



EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF EASO OPERATIONAL INTERVENTIONS IN 2020

SUMMARY REPORT – CYPRUS OP 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Evaluation objectives and scope

This study provides a final evaluation of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)-Cyprus Operating Plan 2020 (OP 2020). It concerns a reflective exercise reviewing EASO's support contributing to the projected results. The geographical scope of the exercise concerns the host Member State (the Republic of Cyprus), and the temporal scope concerns the duration of the intervention (2020), although for contextual reasons it also considers previous operational support interventions and historical asylum statistics.

As it concerns a final evaluation of the intervention, the evaluation offers a retrospective, reflective and objective assessment of the degree to which the objectives have been met, identifying the reasons for any shortcomings and suggesting lessons learned from these interventions that might be useful to EASO in the design and implementation of future interventions in the Republic of Cyprus and beyond.

1.2 Background to the intervention

The pressure on the asylum system of the Republic of Cyprus is a core trend and concern, evidenced by the steady increase in annual asylum applications since 2013, amounting to 13,650 applications lodged in 2019. In 2020, 7,089 new applications for international protection were lodged in the Republic of Cyprus, down by almost half (-46%) compared to 2019.¹ As for most EU countries, this drop resulted from the COVID-19² outbreak which forced the country to take several measures which temporarily disrupted the operation of the Cypriot Asylum Service (CAS) but also substantially affected the number of new arrivals. One of the measures taken was the temporary suspension of most registration activities, which started in mid-March and lasted until early June 2020.

The OP 2020 was the outcome of a rigorous needs assessment conducted by EASO resulting in a formal request from the Cypriot authorities to EASO for support in the area of backlog and case management (first and second instance), reception conditions, and registration. More specifically, the OP 2020 contributed to four distinct measures (objectives):

- **Measure 1:** Improved registration system and access to asylum procedure in Cyprus with particular attention to vulnerable groups.
- **Measure 2:** Enhanced implementation of Common European Asylum System (CEAS) reception conditions and improved overall reception mechanism.
- **Measure 3:** Cyprus has increased capacity to efficiently and effectively manage and reduce first instance backlog.
- **Measure 4:** Cyprus has increased capacity for the Administrative Court for International Protection (second instance).

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for the evaluation of EASO's operational support to Cyprus for 2020 combines qualitative with quantitative data to enable an in-depth assessment of the results of the intervention.

¹ In 2020, Cyprus remained the EU country with the highest share of applicants per capita with about eight per 1,000 inhabitants (EASO Trend Analysis Report 2020).

² Coronavirus disease 2019.

The methodology used consisted of desk research and interviews with EASO operational support staff, the national authorities in Cyprus, international organisations and civil society organisations. It also included a focus group involving EASO staff to validate the results of the evaluation.

The robustness of the methodology was limited by some factors. First of all, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews had to be conducted remotely, via videoconference. For the same reason, observation field visits were not conducted. As a mitigating measure, we ensured to include the perspective of EASO staff and temporary workers from the field in interviews. In addition, despite great improvements in the monitoring system since 2018, for certain indicators no explicit targets were set, so that only a partially qualitative assessment of the respective output was possible.

3. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The findings of the evaluation of the EASO-Cyprus OP 2020 are based on all the information gathered and analysed from primary and secondary sources of evidence, including the review of the monitoring of data and the interviews and focus group held with the stakeholders.

3.1 Measure-specific findings

3.1.1 Measure 1: Improve registration system and access to asylum procedure

EASO's support on measure 1 was highly **relevant**, as it addressed one of the key bottlenecks of the Cypriot asylum system. The large number of new applications filed since 2018 put various Alien and Immigration Unit (AIU) offices under high pressure, as their human resource capacity is still severely limited. The fact that EASO registration assistants covered three quarters of all registrations (5,137 registrations out of the total 7,089 in 2020) indicates the high relevance of this measure. EASO was also in charge of screening cases for the identification of vulnerable persons, which was identified as a priority area in the 2019 needs assessment.

