made workshops on introduction to international protection
- *Measure CY 3*: Intra-institutional screening mechanism detecting persons with special needs
- *Measure CY 4*: Support with development, implementation of relevant methodology and training in the field of age assessment; amended in July 2015
- *New Measure CY 4*: Support in relation to minors/unaccompanied minors in need of international protection; amended in April 2016

- *Measure CY 5*: Support in the field of reception and open accommodation; amended in December 2017
- *Measure CY 6*: Study visits of the Cypriot institutions in the field of asylum and reception to EU Member States
- *Measure CY 7*: Final evaluation of the implementation of the EASO Special Support Plan to Cyprus; amended (in July 2015): New Measure CY 7: Support with capacity building of CY officials; amended (in April 2016)
- *Measure CY 8* (July 2015): Support in enhancing the capacity of the Dublin Unit
- *New Measure CY 8* (amended in February 2017): Support in backlog management in the asylum procedure, amended in December 2017
- *New Measure CY 9* (amended in February 2017): Contingency assistance in case of mass arrivals

Limitations

This evaluation was not intended to constitute a fully comprehensive assessment of all EASO activities in Cyprus, but should be considered as an exercise in order to appreciate EASO's support measures in Cyprus *as a whole*. It only relates to basic operational findings and does not aim to provide in-depth analysis of aspects that go beyond the activities of EASO.

The evaluation methodology was limited to a desk review and selected interviews with national authorities and selected stakeholders in Cyprus and EASO staff as outlined in previous section. To this extent, it does not include views of *all* stakeholders and beneficiaries, in particular excluding the asylum seekers themselves. The evaluator recognizes the challenge of evaluating the Special Support Plan without explicitly defined indicators in place from the start of the intervention.

Another shortcoming was the limited availability of relevant and lack of detailed data that would be necessary for a more in-depth evaluation exercise. For that reason, the evaluator structured this exercise around the evaluation of the actual (operating) measures, without aiming to assess in detail all operational objectives and deliverables mentioned in the SSP and its four amendments. For the very same reason, the evaluator decided (after approval by MEU) to re-organise the overall evaluation of nine measures into four main (categories of) measures, by which the first category is a composite category summarizing all of its activities into the area of 'capacity building' including, trainings, workshops, and study visits.

A major limitation of the evaluation was the lack of hard data (numbers, figures, indicators) on most evaluation fields (measures) and/or of some past but now inactive EASO measures. Whilst EASO was able to provide some documents on a number of personal reports of individual MS experts deployed for short-term mission, and some other documents, the evaluator was unable to obtain reliable data on the actual impact of EASO support activities. The limited scale, timing and timeframe of the SSP's measures and activities and the nature of the intervention (mainly related to activities and processes contributing to some specific outputs) do hardly allow an assessment of the higher level impact and sustainability of the interventions. Due to the very limited availability of internal (or external) project documents including budget-related information on resource use and allocation, progress reports and documentation, internal evaluations etc. as well as the rather short time frame for conducting selected interviews with stakeholders and EASO staff involved, this evaluation was not to be supposed to give a fully comprehensive assessment and evaluation of all EASO's activities since 2014, but aimed to provide a summative assessment of the EASO Support Plan to Cyprus *as a whole*.

2. Key findings

The following overview presents the findings in relation to each of the evaluation criteria with respective specification per measure. For each evaluation criterion, the evaluator expresses an overall rate on a scale of four (very good, good, fair and unsatisfactory). The scale is partially based on the scores given by the interviewed stakeholders, but equally on the overall impression (even

though subjective) of each measure. The evaluator refrained from expressing an opinion (not applicable) when feeling that not enough information was available to make a judgement.

2.1 Measures related to Capacity Building (CY 1-4, 6 and 7)

The measure objectives as stated in SSP and its amendments are:

- CY1: Enhance the capacity of staff with regard to methodologies and methods of analysis aimed at assessing the Cypriot asylum system in the framework of the CEAS. Enhance inter-service coordination.
- CY2: Reinforce the capacity and further develop the skills and abilities on international protection of staff involved in the asylum and reception process..
- CY3: Improve the ability throughout the application process to identify, via a systematic approach, the special needs of vulnerable applicants. Develop further the exchange of relevant information between the different institutions, ensuring the necessary referral to the asylum procedure and provide for adequate support and follow-up.
- CY4: Enhance the capacity of the relevant stakeholders in assessing the age of asylum applicants and in referring unaccompanied minors to suitable facilities. Improved knowledge and expertise in safeguarding unaccompanied minors in need of protection. Guardianship system further developed.
- CY6: Support the further development of the cooperation and promote the exchange of good practices, information and experiences between the Cypriot authorities and other Member States in the field of asylum.
- CY7: Improve knowledge of CY officials on the practical implementation of the recast EU asylum acquis at 1st and 2nd instance. Enhanced capacity of health care professionals examining potential victims of torture.

