

7th EASO CONSULTATIVE FORUM PLENARY MEETING

17th NOVEMBER, BRUSSELS

REPORT

1. Background and objectives

The Consultative Forum (CF) provides for the exchange of information, pooling of knowledge, and was created to ensure close dialogue between the Agency and civil society. Several activities take place throughout the year, including CF Meetings, consultations on key EASO documents, as well as the direct involvement of civil society in various areas of EASO's work, through e.g. meetings, conferences, workshops, practical cooperation activities and informal consultations. In addition, the CF provides a platform for technical and policy dialogue between civil society organisations and Member States in the field of asylum.

The CF annual Plenary Meeting aims to unite a large number of different stakeholders to take stock of developments in the field of asylum as well as to review cooperation between EASO and civil society.

The 7th edition of the Plenary Meeting focused on EASO's operational activities and the proposal's for a Regulation on the European Union Agency for Asylum¹ (hereafter EUAA) objective of further improved cooperation with civil society under the new mandate.

Main questions that the Plenary Meeting aimed to answer included:

- How did the migratory pressure in 2015-2017 impact frontline Member States?
- What has the EU collectively and EASO in particular done to assist frontline Member States?
- How do stakeholders assess these interventions?
- What is the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in assisting in this context and how can we better coordinate responses?
- What will the EUAA bring?
- What changes will the EUAA bring with regard to cooperation with civil society?
- What new role, format and organisational structure for the CF under the EUAA? What specific CF activities do we focus on next year?

2. Format and Structure

This year, the format and programme of the meeting was developed in cooperation with civil society; an ad hoc Working Group composed of civil society organisations from across Europe who had participated in other CF events advised and assisted in the preparation of the meeting.

The meeting consisted of mixed participatory methods. Following the opening statements, a high-level plenary debate on EASO's support provided to Member States (with a focus on Greece and Italy) kick-started the meeting. Three interactive parallel sessions then addressed cooperation between EASO and civil society with a focus on the following themes:

- i) Coordination and cooperation between EASO and civil society at the hotspots;
- ii) Follow-up to relocation; civil society's role in ensuring successful integration of relocated individuals;

¹ Add link to proposal

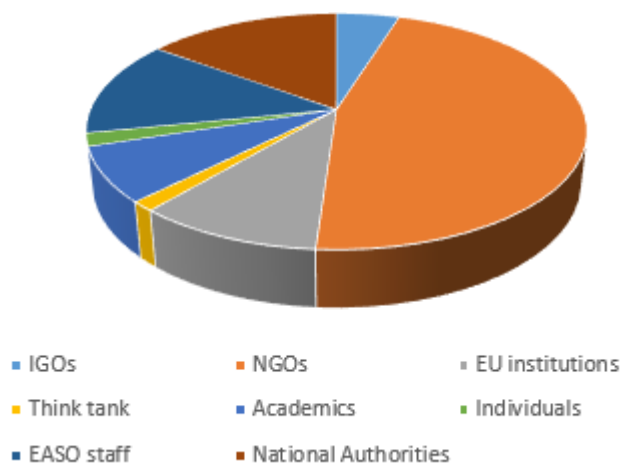
- iii) EASO’s engagement with civil society with regard to information, data analysis, training and asylum processes.

The afternoon session explored the future perspective of the Agency including improved forms of cooperation with civil society. Presentations were given in plenary setting on the state of play of the negotiations on the CEAS reform package and the proposed EUAA following which the session continued with a participatory process. Participants provided their ideas and input on the revised format and structure of the CF under the EUAA in small working groups. A roundtable discussion debating the outcomes of the Working Groups finally closed the forum.

3. Participants

A total of 227 participants attended the Forum from a high variety of different stakeholders, including NGOs (46%), national authorities (15%), EASO staff (13%), EU institutions (10%), academics (7%), IGOs (5%), think tanks (4%), and individuals (2%). Participants came from 28 EU+ Member States² and nine third countries (e.g. Albania, Egypt, Ghana, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Syria, Ukraine, USA). Figure 1 below shows the different proportions of stakeholders that attended.

