



*Support is our mission*

*European Asylum Support Office  
Bureau Européen d'Appui pour l'Asile*

## **EASO Consultative Forum Operational Plan**

**- September 2012 -**

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## 1. Introduction

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The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is a European centre of expertise and support on asylum, responsible for facilitating, coordinating and strengthening practical cooperation among Member States on the many aspects of asylum, so that Member States are better able to provide international protection to those entitled, while dealing fairly and efficiently with those who do not qualify for international protection, where appropriate. EASO supports practical cooperation among Member States, supports Member States facing particular pressures on their asylum and reception systems, and supports the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

The Consultative Forum constitutes a mechanism for the exchange of information and pooling of knowledge between EASO and civil society organisations and relevant bodies operating in the field of asylum policy. In line with the EASO Regulation, EASO has set up a Consultative Forum in 2011 - the first year of EASO operations. This bears witness to the fact that EASO is willing to engage in consultation with civil society because it believes in the added value and cross fertilisation of ideas that such exchange could yield.

Civil society operating in the field of asylum is characterised by a considerable number of active and diverse organisations at local, regional, national, European and International level. These organisations, in their various forms and functions, play a key role in the debate on and implementation of asylum policy and practices at the national as well as at the EU level, and have been instrumental in supporting the fairness and accuracy of asylum procedures, partially by bringing certain cases to the European Court of Justice and European Court of Human Rights.

Many organisations working in the field of asylum have specific experience and expertise that is not readily available to national administrations and other institutions. In many EU Member States, for instance, NGOs run reception centres for asylum seekers and are indispensable to ensure sufficient reception capacity at the national level. NGOs also provide legal assistance and representation to asylum seekers and are often the only accessible sources of information for asylum seekers who are newly arriving in a Member State. All of these organisations can be relevant to the different aspects of the work of EASO. EASO will tap into this form of valuable expertise by consulting civil society using a wide array of methodologies and tools.

The aim of consultation is to ensure that interested parties are given the opportunity to be heard and to contribute to EASO's work. Timely consultation with stakeholders helps to improve the outcome and at the same time enhances the involvement of interested parties and the public at large. EASO believes that consultation and exchange with relevant competent civil society organisations complements its work. In its consultation policy, EASO applies the principle of openness and transparency. Everybody must be able to provide EASO with input. Therefore, there is no stringent accreditation system for interested organisations. However, a set of criteria are applied for the selection of participants to EASO's various consultative activities. EASO will select participants from the Consultative Forum Register (ECFR), which has been set up in 2011.

For EASO, the Consultative Forum is not just an annual meeting, but rather a continuous two way dialogue. Expert meetings, workshops, seminars and specific consultations using IT tools are used.

The overall aim of this document is to ensure that all relevant parties are properly consulted. It also provides the general parameters for consultation that will be applied in a systematic manner. This Operational plan provides a framework for consultation that is coherent albeit flexible enough to allow for specific ad hoc consultation needs that might be necessary from time to time.

## **2. Scope of the EASO Consultative Forum**

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Article 51 of the EASO Regulation states that:

*1. The Support Office shall maintain a close dialogue with relevant civil society organisations and relevant competent bodies operating in the field of asylum policy at local, regional, national, European or international level and shall set up a Consultative Forum for this purpose.*

*2. The Consultative Forum shall constitute a mechanism for the exchange of information and pooling of knowledge. It shall ensure there is a close dialogue between the Support Office and relevant stakeholders.*

*3. The Consultative Forum shall be open to relevant stakeholders in accordance with paragraph 1. The Support Office shall address the members of the Consultative Forum in accordance with specific needs related to areas identified as priority for the Support Office's work.*

*The UNHCR shall be a member of the Consultative Forum ex officio.*

*4. The Support Office shall call upon the Consultative Forum in particular to:*

*(a) make suggestions to the Management Board on the annual Work Programme to be adopted under point (f) of Article 29(1);*

*(b) provide feedback to the Management Board and suggest measures as follow-up to the annual report referred to in point (c) of Article 29(1) and the annual report on the situation of asylum in the Union referred to in Article 12(1); and*

*(c) communicate conclusions and recommendations of conferences, seminars and meetings relevant to the work of the Support Office to the Executive Director and the Management Board.*

*5. The Consultative Forum shall meet at least once a year.*

Moreover, Article 31 (6) (j) defines the responsibilities of the Executive Director of EASO:

*In particular, the Executive Director shall be responsible for:*

*6 (j) the coordination and operation of the Consultative Forum referred to in Article 51. To this end, the Executive Director shall, in consultation with relevant civil society organisations, first adopt a plan for installing the Consultative Forum. Once formally installed, the Executive Director shall, in consultation with the Consultative Forum, adopt an operational plan which will include rules on the frequency and nature of consultation and the organisational mechanisms for implementing Article 51. Transparent criteria for ongoing participation in the Consultative Forum shall also be agreed.*

### **3. Composition and set up of the EASO Consultative Forum**

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#### 3.1. Actors in the EASO consultation process

EASO shall maintain a close dialogue with relevant civil society organisations and relevant competent bodies operating in the field of asylum policy at local, regional, national, European or international level.

