EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF EASO'S OPERATIONAL SUPPORT IN 2021

EVALUATION REPORT

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RAMBOLL

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ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
ARC	Assessment of reception conditions
AST	Asylum support team
BIA	Best interest assessment
C1	Operational Support Centre of EASO
C2	Training and Professional Development Centre of EASO
C3	Asylum Knowledge Centre of EASO
C4	Corporate Management Centre (formerly Administration Centre) of EASO
CAS	Cyprus Asylum Service
CDM	Complementary deployment mechanism
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
COI	Country of origin information
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organisation
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DPS	Department of Public Security (Italy)
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EU	European Union
EU+	EU Member States and associate countries
eu-LISA	European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPAC	International Protection Administrative Court (Cyprus)
LTAC	Long-Term Accommodation Centre (Greece)
ODC	Operational data collection

OP	Operating plan
PMES	Programming, Monitoring and Evaluation Sector
RIS	Reception and Identification Service (Greece)
SAR	Search and rescue
SOPs	Standard operating procedures
THB	Trafficking in human beings
UAMs	Unaccompanied minors
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2021, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)[1] provided operational support to Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, and for the first time, Spain. Operational support was also provided to Latvia and Lithuania but as operating plans (OPs) for those countries were signed in the latter half of 2021, they fell outside of the scope of the present evaluation.

The operational support provided in Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, and Spain was **highly relevant and adapted to the needs of national authorities**. This was notably because the Agency's operational support framework relies on a structured needs assessment process that ensures the measures and activities foreseen to be implemented address the priorities in each specific national context. EASO's working methods also enable it to swiftly respond to unforeseen changes. Over time, the approach to needs assessment and the design and implementation of the OPs has improved significantly, though this evaluation identified scope for further enhancement, to build on the relative strengths and capabilities of respective parts of the Agency to offer a truly coherent Agency-centric approach.

The **effectiveness of the operational support provided varied** across countries and across the measures and activities within the OPs. Variation was largely due to difficulties in recruiting and deploying experts with the necessary knowledge and expertise, the COVID-19[2] pandemic and related public health measures, and most importantly, the capacity of national authorities to absorb the support provided. In other words, the eventual **impact of operational support is contingent on many external influencing factors that the Agency cannot control**. Despite setbacks, EASO was able to support authorities to achieve significant results:

- EASO supported the **registration of more than 28,000 applicants for international protection** in Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Malta during 2021. The extent of its support was aligned with the needs of the authorities: more operational support was provided in Malta and Cyprus, while the support in Greece and Italy was more focused on contributing to improvements in registration procedures through the introduction of templates, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and quality management tools, i.e., with a view to providing more sustainable support;

- EASO supported the processing of applications for international protection by conducting **almost 23,400 personal interviews and drafting more than 12,000 opinions** to support national authorities' decision making at first instance status determination, in Greece, Cyprus and Malta. The interviews were unprecedently high, while opinions were somewhat lower than the previous year (17,562 opinions in 2020). In Greece, EASO hereby continued to effectively tackle the backlog in the mainland following a significant reduction on the islands during 2020. A reduction in the backlog of pending cases was also achieved in Malta; however, in Cyprus the influx of new applications was higher than the rate at which the authorities could issue decisions so the actual backlog decreased only marginally;

- **Significant progress was made in the field of reception management**. EASO's work was traditionally more focused on support for asylum, but in recent years this has shifted, notably following the adoption of the [EASO Strategy on Reception](#) in March 2021. Its operational support concerned information provision to residents in reception facilities, support with social services, support to the authorities in implementing their own reception strategies, and the development and implementation of tools for reception management and quality assurance;

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[1] On 19 January 2022, EASO became the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), when Regulation (EU) 2021/2303 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2021 on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation (EU) No 439/2010 (hereinafter: **EUAA regulation**) entered into force. However, as this is a retrospective evaluation of 2021, the Agency is referred to as 'EASO' or 'the Agency', as was its official name during 2021.

[2] Coronavirus disease 2019.

- EASO **supported the processing of appeals cases at second instance** in Greece, Italy and Cyprus by preparing case files, providing judicial and country of origin information (COI) research, building capacity for the relevant authorities (notably through training and workshops) and setting up data sharing systems. Despite the Agency's high production, actual reductions in backlogs are contingent on the capacity of the authorities (competent courts) to adjudicate the cases and on the rate at which new appeal cases are added to their workloads;

- **EASO played a key role in supporting ad hoc disembarkations and voluntary relocation**. It played a key role in supporting all disembarkation events for which the authorities requested its support in Italy, the only European Union (EU) Member State that continued to provide a port of safety throughout all of 2021. It also provided support in Greece in the continuation of the EU voluntary relocation scheme for unaccompanied minors (UAMs), by facilitating the coordination and flow of information between all involved stakeholders. EASO's role in providing this type of support was highly appreciated in both countries, though the eventual outcomes in terms of the number of people actually relocated remained limited due to a low number of relocation pledges from participating Member States.

Overall, the Agency made significant progress during 2021, building on its longstanding expertise and experience providing operational support to EU Member States in need of support. While the Agency has managed to adapt to changing circumstances and unforeseen crises to date, the volatility of the asylum and reception field paired with its extended mandate to not only provide support in case of disproportionate pressure but also provide more structural support for the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), make it all the more important to ensure that it has the necessary human and financial resources at its disposal to effectively carry out its mandate. As such, this evaluation provides a few recommendations the Agency can consider to potentially implement the operational support in a more efficient and coherent manner.

Recommendation 1: Refine the scope and depth of involvement of all centres in the OP needs assessment process.

The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) regulation foresees a shortened timeframe for the design of OPs. To adapt to this, the Agency should revisit its approach to the involvement of different staff in the needs assessment process. Building on good practices employed since the end of 2020, the Operational Support Centre (C1) should continue to involve its Training and Professional Development Centre (C2) and Asylum Knowledge Centre (C3) as relevant and appropriate, depending on the timeline available for the needs assessment. It should also consider involving the Corporate Management Centre (C4) to contribute its experience with procurement and legal processes to ensure the activities to be proposed in an OP are aligned with the timeframe available to implement them.

Recommendation 2: Put in place an internal mechanism to mobilise staff from across the Agency to support operations under the coordination of C1.

Taking a more Agency-wide approach to operational support by putting in place an approach that is more structured and transparent should enable the Agency to make use of its strained human resources in a more effective and efficient way. Importantly, C1 should consider to what extent C4 staff can be involved in the implementation of OPs (from a logistical, administrative support perspective), and when it might be relevant to deploy staff from C2, C3, and C4 to the field. As part of this, the Agency will need to consider its internal approaches to coordination and line management.

Recommendation 3: Harmonise the level of definition and structure of the Results Frameworks of new OPs to facilitate monitoring and evaluation.

Taking a more harmonised approach to the development of (new) OPs and their Results Frameworks would facilitate their monitoring and evaluation in the future, which is even more important in light

of the shortened timeframe for evaluations foreseen in the EUAA regulation. The Agency should consider an approach for the development of a common definition of (sub-)measures and Results Frameworks of new OPs based on good practices, by involving relevant staff involved in the implementation and monitoring of operational support.

Recommendation 4: Share good practices and experiences to better align the scope of OPs with their timeline and the absorption capacity of national counterparts.

While it is good to be ambitious to some extent, proper planning of OPs is preferable, as underachievement of set targets can lead to demotivation among staff and the authorities. While much of this is outside of the Agency's control, it can consider investing in internal coordination (across all centres) and sharing of good practices in terms of what is feasible and what is not in the available timeframe, also in light of the capacity of the authorities. This could include feasibility checks by C4 in relation to logistical issues, and the introduction (and application) of preconditions for certain activities, which might increase ownership among the authorities.

Recommendation 5: Clearly define and discuss the conditions and criteria for exit in different national contexts, taking into account the need for emergency assistance and EU solidarity.

The Agency's operational support is intended to be temporary in nature, though it aims to build capacity among the authorities for the sake of sustainability, giving the Agency a more permanent operational support role. The conditions and criteria for exit strategy should be developed and agreed upon with the authorities in countries where the asylum and/or reception system has reached the necessary level of maturity.

Recommendation 6: Strive for efficiency gains by reconsidering the approach to the implementation of the OPs and considering ways to enhance the complementarity between the Agency's activities and those of other stakeholders.

In light of the extended mandate of the Agency, there is an increased need for stable financial and human resources. The Agency could make more efficient use of its internal human resources by drawing on the relative strengths and capacities of different centres, and reconsider how it cooperates with external stakeholders (notably the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) and international organisations, as relevant) to further enhance the complementarity of its support with their interventions.
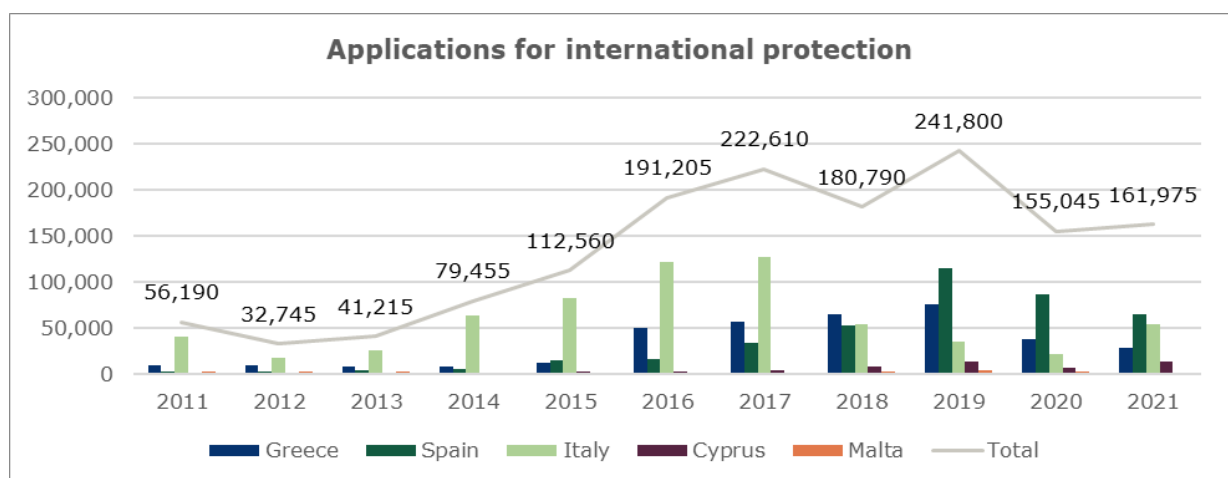
1. INTRODUCTION

This is the final report for the horizontal evaluation of the operational support delivered by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in 2021 through its operating plans (OP) in Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Spain. This report draws the key trends and differences across these countries and interventions, as evaluated in five separate reports. It covers key achievements and challenges, in order to provide the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) with good practices and lessons learned, in order to help improve the overall framework of the operational support of the Agency.

1.1 Asylum and migration context in 2021

Following the downward trend in applications for international protection due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related movement restrictions in 2020, the number of applications continued to decrease in Greece, Malta and Spain, but increased in Italy and Cyprus in 2021 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Applications in Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus and Malta, 2011-2021

Source: Eurostat - Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex, annual aggregated data (rounded)

1.2 Operational support in 2021

The Agency can provide operational support to Member States that are subject to particular pressure that places exceptionally heavy and urgent demands on their reception facilities and asylum systems.[3] Following a formal request by the Member State in need of assistance, the Agency can coordinate the necessary technical and operational assistance to the requesting Member State by deploying, for a limited time, (an) asylum support team(s) (AST) in the territory of that Member State. The conditions of the AST deployment and organisations aspects are laid down in jointly agreed OPs, which set out in detail the support which the Agency is to provide to the national asylum and/or reception services depending on the specific needs of the host Member State. In 2021, the Agency had seven OPs under implementation – for Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Spain, Latvia and Lithuania.[4] The operational support covered a range of actions in support of national asylum and reception systems, depending on the situation in the country, the prioritised needs of the authorities as assessed by the Agency within the framework of available budgets and resources, and where relevant accounting for existing commitments where it has provided support in preceding years.

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[3] Section 2 of Regulation (EU) No 439/2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 May 2010 establishing a European Asylum Support Office. Hereinafter: **EASO regulation**.

[4] Latvia and Lithuania are not in scope of this evaluation as they were established and implemented in the latter half of 2021.

1.3 The way forward – the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

On 19 January 2022 the new mandate of the EUAA entered into force. The EUAA regulation introduced several provisions which will have an impact on the Agency's operational support in the future and are therefore relevant to consider in light of any recommendations made in this report:

- **Extended basis for operations (Article 16(1))**: The Agency was previously only able to provide operational support upon a request from a Member State under particular pressure. Now, it can also provide operational support for the implementation of obligations under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), even in the absence of particular pressures; on its own initiative in agreement with the Member State in question; or at the initiative of the Council in case of non-compliance with the CEAS.[5]

- **Short timeframes for decisions and deployment (Article 17(5))**: The EUAA regulation introduced short timeframes for decisions on the provision of operational support, and for agreement on an OP, notably in cases where the operational support is offered due to disproportionate pressures placed on the Member State in question (rapid response operations).

- **Asylum reserve pool (Article 19(6))**: A reserve pool of at least 500 experts, nominated by Member States, will be placed at the immediate disposal of the Agency to be deployed as part of ASTs under the conditions laid down in the EUAA regulation. This should enable swift deployment of human resources (7 working days from the date on which the operational plan is agreed).

- **Possibility to deploy experts on contract (Article 19(4))**: In addition to its own staff and experts from Member States, the Agency will be able to deploy experts not employed by it with demonstrated relevant knowledge and experience in accordance with operational needs. This should help the Agency mitigate capacity issues.

Where relevant and applicable, potential changes or implications stemming from the new mandate have been highlighted throughout this report.

2. METHODOLOGY

To make the evaluation as relevant and useful as possible to the Agency, targeted evaluation questions were developed collaboratively during the inception phase and adjusted thereafter to take into account the key findings from the country-specific OP evaluations. It was agreed that this horizontal evaluation would take a more strategic approach, focusing on key trends, good practices, common challenges and lessons learned across country-specific operations. The four targeted evaluation questions are:

1. How did **EASO manage its operational support in 2021**? What lessons can be learned from the coordination within the Agency and with external stakeholders? Is there room to further streamline coordination / build synergies?

2. What were the **key achievements and good practices** observed in/across EASO's operational support in 2021? What are the lessons learned for the future, in terms of transferability or replicability of good practices?

3. What were the **key challenges** observed in/across EASO's operational support in 2021? What are the lessons learned for the future, in terms of how these can be avoided / mitigated?

4. To what extent has EASO's support been **impactful and/or sustainable**, notably in countries where support has been provided for several years in a row? What are the preconditions for support to be impactful and/or sustainable? How can they be measured?

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[5] From 2024 onwards, the Agency will have a mandate to monitor the implementation of the CEAS in the EU Member States. If it finds shortcomings, it can recommend measures to be taken by the Member State concerned within a given timeframe. If these are not implemented in time, the Commission may make a proposal for a Council implementing act for operational or technical support to be provided by the Agency.