The following assessment summarizes activities of measures 1-4 and 6-7 as a whole as most of these activities have taken place in small scale, or got suspended after the first amendment.[1] Figure 4 comprehensively summarizes evaluation results for each criterion of measures CY 1-4**,** 6 and 7.

Figure 4 Scores on evaluation criteria on measures CY 1-4, 6-7

*Relevance***:** In 2014, at a time when the EASO Support Plan to Cyprus was designed and first signed, the situation in Cyprus was predominantly characterized by a structural need and very specific demands for training and capacity building activities. In particular, the Asylum Service was experiencing a 'lack of skills' (interviewee).

[1] This reflects the impression of one of the experienced interviewers who said that the EASO engagement in Cyprus started 'overly ambitious' in 2014/15 in terms of the scope of EASO operations and got more 'realistic' later on.

While application numbers were still rather moderate, Cyprus stakeholders primarily requested small scale support in the area of age assessment, capacity building and training for Cypriot officials, and data management systems. Until early 2017, EASO actions and activities responded to the capacity building needs of various Cypriot stakeholders and beneficiaries (mostly CAS, but also Ministry of Health, and Social Welfare Service). During this period, EASO activities such as study visits or trainings on screening of vulnerabilities were perceived as "rather theoretical" (interviewee), while later interventions became more "practical" (same interviewee). The help with the age assessment was truly impactful and sustainable, according to one interviewee.

Another issue of concern, to be addressed by measure 1 of the SSP, was the existence of weak databases and data processing capacities in the Asylum Service, but also other stakeholders. Limited capacities in this area led to inefficiencies and real problems at different stages of the asylum procedure (according to an interviewee, asylum applications "sometimes even get lost"). Data processing and management capacity has been and still is of concern, although respective support activities have been reduced in the last two years.

An evaluation of some training activities for personnel of the Aliens and Immigration Unit (AIU) found that the topics of the training and workshop programs were relevant with the daily duties of Aliens and Immigration Unit concerning asylum procedures. The experience gathered from the training program gave the opportunity to AIU personnel to be aware of procedures followed by other EU MS concerning the processing of asylum application. It also gave the opportunity to gather a wider view of problems regarding vulnerabilities and needs of asylum applicants.

Measure CY 1 on supporting the Cypriot data collection and analytical capacity was an activity with cross-cutting references and involvement of all institutions relevant in the asylum and reception chain. The objective envisaged enhanced capacity of the staff with regard to methodologies and methods of analysis aimed at assessing the Cypriot asylum system in the framework of the CEAS as well as enhanced inter-service coordination.

Effectiveness: A notable result of measure CY 1 that was mentioned was an increased level of inter-service communication and coordination. Especially the Refugee Reviewing Authority (RRA) remarked that before the measure was implemented, the other CY services were not aware or particularly interested in how the appeals procedure is organised and which data is collected on their side. Furthermore, the RRA learned that some additional information might be relevant to collect (e.g. reference to the number of years cases have been pending). However, it was also stressed that neither the objective nor the role of each involved service was clearly explained ex ante. Some representatives were participating because they were asked to. A reason for limited effects was because partly persons were involved in the meetings who were not directly involved in data collection or who did not have sufficient technical or IT related experience. When asked about the results, the plan coordinators on EASO and CY side were unable to provide definite answers. It was repeatedly stressed that the involvement of the coordinators is required for better and streamlined communication. Measure CY 1 was suspended in February 2016.

Measure CY 2 provided tailor-made workshops on introduction into international protection, as the CY authorities expressed a need of basic training covering key messages in the following areas: Fundamental Rights, national Refugees Laws, Dublin-related procedure, Asylum Procedure Directive, identification of persons with special needs. This Measure has been completed in 2016.

Little information is available on the effectiveness of other capacity building activities. One interviewee, however, mentioned that she still uses material and documents from a CY 2 workshop in her daily work. Study visits were used by some of the interviewees, all highlighting learning effects of this instrument. The current camp manager expressed the positive experience of visiting a

Belgium reception centre. However, the quality and overall content of trainings, workshops, and study visits have not consistently been evaluated ex post.

Overall, the small scale and variety of capacity building activities does not allow for a conclusive assessment of the effectiveness of each of these measures. However, the quality of the trainings and workshops, as well as the study visits, has been perceived, by and large, as being high.