The measure was mostly **effective**, because although many targets were not achieved, this was largely due to external factors that were outside of EASO's control. These include restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited absorption capacity of the Cypriot authorities, and the fact that planned activities in Pournara could not be implemented because the necessary infrastructure was not put in place. Despite these challenges, EASO nevertheless was able to support 75% of all registrations in 2020. EASO registration support identified more than 400 vulnerable cases and conducted more than 250 registrations as part of the accelerated procedure for applications from safe countries of origin as well. Targets that were not met refer mostly to the areas that would enhance the long-term capacity of the Cypriot authorities to improve the overall productivity and quality of processing registrations, for instance through the introduction of standard operating procedures (SOPs) on registrations, workflow provision, information for new arrivals, and development of a comprehensive registration system, which were put on halt due to the limitations outlined above.

The **efficiency** of this measure was good. Productivity in terms of the number of registrations per person and per week decreased after the lockdown period (March-June 2020) compared to before, which is explained by the high turnover in staff (which leads to lack of knowledge) and related training needs towards the end of the year. This, in turn, was caused by strict rules on the deployment of temporary workers in Cyprus, but also the limited pool of applications, prolonged recruitment procedures, and limited planning of future recruitment needs.

3.1.2 Measure 2: Enhance implementation of improved reception conditions

This measure was highly **relevant**. Despite the lack of a comprehensive reception strategy in Cyprus (which is planned for 2021), EASO, in close collaboration with CAS, responded to a need by supporting the enhancement of the reception conditions of the Kofinou reception centre (e.g. counselling, vulnerability identification, assessment and referral, community support) and the improvement of the reception mechanism, particularly with regards to social work activities. The deployment of the EASO reception team to Kofinou was highly relevant in addressing the specific needs of the camp residents assigned to them (about half of the residents). EASO operated in close coordination with Talos and other stakeholders to ensure that basic living conditions and other needs of the residents for legal, medical, psychological, etc. support were met.

EASO's support was highly **effective** in improving the situation in Kofinou reception centre in terms of the overall living conditions, vulnerability identification and referrals, community engagement, social and informational support. Overall, EASO was able to achieve most of the set goals related to the Kofinou reception centre. For instance, almost half of all new residents at Kofinou were covered by EASO, pending referrals were carried out, and information packages and sessions were delivered as planned. The situation for residents significantly improved compared to earlier years, partly due to the effective support of EASO's social workers, reception support officer and interpreters, but also through the upscaling of capacities of other stakeholders. Target realisation falls short in terms of the implementation of a reception monitoring (quality assessment) tool and an allocation tool for Kofinou, however. EASO was not able to realise targets in Pournara, primarily due to very limited progress on the establishment of a safe zone and the lack of other infrastructure and coordination, which were required in order for EASO to provide operational support.

3.1.3 Measure 3: Increase capacity to manage and reduce first instance backlog

The backlog of pending cases at first instance in Cyprus remained at a high level during 2020, with procedures often lasting much longer than the six months required by Cypriot asylum law. EASO's support, mainly through the provision of caseworkers, was highly **relevant** as it filled a clear need in the CAS as an understaffed state agency with very limited human resources for coping with the backlog.

The overall **effectiveness** of this measure was limited because of the limited managerial capacity and human resources (caseworkers) at CAS, but also the obstacles caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict interpretation of the law in relation to deployment of temporary workers (i.e. not more than 12 months, without the possibility of renewal). EASO nevertheless significantly increased the number of interviews conducted at first instance compared to 2019 (an increase of 27%), and closed a substantial number of legal opinions, yet this did not lead to a decrease in the backlog at first instance. EASO managed to fully digitalise its files, and implemented support tools for quality assurance (e.g. in the case of vulnerability assessment). However, both have not been fully taken on board by CAS. One could argue that despite EASO's efforts, the managerial/operational capacity of CAS for processing refugee status determination at first instance has not improved during 2020.

In terms of **efficiency**, the median length of the period between lodging an asylum application and the drafting of the recommendation actually increased by more than 130 days to 661 calendar days compared to the respective duration in 2019. These delays can be mainly attributed to the COVID-19 situation, evident from the relatively long duration for an interview to take place (579 days from registration) compared to the time needed to subsequently draft a concluding remark (71 days from interview). The individual productivity in terms of the number of interviews conducted per EASO caseworker per week was highest in the middle of the year and relatively low at the end of 2020, when the number of EASO caseworkers was highest. The reasons for this negative correlation partly

included the high turnover and training required for new arrivals, COVID-19 access restrictions to the office, and reduced space available for interviews.