2.1 Methods

The evaluation combined the use of quantitative and qualitative data to enable an in-depth assessment of results to answer the abovementioned evaluation questions. It combines a meta-analysis of the five country-specific OP evaluations (for key trends and good practices) with targeted desk research and consultations pertaining to the OP framework in more general terms.

Desk research

Aside from the secondary review of operation-specific evaluation reports and their underlying data, this horizontal report made use of documentation pertaining to EASO's activities more broadly, at strategic level. Sources of evidence include work programmes, strategic planning documents and activity reports, internal training plans and data, internal operational monitoring, and analytical analysis reports. The evaluation reports from 2020 and the associated evaluation follow-ups were a key source of evidence for the evaluation of progress made in 2021 as well.

In-depth interviews

A total of 13 interviews were conducted. These interviews aimed to complement already available evidence by uncovering not only *what* has happened but also *how* and *why* certain results were or were not (fully) achieved. The interviews focused on horizontal / strategic issues, drawing on examples at operational level where appropriate (e.g., good practice examples).

At EASO, we spoke with several staff: staff from the Operational Support Centre (C1 – in charge of planning, design, implementation, coordination and monitoring and reporting of operational support); the Training and Professional Development Centre (C2 – in charge of designing, organising and facilitating training activities); the Asylum Knowledge Centre (C3 – in charge of research and data analysis and thematic cooperation between Member States); the Corporate Management Centre (C4 – in charge of administrative matters at Agency level); the Programming, Monitoring and Evaluation sector (C1 – PMES[6]) and from the Quality Management and Evaluation Sector (C4 – QMES).

Interviews with representatives of the European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were conducted to discuss in more depth their working relationship with the Agency, the context in which the Agency operates (including constraints placed on it by its nature as a decentralised agency of the EU), and the key achievements and challenges at operational level during 2021.

2.2 Limitations to the robustness of the evidence base

With certain stakeholders (e.g., DG HOME, UNHCR), only one person was interviewed, which could bias the findings. Triangulation of evidence collected through desk research and interviews with other stakeholders was applied to mitigate such a possible bias.

Due to COVID-19, horizontal interviews and most country-specific interviews were conducted remotely. In-person interviews, notably for country-specific evaluations, would have allowed for more contextualisation of findings. However, remote interviews enabled the evaluation team to flexibly adapt to the schedules of stakeholders.

Finally, there are limits to the degree to which different operations can be compared to one another. As they are adapted to the local context and needs, they have different areas of focus. The number of incoming applications and pending applications vary significantly, as does the capacity of local authorities and their priorities. Therefore, the outputs of each intervention are different, and one registration in one country cannot reliably be compared to one registration in another. However, key trends could be identified even if the numbers may not be perfectly comparable.

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[6] Following the re-organisation of the Agency of 19 January 2022, the Programming, Monitoring and Evaluation Sector was renamed Operational Programming Sector (OPS)).
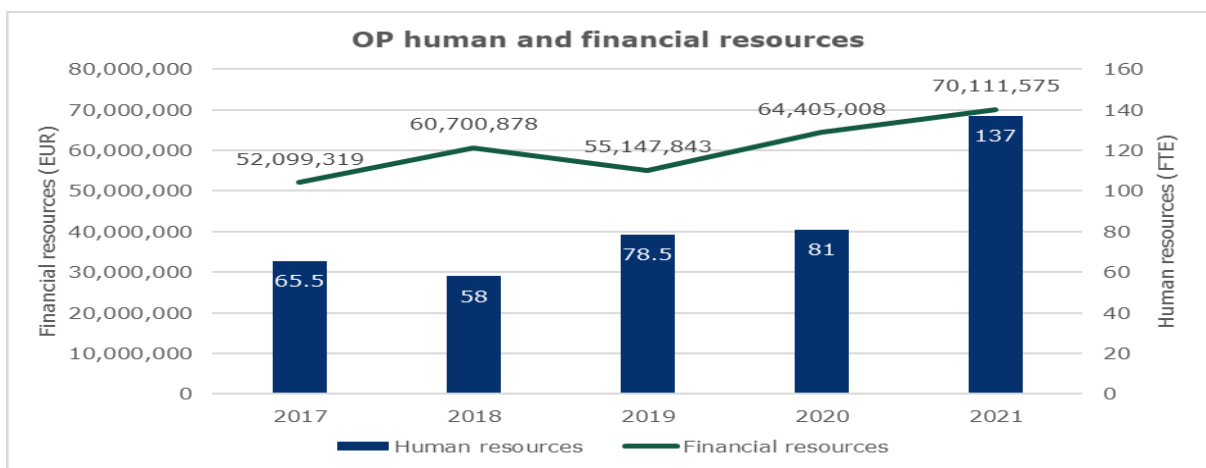
3. FINDINGS

During the latter half of 2021, the Agency was preparing for the adoption of the EUAA regulation and the widened mandate it brought about. While this evaluation concerns the OPs implemented during 2021, i.e., before EASO became the EUAA on 19 January 2022, relevant activities were carried out during 2021 that were nevertheless considered (e.g., planning of OPs for 2022 and beyond). Moreover, the new mandate of the EUAA and its implications on operational support has been taken into consideration, notably in light of lessons learned and recommendations for the future.

3.1 Implementation of EASO's operational support in 2021

When the Agency was established in 2010, it was intended to act as centre of expertise, with the objective of developing practical cooperation between the Member States, offering support in the event of particular asylum-related pressures and providing evidence for EU policymaking. Its role gradually expanded after that. In 2013, the recast CEAS legal framework introduced a more significant role for the Agency in helping Member States implement it. The Agency was called on to play a major role in implementing the immediate actions outlined in the European agenda on migration that focused on strengthening the EU emergency response to the 2015-2016 migration crisis and was involved in the implementation of the EU relocation programme, the EU-Turkey statement, and the EU resettlement schemes.[7]

To enable the Agency to fulfil its tasks, build up staff, and deliver operational and technical support to Member States, its budget increased almost tenfold, from €14.6 million in 2014 to close to €140 million in 2021. The financial resources budgeted for operational support in particular grew significantly, to more than €70 million for 2021 (see Figure 2). A similar upward trend in planned human resources relating to operational support and operational support tools, programming and monitoring of operations staff was observed – it increased to 137 staff member posts allocated[8] in 2021. However, a large share of them (including 58 short term one-year contract agent posts) were intended to be deployed in the field to provide operational support, rather than to support planning, implementing and coordination activities. The latter have not increased substantially, despite the significant increase in operational support activities over time.

Figure 2. Evolution in EASO's financial and human resources for operational support, 2017-2021

Source: EASO Work Programmes, 2017-2021[9]

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[7] European Parliamentary Research Service briefing: Introducing the European Union Agency for Asylum

[8] 119 for operational support in the OP countries and 18 for related activities (Operational support and tools, programming, monitoring and evaluation of operations). Based on Annex I of EASO Single Programming Document: Multi-annual Programming 2021-2023, Work Programme 2021 – Amendment 1, 18 February 2021.

[9] Figures in the graph display the human and financial resources employed in operational support (excl. external dimension), including operational support and tools, programming and monitoring. Data from 2017 and 2018 refer to resources in operational support provided in Italy and Greece.

The Agency's operational support is coordinated by the **Operational Support Centre (C1)**, which is responsible for the needs assessment, design preparation, implementation, monitoring and reporting of operational support. In so doing, it coordinates with the other centres (notably the **Training and Professional Development Centre (C2)** and the **Asylum Knowledge Centre (C3)**, but also the **Corporate Management Centre (C4)**[10]), drawing on each of their relative fields of expertise, as relevant and applicable.

Operational support is intended to be temporary in duration and help relieve the pressures on Member States' authorities, but also seeks to improve quality standards and contribute to more resilient national systems in the long term.

3.1.1 Planning and design of the OPs

When a need for operational support arises in an EU Member State and it requests operational support from EASO, a structured needs assessment is initiated. It is based on a needs assessment methodology that has been implemented since 2018.[11] Through dialogue and consultations with the concerned Member State that made the formal request, the needs assessment is used to define possible assistance measures. Once agreed upon with the Member State, these measures are detailed in the OP, along with means to implement them.

3.1.1.1 Needs assessments

At the end of 2020, in preparation for the first ever OP signed with Spain for 2021, EASO took a more Agency-wide approach to the needs assessment than was common practice prior to that. C2 was involved in assessing training needs, and C3 from the perspective of providing contextual information on the national legislative framework and practices, as well as relevant data, e.g., on asylum flows. Prior to 2020, these centres were asked to comment on draft OPs before their agreement, but not systematically involved from the initial stages of assessing needs.

This practice was continued throughout 2021, with the setup of OPs in Latvia and Lithuania for the latter half of 2021, and in Belgium for the development of the OP for 2022. This Agency-wide approach was highly appreciated by interviewees from C2 and C3, and flagged as a good practice that should be continued.[12] Such an approach enables burden sharing and enables the Agency to capitalise on the relative strengths and contextual knowledge available to different centres and sectors within them. While one could expect an Agency-wide approach to be less efficient because it requires the involvement of more people, the fact that the needs assessments in Latvia and Lithuania could be completed in (less than) one month shows that this approach can be efficient.

In the case of needs assessments preceding the adoption of OPs in countries where EASO has been providing operational support for a longer time (i.e., Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Malta), the approach was somewhat different. In these cases, C2 and C3 were informed about the process and asked to comment on the draft OP, though at a later stage when, according to interviewed staff, fewer changes could be made because high level agreement had already been reached. The logic behind this approach is that operational staff know the context in these countries very well, know what the needs and priorities of the authorities are, have established working relationships with those authorities, and have a clear picture of what is feasible to achieve in the timeframe envisaged for the OP, and thus require less support from other centres. However, experience shows that the latter is not always true, as there are often unforeseen circumstances such as delays in recruitment and procurement processes that impact the degree to which the intended activities can be implemented. Early inputs from other centres could help better strike a balance between the level of ambition of an OP and the timeframe available for its implementation.

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[10] The Corporate Management Centre was called the Administration Centre up until the establishment of the EUAA.

[11] A needs assessment user guide was developed in 2018. Source: EASO Annual General Report 2018, June 2019.

[12] The external evaluation of the 2020 OPs also identified this as a good practice, and recommended that the involvement of C2 in conducting a training needs assessment be formalised where this makes sense, to ensure closer alignment between training needs and the actual training offer, and enable EASO to be better prepared to offer the necessary training.

Box 1. Lesson learned – potential scope to involve C4 in needs assessment process

Staff within C4 has relevant knowledge of and experience with processes related to administration, procurement, facility management, security and recruitment that can be exploited better in the operational context. Traditionally, C4 provided support to C1 on administrative matters such as procurement processes (initiated by C1 but supported by C4), facility management in some countries), and legal support (e.g., in relation to the use of temporary agency workers in different jurisdictions). According to both C1 and C4 staff, the coordination between them has improved over the years. Efforts to continue to do so are ongoing – staff from C4 notably contributed to the setting up of a roster of renumerated experts the Agency can use for deployment in the context of its new mandate.

In cases where it makes sense (notably depending on the timeframe for planning and implementation of an OP), it could be worth consulting C4 in the needs assessment process. Their knowledge on administrative issues such as the time it takes to procure and deploy material resources could be valuable as a 'feasibility check' of what is proposed in an OP. This, in turn, should avoid a situation in which EASO commits to delivering on certain activities that are not feasible in light of contextual constraints.

3.1.1.2 Operating plans

As mentioned, the needs assessment forms the basis for the development of the OP. Measures are defined jointly with the relevant national authorities in the host Member State, in line with their identified needs. They are also adapted to the scope and nature of the support. As a result, the OPs for 2021 were quite divergent in their setup, both in terms of structure, and level of detail.

- The **Greece OP 2021** included four measures: one on asylum, one on reception, one on relocation, and one to contribute to a dedicated taskforce for improved reception and asylum management, including a joint pilot project for a multipurpose reception and identification centre on Lesvos. It was the only OP that included sub-measures within each of these measures, e.g., dividing first instance asylum support per location (islands vs mainland), and first instance asylum support from support at second instance.

- The **Italy OP 2021** included five measures, related to access to asylum procedures, quality and standardisation of the Dublin procedure and asylum determination procedures, management of the judicial backlog, quality management and monitoring of the reception system, and coordination amongst the Italian asylum authorities. The first two measures were closely linked – one dealt with support to the quality and standardisation of access to asylum procedures and the second with support to the timely and standardised registration of applicants.

- The **Cyprus OP 2021** included four measures: one related to the quality of the asylum registration system and access to the asylum procedure, one related to reception management, one related to the processing of applications at first instance, and one related to the processing of appeals cases at second instance.

- The **Malta OP 2021** included two clearly delineated measures: one concerning asylum (first instance support only), and once concerning reception.

- The **Spain OP 2021** was the only OP focused solely on reception. It included five measures, all focusing on separate parts of the reception system. It was the only OP that included a dedicated measure on training.

While such differences do not necessarily hinder the implementation of the OP (see section 3.1.2),[13] taking a more harmonised approach to the definition of measures at different levels could be beneficial for monitoring and evaluation purposes as it enables cross-fertilisation of good practices.

3.1.1.3 Rapid relief vs structural support

The asylum and migration field is volatile and unpredictable, and EASO plays an important role in providing a rapid response following requests for support from Member States. Examples of this are the OPs with Latvia and Lithuania – countries that are not traditionally prone to high influxes of

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[13] In some cases, the setup of the OP does hinder implementation, e.g., if it is planned too ambitiously, as was the case in Spain in 2021.

applicants for international protection, but experienced a sudden surge during the summer of 2021 when the state of Belarus organised state-sponsored smuggling of migrants into the EU.[14] The countries requested urgent support, and EASO was able to carry out a rapid needs assessment in a matter of weeks[15]. Accordingly, the Agency was able to redistribute resources to meet the urgent need for support. For instance, personnel deployed to Greece was able to support the implementation of the OP in Lithuania.[16] This was also facilitated by the significant experience with remote work built up during the 2020-2021 period in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to Latvia and Lithuania, there were requests for support from Belgium and the Netherlands during 2021, specifically in relation to reception management. According to interviewed EASO staff, these requests signify a mindset shift on the side of the authorities, possibly stemming from increased visibility of EASO's work and its added value, notably in the reception area because of the increased structure provided by the EASO Strategy on Reception adopted in March 2021.

Moreover, at the time of writing (April 2022), discussions were ongoing with several countries in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that led to the displacement of more than 5 million Ukrainian nationals.[17] While somewhat different in nature, these discussions underline the continued importance of a quick response and mobilisation of resources (financial, human, material) in times of crisis.