Efficiency: The efficiency of capacity building activities is supposed to be high. Despite lack of budgetary data on each measure, cost-efficiency of capacity building programs is producing good value for money (if programmes are well-designed, see recommendations).

Impact: The impact of capacity building activities on the wider system beyond direct beneficiaries depends on internal knowledge transfer processes from those directly befitting from capacity building activities to the wider system. There is not clear evidence this has happened in the past.

Sustainability: There is no obvious evidence that EASO capacity building activities (trainings, workshops, study visits) have sustained impacts on practices, procedures and capacities of the Cyprus asylum system.

Challenges and constraints

The challenge in evaluating these activities is the availability of limited data and information due to the lack of a systematic monitoring set up by EASO. The evaluator was not able to systematically incorporate evaluations or other assessments of workshops, trainings or study visits or similar activities in this assessment.

Some Recommendations

- EASO may support provision of comprehensive information material (draft agenda, target group, preparatory material, expectations, learning outcomes, etc.) before any training and capacity building activity. However, for some training activities roles and responsibilities of participating institutions and members have not been fully clear. Therefore, draft agenda needs to be shared as soon as possible including information on the target group, aim of the training and possibly maximum number etc.
- EASO may support consistent implementation of comprehensive evaluation of all trainings, workshops, or study visits etc. Expectations and learning outcomes of participants should be documented and evaluated in order to improve quality and design of these activities. For each capacity building measure, outcome and impact indicators should be specified in advance. Participants should be required to evaluate these activities ex post.
- EASO may support provision of mentoring and supervision programmes for selected beneficiaries (permanent staff) in key roles, in addition to one-off training programmes.

2.2. Measure on reception conditions (CY 5)

The measure objective as stated in SSP and its amendments is to “enhance the capacity of the Asylum Service in managing and developing improved reception facilities in order to fulfil international obligations in the field of reception of asylum seekers and refugees.”

Figure 5 comprehensively summarizes evaluation results for each criterion of measure CY 5.

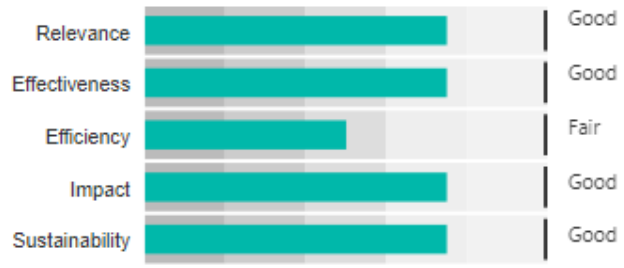

Figure 5 Scores on evaluation criteria on measures CY 5

Relevance: Despite a period of suspension between February and August 2018, EASO's presence and support, and also its strict position on the pre-conditions for returning back to Kofinou reception centre, was of great relevance for improving the managerial capacity and responsibility of the Cypriot authorities, and as a result, the living situation in the centre. With a permanent camp manager installed (although not foreseen by the Cyprus refugee Law), possibly as a consequence of a joint statement by UNHCR and EASO and other pre-conditions set by EASO for resuming operations at the reception centre, and a growing commitment of the Asylum Service to improve reception conditions, EASO has started to re-engage at Kofinou. However, EASO's role has not (yet) been clearly specified.

Effectiveness: EASO was suggesting for a longer period of time, and after the incidence in February 2018, insisted on the appointment of a permanent head of centre to manage day-to-day operations. Ultimately, CAS appointed a camp manager in May 2018. Since then, various improvements in the camp were initiated by the new permanent camp manager hired by CAS, although he is still understaffed and requires additional support to further improve quality of living conditions in the centre.

Before February 2018, EASO was taking a major role in managing the camp; however, the intensity of involvement was perceived as unsustainable (interviewee). During this time, a number of important improvements were realised such as (i) creation of a log where the events/incidents are recorded, (ii) daily briefing with staff of Kofinou centre with help of the log, (iii) monthly meetings with the different stakeholders/volunteers in order to synergize all the different activities and to provide a schedule, (iv) implementation of an intake procedure with all information needed (house rules, asylum and other procedures, detection of vulnerability etc.), (v) develop protocols with police (violence), social welfare (vulnerability), ministry of health (medical issues), volunteers, (vi) implementation of badge control system etc.

Efficiency: Resources made available by EASO were deemed appropriate for the implementation of measure CY 5. Unfortunately, due to lack of information on budget allocations to this measure, little can be said about cost efficiency.