3.1.4 Measure 4: Increase capacity for the Administrative Court for International Protection

The International Protection Administrative Court (IPAC), established in June 2019, was dealing with a large backlog in cases (approximately 750 cases), stemming from the previous procedure, as well as new appeals cases being lodged. Through extensive needs assessment consultations conducted during 2019, EASO and IPAC identified the secondment of research officers, expert meetings and peer-to-peer information exchange as well as judicial professional development activities as key priority areas for EASO support in 2020. EASO began providing this support in March 2020 with the aim of helping IPAC clear up to 80% of the old and new cases. EASO's support on this measure was highly **relevant** and considered fundamental by stakeholders.

EASO's support was **effective**, although the progress achieved was rather low given that the backlog at second instance has increased. The main problem was that the roles and responsibilities of EASO's research officers were not clear to the judges, and a lack of systematic exchanges between them and local research assistants constrained the collaboration, productivity, and ultimately the output of IPAC.

In terms of **efficiency**, the budget spent on the three research officers was very well invested and overall well-received by IPAC. EASO provided critical support at a time when both the judges as well as the local administrative assistants were partially overwhelmed by the qualitative (providing data collection, management and analysis) and quantitative goals (reducing the backlog at second instance) for IPAC.

3.2 Coherence, EU Added Value, Impact and Sustainability

The level and quality of coordination with other stakeholders worked well with regard to operations in Kofinou. CODECA and Talos as providers of various social services have been key, mostly well-organised partners and the support of EASO's social workers was largely complementary. However, EASO faced challenges in safeguarding overall **coherence** of its interventions mainly due to a lack of information flow, mutual exchange and communication between the Ministry of Interior/CAS, EASO, and other stakeholders with regards to the plans and decisions to be made about Pournara.

EASO enhanced a clear **EU added value** in establishing procedures on screening, identification and referral of vulnerable cases at registration, reception and first instance resettlement status determination, which would not have taken place and been followed by other stakeholders to the same extent, due to resource capacity constraints. For various reasons (lack of capacity of local authorities, COVID-19-related restrictions to access, but most importantly the standstill on establishing the safe zone), EASO was not able to create significant added value in the Pournara first reception centre.

The long-term **impact and sustainability** of the EASO intervention in enhancing the capacity of Cypriot authorities, for instance by enhancing the registration system, is limited for two reasons. Firstly, the lack of continuity due to the contractual situation of temporary registration assistants undermines the sustainability of the OP (e.g. on measure 1, but also measure 3). Secondly, the relative focus on 'doing' the vast majority of all registrations rather than enabling and enhancing the capacity of Cypriot authorities to do registrations (including vulnerability screening) is limiting the long-term impact. The contractual situation and the respective fluctuation also seriously impacted the sustainability of measure 2. As a consequence of the constraints on longer-term deployment, for instance, the measure 3 team working in October 2020 was completely different

from the team of January 2020, which results in a loss of know-how and thus negatively impacted the effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention.

3.2.1 Cross-cutting results

Due to the **COVID-19 pandemic**, many workflows were tested to operate in new ways as the Cypriot authorities requested EASO to resume work. Resumption of operations in the midst of the pandemic required significant adaptation of the working environment (e.g. digitalisation of files, virtual meetings and interviews, online training, remote support to reception, etc.), as well as the introduction of new technologies and the establishment of a range of new security, occupational health and safety protocols and procedures. Despite staffing being largely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 onwards, significant steps were taken to ensure continuity of operations in terms of administrative tasks, follow-up on different activities, and communication and support to coordination with various stakeholders. EASO successfully explored alternatives for securing business continuity under multiple dimensions, including remote workflows and remote support as operated by other EASO operations for key roles (team leaders).

Long **procurement procedures** and **insufficient administrative capacity** to handle diverse contracts had a negative impact on the timely provision of contracts. The restrictions imposed on international travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in Member State experts' deployment being prematurely terminated, which in turn resulted in a lower than planned deployment rate and a shorter than planned (average) length of their deployment. Consequently, the target of 75 Member State experts' workdays per month was only achieved in the month of September. A mitigation strategy in bridging the gap was found through the deployment of in-country temporary experts from May onwards.