Box 2. Good practice example – added value of remote work

Starting in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic imposed travel restrictions and other public health measures that caused work to be halted temporarily but also significantly slowed down arrivals and thus enabled 'catching up' with backlogs at operational level, EASO started investing in remote work. As part of its mandate to act as a centre of expertise on asylum and provide technical and practical support to Member States to help them protect persons in need, EASO conducted analyses on asylum trends and COVID-19[18], and organised practical, ad hoc meetings of their network of experts from Member States to share how they dealt with the pandemic, focusing on approaches to e.g., remote interviewing. This enabled the sharing of experiences and challenges, but also good practices that resulted in the development of a set of recommendations[19] that could subsequently be used at operational level. The Agency was also able to provide uninterrupted training support (e.g., training of new and experienced staff) by delivering virtual training courses (webinars). This led to achievements at operational level such as the clearing of the backlog on the Greek islands by working across locations remotely. It could potentially have more widespread benefits, such as lowering the environmental footprint of the Agency by limiting travel, though such an assessment is beyond the scope of the present evaluation.

These experiences with remote work enabled the Agency to take a more flexible approach to staffing, thus facilitating the implementation of new OPs. Depending on the type of activities to be carried out and the scale of the OP, this practice might be beneficial to continue in the future.

Aside from its rapid response mechanism, EASO provides more structural support, including through capacity building. Based on lessons learned, a decision was taken in 2021 to move towards multi-annual planning in countries where a certain level of maturity had been reached but further capacity

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[14] European Commission (2021), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Report on Migration and Asylum, COM(2021) 590 final

[15] In the case of Latvia, support was requested on 18 August 2021, and the OP was signed on 8 September 2021, i.e., within 21 days or 3 weeks. The Lithuanian authorities requested support on 15 June 2021, and the OP was signed on 15 July, i.e., within 30 days or one month.

[16] 61 personnel in Lithuania and 17 field support officers working from Greece. Source: EUAA website, Member States Operations - Lithuania

[17] As per UNHCR data, 5,264,767 Ukrainian nationals had been displaced by 25 April 2022.

[18] This culminated in the publication of two special reports. EASO Special Report: Asylum Trends and COVID-19, 7 May 2020 (issue 1) and 11 June 2020 (issue 2).

[19] In May 2020, EASO published practical recommendations on conducting remote personal interviews on the basis of best practice examples shared by EU+ Member States during practical cooperation meetings and a COVID-19 survey organised by the Agency. In June 2020, EASO published practical recommendations on conducting remote/online registrations on the basis of thematic meetings held by the EASO Asylum Processes Network. In December 2021, EASO published additional recommendations on Dublin transfers under COVID-19

building (more so than emergency response) was needed.[20] For the 2022-2024 period, OPs have been signed with Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Malta. For Spain, an OP was signed for the 2022-2023 period. Multi-annual programming should have a positive effect on (a) the sustainability of operational support, because of the emphasis on capacity building; (b) the relevance and effectiveness of the measures as they can be designed (and adjusted) throughout their implementation period in response to unforeseen challenges or changes to the operational context, thus avoiding overly ambitious OPs; and (c) the efficiency of the overall OP framework, because of the reduced human and financial resources needed to plan and evaluate OPs on an annual basis.

However, there is a **risk of overreliance** on the Agency's support if no clear plan or roadmap for phasing out is included.[21] As operational support is designed to respond to needs, the Agency has gradually phased out over time in certain activities when support was no longer required (e.g., phasing out of first instance support in Italy in favour of focusing on quality management; or implementing an embedded model in Greece to gradually hand over increased responsibilities to the competent authorities). In countries where this has not yet happened, the level of maturity necessary for the Agency to phase out has simply not yet been reached, or there is a feeling that in light of EU solidarity, the Agency should continue to support the authorities with their asylum and reception system. The intention would not be for the Agency to fully leave these Member States to their own devices; it would continue to uphold its duty of providing operational support should that be necessary. However, there is scope to establish synergies with for instance the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), so that an alternative 'EU solution to an EU problem' can be implemented, without overburdening the Agency in a way that hinders it from providing emergency support to Member States that need it.
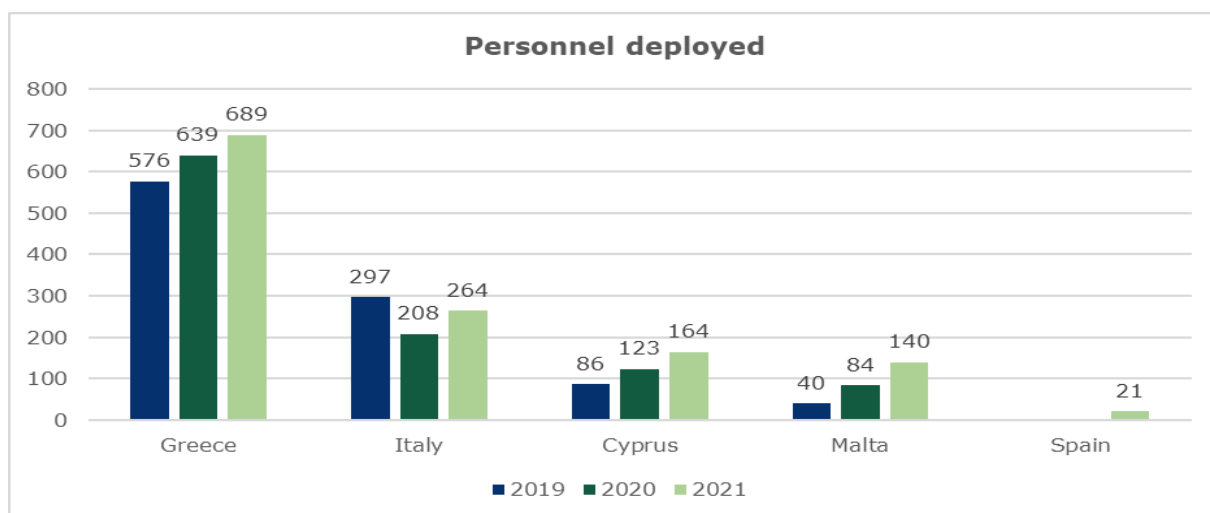
3.1.2   Implementation of the OPs

Operational support is delivered in a planned, phased and sustainable manner, through the deployment of ASTs, working tools and needed equipment.[22] The Agency deploys personnel that can assist on a wide range of aspects of the asylum and reception procedures, e.g., support Dublin units, provide information activities and assist in training activities, assist with registration and information provision upon disembarkations, facilitate relocation to other Member States, carry out registrations, conduct asylum interviews, draft decision opinions, assist second-instance decision makers and work with the authorities to improve procedures and conditions, depending on the focus of the OP as agreed with the authorities. The implementation of the OPs varied significantly across the five countries evaluated, in terms of their scope (activities implemented), scale (financial, human and material resources invested), and mode of implementation (how human resources were deployed). Overall, **the Agency managed to significantly scale up its operational support in recent years**. In Greece, Cyprus, and Malta, there was an increase in deployed staff between 2019 and 2021. In Italy, it had decreased somewhat in 2020 when the Agency phased out of supporting asylum processes at first instance but increased again for 2021. Spain was a new operation in 2021.

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[20] Moving towards multi-annual planning was also a recommendation of the external evaluation of the 2020 OPs. It recommended that EASO consider moving to multi-annual operational programming in Member States where the imminent need for support has stabilised but there is a need for capacity building, because the latter takes time and is difficult to achieve in one year time. At the same time, it recommended that one-year operational planning be maintained in emergency situations only.

[21] This has been acknowledged by EASO and is one of the areas of work the Agency is committed to working on in the near future. It was also already flagged in the external evaluation of the 2020 OPs, which recommended that where multi-annual operational planning is implemented, the OP should include a clear roadmap for phasing out, for instance by making reference to the exit strategy outlined in the multi-annual roadmaps.

[22] EUAA website, Operational Assistance

Figure 3. Deployed personnel in the five OP countries under evaluation, 2019-2021

Personnel deployed

	Greece	Italy	Cyprus	Malta	Spain
2019	576	297	86	40	
2020	639	208	123	84	
2021	689	264	164	140	21

■ 2019 ■ 2020 ■ 2021

Source: EUAA website
Note: the numbers refer to the total distinct persons deployed for each operation during the whole duration of the year.

The degree to which the different centres worked together on delivering operational support differed across operations, depending on needs (e.g., degree to which training is embedded into the OP which determines how much support from C2 is needed). Overall, **there has been a considerable improvement in the coordination across centres and sectors in the delivery of operational support in recent years**, resulting from efforts made since the reorganisation at the beginning of 2020 which sparked a more Agency-centric approach building on relative strengths.[23] In 2021, weekly senior management meetings were implemented, which *inter alia* cover operational aspects, implementation updates, political insights and developments which sometimes lead to the establishment of new OPs. This ensures that senior managers are aware of what is going on across the Agency, facilitating working together towards achieving the same goals. Extended management team meetings that also include heads of unit and heads of sector have since been implemented as well, and take place somewhat less regularly (every third week). In these meetings, the OPs are regularly presented, which improves transparency in the organisation.

In most countries, EASO made use of country desk coordinators for training (C2) and thematic support (C3) who worked closely together with the C1 personnel responsible for implementing the OP in that country, as well as with national authorities, as needed. A somewhat different approach was taken in the case of Spain in 2021, which included a separate measure on training that was coordinated by a measure coordinator from C2 who was regularly present in the field to support the implementation of the OP. This approach had benefits and drawbacks, and may not be replicable in all cases but could be considered in countries where training activities constitute a significant part of the activities to be implemented. Closer involvement of C2 in the implementation of OPs, regardless of the format, would enhance the planning and implementation of training activities and could thereby lessen the burden placed on C1 staff. Similarly, closer involvement of C3 staff with expertise on specific thematic areas (e.g., vulnerabilities and special needs) could add value when activities related to such topics constitute a considerable part of an OP. At the same time, as already mentioned in section 3.1.1.1, the Agency could benefit from more closely involving C4 in the implementation of operational support as well, notably in light of the growing number of OPs.

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[23] EASO adopted a new organisational structure in November 2019 that took effect from 1 January 2020. The new structure saw the creation of the three dedicated competence centres (C1, C2, C3). The internal restructuring of EASO mirrored the priority areas of the Agency as a true hub of knowledge and expertise on asylum; intensifying its training and professional development for asylum experts; and strengthening EASO's operational role. It is a structure carefully modelled to enable the Agency to deliver its support in the most effective and efficient manner building on the skills and expertise of its staff. Source: EASO Single Programming Document: Multi-annual Programming 2021-2023, Work Programme 2021, Amendment 2 page 32.

While cooperation has clearly improved over time, there is not yet a structured mechanism in place for its logistical management. This is especially important if there is to be staff from different centres than C1 present on the ground, as measure coordinators or in a similarly resource-intensive role.

Box 3. Lesson learned – logistical management of cross-centre collaboration

Operational support is and should remain the responsibility of C1, but it can make more use of the relative strengths (knowledge, expertise) of the other centres in implementing the support, also with a view to efficiency gains. Should a decision be taken to make use of measure coordinators from other centres (as done in Spain for training), a robust internal mechanism to mobilise the relevant staff and manage their work needs to be put in place.

Taking a more Agency-wide approach to operational support by putting in place an approach that is more structured and transparent should enable EASO to make use of its strained human resources in a more effective and efficient way. Therefore, the format and role of the different centres in operational support, and an approach to coordination of their work and line management, should be defined within the Agency.

Aside from internal cooperation within the Agency, it is important to note that the implementation of OPs in line with plans is highly contingent on external factors as well. Important factors include the human resource and absorption capacity of the authorities, migration flows, and any other contextual changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as explained in more detail in section 3.2.

3.1.3 Monitoring of the OPs

Since 2019, the Agency has applied a more robust, results-based planning approach in the implementation of OPs.[24] Results Frameworks that detail what the operation seeks to achieve at output and outcome level, along with indicators and associated targets to measure implementation were rolled out across the operations since then.[25] A fidelity monitoring system was also rolled out across all operations at the time, including the launch of a dedicated User Guide on Monitoring of Operations, specific monitoring plans for each intervention and a structure for results and process monitoring.[26] This included the measurement of common key performance indicators related to financial and human resources. Throughout 2021, in preparation for the move towards the EUAA, additional work was undertaken to update the user guides.

The existence and use of Results Frameworks and fidelity monitoring systems improved transparency and accountability through monitoring.[27] It also facilitated the evaluation of operations *post hoc*. In 2021, the monitoring system became more decentralised, with programme management officers in the field being responsible for it, but with clear guidance and templates provided by PMES. Progress was subsequently made towards streamlining the reporting on monitoring tools (e.g., a common approach to monthly and quarterly monitoring reports), which added to this positive finding. Further streamlining of the monitoring and reporting could have benefits for the Agency in improving its operational support framework, as consistent monitoring and reporting enables horizontal / cross-cutting analyses to be done, that can point to relative strengths and weaknesses of individual operations and lessons to be learned across countries.

The issue with further streamlining or harmonisation in the indicators used is that the OPs are designed in such different ways, due to the different national contexts they seek to address. As such, it would not be possible to completely streamline the use of indicators. During 2021, PMES made efforts to streamline the approach taken across operations, but limited progress was made for the abovementioned reasons. However, some degree of a coordinated approach (e.g., a core set of

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[24] Planning for the move towards a results-based management approach started in 2018, to be implemented for the first time for the 2019 OPs.

[25] In 2020, three out of four OPs had a validated Results Framework in place. In 2021, all five OPs under evaluation had a Results Framework in place.

[26] EASO Annual General Report 2019, June 2020.

[27] Note that they are also used as planning tools as they outline key performance indicators for the different activities that are expected to be implemented as part of an OP.

indicators and a larger set of adaptable ones) and guidance in terms of how indicators are established and phrased would be beneficial in that it would allow for a more consistent evaluation of achievements and comparison across interventions. This would not come without costs. An initial time investment would need to be made in order to design Results Frameworks in such a way that output and outcome indicators that are the same across interventions also measure progress in the same way. This requires inputs from C1 (including PMES) to share their experiences with what does and does not work, C2 in relation to the measurement of training outputs and outcomes, C3 to help contextualise targets, e.g., in relation to the existing backlogs, and C4 from the perspective of feasibility in relation to logistical and administrative constraints.

3.1.4 Coordination with external stakeholders

The Agency works together with a range of external stakeholders active in the asylum and migration field. As a decentralised EU Agency with its own governance structure, EASO acts within the policies and institutional framework of the EU, which requires strong cooperation with the EU Institutions and other EU Agencies.[28] EASO reports to DG HOME, but also cooperates with other DGs of the European Commission where relevant. EASO is also part of the EU Agencies Network and the Justice and Home Affairs Agencies Network and has bilateral inter-agency cooperation agreements with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA). Beyond EU institutions and bodies, EASO collaborates with international organisations (most notably UNHCR but also the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and civil society organisations (CSOs).[29]

3.1.4.1 EU stakeholders

DG HOME has always been consulted by EASO at the design stage of OPs, and has been kept in the loop on their implementation through their participation in the Agency's Management Board meetings where this is an agenda item.[30] Communication has improved over time, and DG HOME is now also more actively involved in the implementation of the OPs, notably the larger ones.[31] There are frequent meetings at strategic level (DG HOME in Brussels with EASO headquarters in Malta), as well as at local level with DG HOME representatives in the Member States where EASO provides operational support, though to varying degrees depending on DG HOME presence and needs for coordination. The relationship works both ways, with EASO also being invited to comment on EU Member States' national AMIF programmes for the sake of consistency across planned measures; to ensure there is no duplication in (financial) support coming from the EU.