Figure 1: Participants CF Plenary Meeting 2017



4. Summary of the Meeting

The following sections of the report provide an account of the key topics presented and discussed during the meeting.

Opening Statements

EASO Executive Director, José Carreira, opened the meeting, emphasising that this year’s edition brought together a record number of participants including a high diversity of stakeholders. Cooperation with civil society was considered more important than ever in a context where the Agency had grown into a strong operational actor, activities had increased incrementally, and were likely to further expand in the future including in view of the future EUAA. The role of the Consultative Forum should be reinforced under the future EUAA. After discussing the current state of play of the

² AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, EL, HU, HR, IE, IT, LT, LU, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, CH, NO



reform of the CEAS, participants were invited to provide their ideas and input on ways to strengthen EASO cooperation with civil society including a possible revised format of the Forum.

The **Deputy Director General of DG Migration and Home Affairs, Simon Mordue**, provided an overview of the CEAS state of play and emphasised the progress in reduction of irregular arrivals and more control being exerted on the main migration routes since the start of the migration crisis in 2015. The migratory situation remained fragile and required continuous action. The hotspot approach and the relocation programme had helped reduce the pressure in frontline Member States, but needed further improvements, e.g. with regard to the treatment of vulnerable migrants and coordination between stakeholders on the ground. Current priorities included enhancing legal pathways, tackling the root causes of migration as well as the reform of the CEAS. The transformation of EASO into the EUAA was much anticipated as EASO's operational activities in Greece and Italy had shown that the Agency had outgrown its current mandate. EASO's staff was commended for the important work it had delivered. All civil society organisations were also thanked for their efforts and important role they had played as vital partners in the management of the crisis.

Plenary Session I: How well has the EU and EASO in particular assisted frontline Member States?

The panel discussed the current state of play of EASO's support to Member States, focussing on the situation in Greece and Italy.

The **Head of the Asylum Unit of DG Home and Migration, Henrik Nielsen**, was satisfied with how EASO had supported Greece and Italy, especially considering the speed with which EASO mobilised support. He stated: "Without EASO the situation on the ground and the situation for asylum seekers would have been much more difficult. There is no doubt that EASO has made a big difference". Further improvements for the provision of EASO operational support were identified, for example, the need for Member States to provide (more) experts in a timely manner and better coordination with other stakeholders on the ground. The new EUAA mandate would further equip the Agency with the necessary tools to provide increased operational support when and where needed.

EASO's Head of Department of Asylum Support and Head of Department of Operations a.i., Patricia Van de Peer, provided an overview of the support activities implemented in both Italy and Greece since 2017. She explained that, in the wake of the migratory situation, EASO was requested to quickly step up its efforts. In Italy, EASO was providing information to potential applicants eligible for relocation and Dublin family reunion, registering candidates for relocation and international protection, providing support to the Dublin Unit in Rome, and supporting the Italian Ombudsman for children and adolescents. In Greece, EASO was providing support in the context of the relocation programme (provision of information, registration of eligible candidates for relocation, and support to the Dublin Unit) as well as in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement through its involvement in admissibility and eligibility procedures. As a result 7,864 interviews were conducted by experts deployed by EASO in Greece and 31,800 persons have been relocated from Greece and Italy. Approximately 600 experts have also been deployed and engaged in joint processing activities. These experts learned from each other's practices and have taken this knowledge with them to their Member States.

The **Head of the Greek Asylum Service, Maria Stavropoulou**, recalled the developments after the adoption of the EU-Turkey Statement and commented on the support received by EASO. It had been



remarkable to see, not only the total number of asylum applications, but the speed with which the applications had increased from one day to the next. This required a proportionate reaction not only from Greece, but from the Union as a whole. *“Had we not partnered with EASO, we would not have achieved what we have today. In particular, the EU-Turkey Statement and the support provided by EASO in that context (conducting admissibility and eligibility interviews) really helped increase our capacity tremendously”*. Similar to EASO, she underlined the added-value of Member States’ experts working together on the islands, being involved in joint processing in a very practical way.