However, the most important challenge in Cyprus operations was the **limited flexibility in temporary contracts**. The legally bound duration of 12 months contracts (including training), paired with restrictions on replacing a function after this period, brings the operation to its limits on securing continuity and expansion in human resources. This external constraint significantly impacted the quality and quantity of deliverables and outcomes, led to underperformance, high turnover rates, constant recruitment, demotivation, and limited growth. If a solution for this issue is not found in due course, these restrictions will continue to create negative impacts across all measures and will seriously undermine the long-term impact and sustainability of EASO's support to the Republic of Cyprus. There was also a significant shortfall in deployment of operational temporary staff, particularly in the second half of 2020. In spite of the numerous efforts made to find a solution, all means to mitigate the identified risk in the short or medium term remained limited. Therefore, the contracts of all temporary workers who had already been working at EASO for one year were (and still are) not renewable. In order to ensure that all recruitments occur in full respect of the Cypriot law, contracts under Greek law, that were thought to be a potential solution to the situation, have been discontinued. The uncertainty that surrounds this situation contributed to feelings of demotivation in the Cyprus operations. It can be expected that temporary workers whose contract is approaching an end will start looking for other jobs and that some of them could leave EASO operations before the end of their contract.

As for **training**, while EASO provided the planned number of training sessions with an even larger than planned number of participants, underspending is predominantly caused by deployments below plan. While the overall budget consumption during the first half of 2020 was roughly on target for most measures, in the second half of 2020 all measures consumed only about half of the measure budgets.

Overall, mostly due to the significant discrepancy in the number of deployments, the overall (adjusted) budget for implementing EASO's OP 2020 for Cyprus was underspent by about 25%.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The table below presents a scoring of the achievements of each measure of the EASO-Cyprus OP 2020. While scores may be subjective to the assessment of the evaluator, they have been discussed and adjusted after a validation meeting with the EASO operations team.

Table 1. Scoring of achievements of the EASO-Cyprus OP 2020

	Measure 1	Measure 2	Measure 3	Measure 4
Relevance	Very Good	Very Good	Good	Very Good
Effectiveness	Good	Fair	Fair	Good
Efficiency	Good	Fair	Good	Good
Coherence	Good	Good	Good	Good
EU added value	Good	Good	Good	Good
Impact	Good	Good	Fair	Good
Sustainability	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair

Overall, the **relevance** of the entire intervention is considered **very good to good**. The scaling-up of activities and budget since 2019 required the prioritisation of recruitment of EASO resident and statutory staff in the country office.

The **effectiveness** of the intervention was **good to fair**. Multiple challenges deriving from external factors (e.g. COVID-19 emergency situation, limited capacity of Cypriot authorities, limited duration of contracts in place, etc.) contributed to the fact that EASO could not reach the extent of the expected support, particularly on the reduction of backlog of first instance interviews and recommendations. Nevertheless, the establishment of an increasingly effective centralised monitoring system can provide a clearer picture of where EASO's intervention is most relevant, where progress was achieved (or not), and where improvements are most required.

Improvements were achieved on all measures, both in terms of productivity and quality. Substantial steps were undertaken towards establishing a comprehensive vulnerability identification and referral system in registration, reception, and during interviews. These include the deployment of vulnerability experts, the provision of guidance for vulnerability identification during interviews, the production of relevant templates for assessment, and an increasing presence of a vulnerability system during reception.

While staffing and deployments were largely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 onwards, significant steps were undertaken to ensure continuity of operations in terms of administrative tasks, follow-up on different activities, and communication and support to coordination with various stakeholders. The restrictions imposed on international travel resulted in Member State experts' deployments being prematurely terminated. A mitigation strategy partially bridging the gap was found through the deployment of in-country experts from May onwards.

The **efficiency** of the intervention was **good to fair**. With some of the preconditions (notably the Pournara safe zone) not in place, EASO's resources remained partly unused. The support that was provided, however, was considered efficient. Yet, individual productivity fluctuated, and the set numerical targets proved difficult to reach due to lower than planned deployments because of (i)

temporary contract limitations, (ii) challenging recruitment situation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and (iii) disruption of face-to-face activities for three months (even though remote interviews have been established).