- In **Greece**, the Agency played an important role in the implementation of the voluntary relocation scheme for UAMs that was coordinated by the Commission (see section 3.2.7), including by supporting the matching process. It also contributed to the taskforce[32] set up by the Commission to establish a new, up-to-standard reception centre on the island of Lesvos.[33]

- In **Italy**, there was complementarity in the actions implemented. For instance, while the Agency's work was mainly concerned with enhancing capacity of the Italian system by improving the quality of Dublin outgoing cases, a national project funded under the AMIF supported the management of incoming cases. Moreover, there was coordination between EASO and other EU agencies[34] through the European Union Regional Task Force in Catania, to coordinate EU

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[28] EUAA website, partners – EU stakeholders

[29] EUAA website, partners – international stakeholders

[30] According to interviewees from EASO and DG HOME, this has been done for years and always worked well.

[31] Notably in Greece and Cyprus, according to interviewees.

[32] European Commission, Press Release: Migration: a European taskforce to resolve emergency situation on Lesvos.

[33] European Commission, Press Release: Migration: Commission and Greece agree joint plan for a new reception centre in Lesvos.

[34] The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), and Frontex.

assistance to national authorities in identification, registration, asylum support and return of third country nationals, as well as criminal investigations into trafficking in human beings (THB).

- In **Cyprus**, the Agency was involved in processes for drafting applications for the AMIF funding, which ensured complementarity with the strategic development of the International Protection Administrative Court (IPAC). Through the AMIF, financial resources were made available to enable IPAC to recruit new staff, which in turn enables the Agency to support this staff in becoming self-sufficient from 2022 onwards.

- In **Malta**, the Agency provided support with the implementation of the voluntary relocation scheme coordinated by DG HOME and the authorities.

- In **Spain**, the Agency provided advice to the authorities on the strategic use of the funds offered by the AMIF, and intended to support the drafting of an EU funding strategy.[35]

Despite the positive collaboration and general improvements therein over time, and with no concrete overlaps or duplication in funding being identified, interviewees from both sides agreed that there is scope to further explore possible synergies. Especially where the Agency's support has evolved to a more strategic level and is mainly concerned with maintaining/strengthening rather than building up national systems, more structural support could be provided by the Commission through the AMIF, for instance for interpretation services.[36] This would have the benefit of alleviating a burden of contract management from the Agency to free up resources for operational support, while still showing EU solidarity.

3.1.4.2 *International stakeholders and civil society*

The Agency has consultations with international organisations where this is relevant to the design and implementation of an OP, depending on the degree to which other actors (notably UNHCR and IOM) are active on the ground. Since 2020, UNHCR has been involved in the needs assessments conducted by the Agency in cases where this made sense, e.g., because there was a gap that UNHCR could fill through its local presence in countries that were 'new' to the Agency.[37] In the case of the needs assessment preceding the adoption of the OP for Belgium, there was no such need for involvement of international actors because the request for support was more straightforward and narrow in scope (focused on material resources). In general, the coordination and cooperation between the Agency and international organisations at strategic level works well and has improved over time.[38] The frequency and intensity of collaboration is not homogeneous across all OP countries because it is contingent on the degree of involvement of different actors in given activities and the national context.

- In **Greece**, a key achievement was the launch of a national tracing and protection mechanism for unaccompanied children, including a 24/7 hotline ran by the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors with EASO's support and in collaboration with UNHCR and other partners.[39]

- In **Italy**, while there were previously concerns about potential duplication of work between the Agency and UNHCR in relation to quality assurance of the asylum procedure. However, there now is better coordination as the recently established quality unit has a tripartite composition (the authorities, EASO, and UNHCR) with defined roles and responsibilities. IOM and UNHCR also play a role in information provision and vulnerability, where scope for better coordination exists.

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[35] This strategy did not materialise.

[36] As explained by an interviewee, interpretation services in Greece should be covered by the AMIF rather than the Agency, but there is a lack of absorption capacity on the side of the authorities to fully use the AMIF funds for this purpose. They were of the opinion that these types of services should still be provided by the Agency in emergency situations (e.g., new OPs).

[37] UNHCR has a regional office in Stockholm that covers the Baltic countries: UNHCR's Representation for the Nordic and Baltic Countries. UNHCR has been present in several locations in Spain since late 1960 and has a role in the asylum procedure.

[38] According to interviewees from UNHCR as well as EASO.

[39] UNHCR, Joint press release: Greece launches national tracing and protection mechanism for unaccompanied children in precarious conditions, 6 April 2021.

- In **Cyprus**, the Agency collaborated with CSOs and UNHCR in relation to information provision and guiding residents of the Kofinou reception centre during the appeals procedure, in such a way that avoided duplication in activities and, as a result, had a positive impact on the assistance that could be provided to residents.

- In **Malta**, the Agency worked with international and civil society organisations by, e.g., sharing information and coordinating with the IOM on relocation; referring vulnerable cases; and sharing interpreters.

- In **Spain**, reception training activities were coordinated by the Agency with support from UNHCR, IOM, the Red Cross, and other CSOs who play an active role in the management of the reception system in Spain. This led to the development and codelivery of reception induction courses for the Canary Islands as well as for the State Secretariat for Migration at central level.

It can be valuable for the Agency (and other organisations) to establish synergies, in a way that avoids duplication of work and ensures continuity in the work while always ensuring respect for each organisation's mandate and role in the local contexts. For instance, as concerns UNHCR, concerns were raised by the Agency and UNHCR alike about reciprocity in efforts to share information and collaborate in the field. According to interviewees, efforts to reach agreement on the scope and frequency of information exchange across countries are ongoing in the framework of the working arrangements which were updated in 2021. This should have a positive impact on coordination and limiting duplication going forward.

3.2   Key achievements and challenges

This section outlines the key achievements and challenges of the Agency's operational support during 2021. The presented findings have been extrapolated from the five country-specific OP evaluations and interviews conducted at horizontal/strategic level. They highlight good practice examples, including on how the encountered challenges were mitigated (where applicable).

3.2.1   Registration of applications for international protection

During 2021, **the Agency supported the registration procedure in the relevant Member States in a proportionate manner, in line with their needs**. The Agency's support ranged from carrying out registrations, to helping Member States improve their registration procedures through the development and implementation of workflows, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and practical tools.

EASO supported the registration of more than 28,000 applicants for international protection in Greece, Italy, Cyprus and Malta during 2021.[40] The Agency carried out all registrations in Malta, 59% in Cyprus, 39% in Greece and 14% in Italy.[41] This large range is representative of the needs in each country, and the related focus of each OP in 2021. Support with registration was more needed in Cyprus[42] and Malta, while support to the Italian and Greek authorities was more focused on capacity building and/or quality management than on day-to-day registration activities. As such, the support provided in this regard was relevant and adapted to the local context across all the OPs.

- Significant progress was made in **Cyprus** in 2021. EASO registration assistants were able to support 7,880 registrations, significantly exceeding the target of 4,734. EASO's registration support progressively moved from Pournara First Reception Centre and regional Police districts in the first few months (January-March 2021) to only Pournara First Reception Centre (end of March onwards), whereas no such support could be provided in 2020 due to the prerequisite safe zone not having been established. This centralisation of registrations led to an increase in the

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[40] Figures are taken from EASO's internal operational monitoring data from 2021 for each of the four countries. There was no support with registration of applications for international protection in Spain.

[41] Figures are based on EASO's internal operational monitoring data from 2021.

[42] The evaluation of the Cyprus OP 2021 found that there was a clear division of labour between the Cypriot police and the Agency in the registration procedure, which made the presence of EASO registration assistants essential. Without the support of the EASO registration team, the authorities would not have the capacity to cope with the high number of registrations, and the identification of vulnerable cases would not have taken place to the same extent and quality.

number of EASO-supported registrations by nearly 50% compared to 2020 (5,317 registrations), with nearly the same human resource investment, signalling high productivity. EASO also helped put in place workflows and a comprehensive registration system at Pournara First Reception Centre, and provided registration-related training (e.g., registration, information provision, identification of potential Dublin cases, THB level 1) to internal staff, national registration officers, and staff of CSOs (vulnerability officers seconded to the Cyprus Asylum Service (CAS)) which enhanced the overall capacity and quality of the registration system. EASO also prepared revised SOPs on registration, although these were not yet adopted by the end of the year.[43]

- In **Malta**, the Agency conducted 1,190 registrations in 2021. This is considerably lower than the year before (2,186 registrations in 2020, i.e., a reduction of 45%) due to the reduced number of arrivals in 2021. In fact, the Agency conducted more registrations than planned (920) and did so more efficiently than envisaged, and was able to shift resources to backlog management support activities where substantially more interviews could be conducted and evaluation reports drafted (see section 3.2.2).

- In **Italy**, the Agency carried out 8,150 registrations in border areas, entry points and locations under particular pressure. The majority of the persons registered by the Agency consisted of spontaneous presentations (46%), followed by registrations made after disembarkation events (43%). These numbers justify the OP 2021 focus on registrations from search and rescue (SAR) disembarkations, which was very successful (see section 3.2.7). The Agency also implemented various (thematic) training sessions on registration procedures. However, certain planned activities, e.g., regional registration hub(s), could not be put in place. While the Agency took the necessary steps to implement them, they could not be fulfilled due to lack of prioritisation / lack of resources on the side of the authorities.[44]

- In **Greece**, registrations in 2021 were considerably lower than in 2020 (10,989 compared to 16,619), in line with the reduction in arrivals. However, the share of registrations carried out by the Agency compared to the total registrations remained stable (39% in 2021 compared to 41% in 2022), signalling that a certain level of stability in this task on the side of the authorities.

One of the encountered challenges related to the **COVID-19 pandemic**. In Malta, for instance, despite the success observed in relation to the registrations carried out by the Agency, the time between entry and registration increased from a median duration of 84 days in 2020 to 124 days in 2021 due (in part) to delays in the medical clearance of applicants.[45] In Cyprus, a COVID-19 outbreak with approximately 190 positive cases in August 2021 led to a decrease in registrations, which had to be temporarily halted due to interruptions of activities in the previous steps of the camp (e.g., fingerprinting and de-briefings). To mitigate the impact of this interruption, EASO registration assistants switched to other activities, including operational support to archive or clear the backlog of medical documents and vulnerability assessments.

Other challenges encountered related to **local rules and restrictions that were beyond the control of EASO**. In Greece, in November 2021, a law was issued,[46] by virtue of which the lodging of applications for international protection on mainland falls under the responsibility of national reception authorities (Reception and Identification Service (RIS)), with the exception of specific cases (subsequent applications, vulnerable persons including UAMs and persons with a referral documentation from the Hellenic Police) that continue to be registered in regional asylum offices, which reduced the number of registrations the Agency could conduct in the final quarter of 2021. In Cyprus and Italy, human resource constraints caused by legislation restricting temporary worker contract duration affected the effectiveness and efficiency of the Agency's work on registration

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[43] EASO shared the revised SOPs in October 2021. By December 2021, they had not been agreed upon and finalised by the Cypriot counterparts.

[44] EASO took logistical and organisational steps to set up a regional hub in Bari. Operational tools and guidelines on remote registration for applicants and reception centres involved in SARs were drafted but not implemented due to capacity issues.

[45] The median duration between notification of medical clearance and registration was 43 days.

[46] Circular of the General Secretary for Migration Policy on the implementation of articles 39 par. 1 and 46 of Law 4636/2019.

related activities, and the limited administrative capacity of the authorities played a role as well. In Malta, there was a considerable share of no-shows, which also was beyond the Agency's control.

3.2.2 Processing of applications at first instance

Through its operational support, the Agency can support the authorities in conducting asylum personal interviews and in the drafting of opinions. It is then up to the host Member States to decide whether to take those remarks into account in their final decision. As such, the impact of the Agency's contribution on reducing backlogs at first instance is contingent on the capacity of the determining authority to decide on cases based on the opinions drafted by Agency personnel.

Operational support to determination procedures at first instance was provided in Greece, Cyprus and Malta in 2021. Between January and October 2021, **EASO supported the backlog management at first instance** by conducting almost 23,400 interviews in Greece, Malta and Cyprus,[47] 32% more than the previous year. Regarding the drafting of opinions, there was a 20% decrease compared to the previous year.

- In **Cyprus**, EASO's support remained key given the high backlog of pending cases accumulated in the country (18,805 by the end of 2021). The Agency's support increased considerably compared to the previous year, as it submitted 44% more recommendations (1,386 vs 960) to the CAS and finalised even 283% more opinions (1,934 vs 505). EASO case officers also conducted 1,648 interviews, 80% more than in 2020. The eventual closure of cases, however, was slow, but this was beyond the Agency's control as it is the responsibility of the authorities.

- The OP 2021 in **Malta** achieved a significant decrease in the applications backlog, from 5,100 pending cases at the end of 2020 to 3,265 cases at the end of 2021.[48] EASO conducted 973 interviews in the individual asylum determination procedure (compared to 581 in 2020) and submitted 911 evaluation reports (compared to 653 in 2020). All opinions drafted by Agency personnel were accepted by the Maltese authorities which can be considered an achievement.

- The support provided in **Greece** in 2021 mainly concerned the provision of more strategic support and tailored capacity building to the authorities for the processing of applications. In 2021, the Agency's support shifted from the islands to the mainland due to the clearance of backlog and reduction in the number in arrivals. On the mainland, the number of opinions drafted was lower than initially planned (9,196 instead of 18,900) due to lower than expected influxes of applicants and the application of the safe third country concept which does not require the drafting of opinions in the case of certain applicants. This is linked to the increase in the number of interviews conducted which exceeded the planned target (16,167 instead of 13,200) as human resources could be reallocated from drafting opinions to conducting interviews.

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[47] EASO internal operational monitoring, 2021.

[48] Evaluation of the Malta OP 2021.

Box 4. Good practice example – remote modalities in the asylum procedure in Greece

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to the adoption of strict restrictions which impacted the operational support provided by the Agency in many ways. However, the Agency's support in Greece and the high level of flexibility employed in the allocation of resources, including the use of remote modalities, significantly contributed to the effectiveness of the Greece OP 2021.

The Agency shifted to remote modalities on the islands in 2020 to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 which restricted access to the asylum procedure and processing of pending applications. Indeed, the introduction of remote interviews ensured the continuity of operations but also maximised effectiveness through an efficient use of available resources. In 2021, remote modalities were used on the mainland in connection with Project South but also in different regional asylum offices. Guidelines were agreed between the Agency and national authorities, training sessions were conducted with case officers and specific equipment was allocated to these activities. This is a good practice that can be replicated in other operations (where legally feasible) and by the Greek authorities in different kinds of service provision to applicants. However, it should be noted that this tool is not suitable to meet the needs of all applicants: face-to-face interviews are preferable with respect to applicants with vulnerabilities.