The President of Metadrasi, Lora Pappa, expressed concerns about the situation in Greece, particularly referring to the Greek islands. She held that the reception conditions at the Greek islands were *“somewhere between sub-standard and completely unacceptable”*. Reference was made to many asylum seekers who were in a desperate state, suffering psychological problems, being subject to lengthy procedures and who often could not be reunited with their family members in other Member States. Although she acknowledged that support provided by EASO had been essential, she raised some concerns about the quality of EASO interpreters. Finally, in terms of improvements, she suggested putting more trust in local NGOs and involving them in operational activities. She also advocated for more transparency with regard to EASO’s operational activities. She concluded by recalling the need to move from a short-term response to long-term sustainable management of migratory pressure.

Save the Children’s Head of the Brussels Office, Ester Asin, expressed concern about the EU political/legal environment, and the focus placed on prevention of absconding, border management and return. The hotspot approach had been an experiment of *“human misery”*, characterised by sub-optimal reception conditions, lack of adequate reception for UAMs, increased use of detention of UAMs, lengthy procedures, etc. This had led to the desperation of applicants including minors. Calls were made for a more fair and humane system based on solidarity and responsibility sharing; one in which the identification and treatment of vulnerable persons would be a key focus. Under the EUAA, the Agency would have an important role to play in ensuring that the existing system and safeguards (e.g. guardianship, age assessment, and best interest assessment) were adhered to in practice.

The Head of Policy and Legal Support Unit of the UNHCR Bureau for Europe, Sophie Magennis, addressed three main points: elements that had worked well when providing support to frontline Member States; gaps, and suggestions for improvements. Elements that had worked well included relocation (as solidarity mechanism between Member States) and improved data collection including better preparedness by EASO to respond to situations of pressure. For remaining gaps, she made reference to the situation on the Greek islands, the continuing high divergence in refugee recognition rates, and Member States’ lack of compliance with the CEAS. Suggestions for how to address such gaps included more involvement of NGOs in the EASO Operational Plans, more scope for EASO to define the Operational Plans, the need for a strengthened EASO and better coordination of stakeholders when implementing support measures on the ground.

The Director of the IOM Regional Office for the EEA, EU and NATO, Eugenio Ambrosi, explained that the increased mixed flow had exposed limitations of the CEAS, which had led to *“a crisis of the system”*. The hotspot approach, underpinned by cooperation and coordination of different stakeholders, had been a good way to respond to mixed flow, as it is also based on the principle of humanitarian border management. The cooperation established at the hotspots between IOM and EASO was a positive development. Current priority included making it more effective and efficient. This required a stronger

effort to improve procedures and to ensure appropriately trained staff we are able to treat different groups of vulnerability. Finally, he called for the elimination of the detention of children, which was held to be unacceptable.

During **Q&A**, several thematic issues were discussed, including the EU-Turkey Statement, legal pathways, vulnerable groups, and the role of civil society organisations. On the EU-Turkey Statement and the situation at the Greek islands, the Greek Asylum Service clarified that the average length of asylum procedures is two months and that the high eligibility rates reflect the fairness of procedures. Moreover, the Greek Asylum Service asked; *“If not for the EU-Turkey Statement, what other realistic alternative to ensure adherence to international refugee law”*? On legal pathways, the Commission explained that the aim is to increase primarily resettlement efforts by Member States. For the next two years, the aim would be to resettle 50,000 refugees. The Commission was going to provide half a billion EUR of funding for this purpose (10,000 EUR pp). IOM added however that other legal pathways would need to be explored in addition to those of refugees, as otherwise irregular migration would not effectively be tackled. Concerning vulnerable persons, UNHCR advocated for a truly common approach to establishing vulnerability, using common tools and methods. The importance of exempting vulnerable persons and family reunion cases under Dublin from the Greek border procedure was emphasised. Metadrasi emphasised the importance of providing sufficient reception places tailored to the needs of vulnerable persons in particular more reception capacity for vulnerable persons in Moria. Finally, Save the Children stated that CSOs no longer have space for open and transparent debate with regard to search and rescue operations. Finally, civil society organisations had effectively contributed to positive changes concerning the rights of the child. This was provided as good example where CSOs have had a direct impact on policy-making.