Impact: EASO's contributions and its leading role in managing the camp between July 2017 and February 2018 had an overall positive impact on the overall quality of living standards and operational procedures in the camp. Even though camp operations were (and still are) under-resourced by CAS, some targeted operational support measures had a wider impact. Presumably, EASO's strict position on some major pre-conditions before resuming activities later in 2018 had a major impact on the significantly improved conditions for residents and staff at Kofinou.

Sustainability: The sustained positive impact of EASO interventions at Kofinou reception centre depends on the persistent commitment of CAS in providing sufficient resources and support for the current camp manager and its team. Some of the past activities, supported and/or initiated by EASO such as the development of SOPs, security conditions, vulnerability detection, entry-exit procedures etc., are only partially sustained after EASO suspended activities in February 2018.

Challenges and constraints

Despite positive developments at Kofinou reception centre, some significant challenges and constraints remain for further improvements. For instance, the outflow of residents is a major issue due to coordination problems with the Social Welfare Service and the Labour Office. SOPs on outflow management need to be drafted and implemented. Challenges remain regarding monthly allowance, hygiene conditions, sanitation and kitchens, sewage (improved), security (improved) etc. A major challenge is the lack of affordable private housing and the limited amounts available for renting privately.

Some recommendations

- EASO may support the Asylum Service and the Social Welfare Service in working together to implement pathways to affordable private housing as this constitutes a significant part of the reception conditions. Further cooperation between these two services is pertinent to enable more strategic decisions on allocation of reception accommodation, in particular the use of initial transit accommodation within the reception centre to be carried out more efficiently.
- EASO may support the Social Welfare Services in initiating contingency accommodation plans in the event that the Kofinou Reception Centre is at full capacity.
- EASO may support necessary improvements in reception standards at the Kofinou centre such as: creation of a digital database for the centre, regular provision of information to the residents throughout the whole asylum procedure, development of routines for the follow up with the vulnerable persons, functioning air conditioning, support and on-the-job training for the new camp manager, administrators, social workers, translators, security personnel etc.
- EASO may support efforts in areas such as:
    - Psycho-social support for residents with trauma and other emotional needs
    - Detect vulnerability and refer vulnerable cases to other types of housing
    - Ensure emergency care for residents
    - Providing better transportation opportunities to Nicosia (not only to Larnaca)
    - Support and assistance in improving labour market access
    - Support and assistance in finding affordable private housing

2.3. Measure on backlog management (CY 8)

The measure objectives as stated in SSP and its amendments are: “Providing assistance to CY in order to manage the backlog of pending cases by deploying assistants”.

Figure 6 comprehensively summarizes evaluation results for each criterion of measure CY 8.

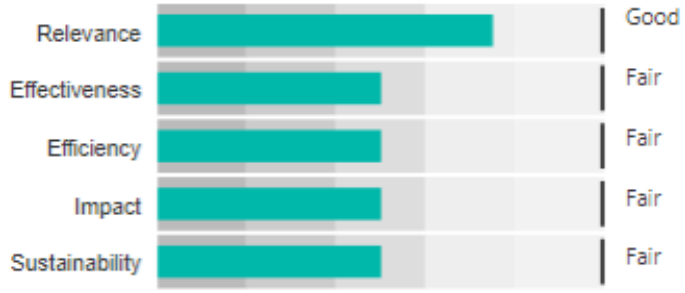

Figure 6 Scores on evaluation criteria on measures CY 8

Relevance: After a period of relatively low numbers of asylum applications between 2012 and 2015 (below 3’000 applications p.a. after more than 10’000 p.a. during the mid-2000s), Cyprus experienced a significant increase in applications of around 33 per cent in 2016, which further increased the backlog of pending cases. At the same time, CAS experienced a lack in resources for adequately responding to this resurge in asylum numbers. As a consequence, the third amendment of the SSP (signed in February 2017) incorporated a new measure on backlog management aiming to support CAS with caseworkers with the implicit aim of reducing the backlog of pending cases. EASO’s rapid response to this growing need at the time is highly applaudable and it shows its capacity and flexibility in rapidly addressing rising needs.

In 2015/16, the first instance procedure took between 2 and 3 years for nationalities that are not prioritised,[2] and about two years for well-founded cases.[3] However, the general need for support in managing the backlog of pending cases by reducing average length of case procedures was associated with the special need in identifying vulnerable cases on the one hand and a fast track procedure on the other hand for manifestly unfounded cases. As a consequence, EASO's backlog management support since 2017 was perceived as "very helpful, otherwise we would have had riots" (interviewee).