Due to the **unpredictability of asylum inflow**, no accurate estimation on the reduction of the overall national backlog can be made even if the outputs of the Agency's personnel increase. If the number of applications for international protection keeps growing, so does the backlog, even if the rate at which interviews are conducted, opinions are drafted, and eventual decisions on status determination are taken by the authorities is high. In cases where the inflow of applications is higher than the rate of decision making on status determination, it is impossible to clear all pending cases. This is exemplified in Cyprus, for example, where a considerable number of cases were processed but the backlog did not reduce due to the high numbers of applications (on average 1,103 per month).

An additional challenge which impacted the effectiveness of the Agency's support in the processing of applications relates to **human resource constraints** at Agency and national authority level. For example, in the case of Cyprus, the Agency contributed on average to the processing of (only) 15% of all new cases at first instance[49] due to the limited deployment of case officers in light of recruitment challenges and local labour law hindrances. Similarly, the Maltese authorities experienced recruitment and retainment constraints which impacted their capacity to process cases.

3.2.3 Management of reception and quality standards in line with the CEAS

The Agency's mandate includes the provision of support to Member States which face specific and disproportionate pressure on their asylum and reception systems. The Agency traditionally focused its work (operational and structural) more on asylum processes than on reception. In recent years, there was a **shift towards more support for reception**. As explained in section 3.1.2, EASO adopted its Strategy on Reception in March 2021, which provided a framework within which the Agency conducts its reception related work. This was the result of efforts in recent years to improve the intervention logic on reception and has seemingly already had a positive impact, as evidenced by increased interest in reception related support.

In 2021, all OPs included specific measures on reception, with the Spanish OP placing more emphasis on this intervention area than others (it focused almost solely on reception, and to a lesser extent resettlement). The Agency's support on reception in 2021 mainly entailed information provision and counselling, support in the identification, assessment, and referral of vulnerable cases (see section 3.2.4), the organisation of training and capacity building activities, and the provision of social services.

- Significant progress was made in **Cyprus** compared to 2020. For example, regarding information provision, 408 residents in reception centres received information sessions (compared to 150 in

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[49] Evaluation of the Cyprus OP 2021.

2020), and 1,021 counselling sessions were organised (compared to 466 in 2020). Moreover, 94% of EASO-assigned residents were reached, significantly exceeding the 75% target.

● In **Malta**, a higher number of information provision sessions was conducted in 2021 compared to 2020 (580 sessions vs 272). Despite case officer recruitment challenges, 92 cases were being followed by EASO social workers in Malta by the end of 2021, slightly above the target of 90 cases for that year.

● The Agency's support in **Greece** mainly concerned the provision of capacity building activities and the development of tools. The most important achievement was the establishment of an operational National Reception Monitoring Framework, including the piloting of the assessment of reception conditions (ARC) tool in four facilities.

● The Agency's support in reception in **Italy** primarily entailed the development of tools and workflows for the collection and management of data, and only limited deployment of personnel for operational support at local level. The Agency also developed and put in practice a range of qualitative tools to monitor the conditions of the first line reception system, as well as supported the legal, financial and qualitative monitoring of reception conditions. A notable achievement concerns the complementarity between measures on reception and registration which was translated into better coordination, timely information sharing and communication between stakeholders during SAR events (see also section 3.2.7).

● Despite not achieving some of the targets set because they were overambitious for a first-time, one-year OP, the Agency's support in **Spain** significantly contributed to the enhancement of its reception system by supporting with the development of a draft reception model document; implementing a wide range of professional development activities and training; carrying out a series of reception site assessments; and contributing to the development of a national guidance on information provision and vulnerability in emergency reception in the Canary Islands.

Some of the challenges in this area are associated with the **absence of an integrated and consolidated national strategy on reception**, particularly in the case of Greece, Cyprus, Malta and Spain. As a result, there were no SOPs and workflows in place which impacted the effectiveness and efficiency of the support. Now that the Agency's own Strategy on Reception is in place, it should be better placed to support the authorities in the finalisation of their own strategies, but this process takes time. Moreover, contextual factors such as the **outbreak of humanitarian crisis and unforeseen emergency events** (e.g., increase in SAR events in Italy, Ceuta crisis in Spain, Afghan arrivals to Greece and Italy) also impacted the management capacities of reception authorities and the Agency. Another challenge identified across OPs and highlighted during interviews concerns the **shortage of employed (qualified) personnel**, in particular in the area of social work.

3.2.4 Identification, assessment and referral of vulnerable cases

Identification, assessment, and referral to adequate support of vulnerable applicants for international protection is an obligation for Member States.[50] The Agency supports EU and associated countries in this process through practical cooperation and information sharing, and the development of practical tools and guidance to support the Member States to support them from a methodological point of view. Through the different stages of the operational support provided, the Agency can also support the host Member States in ensuring identification, assessment and referral workflows through the development of SOPs and tools on vulnerability related issues.[51]

During 2021, operational support in relation to identification, assessment and referral of vulnerable applicants was embedded in the OPs, particularly in the case of Cyprus and Malta (under the asylum and reception measures), Greece (under reception and relocation) and Spain (under reception). In the case of the OP in Italy there was no specific (sub-)measure related to the management of vulnerable cases, although a need to set one up was identified.[52]

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[50] EUAA website – vulnerability
[51] EUAA website – vulnerability
[52] Evaluation of the Italy OP 2021

- In **Cyprus**, the Agency's support contributed to performing 1,462 vulnerability assessments, surpassing the 1,190 target, and identified 299 vulnerable cases in 2021.

- The Agency conducted 810 vulnerability assessments in **Malta** in 2021, 81% of its target of 1,000 assessments for that year. Moreover, its support succeeded in contributing to the development of guidelines and templates on age and vulnerability assessments which have been adopted by the authorities and are a steppingstone towards the development of a Maltese vulnerability assessment team in 2021, contributing to the sustainability of results.

- In **Greece**, the launch of a national tracing and protection mechanism for UAMs was one of the main achievements in relation to the management of vulnerability cases. Furthermore, the Agency established a joint working group together with national authorities on vulnerability, aiming at implementing a harmonised approach and standardised tools for both RIS and EASO embedded staff.[53]

- The Agency's support in **Spain** in 2021 led to the development of national guidance on the identification of vulnerable people for first line officials. The national guidance was initially delayed due to prioritisation of the Vulnerability Protocol, but a draft was eventually circulated, pending final validation and approval from the Spanish reception authorities.

Together with the challenges outlined above, the **COVID-19** outbreak and related restrictions impacted the Agency's support in the area of vulnerability as face-to-face interviews and assessments, key in handling vulnerable cases, could not be conducted. Had there not been a pandemic, the Agency's positive impact in this field would likely have been magnified.

3.2.5   Processing of appeals cases and reduction of backlog at second instance

As part of its mission to support the implementation of the CEAS, the Agency supports the Member States in their management of second instance asylum procedures. The Agency coordinates the Courts and Tribunals Network and produces high-quality materials designed to support judicial practitioners in their daily tasks and to conduct professional development activities in due respect of judicial independence. At operational level, the Agency can provide support at second instance through capacity building (e.g., training, provision of reference documents), as well as support with COI research and legal research. The ultimate decision making is up to the competent courts.

The Agency provided support at second instance in Italy, Cyprus, and Greece during 2021. The support (implemented activities and extent of the support foreseen) provided was highly relevant to meet the needs of competent authorities. The **support was more successful in some countries than others**, however, and its impact on reducing the backlog was limited due to the nature of the support provided and the legal limits to what the Agency can do.

- In **Italy**, the Agency's support at second instance was substantial, and was one of the most successful measures of the OP. It focused on providing COI research and jurisprudence research; support to judicial hearings, preliminary study of cases, and judicial research; and support to the court of cassation. The Agency also provided tailor-made training sessions and workshops for judiciary and personnel seconded by EASO to improve their expertise, specialisation and professional development, including on thematic issues.

- In **Greece**, the support provided was reduced compared to the previous year because the backlog at second instance was significantly lowered during 2020. The Agency's support was more geared towards capacity building of judges (workshops, professional development sessions, training) than the preparation of essays for the appeals lodged, in line with the appeal authority's needs. In November 2021, EASO signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National School of the Judiciary, establishing a framework for more tailored support to the needs of Greek judges working in the field of international protection.

- In **Cyprus**, the Agency focused its support on file preparation and COI research, as well as enhancing data management capacity. Despite its efforts, the second instance backlog actually

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[53] Based on EASO documents, 8 meetings of the Working Group took place focusing on the development of a tracking tool for vulnerable individual cases.

increased during 2021. The situation improved towards the end of the year,[54] signalling that it may improve further in 2022. The Agency contributed to the establishment of an operational data collection system that was deployed in December 2021, which was a crucial achievement as there was no digital database before and no data at all on second instance in Cyprus.[55]

The key challenge encountered at second instance was the general **asylum and migration context**. Due to the nature of the Agency's support in this area, the impact of its support on changes in the backlog is contingent on the capacity of the competent courts to take decisions. Moreover, when there is a surge in applications at first instance, this naturally has a knock-on effect at second instance in the medium term. In Cyprus, for example, the number of pending cases grew exponentially because of the high number of rejections at first instance that led to appeals lodged before IPAC, thus increasing its workload.[56] While the productivity of EASO research officers increased throughout the year,[57] there were not enough judges at IPAC to keep up with the caseload.[58]

Other issues related to **human resources**. In Cyprus, although productivity increased over the course of the year, it could have been higher if there had been a more structured and coordinated approach and workflow between the research officers and judges.[59] Moreover, there were high turnover rates among research officers and concerns of their legal expertise. In Italy, restrictions around temporary contracts made it difficult to deploy research officers. While the complementary deployment mechanism (CDM) provided a partial solution, there were uncertainties around the deployment of experts which threatened the working relationship between the Agency and the courts.

Finally, the **COVID-19 pandemic** played a limited role as well. In Italy, there was a plan for closer cooperation with the *Scuola Superiore della Magistrature* for the use of their premises, dissemination of information, and selection of trainers. Due to the pandemic, this could not yet be put in place but was postponed to 2022.

3.2.6 Support to the Dublin procedure

The Agency supports Member States in the implementation of the [Dublin III regulation](#) through its dedicated Network of Dublin Units. Through the Network, the Agency facilitates the exchange of practices and cooperation between the Member States, and coordinates the development of specific operational standards, indicators, collection of good practices, guidance, network recommendations.[60] This knowledge is also applied in the operational context, where the Agency can support with processing Dublin requests and deploying Dublin experts and technical support.

In 2021, support to the Dublin procedure was provided in Malta, Greece and Italy. Although Dublin transfers continued to be low during 2021 due to COVID-19 measures limiting cross-border travel,[61] the Agency's support contributed to the achievement of the following results:

- In **Malta**, support to the Dublin procedure was very successful as 100% of outgoing Dublin requests were processed in 2021. EASO experts prepared 303 Dublin outgoing requests and supported with the issuing of 174 Dublin decisions.[62] At the same time, one could argue that if

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[54] The productivity of IPAC increased significantly in the second half of 2021, and the backlog only increased by 2% in November and December.

[55] The EASO operation was the first operation to set up an ODC on second instance.

[56] An average of 1,375 first instance decisions per month, of which around 80% were rejections. Around 70-80% of the rejected applicants lodged an appeal before IPAC.

[57] From less than one to almost three files file per week per research officer.

[58] This should improve in 2022, as five new judges were appointed in January 2022.

[59] Clearly specified and agreed SOPs and workflows between the research officers and judges could not be implemented yet because it depended on the possibility to host missions of Member State judges, which were delayed due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. EASO identified judges from Greece and Germany that went on missions to Cyprus and drafted a report to provide recommendations to IPAC for amendment of procedural management.

[60] EUAA website – [Dublin procedure](#)

[61] EASO internal operational monitoring.

[62] EASO internal operational monitoring.

the Agency is processing 100% of the requests, there is an issue of capacity at national level, which is not sustainable in the long term;

- In **Greece** the Agency's support contributed to performing 2,593 outgoing Dublin requests, surpassing the 2,400 targeted for 2021. At the beginning of the year, there was a stagnation in the processing of Dublin outgoing requests due to logistical issues, but these were resolved;

- In **Italy**, the activities supporting the Dublin Office were very effective in 2021 as 100% of queries were successfully addressed and closed by the Agency, compared to 80% the previous year. EASO's experts supported the processing of the Dublin cases of 2,761 persons.

3.2.7 Search and rescue support and voluntary relocation

In addition to the burden sharing mechanism provided by the Dublin III regulation, the EU can put in place temporary solidarity mechanisms for SAR disembarkation and voluntary relocation exercises. While the Dublin regulation provides a legally binding process, voluntary relocation schemes are based on voluntary commitments by participating States for solidarity and humanitarian reasons. EU Regulation 656/2014 establishes rules on SAR operations and disembarkation, and provides a common EU concept of 'place of safety' which is protection-driven.[63] Since the summer of 2018, a number of cases of disembarkations following SAR operations at sea have been addressed through ad hoc disembarkation and voluntary relocation[64] arrangements. Since January 2019, in the framework of the 2019 Malta Declaration, the Agency provides support for voluntary relocation programmes to the concerned national authorities as well as participating Member States, following disembarkations from SAR events in Malta and Italy, under the coordination of the European Commission.[65] During 2015-2017, the EU implemented an emergency relocation programme[66] to relieve pressure on Italy and Greece by transferring 160,000 asylum seekers to other Member States. In March 2020, the Commission launched an ad hoc voluntary relocation exercise outside of the framework of the Dublin regulation, specifically focused on relocation of UAMs and children with severe medical conditions and other vulnerabilities with their families from Greece to other Member States, whereby even recognised refugees were relocated.

The Agency effectively supported the coordination of SAR disembarkation and voluntary relocation events for which their support was requested during 2021.[67] As concerns SAR events, Italy was the only EU Member State that continued to provide a port of safety throughout all of 2021. During 2021, rescue boats in the Central Mediterranean continued to remain at sea for a long time waiting for authorisation to enter a safe port, similar to previous years. As of 10 December 2021, 28 instances of vessels with rescued persons (8,293 rescued persons, including at least 2,500 children)[68] having to remain at sea for more than a day waiting for the assignment of a safe port were reported.[69] In the case of Greece, where the relocation of UAMs from Greece continued during

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[63] Regulation (EU) No 656/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 establishing rules for the surveillance of the external sea borders in the context of operational cooperation coordinated by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union.

[64] Relocation refers to the process whereby Member States help another Member State to cope with the pressure of hosting a relatively large population of applicants for international protection and refugees by agreeing to receive a number of them. It represents an EU solidarity and burden-sharing mechanism.

[65] Temporary solidarity arrangements between EU Member States do not replace the Dublin asylum system, but rather serve as temporary solutions in order to ensure prompt and predictable disembarkation for people rescued at sea.

[66] On the basis of two Council Decisions (Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 and 2016) in the context of Art. 78(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which allows the Council to adopt provisional measures in emergency situations as part of the emergency response system meaning a temporary distribution scheme for persons in clear need of international protection to ensure a fair and balanced participation of all EU Member States to this common effort. The programme ended in 2017.