Parallel workshops on cooperation between EASO and civil society in different areas of activities

During the break-out sessions, participants explored how civil society and EASO could continue to improve their cooperation in implementing the CEAS. Three parallel workshops took place, as summarised below.

Workshop 1: Coordination and Cooperation between EASO and Civil Society at the Hotspots

This workshop aimed at reviewing how EASO and civil society were cooperating at the hotspots, exploring areas for improvement. Introductory statements were provided by EASO, Cooperativa Badia Nuova Grande and Metadrasi. EASO explained how they were cooperating with civil society at the hotspots in Italy and Greece: In Italy, EASO established good cooperation with a variety of different stakeholders, including local and national authorities, IGOs (UNHCR and IOM), as well as NGOs. There is no written agreement to guide cooperation, rather, cooperation takes place according to the needs on the ground. Cooperativa Badia Nuova Grande supported these statements and emphasised the very good level of cooperation that had been established with EASO and other stakeholders at the Trapani hotspot. Such cooperation had helped to effectively and efficiently share information and significantly improve the care for applicants for international protection. The role and added-value of EASO was highlighted, especially with regard to the provision of information in the context of the relocation programme. An EASO cultural mediator explained their activities at the Italian hotspots, including bringing knowhow on how to best communicate with asylum seekers and migrants and their ability to establish direct links with the Italian authorities, asylum seekers and migrants.

In Greece, regular weekly meetings take place with all stakeholders involved in the hotspots (including CSOs). Cooperation further takes place on a daily basis between EASO and civil society e.g. concerning the delivery of services or the provision of interpreters (previously delivered through cooperation with Metadras).

During discussions, participants addressed concerns in particular with regard to the situation on the Greek islands, including the quality of EASO experts, the activities they perform (involvement in admissibility and eligibility procedures), the accessibility of the hotspots by civil society actors and lack of or insufficient level of cooperation with regard to operational tasks. For the latter, reference was made to, for example, NGOs who could provide for additional reception capacity.

In response, EASO clarified that all experts deployed follow an intensive training and quality procedures are in place (senior coaches, helpdesk, and evaluations) to ensure that a similar level of quality is maintained for all experts. On the role of EASO during interviews, it was explained that experts do not take any decisions, but conduct interviews and draft opinions. EASO was thus acting within its mandate as responsibility for decision-making remained with the Greek authorities. Host Member States are furthermore responsible for granting access to the hotspots. Finally, EASO clarified that it implements activities as agreed in the Operational Plan – possible involvement of civil society in the provision of reception would be for the host Member State to decide.

The following suggestions were made for areas in which cooperation between EASO and civil society could be further developed at the hotspots:

- More transparent communication on operational activities;
- Exploring cooperation on practical operational activities, e.g. with regard to identifying vulnerable applicants as well as Dublin family cases, guardianship, interpretation, and the provision of legal aid

Workshop 2: Follow-up to Relocation – Civil Society's role in ensuring successful integration of relocated individuals

This workshop aimed at reviewing personal experiences of relocated individuals as well as factors determining successful integration for relocated individuals. Introductory statements were provided by EASO, IOM, the Refugee Support Platform, and a relocated individual.

EASO has played a crucial role in the implementation of the Relocation Scheme, including through the provision of information to potential candidates, registration of eligible applicants, developing tools in support of specific steps in the relocation procedure as well as by implementing a relocation communication package. The latter also included video interviews with relocated individuals, which had been very encouraging and enriching to make, as testified by an EASO representative. IOM explained the importance of pre-departure information, emphasising the positive impact it can have on integration in the host Member State. IOM implemented the following activities in this context: pre-departure assessment (on the basis of a skills assessment questionnaire, followed-up on post arrival); provision of information, and; pre-departure orientation. Whilst IOM had recommended providing information over the course of three days, in practice this had been restricted to one day due to lack of financial/human resources and time constraints. Despite certain challenges (involvement of different stakeholders), improvements were visible in the consistency and quality of information. The Refugee Support Platform explained the types of activities it provided including the provision of accommodation, food, clothing, support with labour market integration, social cultural