In 2017, some deployed experts provided assistance in screening applications for international protection, including one caseworker with expertise in vulnerable persons. Some evidence showed that this screening was indeed leading to the identification of vulnerable cases, which resulted in these cases being given priority as well as being examined by an EASO caseworker with relevant expertise. However, it remains unclear whether by now all such cases are being identified in a timely way.

It becomes increasingly clear though that the backlog of pending cases does not only exist at first instance but also at the appeal stage.[4] Besides some training for judges and legal assistants of the Administrative Court, EASO support activities have not addressed the backlog of cases at this stage of the asylum procedure.

Effectiveness: While cases processed by EASO deployed experts represented only a small subset of the applications awaiting determination at first-instance by the Asylum Service, the rise in the number of days lapsed between the lodging of the asylum application and the interview throughout the year was a sign of the formation of an ageing first-instance backlog and insufficient output to generate a backlog reduction. In January 2018, the median duration of 324 days was measured between the lodging of the application and the interview, a quantity which went up to 383 days in December 2018.

This evolution seems in line with monthly figures obtained in the context of EASO EPS data collection indicating a doubling of pending cases during 2018 from 4 148 at the end of January 2018 to 8 505 at the end of December 2018. This growing length in duration is obviously driven by a number of factors which are partially beyond factors EASO support activities are responsible for. Rising application numbers and limited allocation of additional resources in CAS equally contributed to extended periods of time until interviews are scheduled.

Efficiency: Based on debriefing reports, deployed experts doing casework highlighted both the high level of teamwork (e.g. sharing knowledge in problem–solving to deal cases appropriately) and independence (organization of work in the most efficient way from individual point of view). Also, checking of recommendation reports by one superior was perceived as a good practice.

It was also mentioned that although interims can be considered a good alternative for MS experts, some do lack experience, and in some cases, do not have sufficient English skills to conduct interviews in English (if necessary). EASO resources might also be better allocated if partly supporting procedures at the second instance (appeals). Efficiency is also hampered due to lack of a sound data management and filing system. Short deployment periods of MS experts and interim workers from Greece were perceived as suboptimal, employment of local staff on longer contracts was considered a good alternative.

[2] AIDA report, The length of asylum procedures in Europe, October 2016, p.5
[3] AIDA Country Report Cyprus: Second Update, November 2015, 22.
[4] AIDA Country Report Cyprus, Update 2018, p.30, accessed 18 March 2019

*Impact***:** In general, EASO's support to the backlog management ensures harmonized procedures and results and they may help CAS adopting standard practice for all cases. The overall impact is not (yet) measurable due to rise in backlog at first instance. However, up-scaling of both EASO and CAS resources in 2019 should increase the wider impact both on the length of procedures and the standards.

*Sustainability***:** Direct support on casework to reduce backlog is unlikely to be sustainable. Furthermore, there is some indication that deployed caseworkers would have required more supervision, communication and support by CAS. Structures for ensuring mutual and long-term knowledge transfer between EASO deployed persons and CAS caseworkers can be further improved. Training activities, SOPs, and capacity building on the other hand seem to have more lasting effects on the quality and duration of asylum procedures.

Challenges and constraints

- A challenge mentioned relates to the scheduling of interviews at the point of arrival of the deployed expert. Some experts had their first interviews only after a week. Some experts raised concerns about security in and around the CAS building. Security standards in the building have but should be further improved.
- It was mentioned that some interpreters were not fully qualified and trained. Interpreters have not received an introduction or any information on the rights and obligations they have. As a consequence, they are often "too involved in the actual process", which results in them overstepping their boundaries.
- Another challenge is the unequal work and remuneration conditions between deployed EASO experts and local CAS staff effectively doing the same work.
- Lack of integration of EASO experts in EASO OPU. Some experts reported that they had not been informed to what extent and for what matters they can contact EASO.
- Due to lack of a coordinator in country, it was sometimes perceived that the information flow between EASO OPU and deployed persons was sometimes a little slow or lacking. Some experts noted that they were not always provided with the same information.

Some recommendations

There is a need for support in improving several practical and procedural matters:

- EASO may support the development of a more secure system for transferring and storing of files where sensitive and confidential data is involved.
- EASO may support continued development of a pool of qualified ('on demand') interpreters, introduced to and trained on the EASO standards of conducting and interpreting interviews..
- EASO may provide short introduction programmes for new experts including brief written descriptions of routines and useful information. Welcome package containing instructions, advices, general practices and templates should be prepared and provided at the beginning of the deployment.
- EASO may support development of new SOPs and guidelines for interviews and drafting reports/recommendations. In addition, lack of concrete and standard guidelines about each country of origin as adopted by Cyprus is a big challenge. EASO caseworkers should be introduced at the beginning of their deployment to country of origin information (COI) for each relevant country of origin so that caseworkers do not have to search on their own when writing the recommendation report.
- EASO may support a system for interview booking which should prioritise vulnerable cases and those who have waited for the. Arranging and scheduling interviews has to be taken care of in a concrete and secure manner to ensure case officers are not losing working days because interviews could not be arranged.