These include:

- IGOs
- NGOs
- Academics
- Members of the tribunals and courts

The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) is a participant in global civil society. UNHCR is a non-voting member on the EASO Management Board and a member of the EASO Consultative Forum ex officio.

#### 3.2. Membership, EASO Consultative Forum register and categorisation

The Consultative Forum is open to relevant competent bodies in accordance with EASO Regulation. EASO addresses the members of the Consultative Forum in accordance with specific needs related to areas identified as priority for EASO's work, as outlined in its annual work programme. In particular, EASO calls upon the Consultative Forum to make suggestions on the annual work programme, to provide feedback and suggest measures as follow-up to the annual report, and to communicate conclusions and recommendations of conferences, seminars and meetings relevant to the work of EASO.

EASO wants to consult interested parties on the widest possible basis and to ensure that every interested party, irrespective of size or financial backing, is given the opportunity to contribute to its work. At the same time, however, it must be clear to the general public what input the interest groups provide and how they seek to participate in EASO's work. In particular, it must be clear whom they represent, what their mission is and how they are funded.

EASO established the EASO Consultative Forum Register (ECFR) in November 2011. Registration is open to all interested organisations and bodies. EASO will select participants to its various consultative activities using the EASO Consultative Forum Register (ECFR). Registration forms are available online at: [www.easo.europa.eu](http://www.easo.europa.eu)

The register is categorised according to various headings in order to enable EASO to consult the right organisations concerning specific topics. Categories include:

- Training providers, quality processes, COI, Interpretation, legal assistance, unaccompanied minors, LGBT, etc...
- Emergency and operational support activities, including reception conditions,

- Information, documentation and analysis, including geographical specialists
- Relocation, resettlement and external dimension

EASO wants to encourage more involvement of interested parties through a wide and transparent consultation process, which will also enhance EASO's accountability to EU citizens.

## **4. Selection criteria for the various consultation processes**

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Given the very large number of relevant organisations and their diverse nature, and in order to ensure an efficient and effective approach, EASO has established a number of criteria for the selection of participants at the different EASO Consultative Forum activities. This provides for a flexible composition, adapted according to the topics being discussed. Selection is based on the following criteria, which will be subject to revision during 2012 and 2013:

- Relevance – of the organisation's participation vis-à-vis the theme(s) discussed by the Consultative Forum.
- Knowledge and Expertise – degree of knowledge and expertise in the area(s) being dealt with by the Consultative Forum.
- Availability – of the organisation to get involved in the work of the Consultative Forum.
- Involvement at national and EU level – degree of involvement of the organisation in the relevant area(s) at national and EU level (European orientation).
- Affiliation – of the organisation in relevant networks/groups.
- Relationship – of the organisation with EASO and/or involvement in EU Practical cooperation measures/training/academic activities in the field of asylum.

### 4.1. Advisory group

In order to support it in the setting up and initial stages of the Consultation Form, EASO has set up an ad hoc advisory group in October 2011. Currently, this group is composed of five senior experts nominated by the European Commission, UNHCR, ECRE, ODYSSEUS Network and the IARLJ. This group advises the EASO Executive Director, amongst other things, on the composition and the format of the EASO Consultative forum, topics for targeted consultations and support EASO in facilitating the feedback process and the plenary meetings. The group meets on an ad hoc basis and is chaired by the EASO Executive Director.

## **5. Involvement of civil society in EASO activities**

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EASO involves civil society in activities outlined in the Regulation and in aspects of EASO activities that would benefit from input and involvement of civil society.

In line with Article 51 (4), EASO calls upon the Consultative Forum in particular to:

- (a) make suggestions to the Management Board on the annual Work Programme to be adopted under point (f) of Article 29(1);
- (b) provide feedback to the Management Board and suggest measures as follow-up to the annual report referred to in point (c) of Article 29(1) and the annual report on the situation of asylum in the Union referred to in Article 12(1); and
- (c) communicate conclusions and recommendations of conferences, seminars and meetings relevant to the work of the Support Office to the Executive Director and the Management Board.

In line with Article 32 of the its regulation, EASO will – where relevant – invite representatives of civil society working in the field of asylum to attend working party meetings set up by EASO, in particular, on the analysis of information on countries of origin (Article 4 (e)) and the production of technical documents on the implementation of asylum instruments of the Union (Article 12 (2)).

EASO could also involve civil society in reference groups that it sets up for specific activities, such as for EASO training on asylum. Other areas of possible involvement include resettlement and emergency situations.

## **6. Methods and frequency of consultation**

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### 6.1. Methods of consultation

For EASO, the Consultative Forum is not just an annual meeting, but rather a continuous two way dialogue. Expert meetings, workshops, seminars and specific consultations using IT tools, are used. These methodologies will become the ordinary way of consultation. In 2012, EASO will also explore the possibility of using an e-platform for online consultation.