[67] There were 44 such events in Italy during 2021. The Agency supported with registrations for the first 40 during 2021. The last 4 were supported in early 2022 (after the 14-day mandatory quarantine period ended in January 2022).

[68] Fundamental Rights Agency, December 2021 Update – Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean and fundamental rights

[69] Fundamental Rights Agency, December 2021 Update – Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean and fundamental rights

2021, the Agency played an important role in the facilitation of coordination and flow of information between all involved stakeholders[70] as well. While the programme is coordinated by the Commission together with the Greek authorities, the Agency supported its implementation together with other international and civil society organisations.[71] As such, it provided support with communication with pledging Member States, supporting security missions, and arranging transfers.

Beyond coordination activities, the Agency also provided more operational support. In Italy, the Agency carried out registrations for voluntary relocation, facilitated Member State delegation missions with logistic and interpretation support, organised roundtables with the Italian authorities, organised operational meetings on voluntary relocation and other SAR events, and implemented capacity building activities for reception centres hosting migrants involved in SARs, which were well received by stakeholders. In December 2021, a coordination workflow was put in place, and guidance for the harmonisation of SAR events procedures implemented. In Greece, the Agency conducted best interest assessments (BIAs), interviews with eligible candidates, matching exercises, and transfers, in addition to capacity building through training and tools (e.g., templates and guidance, implementation of a relocation case management system - REDMAS).

EASO's role in providing this type of support was highly appreciated in both countries. However, its eventual **impact was limited by factors largely beyond the Agency's control**. In Greece, delays were experienced due to the non-timely receipt of the pool of eligible candidates, and the strict criteria for eligibility set by participating Member States which excluded most profiles of the refugee population. The existence of bilateral relocation agreements (with France and Portugal) also led to a duplication of efforts and had an impact on the efficiency of the Agency's support. In Italy, a limited number of pledges for relocation was offered by EU Member States, which evidently reduced the rate at which applicants could be relocated. To mitigate the impact of this on the effectiveness of its support, the Agency agreed with the authorities to limit the number of locations from which to provide registration support for voluntary relocation,[72] to make more efficient use of strained human resources. While this led to positive results in the third quarter of 2021,[73] a lack of stable **human resource deployment**, paired with an increase in arrivals and a high number of absconded applicants increased the backlog again during the final quarter of 2021.

Finally, the **COVID-19 pandemic** delayed the SAR disembarkation and voluntary relocation process in general, resulting from a lack of spaces for interviews and other public health restrictions such as medical checks and mandatory quarantines.[74]

Box 5. Good practice example – relocation from Greece

The voluntary relocation scheme for UAMs, vulnerable families with children and beneficiaries of international protection from Greece was activated in 2020 and reinforced after the fire in Moria and in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of 2020, more than 4,000 UAMs were situated in Greece –most of them in precarious situation. With the Agency's support, 4,646 were relocated between May 2020 and December 2021.[75]

The Agency's support to the coordination of this relocation scheme, as with previous ones during 2015-2017, was crucial. The tools, SOPs and workflows developed for the relocation schemes together with the

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[70] European Commission, asylum services of participating Member States, eligible candidates for relocation, CSOs providing services to applicants/beneficiaries of international protection and international organisations participating in the implementation of the scheme (IOM, UNHCR, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund - UNICEF).

[71] European Commission website – Relocation of unaccompanied children from Greece to Portugal and to Finland – Questions and answers

[72] It was agreed with the Italian authorities that from June 2021 registrations would take place only in one reception centre.

[73] In Q3, EASO reported that voluntary activities at the reception centre in Bari were proceeding according to plan, as the backlog was absorbed, and registrations proceeded smoothly, although with some exceptions due to temporary lack of human resources and technical issues.

[74] In Italy for instance, while a 4-week timeframe is foreseen for the completion of the voluntary relocation procedure, exercises carried out in 2021 required longer processing times, with the COVID-19 measures further affecting the ability to timely proceed with registrations and transfers, thus leading to longer waiting times for applicants to access the IP procedures.

[75] Greek Council of Refugees, Save the Children, 'Children on the move', September – October 2021 update.

accumulated experience of Agency staff (including on vulnerability issues) could be consolidated to be replicated in other Member States with similar needs, where applicable.

That being said, these schemes are coordinated by the Commission and are heavily reliant on solidarity being shown by other Member States through pledges for relocation, ultimately hampering the potential impact of the Agency's operational support in this field. The Commission has already highlighted that the current ad hoc approach to relocation efforts is neither sufficient nor sustainable and highlighted the need for a more predictable solidarity mechanism, as foreseen in the proposal for an asylum and migration management regulation.[76] If such a mechanism is indeed put in place, it may require a reconsideration of the scope / breadth of the Agency's support.
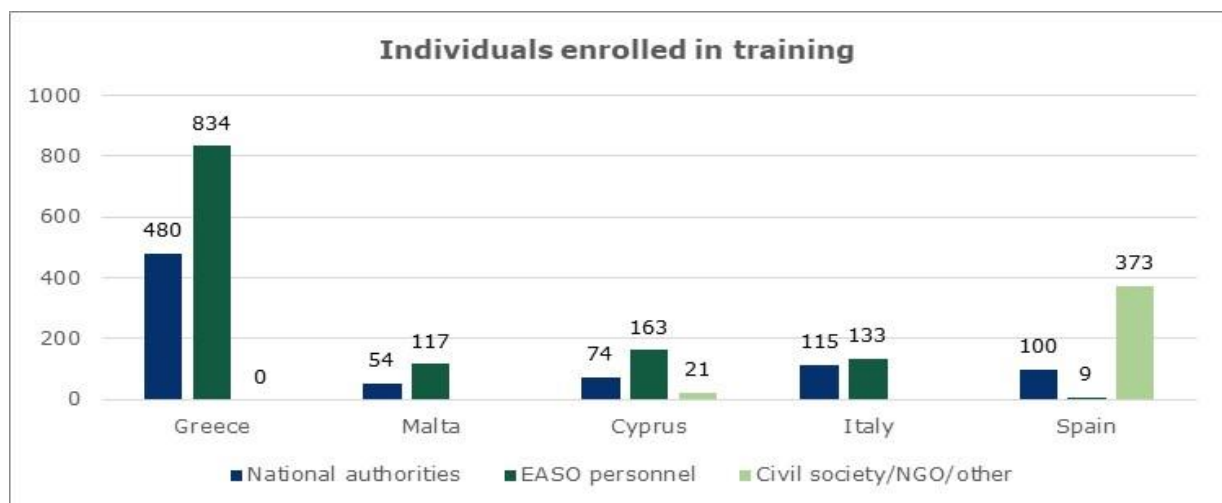
3.2.8 Cross-cutting: Operational training activities

The Agency has a centre of expertise dedicated to training and professional development that supports the practical implementation of the CEAS through harmonisation of practices and the enhancement of quality standards. The training offer ranges from training to newly recruited staff and national officials and specialised training for experienced staff, to on-the-job coaching and train-the-trainer sessions for capacity building. In the context of operations, the whole range of training can be used, depending on needs.

Training components were embedded across all OPs in 2021. They focused both on delivering training for deployed staff and national administration officials, and on supporting the authorities in capacity building, that would allow them to be able to continue delivering training with internal means in the longer term, through the delivery of train-the-trainer sessions for future roll-out of national training on Agency curriculum modules. The overall aim of training activities in OPs is thus not only to help provide immediate support in the delivery of training, but also to contribute to the sustainability of the operational support by creating a system whereby if the Agency were to leave, the authorities have national pools of trainers, who can continue delivering national training sessions.

In 2021, a total of 2,473 individuals enrolled in the training sessions provided by the Agency in the context of operational support in Greece, Malta, Italy, Cyprus and Spain. The distribution of stakeholders enrolled in training sessions varied considerably (see Figure 4). For instance, while in the case of Spain, the presence of CSOs in the training sessions was predominant (given their strong presence in reception), in the rest of countries it was more limited. All the training sessions received high satisfaction rates (above 84%).

Figure 4. Number of individuals enrolled in training in the context of operational support per stakeholder in 2021

Source: EASO internal training data

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[76] Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on asylum and migration management and amending Council Directive (EC) 2003/109 and the proposed Regulation (EU) XXX/XXX [Asylum and Migration Fund].

The degree to which training is embedded in OPs depends on the needs and requests of the authorities.[77] The degree to which it is successful and positively received also depends on the authorities and their interest in / engagement with the training offer. Key achievements per OP include:

- In **Greece**, the Greek Asylum Service placed more emphasis on the importance of creating a professional pool of trainers. Given the large scale of the operation in Greece, national train-the-trainer sessions were organised for Greece specifically, which resulted in the establishment of a broad, strong pool of trainers. There was also reinforcement of on the job coaching that was very well received. In this respect, two coaching rounds were organised: one covering topics related to interviewing and decision drafting horizontally and one, thematic, focusing on the implementation of the safe third country clause. At the same time, there was stronger cooperation with the Greek RIS to start building a pool of trainers on the reception side. More advanced thematic modules (e.g., reception of vulnerable applicants' specialisation) will be implemented during 2022;

- In **Spain**, a very high number of participants was reached, especially considering the relatively small scale of the operation.[78] Training sessions were planned and implemented in cooperation with international organisations and CSOs who are running reception centres on behalf of the authorities. Importantly, an induction training on reception was developed in the Canary Islands, which was followed by many people who had been working in the field for several years but had never received formal training;

- In **Italy**, the Agency supported the roll-out of national training sessions for police, following its support to the authorities in building a pool of trainers on modules such as registration and identification of Dublin cases.[79] A limited number of training sessions were offered in the area of reception, because the competent authority seemed less aware of the training curriculum;

- In **Malta**, the Agency managed to support the national reception authority in building a pool of trainers, through the participation in train-the-trainer sessions and in the roll-out of national training sessions in the area of reception. A few thematic training sessions were implemented as well, and the Agency assisted with the translation of induction materials into Maltese;[80]

- In **Cyprus** 2021 marked a year of change; there were many more registrations than in previous years. The Agency trained all newly hired case officers in its core modules and managed to start discussing with the authorities the potential of implementation of coaching sessions in the future. The Agency also trained some trainers, although to a more limited extent than in other countries.

Challenges encountered in the implementation of training were primarily related to contextual factors. The first was **COVID-19** which required certain training sessions to be implemented online rather than face-to-face, though the Agency adapted well to this new context (already in 2020) by implementing online training / webinars. Most important, however, is the willingness of stakeholders to participate and engage in training sessions; participation rates naturally fluctuated, and there were high drop-out rates in some countries (e.g., Cyprus).

3.2.9 Cross-cutting: Operational tools and guidance

The Agency develops practical tools and guidance to help increase the knowledge and technical skills of asylum practitioners working in the field of international protection. The tools translate the legal obligations, standards and good practices into commonly agreed guidance in various user-friendly

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[77] In some cases, C2 gets requests directly from the authorities to implement training activities outside of the scope of OPs. These are not considered here as this evaluation concerns operational support only.

[78] This is in part because of the good practice of having a dedicated training measure coordinator from C2 (see section 3.1.1.2).

[79] The Agency started creating a pool of trainers in the Department of Public Security (DPS) in 2019. During 2020, preparation was completed. In 2021, the implementation of the national sessions started, where DPS police officers are trainers of the modules with the Agency's support. Efforts will continue in 2022.

[80] According to interviewees, while the asylum system is managed in English, on the reception side the predominant working language is Maltese.

formats, including checklists, pocketbooks, web-based interactive tools, etc. The full range of tools can be used in the context of operational support.

The Agency made use of a wide range of practical tools and guidance across its operations in 2021. Their use differed considerably, and a thorough assessment is not appropriate in the context of this report, but a few key achievements are worth highlighting.

- **Quality of asylum processes**: In **Italy**, an important milestone was reached at the end of 2021 when the Agency received final endorsement from the Italian authorities on the quality self-assessment methodology and tools on registration procedures. In **Greece**, the extensive use of EASO's quality assurance tool for asylum personal interviews and opinions was further extended through the development of a tool incorporating the admissibility examination of applications falling under the safe third country concept. Moreover, discussions started on core standards / indicators on asylum processes, to see if they can potentially be used for a self-assessment tool.

- **Reception**: In **Malta**, the Agency built on the support provided in late 2020 for the development of a range of tools for reception.[81] In 2021, a social work case management tool was developed by EASO social workers and tested in the final quarter of the year, resulting in a positive response from the authorities, who will adopt the tool for all of their social workers from 2022 onwards.

- **Quality of reception**: The tool for the ARC was launched in April 2021. The Agency tried to roll it out in different Member States. In **Greece**, the ARC was successfully piloted and rolled out in four reception facilities[82] in 2021, marking an important milestone in the establishment of an operational national reception monitoring framework which had been planned for 2020 already. It was subsequently translated to Greek, enabling its wider use from 2022 onwards. In **Italy**, the tool was developed together with UNHCR[83] but there was a certain reluctance among the authorities to make use of it, at least until it was translated to Italian. In **Cyprus**, the tool was tested but not implemented as planned. Finally, following a meeting in May 2021 on reception conditions monitoring systems in other country operations (Greece, Italy and Cyprus) to share good practices, the ARC tool was tested in two sites[84] in **Spain**. The tool could not yet be adopted in **Malta**.

- **Vulnerability / special needs**: The Agency provided support in the development of templates and SOPs designed for relocation of UAMs and designing templates for BIAs in **Greece**. A working group was also established to develop a tracking tool for vulnerable cases that met throughout the year with the aim of implementing a harmonised approach and standardised tools for both the authorities and EASO personnel. In **Malta**, a vulnerability assessment tool was used, and the Agency supported SOPs for age assessments for UAMs where there is a doubt about age. More work on assessing special needs to be able to refer applicants correctly is ongoing, but the Maltese authorities have expressed a willingness to continue testing and using the Agency's tools.

- **Operational Data Collection (ODC)**: In **Cyprus**, the Agency contributed to the establishment of an ODC system at the end of 2021, which was a crucial step as there was no digital database before and no data at all on second instance in Cyprus. In **Greece**, ODC tools were used to collect data complementary to narrative reports on vulnerability, information provision and UAMs, which improved the effectiveness of the Agency's support to reception. In **Italy**, the Agency introduced a tool for data collection on transfers and allocation of applicants and workflows for the management of data of applicants from disembarkation from quarantine vessels or transfers from quarantine land facilities to their allocation into reception facilities. In **Malta**, the Agency

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[81] In 2020, EASO's support resulted in the development of a range of tools, i.e., a Referral Form, a Vulnerability Assessment Tool, a Screening Tool for residents who have not registered their application yet, a Dry Screening Tool to prioritise cases of registered applicants that need to be assessed, and a recording tool to keep track of the stage of each referral and whether a case was finalised.

[82] Pilot testing already started in 2020, before a digital version of the tool was available. The digital ARC tool was tested 2021 in the Long-Term Accommodation Centre (LTAC) of Schisto and Ritsona in central Greece and the LTACs of Katsikas and Nea Kavala in northern Greece.