- EASO was able to build a close relationship with the Cyprus Asylum Service, it engages only occasionally or not at all with various other stakeholders and ministries. Here, a permanently residing Plan Coordinator would be able to engage and coordinate more effectively with other relevant stakeholders.
- EASO may support more long term deployments of caseworkers (ideally for a year).

2.4. Measure relating to registrations (CY 9)

The measure objective as stated in the SSP and its amendments is: "EASO will assist CY by deploying assistants in order to assist registration […]". Figure 7 comprehensively summarizes evaluation results for each criterion of measure CY 9.

Figure 7 Scores on evaluation criteria on measures CY 9

Relevance: EASO's support on registration as part of measure CY 9 of the SSP responded to the growing backlog of pending registrations at this early stage of the asylum procedure. Delays in fully registering asylum seekers and a missing 'alien book' created problems for asylum applicants in accessing social benefits and other support services. Since August 2018, EASO supports AIU in three registration offices with five interim experts (registration assistants) and until end-December more than 2200 registrations, including 95 vulnerable cases were processed. EASO workforce has helped to remove waiting lists for registrations, and ultimately, contributed to reduce the average time needed to process a full registration.

According to an interviewee currently deployed in the Nicosia registration office, "police officers are learning from EASO interims, e.g. on adequate treatment of vulnerable cases". This type of operational support seems to contribute to a knowledge transfer on-the-job addressing not only a shortage of resources but also helping to address an apparent lack of expertise in identifying and processing vulnerable cases at this stage of the asylum procedure. Thus, EASO filled a gap that could not be addressed by AIU. Consequently, the measure was timely and relevant.

Effectiveness: It is reasonable to assert that EASO's support in the field of registration was instrumental in increasing the registration capacity of AIU at a time when the weekly average number of asylum applications lodged nearly doubled from 108 applications a week between January and July 2018 to 195 applications between August and December 2018.

Up to October 2018, AIU was short on staff on registration, which created a backlog where filing an asylum application could have taken 2-3 months (creating serious issues for those applicants in need of SWS support). According to the interviewed registration assistant, waiting time for full registration has dropped significantly by the end of 2018. A positive effect mentioned by an interviewee is also that police officers are learning from EASO interims, e.g. on adequate handling of vulnerable cases. EASO has also created an accelerated procedure for registration.

Overall, EASO demonstrated flexibility and adapted effectively to the rising need at this part of the Cyprus asylum system.

Efficiency: This activity under the contingency measure seems to provide high value for money in a situation with rapidly increasing numbers of registrations for asylum. Even though interim workers (if hired from abroad) are more expensive than locally hired and employed staff, the immediate deployment of EASO experts with limited extra training justifies this temporary measure.

Impact: It was mentioned that knowledge transfer takes place in registration offices in handling registrations in general, and registration of vulnerable cases in particular. EASO support allowed for faster case processing and more rapid issuance of the alien book number, which entitles for access to social welfare support for applicants.

Sustainability: Given the short period this intervention is active, and the temporary nature of this contingency measure, assessment of sustainability is considered not applicable.

Main challenges and constraints

- Police officers partly lack experience in handling adequate registration procedure.
- Availability of adequate interpretation for more complicated cases.

Some recommendations

- EASO may support training for the police officers e.g. on human trafficking, on identification and dealing with vulnerable persons, giving directions to vulnerable persons.
- EASO may support establishment of a pool of interpreters readily available ('on demand') at all registration offices, in particular for most needed languages
- EASO may support supervision and mentoring of police offers and EASO registration assistants alike.

3. Conclusions

Over the past four years, EASO's interventions have been most relevant in addressing both the pressing and the more long-term needs of Cyprus authorities, and measures have been mostly effective in contributing to the objectives stated in the SSP. In the course of the past two years, EASO's measures have become much more targeted on the most severe bottlenecks in the Cyprus Asylum Service, namely the support on reception and the management of the first instance backlog.