#### 6.6.1 Workshops, working parties, expert meetings

Where relevant, EASO will invite relevant organisations to participate in workshops, working parties and other expert meetings. Consultation could also be done via questionnaires and interviews. Workshops, working parties and expert meeting will be chaired by EASO and supported by the Consultative Forum Coordination Point (CFCP).

#### 6.6.2 Online consultations, including e-platform

In order to ensure the broadest possible reach, and to ensure that all organisations wishing to contribute in a cost effective manner, EASO endeavours to use online consultations as much as possible. EASO is also looking into the possibility of creating an e-platform for consultation with civil society.

### 6.2. Annual Plenary meetings

EASO organises at least one plenary meeting of the Consultative Forum per year. Participation is open to all organisations registered with EASO.

The Organisations invited to participate at the meeting need to appoint their representative(s) and alternate(s) prior to the meeting and inform the Chairperson and the CFCP. The EASO Executive Director chairs the annual plenary meeting.

Relevant EASO staff, according to the agenda items, and the CFCP will attend the meeting.

The Chairperson can invite organisations at his own initiative or following the proposal of Consultative Forum members<sup>1</sup> on the basis of a specific agenda item in order to contribute actively to the discussions or as observer.

The Annual plenary meeting may be convened by the Chairperson at his own initiative or following the initiative of a majority of Consultative Forum members.

The Agenda shall be set by the Chairperson. Agenda items may be proposed by any Consultative Forum member.

The outcome of discussions, drafted by the CFCP and after approval by the Chairperson and Consultative Forum Members, shall be formally recorded in the official report of the meeting and published on the EASO website.

At the start of each meeting, any Member or participant at the Consultative Forum meeting whose participation in the group's work would raise a conflict of interest shall inform the Chairperson.

In principle, participants pay for their own travel and accommodation expenses. However, on the basis of a substantiated request, EASO would consider covering 50% of the travel costs. For the sake of efficiency and effectiveness, and in order to have a meaningful and focused discussion on key topics, participation to the annual plenary Consultative Forum meetings is limited to around a maximum of 100 persons.

### 6.3. Frequency of consultation/ yearly consultation calendar and location

EASO develops an annual consultation calendar, which is discussed at the annual plenary meeting of the preceding year. This allows the Consultative Forum to share, plan and identify available expertise well in advance to provide input in the most effective manner. The calendar is flexible enough to allow for ad hoc consultations on specific themes which could become necessary due to changing circumstances and needs – such as in the case of emergencies or unexpected changes in caseloads in the EU. The calendar is regularly updated and published on the EASO website.

In principle, all Consultative Forum meetings will take place at the EASO Headquarters, in Valletta, Malta.

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<sup>1</sup> Consultative Forum members are those organisations listed in the EASO Consultative Forum Register (ECFR)

## **7. Follow-up to suggestions and feedback given by the Consultative Forum**

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EASO takes seriously and considers favourably input from the Consultative Forum. A structured feedback process is important to constitute a two-way consultation process. This allows civil society organisations to understand the significance of their contribution, to draw lessons from and to further improve the consultation process/contribution.

EASO acknowledges suggestions and feedback given by the Consultative Forum in its different configurations and themes covered. The EASO regulation states that the Consultative Forum shall be invited to provide feedback to EASO and suggest measures as follow-up to the two annual reports published by EASO. Such feedback and suggestions will be consolidated by EASO and published on its website. The Executive Director also addresses the annual meeting plenary meeting of the Consultative Forum to inform how, and to what extent, were taken onboard by EASO, taking into account the independent role and specific responsibilities of the Agency.

## **8. Other considerations**

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Consultative Forum members and other invited participants shall handle EASO information in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 1049/20012 and detailed rules for its application<sup>3</sup> where the EASO Regulation and this MB Decision does not establish more favourable provisions. Consultative Forum members and other invited participants shall also sign a confidentiality agreement.

Information shall be transmitted to or requested by Consultative Forum members via the Secretariat at [consultative-forum@easo.europa.eu](mailto:consultative-forum@easo.europa.eu)

All processing of personal data for the purposes of the Consultative Forum shall be in accordance with Regulation (EC) 45/2001.

## **9. Consultative Forum Coordination Point (CFCP)**

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### **9.1. Communication with the Consultative Forum**

EASO wants to establish an organisation-wide approach to consultation with civil society organisations. A single point of contact is therefore being established in order to ensure smooth and effective communication between the various civil society actors and the different units within EASO. A single mechanism and method has been set up for consulting the different sectoral interest groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EC) no 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents

<sup>3</sup> Decision no 6 of the EASO Management Board of 20 September 2011 on access to EASO documents

The CFCP provides the Forum with the administrative support for the preparation, implementation and management of its work. The secretariat plays an important role in ensuring that civil society information/documents/papers shared with EASO are communicated to the competent EASO unit and to follow-up and give feedback on the civil society/EASO communication and request for input to specific documents within established deadlines. The CFCP will also be responsible for the e-consultation platform and to update the relevant section of the EASO website/portal.

The CFCP's email address is: [consultative-forum@easo.europa.eu](mailto:consultative-forum@easo.europa.eu)

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