[83] UNHCR is involved in reception standards in Italy.

[84] Las Raices and Las Canteras in the Canary Islands.

supported the development of centralised data collection tools for social workers, which should allow for better monitoring and planning.

● **Tools for remote work**: During 2021, tools developed by the Agency on remote registration and remote interviews were further rolled out in the Member States, which enabled business continuity. The Agency also implemented a few more specific tools, e.g., a SharePoint® tool for scheduling remote interviews in **Greece** that also helped share data and extract statistics.

The development and implementation of the tools in operations was not without difficulties. As with most of the Agency's support, their use is **contingent on their relevance and applicability**, e.g., based on which languages the tool is available in and how well adapted it is to local context. The flexibility of the tools (e.g., those related to quality management) to be adapted to local context was appreciated. However, some concerns were also raised by stakeholders that given tools might be too complex or detailed,[85] thus potentially having a negative impact on the efficiency of the operations. This concern was not raised at operational level, however, and should thus be interpreted with caution. An assessment of whether this is indeed the case is beyond the scope of this assignment.

3.3 Impact and sustainability

The Agency's operational support is intended to provide relief to Member States experiencing disproportionate pressure, though the Agency also supports the implementation of the CEAS in a more structural manner. Thus, the Agency is not only concerned with short-term activities and results of its operational support, but also seeks to have a long-term sustainable impact on host Member States from a capacity building and national systems change perspective.

It **takes time for a true sustainable impact to become visible**, especially if it concerns systems change. In countries where the Agency has been present for a longer period of time, notably Greece and Italy, there has been a **clear evolution in the type of support offered**. Whereas it started as more operational support with day-to-day asylum processes, it has shifted towards a more strategic support that is intended to last, by introducing workflows and SOPs, training the authorities to strengthen their capacity, and focusing on improving the quality of the systems. In other words, the Agency intervenes to meet the immediate needs of the authorities, but when the pressure stabilises (e.g., backlogs are reduced), it can add significant value by training local staff (notably through train-the-trainer programmes), introducing new ways of working, introducing quality standards and generally building the capacity of local authorities from the ground up. Such practices can be taken on board by the authorities and become embedded in their working procedures in such a way that they are bound to be sustainable. This is especially the case where procedures and workflows have been jointly developed by the Agency and the authorities, as there is a higher sense of ownership. This is also reflected in the **shift to multi-annual planning** for established OPs, as discussed in section 3.1.1.3. Multi-annual programming in countries where the Agency has been providing operational support for several years should have a positive effect on the sustainability of the support because of the emphasis placed on capacity building.

The second issue is the **context in which the Agency operates**. There are limits to the results and eventual impacts that can be achieved with the Agency's support due to contextual factors. When it comes to backlog management at first instance, for example, the influx of applicants for international protection plays a considerable role. When influxes are high and asylum systems are overwhelmed, the focus of operational support needs to be on dealing with the immediate pressure and there is less scope for capacity building. Each step in the asylum and reception procedure affects the next, so this holds true at all stages. The same goes for case processing where results rely on the speed at which the authorities take decisions, and relocation, where the number of cases processed by the Agency does not really matter if there are no pledges for those cases to be relocated.

Another factor which can limit the Agency's impact and sustainability is the **absorption capacity and ownership of host Member States**. In line with the previous point on contextual factors,

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[85] For example, it was mentioned by two interviewees that the ARC tool included a lot of indicators about very detailed aspects of reception conditions that might not be the most relevant to measure.

authorities that are strained in human resources need to focus their efforts on dealing with immediate priorities and might need to forego 'less urgent' capacity building activities. However, the work needs to be done, and if it cannot be done locally, the Agency needs to step in. This creates a **risk of overreliance on operational support** and requires a careful balancing act from the Agency's side. The aspect of EU solidarity similarly plays a role – even once countries reach a satisfactory level of stability and capacity, they may not want the Agency to leave. To mitigate this to some degree, the Agency includes preconditions for certain aspects of its support, e.g., in relation to office space or having a designated counterpart on the authority side. The aim is for the Agency to support the authorities, not take over their work, but the success of the support and sustainability of measures ultimately depends on the willingness of the authorities to continue to apply the lessons learned from operational support beyond the Agency's intervention. It is important that the Agency clearly communicates to host Member States from the start that its operational support is temporary in nature, and discusses a clear exit strategy or minimum level of stability allowing for its departure.

Box 6. Good practice example – embedded model

> The embedded model that has been implemented in Greece since 2020 was intended to foster the sustainability of results by shifting the ownership of the support to the Greek authorities.[86] The approach was well-received and achieved good results in Greece. It added to the sustainability of the Agency's support, where EASO embedded staff and permanent national staff collaborated effectively in different tasks, sharing knowledge, expertise and ideas. However, there is a risk of the authorities becoming dependent on the qualified seconded staff which by definition is of a temporary nature (temporary agency workers).
>
> Moreover, the replicability of the model in other contexts is dependent on certain preconditions being met. First of all, the approach requires a certain degree of scale. The Greek operation is by far the largest, and it is unlikely that the national administrations in any of the other host Member States could absorb this type of support. It requires a sufficiently mature national system with the willingness and capacity to absorb EASO embedded support, and a detailed OP with common agreed objectives, benchmarks, inputs and outputs.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the key strengths of the Agency's operational support during 2021 was that it was highly relevant and sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing needs.[87] Because they are established following a structured needs assessment that is based on an agreed methodology, the OPs are by design adapted to the needs of the authorities. OPs also include a flexibility clause that enables amendments on the basis of changing needs, which is crucial in the unpredictable context of asylum and reception. Flexibility was further maximised by using staff flexibly between different locations, both between countries and within them, including through the use of remote processes. This flexibility is also visible at strategic level, where EASO was able to swiftly respond to new unforeseen requests for support during 2021 from Latvia and Lithuania. However, there may be scope for more collaboration within the Agency to maximise the degree to which human resources from different centres are flexibly staffed to support operations, where this makes sense in light of efficiency gains.

The effectiveness of the Agency's operational support varies across OPs, and across activities within them.[88] The Agency was mostly able to implement the planned activities and

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[86] Such an approach, built on the integrated approach to the implementation of the OP through the embedding of deployed experts within the authorities' structures, has the potential to create a higher degree of ownership than a direct management approach to operations.

[87] All measures of the OPs in Greece, Malta, Cyprus and Spain were considered (very) relevant. There is only one exception to this: the OP with Italy included a measure concerned with the development of information systems to facilitate coordination among the authorities. This was deprioritised by the authorities, and subsequently taken out of the OP 2022-2024.

[88] On average across all measures, the effectiveness was rated as 'Good'. Several measures were rated as 'Very good' (5 measures) and as 'Fair' (4 measures). Only one was rated 'Unsatisfactory' (1). The latter concerned the measure in the Italy OP related to the development of information systems to facilitate coordination among the authorities, which was not put in place at all. When comparing OPs, the most effective was Greece, and the least effective was Cyprus.

deliver on outputs. The increased Agency-wide approach (i.e., involvement of different centres and sectors building on the skills and expertise of staff) was a key strength in this regard which can be further built upon. That being said, the eventual outcomes that are achieved are quite far removed from these activities and outputs given the context in which the Agency operates, and the scope of its mandate (i.e., to support Member States in carrying out their duties in line with EU as well as national rules). In other words, there were many external factors (COVID-19 pandemic, migration flows, administrative capacity of the authorities, human resource constraints, labour laws) that affected the degree to which operational support could contribute to the intended outcomes. Considering the circumstances and challenges encountered, the Agency's operational support during 2021 can be considered highly effective.

The same applies to the long-term impact and sustainability of the Agency's operational support.[89] Clear improvements have been made, notably in countries where the Agency has been present for longer, as evidenced by the shift in activities from the operational to the strategic level. The move to multi-annual programming in such countries should have a further positive impact, as capacity building takes time. This move should also produce efficiency gains as it will free up resources otherwise needed for annual needs assessments and evaluation. This is especially important in light of the ongoing Ukraine crisis putting pressure on reception systems across the EU, which (among other factors) may lead to new requests for the Agency's support. Having a separation between more structural operational support and rapid response operations is a good evolution in this regard, providing opportunities for the future.

The efficiency of operational support was quite good across the board, though there is scope for efficiency gains at strategic level.[90] The Agency has fixed human and financial resources, while it operates in a volatile context that requires swift adaptation to new needs and unforeseen challenges. The Agency has consistently been able to use up its growing budget. Even if certain activities could not be implemented, or productivity on certain tasks was low, resources were flexibly reallocated (including through the use of remote processes), thus maximising the efficiency of the Agency's support overall even in light of constraints. There is an opportunity for further efficiency gains by rethinking the approach to the planning, implementation and monitoring of operational support, although this does require an investment in the short term, which may be difficult to prioritise.

The Agency has made considerable efforts to work with other stakeholders at EU and international level to maximise the coherence of the work they do.[91] At operational level, the coherence with other actions was quite good in 2021. There are differences in the scope and format of coordination across countries, e.g., with the Commission's local offices and with actors like UNHCR. This largely depends on the context and how involved other actors are on the ground. However, there is scope to harmonise approaches to some extent, and identify opportunities to make the best use of each actor's relative strengths and experience with a view to making the best use of EU funds (invested via EASO and via AMIF) and lessen the administrative burden placed on the Agency.

The EU added value of the Agency's support is indisputable.[92] Pressures on asylum and reception systems are by many considered an EU problem that requires EU solidarity to solve. While there are other international actors that may be able to implement similar activities and achieve similar outcomes, they do not bring the 'EU solution' to this EU problem. At the same time, the Agency's longstanding experience and expertise providing operational support, as well as its training

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[89] On average across all measures where this was measured, the impact of EASO's support was rated as 'Good' and the sustainability as 'Fair' to 'Good'.

[90] On average across all measures, the efficiency was rated as 'Good'. When comparing OPs, the most efficient was Greece, and the least efficient was Malta.

[91] On average across all measures, the coherence was rated 'Good' to 'Very good'. When comparing OPs, the most coherent was Spain (due to all measures being related to reception) and the least coherent were Cyprus and Malta, though these both still received an average score of 'Good'.

[92] On average across all measures, EU added value was rated as 'Good' to 'Very good'. The only instance where this was rated 'Fair' was for the measure on the development of information systems in Italy, for reasons explained above.

expertise and asylum knowledge drawing on its wide networks across the EU Member States and associate countries (EU+ countries), sets it apart from what other actors could achieve.

4.1 Recommendations

It is clear that the Agency has made significant progress during recent years, including 2021, and managed to mitigate many of the challenges posed to its operational support. The Agency should continue its support to Member States under particular pressure, and maintain its flexible approach to operational support, which was a decisive factor in ensuring business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic and unforeseen migration influxes. Based on the findings and conclusions presented in this report, a few concrete recommendations for change can be made.

Recommendation 1: Refine the scope and depth of involvement of all centres in the OP needs assessment process.

The Agency employs a structured needs assessment methodology since 2018 which has had a positive impact on the relevance and effectiveness of its operational support. At the time of writing, efforts to review this methodology and update the Needs Assessment User Guide were ongoing. However, the EUAA regulation foresees a short timeframe for needs assessments and the agreement of an OP and the design processes should be adapted accordingly.[93] Moreover, there is room for efficiency gains to be derived from restructuring the approach to the involvement of different staff in the needs assessment/plan design processes.

- Consolidate and where relevant further streamline cross-centre involvement in needs assessments, i.e., depending on its scope and timeframe, with a view to benefit from the relative fields of expertise of C2, C3 and C4 in the development of needs assessments.

- Where relevant and depending on the scope of the request, involve C4 to help assess the feasibility of a request for support / draft OP from the perspective of (human, financial, material) resource deployment, including the feasibility of it providing timely resources for supporting with procurement (e.g., renting of premises, IT, telephone lines), logistics and recruitment. This should be done from the start of the needs assessment/plan design processes in the case of short timeframes but can be done later on (as a feasibility check of a first draft OP) in the case of renewed OPs. This should also ensure better alignment between the level of ambition of an OP and its timeframe (see recommendation 5).

Recommendation 2: Put in place an internal mechanism to mobilise staff from across the Agency to support operations under the coordination of C1.

There were different levels of involvement of other EASO centres in the implementation of operational support, which is the ultimate responsibility of C1. In certain circumstances, having a measure coordinator from another centre in the field can improve effectiveness and efficiency, while in other cases retaining the usual approach of having country desk coordinators to support operations is more effective and efficient. C4 has not been involved in a structured manner in the implementation of all OPs, but could add value. Putting in place a clear, structured and more transparent mechanism for the involvement and use of Agency staff should enable the Agency to make use of its strained human resources in a more effective and efficient way.

- Discuss internally the feasibility of involving C4 staff in the support of the implementation of operational support. With a view to better balancing out resource use and to make effective use of the relative strengths and competencies of the Agency's staff, it could be useful for C4 to step up their support regarding procurement, recruitment and administrative processes related to

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[93] As per the EUAA Regulation, Article 17(5), the Executive Director has 3 working days from the receipt of a request for support from a Member State *or* from the date of a Member State's agreement with the EUAA's own proposal to provide support, to take a decision on the provision of operational and technical assistance, including on the deployment of asylum support teams. The OP needs to then be designed and agreed upon within 5 working days in case of a request for assistance in light of disproportionate pressure (emergency situations) or when the proposal is coming from the EUAA; and within 10 working days in cases of requests from Member States for support with the implementation of its obligations under the CEAS (more structural operational support).

operational support. The format and scope of their involvement should be defined internally, as it is contingent on strong coordination and line management approaches that are beyond the scope of this evaluation.

- Define and agree across all centres on a common approach/mechanism for the involvement of all centres and sectors in the implementation of operational support based on the focus and breadth of an OP, for the sake of efficiency gains. The format and scope of their involvement should be defined internally, as it is contingent on strong coordination and line management approaches that are beyond the scope of this evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Harmonise the level of definition and structure of the Results Frameworks of new OPs to facilitate monitoring and evaluation.

While the use of Results Frameworks in recent years provides a clear benefit for the monitoring and evaluation of OP implementation, its potential could be maximised by further harmonising the approach across all countries. The drawback of the current approach is that the Results Frameworks look different in terms of the level of definition of different (sub-)measures and associated indicators. While it might not be worthwhile to adapt the OPs that have existed for longer, taking a more harmonised approach to the development of new OPs and their Results Frameworks would facilitate their monitoring and evaluation in the future, which is important because the new EUAA mandate foresees a short timeframe for evaluation.[94] Developing such a common structure will require a time investment, notably from C1 management, staff concerned with OP monitoring in the field and OPS, and should be planned for accordingly.

- Devise and plan for an approach for the development of a common definition of (sub-)measures and Results Frameworks for new OPs based around the themes (asylum vs reception), types of activities (registrations, case processing, training, etc.) and stakeholders involved. Involve C1 management, monitoring staff, and OPS to share good practices on the structure of existing OPs. This could be done through a workshop, meetings, or setting up a taskforce, for example.