integration etc. Finally, Ms. Dania Shriki, an 18-year old Syrian woman who had been relocated from Greece to Portugal shared her experience, focusing on her integration into Portuguese society. She explained that her first priority was to start legal proceedings, i.e. obtaining a residence card. Followed by attending Portuguese language courses which were provided free of charge at the University. These were complemented by private lessons from volunteers of the host institution. One year after her arrival in Portugal, Dania was fluent in Portuguese. This had facilitated access to school and University and she was currently enrolled in a university degree on pharmaceutical science. She also felt successfully integrated socially, having received many invitations to social gatherings.

During discussions, participants voiced concerns, emphasising gaps between theory and practice, arguing that Dania's success story was not reality for all relocated individuals. For example, in France and Spain, many relocated individuals had not received proper pre-departure information and many had also moved on in secondary movements from Lithuania and Spain.

The following suggestions were made to improve integration perspectives for relocated individuals:

- Start integration efforts from the first moment of arrival in the EU (including at the hotspots through the provision of information);
- Tailor pre-departure information to the specific target group. In particular, the need for child-friendly information was highlighted;
- Establish post-arrival monitoring programmes to follow the long-term integration of relocated individuals into the host Member States;
- Reach out to the host society to inform them about the situation of refugees with a view of facilitating social integration

Workshop 3: EASO's engagement with civil society with regard to information, data analysis, training and asylum processes

This workshop aimed at discussing how EASO cooperated with civil society on provision of information, data analysis, training, and asylum processes, with a view of collecting feedback and improving future cooperation in these areas.

For the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum, EASO established good cooperation, especially this year. The report was based on a variety of sources, amongst which civil society. A call for input was launched and 22 contributions were received. These contributions were, to the extent possible, taken into account. All contributors were acknowledged in the report and their full contributions were made available on the EASO website.

Concerning asylum processes, a core Reference Group (including the Commission, UNHCR and ECRE) is involved in the development of all practical tools and guidance, with the possibility to extend this group to selected CF members depending on the topic. For the development of some tools and guidance (e.g. IPSN Tool and Reception guidance), EASO also opens consultation to all interested CF members via online consultations. In addition, selected CSOs are directly involved in the network on children. Consultations with members of the CF are systematically launched for all material that forms part of the Professional Development Series in the context of EASO's work on courts and tribunals.

As to training, cooperation with civil society similarly takes place through a 'core' Reference Group, composed of representatives from the Commission, UNHCR, ECRE, IARLJ and the Odysseus network. Depending on the topic, the Reference Group can also be expanded to include CF members on an ad

hoc basis. The Reference Group is regularly consulted on the development, update and quality maintenance of all training modules and tools. For the first time this year, EASO also consulted all CF members on a training module on interpretation through an open call for feedback and has also welcomed some CSO representatives in EASO train-the-trainer sessions.

With regard to COI, specialised CSOs (e.g. ACCORD and the Asylum Research Consultancy) are regularly invited to participate in COI meetings, conferences and informal consultations. Moreover, EASO has also involved some external experts in the revision of COI products.

Several representatives from civil society (e.g. ECRE, Odysseus Network and ACCORD) commented, emphasising that the level of cooperation with civil society on aforementioned activities had evolved over time, from little engagement with civil society in the initial years to increasingly more involvement over the last one/two years. This was regarded as a positive development. The Agency had clearly showed more openness and interest in reaching out to civil society.

During discussions, participants made the following suggestions for further improving cooperation:

- Resettlement was highlighted as an area for tripartite cooperation between Member States, the Agency and CSOs. CSOs should be involved from the very start and should be included in any information exchange, development of training and/or practical tools. Furthermore, concrete suggestions were made for involving CSOs in operational support activities e.g. jointly carrying out selection missions.
- Exploring increased levels of cooperation with civil society on training, notably by organising joint training sessions for Member States and CSOs (including for CSOs from third countries)
- Ensuring more visibility of electronic consultations

CSOs were also reminded that an effective way of being directly involved in the Agency's activities is via the list of individual experts and were encouraged to apply on the EASO website.