EASO's initial SSP to Cyprus provided very useful and tailor-made trainings, workshops, study visits and other capacity–building measures in order to support Cyprus authorities in improving their capacity required for a functioning asylum and reception system. Most of these activities were taking place from July 2014 until early 2017 and have been well-appreciated by participants and contributed towards respective measure objectives as mentioned in the SSP. EASO's operational engagement in Cyprus during this initial period was small-scale, both in terms of budget allocations and intensity of actual in situ operations. These 2014-16 'capacity building' measures, although without doubt relevant to some beneficiaries and individual participants, had rather modest effects on the wider system, firstly, due to reason of limited scale, and second, because of limited transfer of knowledge from direct beneficiaries to other relevant stakeholders.

Since 2017, though, with the third amendment signed in February 2017, the budget allocated for the SSP to Cyprus increased significantly due to relatively costly deployments of experts for backlog management and at Kofinou reception centre. This upscaling and targeting on key activities has shown that EASO is in the position to swiftly respond to changing demands and needs of the member state authorities.

In 2018, with a significantly larger budget at hand, EASO further consolidated and targeted its support activities on the three remaining (though cost-intensive) measures of backlog management, reception conditions and registration, all contributing to a significant – even though not measurable – effect in the respective areas targeted.

Overall, based on conducted interviews and other sources of information, EASO's presence and support of Cyprus authorities over the past four years received positive feedback by stakeholders and other beneficiaries and was described as relevant, useful and effective. The Minister of Interior, Constantinos Petrides, emphasized in September 2017 the importance of EASO's support to Cyprus in improving and enhancing the Cypriot asylum and reception system: *"In this challenging period of refugee crisis, EASO proved that it can provide practical, efficient and timely support following a request by a Member State. We would like to thank EASO for its flexibility and immediate response to each of our requests for support and also the Member States which, in the framework of solidarity, nominated a number of experts, who contributed significantly in the successful implementation of the activities set out in the EASO Special Support Plan to Cyprus."*[5]

The evaluation outcome, summarized in Table 1, indicates that for all measures foreseen in the SSP, in particular those more recent activities on reception and registration, but also on first instance backlog management, EASO's engagement in Cyprus is well-targeted and mostly effective in contributing to the objectives stated in the SSP. The wider impact of EASO activities is, due to the small scale, hard to identify but presumably non-negligible. Sustainability of most EASO interventions is even harder to assess as relevant information is not available. It turns out that due to the lack of a sound data management and monitoring system and clearly specified measure output/outcome indicators, a more rigorous (and objective) assessment of the EASO interventions is not possible.

Table 1 Summary of the Scores on Evaluation Criteria per Measure

Measure	Relevance	Effectivenss	Efficiency	Impact	Sustainability
CY 1-4, 6-7	Good	Good	Good	Fair	Not assessable
CY 5	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good
CY 8	Good	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair
CY 9	Very good	Very good	Good	Good	Not assessable

This shortcoming in the evaluation of the SSP indicates a more fundamental problem with regard to quality management of EASO activities (in Cyprus). Although the Special Support Plan states under section 3 (General reporting provisions) that "A reporting system will be established for monitoring the implementation of the Special Support Plan and to define improvements within the Cypriot asylum procedure so as to assess any further needs or changes. In particular, the Support Teams will provide a Final Report to the EASO", this has not (yet) been realized to the extent necessary to monitor and assess the outputs and outcomes of the activities as foreseen by the SSP. Also the provision "Cyprus will report to EASO on progress made. The reporting may comprise of statistics, management information and reports about improvements to the asylum and reception systems but shall not include any personal data" has only partially been fulfilled and turns out as an area for significant improvements (see recommendations).
Furthermore, even though EASO deployments are based on the idea of European solidarity with member states in need for support, it has however become a growing challenge for EASO to receive sufficient nominations of MS experts. In particular since 2017, MS nominations have gone down and EASO had to shift to other, more expensive interim experts (mostly recruited and on mission from Greece). This is a second-best solution at best for various reasons: cost-inefficiency, short duration and rotation of interim deployments, and unequal work conditions and salaries between local and interim workers. Fortunately, this issue has partly been resolved with a contract recently issued for

[5] EASO Press Release: EASO support to Cyprus, 20 September 2017

the provision of interim services to the EASO in Cyprus as a result of procurement procedure EASO/2018/642.
In December 2018, EASO signed a new Operating Plan with authorities in Cyprus, significantly stepping up its operational support. In response to the increasing pressure on the Cypriot authorities, the Operating Plan (OP) for Cyprus is expanding the technical and operational assistance it has been providing to the country as part of the Special Support Plan since 2014 and also addressing some of the challenges and needs highlighted in this report. Specifically, EASO will continue to support the Cypriot authorities with the registration of applications for international protection and with improving reception conditions, not only in the accommodation centre in Kofinou but also in the newly established first reception centre in Kokkinotrimithia ('Pournara'). EASO will also maintain, and in the course of the year incrementally increase its capacity to stabilize and reduce the backlog of pending cases. Under the new Operating Plan, EASO will also support the Cypriot authorities in the area of data management and coordination.