Recommendation 4: Share good practices and experiences to better align the scope of OPs with their timeline and the absorption capacity of national counterparts.

A key weakness of the Spain OP, which was new in 2021, was that there was misalignment between the scope of the OP and the timeframe available to implement it. Relatedly, there was misalignment between the scope and the absorption capacity of the authorities, which is an issue observed in other countries to varying degrees as well (notably in Cyprus). While it is good to be ambitious to some extent, it is important to ensure proper planning as underachievement of set targets can lead to demotivation among staff and the authorities. While much of this is outside of the Agency's control, a few actions could be considered.

- In light of the division between rapid response and more structural support, ensure the scope of an OP is adapted to its timeframe. The Agency should discuss and coordinate with stakeholders on what is feasible and what is not in the available timeframe, as well as invest in internal coordination (across all centres) and the sharing of good practices to better understand what is and is not feasible within a given timeframe.

- Take a more realistic approach to the design of OPs in light of national counterparts' capacity. The Agency could assess the technical and operational capacities of the counterparts and be more assertive in adapting the OP accordingly. Importantly, the Agency could consider making more consistent use of preconditions for support in the OPs, as this might increase the ownership among the authorities.

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[94] As per the EUAA Regulation, Article 16(4), the Executive Director shall evaluate the result of the operational and technical measures and transmit to the Management Board detailed evaluation reports within 60 days of the end of the provision of those measures.

Recommendation 5: Clearly define and discuss the conditions and criteria for exit in different national contexts, taking into account the need for emergency assistance and EU solidarity.

The Agency's support is intended to be temporary in nature, though it also aims to achieve long-term sustainable results through some more permanent support measures, including capacity building. The conditions and criteria for exit should be developed and agreed upon with the authorities in countries where the asylum and/or reception system has reached the necessary level of maturity.

● Define within the Agency what the conditions and criteria for exit are in different national contexts, taking into account other agreements/legal requirements, the Agency's role as a provider of a rapid response to emergency situations and the principle of EU solidarity.

● Engage with the authorities to discuss and reach a common understanding of what constitutes a sufficient level of maturity where a (partial) exit is warranted. This could be considered in all countries where the Agency has been providing support for two years or longer, even if the discussion focuses on a longer time horizon. One-year OPs should focus on immediate support and do not need to consider the conditions and criteria for exit.

● Discuss and agree upon a contingency plan to be followed in case of a sudden crisis or influx of applicants for international protection that puts disproportionate pressure on the national systems. This would be a sign of EU solidarity and reassure the authorities that the Agency is ready to support when needed.

● Ensure the authorities are aware of and regularly updated on the permanent support offered by the Agency outside of the operational context (e.g., training offer, tools and practical guides) through the Agency's already established permanent support channels (National Contact Points, thematic networks, etc.). Such transparency and awareness should also be encouraged in relation to the AMIF funding possibilities, though this is a task for DG HOME (see recommendation 6).

Recommendation 6: Strive for efficiency gains by reconsidering the approach to the implementation of the OPs and considering ways to enhance the complementarity between the Agency's activities and those of other stakeholders.

The unpredictable nature of the asylum and reception field, paired with the expanded mandate of the Agency, introduces an increased need for stable financial and human resources. While the Agency has been able to respond flexibly to requests by reallocating resources, this will become more challenging as its responsibilities grow. The EUAA regulation provides for the mobilisation of an asylum reserve pool and remunerated experts, which should alleviate some of the pressures placed on statutory staff, but there will still be a need to mobilise additional resources and/or revisit ways to make more efficient use of the resources already available, internally within the Agency as well as externally by cooperating with other actors in the fields of asylum and reception.[95]

● Make more efficient use of the relative strengths and capacities of C2, C3 and C4 staff with a view to alleviating some of the pressure placed on C1 staff. Notably logistical/back-office tasks should be the responsibility of C4 rather than C1 whose focus should be on operational support (see recommendation 2).

● Consult with DG HOME to ascertain whether there is scope to shift more structural support activities away from the Agency to free up some of its resources. There are certain activities that are currently covered by the Agency but could also be funded through the AMIF, e.g., support with interpretation in Greece. This is only applicable for longer term / structural support, and in areas where the Agency's added value as the centre of expertise on asylum and reception is less pertinent. As the AMIF is funded through shared management, alternative funding options would need to be discussed with the authorities and agreed with them as well.

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[95] Efforts to ensure complementarity between the actions carried out by the Agency and other actors are already ongoing. DG HOME and UNHCR are consulted by EASO in the process of the development of OPs which represents a mechanism to avoid duplications of efforts or funding. At the same time, EASO is being involved more frequently in the development stage of the AMIF actions funded by DG HOME with this same purpose.

- Consider further cooperation with international organisations such as UNHCR and IOM where this makes sense, including by ensuring better and more timely information exchange to ensure greater coherence in the support provided to the authorities, or considering the scope to work jointly to increase the efficiency of the support provided and/or relieve human resource pressures. Ongoing efforts by the Agency and UNHRC to streamline the approach to information sharing and agreements on working arrangements are a step in the right direction and should be furthered/concluded. Any changes in cooperation with international stakeholders should respect their relative legal bases and roles, and seek to build on the relative strengths and experiences of each organisation.

Time and resource investments for such coordination should be proportionate to the potential efficiency gains to be made, and only invested if they are reciprocated by the other stakeholders.

Annex 1   Evaluation matrix

Table 1. Horizontal evaluation matrix

Operationalised questions	Link to BRG evaluation criteria	Indicators / descriptors	Norms / judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
How did EASO manage its operational support in 2021? What lessons can be learned from the coordination within the Agency and with external stakeholders? Is there room to further streamline coordination / build synergies? Prompts: *How, in general terms, did EASO perform in 2021 in view of providing operational support to Member States under particular pressure? How does this compare to 2020?* *How well were operations coordinated (internally and with external stakeholders)? What factors explain good or bad practices in this context?* *What was the nature of the relationship between EASO and external stakeholders (e.g., DG HOME, UNHCR, IOM) in the delivery of operational support? Has this evolved over time? Are there any areas for improvement?* *What lessons might be learned for the future, especially considering the forthcoming changes in the context of the EUAA?*	Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence	Stakeholder views on how EASO is managing its operational support Evidence / examples of key achievements and challenges (linked to other questions) Evidence / examples of the relevance of the OP framework in its current state Stakeholder views (internal + external) on how well EASO is managing its operations Evidence / examples of good/bad practice in terms of coordination (internal and external) Stakeholder views on the degree to which there is adequate coordination Stakeholder views on lessons for the future	EASO's operational support is relevant and is managed in an effective, efficient, coherent way; shortcomings are duly justified	*Answers to all preceding evaluation questions* EASO governance documents EUAA regulation Meta-analysis of country-specific OP evaluations (all evaluation criteria) Previous evaluations Management Response Sheet of 2020 evaluation Interviews with EASO (C1, C2, C3, C4, PMES, QMES ED) Interviews with external stakeholders (DG HOME, UNHCR)
What were the key achievements and good practices observed in/across EASO's operational support in 2021? What are the lessons learned for the future, in terms of transferability or replicability of good practices?	Effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value,	Common trends (achievements, innovations, opportunities) in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value, sustainability emerging from the country-specific evaluations	There was an improvement relative to 2020 Positive innovations	Meta-analysis of country-specific OP evaluations (all evaluation criteria) Previous evaluations

Operationalised questions	Link to BRG evaluation criteria	Indicators / descriptors	Norms / judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
Prompts: *Which common achievements / innovations / opportunities were observed during 2021 across different countries? How do these compare across countries and to 2020?* *What factors explain these achievements / innovations / opportunities? To what extent were they the result of EASO's actions compared to other (external) factors?* *What are the prerequisites or conditions for EASO's support to be successful? Does this differ per country? Why and how?* *What lessons might be learned for the future, especially considering the forthcoming changes in the context of the EUAA?*	impact, sustainability	Stakeholder views on the key achievements / innovations / opportunities in 2021 Evidence / examples of factors that encouraged achievements / innovations / opportunities Evidence / examples of differences between countries and reasons explaining those differences Evidence / examples of experiences from previous years having been built on to improve EASO's overall operational support Stakeholder views on lessons for the future Stakeholder views on the potential implications of the adoption of the EUAA regulation	from 2020 were mainstreamed Opportunities identified in 2020 were taken up	Management Response Sheet of 2020 evaluation Training / capacity building documents and data Interviews with EASO (C1, C2, C3, C4, PMES, QMES ED) Interviews with external stakeholders (DG HOME, UNHCR)[96]
What were the key challenges observed in/across EASO's operational support in 2021? What are the lessons learned for the future, in terms of how these can be avoided / mitigated? Prompts: *Which common challenges / threats were observed during 2021 across different countries? How do these compare across countries and to 2020?* *Are there key differences between countries? What caused these?*	Effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value, impact, sustainability	Common trends (challenges, issues, threats) in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, EU added value, sustainability emerging from the country-specific evaluations Stakeholder views on the key challenges / threats in 2021 Evidence / examples of factors that caused challenges threats (or hindered achievements / innovations / opportunities)	Challenges and threats identified in previous years were addressed; the overall situation improved	Meta-analysis of country-specific OP evaluations (all evaluation criteria) Previous evaluations Management Response Sheet of 2020 evaluation EASO legislative documents, work programmes, activity reports etc.

[96] Questions asked of external stakeholders would not focus on the actions implemented by EASO, but take a high-level perspective to help assess the overall effectiveness, relevance, added value, sustainability, coherence, and impact of EASO's support and the changes introduced since 2020.

Operationalised questions	Link to BRG evaluation criteria	Indicators / descriptors	Norms / judgement criteria	Sources of evidence
What factors explain these challenges / threats? To what extent were they the result of EASO's actions compared to other (external) factors? *Was there anything missing from EASO's operational support? If so, what?* *What lessons might be learned for the future, especially considering the forthcoming changes in the context of the EUAA?*		Evidence / examples of differences between countries and reasons explaining those differences Evidence / examples of challenges / threats from previous years having been mitigated to improve EASO's overall operational support Stakeholder views on lessons for the future		Training / capacity building documents and data Interviews with EASO (C1, C2, C3, C4, PMES, QMES ED) Interviews with external stakeholders (DG HOME, UNHCR)
To what extent has EASO's support been impactful and/or sustainable, notably in countries where support has been provided for several years in a row? What are the preconditions for support to be impactful and/or sustainable? How can they be measured? Prompts: *Is there evidence of a long-lasting impact of EASO's support? Is there evidence of the sustainability of results?* *Which approaches to operational support have the largest (potential for) impact on Member States? What causes these differences?* *What are the prerequisites or conditions for EASO's support to have a lasting impact and to be sustainable? Does this differ per country? Why and how?* *What lessons might be learned for the future, especially considering the forthcoming changes in the context of the EUAA?*	Impact, sustainability, EU added value	Evidence of lasting impacts (from country-specific OP evaluations) Stakeholder views on the (potential) impact of EASO's operational support Evidence / examples of factor which help of hinder EASO's support being impactful Evidence / examples of differences across countries and identified reasons why Examples of good and bad practices to maximise the impact of interventions Stakeholder views on lessons for the future	EASO's support has been impactful and has had added value for host Member States, notably those where EASO has been present for a long time	Answers to all other evaluation questions Meta-analysis of country-specific OP evaluations (all evaluation criteria) Previous evaluations Management Response Sheet of 2020 evaluation Training / capacity building documents and data Interviews with EASO (C1, C2, C3, C4, PMES, QMES ED) Interviews with external stakeholders (DG HOME, UNHCR)

Annex 2 Follow-up on the 2020 evaluation recommendations

The table below sets out the progress made in 2021 in relation to the recommendations of the evaluation of the horizontal evaluation report on operational support in 2020. Most of the recommendations are still under implementation as they concern long term / strategic processes that take time to adapt. Notable progress towards each of the recommendations has been made in 2021.

Table 2. Recommendations from 2020 evaluation

Recommendation	Status	Progress / achievements
1. Introduce different ***modus operandi*** to strengthen the continuity and predictability of resources in operations	Under implementation	The CDM is being finalised. A thorough assessment of the embedded model as concerns the use of temporary workers was performed, including in the framework of the CDM. The OP template was revised to specify the embedded model as an implementation modality. It has not yet been replicated in other countries.
2. Avoid ambiguity by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of key EASO staff in operations from the start-up phase	Under implementation	The implementation of the CDM and new modalities enabled by the EUAA regulation should optimise the use of resources and clarify further roles and responsibilities. The creation of the First Response Unit as part of the EUAA organigramme, comprising Preparedness Sector and First Response Sector, provides for contingency and surge capacity.
3. Consider moving to multi-annual operational programming, at least in Member States where the imminent need for support has stabilised but there is a need for capacity building	Implementation concluded	Multi-annual OPs established for Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Spain. Efforts to implement longer-term capacity building and training support are ongoing as part of the multi-annual OPs.
4. Continue to prioritise and invest in training and coaching activities	Under implementation	All OPs in 2021 contained training plans. Enrolment in training sessions across the board (asylum and reception) increased compared to 2020. Collection of all training data is centralised in C2 and reported on with support from C3 on a quarterly basis. Coaching needs to be further strengthened and expanded. C2 is developing a new module (Introduction to coaching) aiming to provide learners the knowledge and skills needed to act as coaches in the field of asylum and reception. C2 drafted a methodological guide for Training Needs Analysis, but the methodology is not yet fully embedded in the Operational Needs Assessment, in particular given the tight timeframes involved.

Recommendation	Status	Progress / achievements
5. Explore the legal feasibility of accommodating teleworking and remote processes where relevant	Under implementation	Efforts to better engage with Member State experts who would be willing to provide expertise through remote working are ongoing, within the framework of legal constraints in different national contexts. An internal assessment to analyse if EASO could be using remote processing as an underlying business model which can be embedded as the de facto solution while working in emergency contexts or a *modus operandi* even beyond is planned for 2022.
6. Consider streamlining the approach to defining certain core indicators to measure progress, when considering the same type of activity in different operational interventions	Under implementation	Revision of the monitoring framework is in progress. Harmonisation of results is ongoing and needs to be coordinated across C1, C2 and C3. C1/OPS initiated a process of harmonisation and consolidation of indicators per key intervention area/action. Work is on hold and will resume once a top-down approach is agreed. C3 is working on the development of Core indicators on Reception, in collaboration with C1 and C2. Data sharing has been introduced as precondition in new OPs and will be reinforced within each new OP.
7. Improve the usefulness and accuracy of the monitoring process by setting targets in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and, where relevant and logistically feasible, jointly monitoring their achievements	Under implementation	Monitoring frameworks have been operationalised across all OPs and enhanced collaboration between C1 country offices and C3 has been established. C3 Data Hub started contributing to needs assessments and contributes to the monitoring mechanism with participation in country meetings and the development of specific monitoring tools. Further alignment of the level of collaboration for all country operations is required.
8. Adapt the evaluation cycle to make results more useful to EASO	Implementation concluded	With the move to a three-year programming cycle, there will be a mid-term and final evaluation, thus making the evaluation cycle more fit for purpose.