As for **coherence**, there is room for improvement regarding a more systemic and institutionalised coordination with national and international stakeholders. However, as an example of good complementary practice, EASO was able to support the CAS to relocate 30 persons, 14 unaccompanied minors and 16 persons belonging to single parent families to Finland, implementing the jointly developed SOPs.

Overall, the **EU added value** of EASO's interventions was **good**. By providing strategic expertise, operational human resources, and capacity building and training, EASO could address some systemic gaps where national authorities still do not have the capacity to manage it alone. This ranged from additional administrative tasks performed by EASO registration assistants and interpreters to the attribution of more complex cases to EASO caseworkers. EASO's added value is also manifested by laying the groundwork for vulnerability identification and harmonising vulnerability assessment tools in the asylum procedure.

The **sustainability** of the EASO intervention in Cyprus is **fair**. EASO enhanced capacities of local authorities and stakeholders in various aspects including vulnerability assessments, enhanced reception conditions at Kofinou, and efforts for an enhanced quality assurance for case management. However, the Cypriot authorities still struggle with resource capacity issues, and EASO's potential to build capacity is threatened by the specifics of the local legislation regarding temporary workers. In spite of the numerous efforts made to find a solution, all means to mitigate the identified risk in the short or medium term have proven unsuccessful. A solution needs to be found urgently as these restrictions have serious implications on the effective short-term operability across all measures.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Enhance stable and sustainable deployment of experts and Member State experts. EASO should explore possibilities for enabling longer-term deployment contracts (e.g. 2-3 years) for temporary interim workers to limit high turnover and loss of expertise and usage of resources (for recruitment procedures, training of incoming staff etc.). One solution could be to establish a pool of EASO-trained experts who are readily available, e.g. through deployment rotation with other EASO operations. This would create more stability in EASO activities, which in turn would enhance the sustainability of the intervention by building up capacities of local partners.

Recommendation 2: Support the development of a comprehensive data management system. EASO should support the development of a comprehensive data management system across authorities and stakeholders to improve efficient and flexible use of case-specific data. Building on its own experience with digital data management, EASO could help establish an integrated digital data management system to be jointly implemented with CAS, AIU, and IPAC to increase consistency and the efficient collection and use of case-specific and other data (e.g. Country of Origin Information, vulnerability).

Recommendation 3: Support comprehensive and integrated vulnerability procedures. EASO should provide cross-cutting and integrated support for vulnerability identification and assessment at all intervention areas (registration, reception, first instance refugee status determination) and across various Cypriot stakeholders (e.g. CAS, AIP, non-governmental organisations). EASO should also enhance capacity for an effective prioritisation and referral system for vulnerable applicants based on formal standard operating procedures. This would increase

overall consistency in the application of vulnerability criteria and procedures across different stakeholders and intervention areas.

Recommendation 4: Aim for proportionality of EASO support. EASO could introduce proportionality as a general principle in the OP, to ensure capacity of national authorities to absorb EASO support (i.e. increase EASO support to Measure 4 in line with absorption capacity of e.g. IPAC and CAS). This should increase buy-in on the side of the authorities and subsequently have a positive impact on the ownership and sustainability of the operational support.

Recommendation 5: Support mainstreaming of the reception strategy and its implementation. EASO should support the establishment and implementation of a comprehensive reception strategy at national level, and support and coordinate an effective and efficient national reception management system involving all relevant stakeholders. This would help overcome fragmentation in the area of reception and facilitate synergies across intervention areas and activities of local stakeholders.

Recommendation 6: Intensify coordination and communication with stakeholders. Enhancing systematic coordination and cooperation with national and international stakeholders, in particular regarding progress on the Pournara first reception centre, would increase the effectiveness of EASO's intervention. Enhancing communication with local authorities and other national and international stakeholders regarding mid-/long-term planning would ensure complementarity and awareness about EASO's priorities and plans.

Recommendation 7: Consider strategic planning framework. In time, especially for measures that require a longer time horizon for capacity building of authorities, EASO should develop (criteria /pre-conditions for) a measure-specific transition to more strategic (rather than operational) support. The Agency could develop, in agreement with the authorities, a comprehensive perspective and vision for the longer-term provision of operational support in Cyprus. This would remove uncertainties regarding EASO's commitment to support the Cypriot authorities as long as required.