4. Recommendations

The following list of recommendations reflects the consolidated outcome of observations, interviews, and desk research of the evaluator. The list is not exhaustive and some of the proposals have already been considered in the new Operational Plan 2019.

Recommendation 1: *Providing support in improving (establishing) inter-departmentally shared/coordinated databases and data management systems, and also, in implementing a joint monitoring and evaluation system of Cyprus asylum and reception system (involving ministerial, departmental and local levels)*

Functionality of existing databases to collect, analyse and sharing information should be improved. A cross-institutional data management and processing system, enabling secure and practical access and transfer of comprehensive case-sensitive data between administrative units should be developed. A joint database for COI information for CAS and EASO caseworkers would improve efficiency as the same topics are repeated on a regular basis. In addition to one-off trainings, more accompanying mentoring and supervision support should be provided by more permanent EASO operational staff to both deployed interim staff as well as staff of different stakeholders.

Recommendation 2: *Enhancing support in managing (reducing) backlog at first instance (Asylum Service), and increasingly important, the backlog at the second instance determination (appeal) stage (newly established Administrative/Asylum court)*

Besides continued (temporary) support of caseworkers at first instance, an area which EASO has put so far less priority on is the second instance (appeal) stage of the asylum procedure. In view of the intention to abolish the Refugee Reviewing Authority (RRA), and the transfer of officers of the RRA to other authorities, many appeals were pending for several years. This hinders the effectiveness of the EASO SSP that was set up to address the backlog of pending cases. EASO may provide training to caseworkers, administration and judges, support with the development of SOPs, support file management with software and expert advice, and enhance quality improvement and consistency and a well-considered system of prioritization.

A comprehensive data management and analysis system will enable continuous and robust monitoring evaluation of all operational activities. A well-developed M&E system is the prerequisite for strategic evidence-based planning and effective and (cost-) efficient implementation.

Recommendation 3: *Supporting Alien and Immigration Unit by providing personnel and training to EASO deployed persons and AIU staff for ensuring timely and effective registration processes*

Support in registration has seen good progress over the past six months and should be continued for some more time. However, phase-out should be prepared and some more training and mentoring of police officers should be provided.

Recommendation 4: *Supporting camp management and administration of Kofinou reception centre in the transition to an information and training facility*

Enhancing support for the on-site camp manager at Kofinou reception centre in improving administrative and managerial capacity is required. The reception centre needs to turn into a transitional facility providing information, training and other relevant support for its residents. The day-to-day running of the centre will require more resources and there is likely to be an increased need for on-site management. In particular, providing training, mentoring for staff (camp management and administration) as well as residents of the reception centre (vocational, language, skill training, psychological support, advisory services on employment, housing, culture etc.)

Recommendation 5: *Residing EASO representative for coordinating field operations, liaising with stakeholders, and engaging in advocacy*

Coordination of activities in Nicosia, Kofinou and various registration offices is very challenging. With expanding operations, a more long-term residing field coordinator would ensure to monitor and supervise operations on a day-to-day basis and could more effectively liaise with different stakeholders. Engaging at higher (ministerial) levels on a regular basis may further improve quality and impact of EASO operations and the functioning of the asylum system.

Recommendation 6: *Providing mentoring programmes for all permanent staff (Asylum Service, Reception centre, Administrative/Asylum Court) and on-the-job training and supervision for incoming temporary staff (caseworkers, social workers, registration officers)*

In addition to one-off trainings, more accompanying mentoring and supervision support should be provided by more permanent EASO operational staff to both deployed interim staff as well as staff of different stakeholders.

Recommendation 7: *Providing crosscutting support for vulnerability assessment and procedures across various Cypriot stakeholders*

Development, updating and ensuring the implementation of SOPs and other tools and mechanisms for vulnerability identification, assessments and referrals is still required, including provision of tailor-made trainings to all profiles and all relevant administrative units.

Recommendation 8: *Developing (criteria for) a measure-specific, and ultimately, a comprehensive exit strategy of EASO support to Cyprus*

In the current situation of high and further growing numbers of asylum applications and stagnating backlogs at first and second instances, EASO support to Cyprus authorities is more than needed to ensure functioning of the Cypriot asylum and reception system according to CEAS provisions. However, EASO is also well advised in specifying and communicating to stakeholders the conditions for a phasing-out of specific activities and closure of entire measures.