Plenary Session on the EUAA

The **Estonian Presidency, JHA Counsellor Sigrid Soomlais**, provided an update on the state of play of the CEAS negotiations. Three files were under trilogue including the Reception Conditions Directive, the Qualification Regulation, and the Eurodac Regulation. In contrast, further discussions were required within Council on the Dublin and the Asylum Procedures Regulation. With regard to the EUAA, political agreement had been reached on a compromise text in June 2017. Under the Estonian Presidency, work continued at technical level to finalise the agreement reached. The main changes of the new mandate for the Agency include, amongst others: monitoring the operational and technical application of the CEAS; developing common analysis on the situation in specific countries of origin; providing more operational capacity including an Asylum Reserve Pool of minimum 500 Member States' experts; establishing a Fundamental Rights Officer, a Fundamental Rights Strategy and a complaints mechanism; expanding the training curriculum; and reinforcing the role of the CF.

Policy Officer for DG Home and Migration, Charmaine Hili, explained the envisaged changes to the CF under the EUAA. Suggested changes were motivated by 1) making sure that the CF would be able to provide independent advice; 2) rendering the CF more efficient; and 3) more effective. As such, the EASO Executive Director would no longer chair the Forum and, in addition to an annual plenary meeting, the CF would meet more regularly in thematic and/or geographic consultation groups. The

CF would be consulted on a number of activities such as the Work Programme, the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum, the Annual General Report, the Fundamental Rights Strategy, the complaints mechanism, and the codes of conduct. Moreover, the CF can advise on the implementation of the Agency’s new tasks and civil society was also encouraged to communicate relevant findings from studies and reports to EASO. Finally, the CF would also closely collaborate with the FRO.

During **Q&A**, participants sought clarifications on specific changes related to COI and the monitoring of the CEAS including possible involvement of civil society. On COI, it was explained that the Agency would develop common analysis as well as guidance notes. Hence, the Agency would go one step further by not only providing raw information, but also drawing conclusions. Concerning monitoring, no role was foreseen for the CF as such, however, indirectly the CF could advise the Executive Director and Management Board on monitoring aspects as part of its tasks to provide advice on the implementation of the Agency’s new tasks.

Working Groups on the revised format of the CF under the EUAA

During the Working Groups, participants exchanged information and ideas on a possible revised format and structure of the CF under the EUAA. Discussions took place in three separate rounds centred around the following main questions:

- What are the specific objectives and desired outcomes for the Forum? (Round 1)
- How should the CF be composed? (Round 2)
- What type of activities should the Forum implement? (Round 3)

The main suggestions proposed by participants are set out, per theme/round, in the table below.

Table 1: Main findings of the Working Groups on the revised format of the CF under the EUAA

Theme	Suggestions
Objectives and desired outcomes (Round 1)	CF to provide/facilitate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accountability and transparency - Structured platform for the exchange of information - Two-way exchange of information: from CSOs to the Agency and from the Agency to CSOs (e.g. on actual operations) - Direct exchange between CF and MB - Building trust between the Agency, civil society, MS and EU institutions - Input to the Agency’s work - Independent expert advise - Making a real impact on the Agency’s activities - Involving CF members in substantive, in-depth, content issues
Membership and organisational structure (Round 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preference to keep membership open and all-inclusive - Balanced membership with high diversity of stakeholders (different profiles including theoretical experts and operational experience) - More involvement of asylum seekers/refugees, grassroots organisations, operational NGOs and third country NGOs

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make CF membership list public - CF to be chaired by steering committee of elected CSOs to provide more ownership and responsibility to the CF. - Steering Group members should have different areas of thematic expertise - Steering Committee to decide on CF activities - Maintain EASO CF Contact point to liaise with the Agency
<p>Activities (Round 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular thematic and geographic meetings - Possible topics to focus on for thematic/geographic meetings: access to protection, safe and legal pathways including resettlement, reception, Dublin family reunification cases, vulnerable groups and UAMs, protection of fundamental rights, integration, etc. - Continue annual plenary meetings to be prepared with involvement of CSOs - Continue involving CSOs in EASO’s work with regard to training, COI, vulnerable groups, practical tools, etc. - Greater involvement of CSOs in EASO training activities including participation in train-the-trainer sessions - Monitoring EASO’s activities and implementation of the Agency’s new tasks - Closer cooperation on operational activities - Production of position papers/recommendations by CF to ED and MB (emphasis placed on receipt of official response and monitoring of follow-up to the recommendations) - Field consultations with operational NGOs - Fact-finding missions - Information campaigns and outreach efforts (e.g. art exhibition) to the general public on refugee issues - Creation of an online platform to facilitate the exchange of information between Forum members

Roundtable discussion on the revised format of the Consultative Forum under the EUAA

During the roundtable discussion, **two Forum members, Aniko Bakonyi** from the **Hungarian Helsinki Committee** and **Adriana Tidona** from the **AIRE Centre**, reported back on the findings of the Working Groups, as presented above. Subsequently, EASO, a member of the EASO Management Board, and a representative of ECRE reacted to the findings:

EASO’s Head of Communication and Stakeholders Unit, Jean-Pierre Schembri, explained that from EASO’s point of view there were three main objectives and related desired outcomes for the Forum. These include providing a structured platform for the exchange of information between EASO and civil society, mutually exchanging information both from civil society to EASO and vice-versa, as well as for civil society to contribute to the Agency’s work by providing independent expert advice. In terms of composition, EASO would agree with maintaining a broad representation of members, taking into



account the diversity of expertise available in the field of asylum. Similarly, it was also felt important to increase the focus on organising smaller thematic/regional meetings.

The Belgian Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Dirk Van den Bulck, member of EASO Management Board, emphasised the importance of establishing good cooperation between the Agency and civil society, drawing comparisons on how this had been established within the Belgian system. He advocated for a more structured dialogue and referred to challenges of efficiently organising “civil society within civil society”. He also called for the need for the CF to create real impact on the Agency’s work, which would require different types of information exchange activities as and where required.

ECRE’s Senior Policy Officer, Aspasia Papadopoulou, emphasised that the CF should provide accountability, transparency, facilitate the exchange of information, and facilitate CSO input to the Agency’s work. The need for more two-way dialogue was emphasised and the Agency was encouraged to regularly provide information on their operational activities. The CF should also facilitate direct exchange with the Management Board so that members could frame issues of concern and could issue recommendations. The Forum should be independent from the Agency and could be chaired by CSOs. Any future meetings should facilitate in-depth discussions and should go more into the substance. Finally, the CF should not be the only way for the Agency to interact with civil society. Established forms of cooperation in the field of training, COI, practical tools and vulnerable groups should continue.

During **Q&A**, EASO clarified that the recommendations as put forward by participants at last year’s Forum had been summarised in a meeting report as well as a separate Action Plan which is accessible on the EASO website. The CF Contact Point had monitored implementation and most, if not all, action points had been successfully implemented by the Agency. ECRE emphasised that the selection of the chairmanship should be based on nominations and elections by the Forum members, and should not be by appointment of the Agency.

Closing Statements by the EASO Executive Director

The **EASO Executive Director** closed the meeting, emphasising that despite having heard different perspectives throughout discussions, unity and common purpose prevailed. The common goal to manage mixed migration flows effectively and to grant protection to those in need is what unites EASO and civil society. Cooperation had grown stronger over the last year; for example, CF activities were multiplied (a total of four meetings had taken place, six consultations and more than 120 activities with involvement of CSOs); civil society had been involved in the preparation of the plenary meeting; and during the plenary participants were consulted on how they would like the CF to move forward. This shows that the Agency is willing to work openly, involving and cooperating with civil society where relevant. The Director expressed his personal gratitude to all participants for their presence and active contributions.