



EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF EASO OPERATIONAL INTERVENTIONS IN 2020

SUMMARY REPORT – GREECE OP 2020

Ramboll Management Consulting

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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)-Greece Operating Plan (OP) 2020. It concerns a reflective exercise reviewing the EASO support contributing to the projected results. The geographical scope of the exercise concerns the host Member State (Greece), 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.

1.2 Background to the intervention

As a gateway to Europe, Greece has been experiencing a steady increase in migratory flows and in applications for international protection with this volume constantly rising over the past years. In 2019, Greece had the fourth largest number of applications for international protection in the EU27¹ countries, accounting for 77,257 applications out of the 698,740 registered in the EU27 in total (i.e. 11% of all applications). With the steady increase in applications, the backlog of applications awaiting decision increased considerably as well.

During 2020, the pressure on the Greek asylum and reception system continued. In a change in trends, for the first time in years, migrant arrivals fell drastically, decreasing by 80%. At the Eastern Aegean islands 9,000 persons arrived in 2020, 85% fewer than in 2019. The COVID-19² outbreak and the associated lockdown and movement restrictions had a major impact on third-country nationals' attempts to reach the Turkish shores and cross to the Greek islands³. Despite the decline in migratory flows, the total number of migrants and asylum seekers in Greece remained high at 119,700⁴. Reception sites, especially on the islands, were already overcrowded from previous years, operating above maximum capacity. Moreover, the asylum system was overburdened from the backlog of pending applications as well as from the backlog of pending asylum registrations.

Cooperation between EASO and Greece was extended through the 2020 OP to meet the needs outlined above. For 2020, EASO mobilised a budget of € 41,076,664. The OP aimed to achieve the following key objectives:

- **Measure EL-AS 1:** Enhance the capacity of the Greek Asylum Service (GAS) and Appeals Authority (AA) to implement the asylum procedure efficiently and on a timely manner, ensuring the protection of fundamental rights of applicants for international protection towards the implementation of the European Union (EU) Asylum Acquis;
- **Measure EL-REC 2:** Enhance the capacity of the National Reception Authorities to manage and operate the National Reception System, towards the implementation of the minimum EU reception standards;
- **Measure EL-REL 3:** Enhance the capacity of the Greek Authorities to manage and implement relocation from Greece under the common agreed procedure with participating Member States.

¹ The European Union's 27 Member States, excluding the United Kingdom.

² Coronavirus disease 2019.

³ EASO 2020 Operational Analysis

⁴ Ibid.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for the evaluation of the EASO operational support to Greece for 2020 combines qualitative with quantitative data to enable an in-depth assessment of the results of the intervention. It consisted of desk research, interviews with EASO operational support staff, interviews with the national authorities in Greece, interviews with international organisations and representatives from DG HOME. It also included a focus group involving EASO staff to validate the results and co-create the SWOT analysis.

The robustness of the methodology was limited by some factors. First of all, due to COVID-19, 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. Direct comparison of outputs on sub-measures 1.1 and 1.2 between 2019 and 2020 was limited, due to the difference in scope of these sub-measures, i.e. border and regular procedure (OP 2019) / islands and mainland (OP 2020). To address this limitation, measurement of outputs was adapted and we made use of data found in 2019 and 2020 Operational Factsheets. Reporting material did not include information on the quality of outputs, so for this aspect, emphasis was placed on quality in the interviews. The Process Indicator Database on human resources was not dedicated to each sub-measure. For this reason, information on sources deployed was sought in different reporting documents (e.g. measure-based reports).

3. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The findings of the evaluation of the EASO-Greece 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: Enhanced capacity of the Asylum Service and Appeals Authority to implement the asylum procedure efficiently and in a timely manner, ensuring the protection of fundamental rights of applicants for international protection towards the implementation of the EU Asylum Acquis**

Measure 1 included five sub-measures:

- EASO support to the Asylum Service & Appeals Authority to strategically plan and manage the Asylum System
- EASO support to the Asylum Service for processing applications for international protection at first instance on the islands (border procedure)
- EASO support to the Asylum Service for processing applications for international protection at first instance on mainland (regular procedure)
- EASO support to the Dublin Unit to process outgoing requests according to the Dublin Regulation criteria
- EASO support to the Appeals Authority in issuing 2nd instance decisions

The main achievement of the Greek Operation under this measure was the significant reduction of the backlog on the islands and the mainland. Other achievements were the enhancement of capacity in terms of competence and sharing of expertise from EASO staff to GAS staff as a direct result of

the implementation of the embedded model; the introduction of teleworking modalities on the islands as a response to COVID-19 challenges; and the design and implementation of Project North.

This measure was highly **relevant** and well-adapted to the specific needs of stakeholders. The constant increase in arrivals up until 2019 resulted in the accumulation of a large backlog, which remained high at the beginning of 2020. The management of the backlog was a priority of the Greek authorities during this year and EASO focused its support to this end. In this context, EASO deployed increased personnel on the islands and mainland under the embedded model and focused on capacity building of caseworkers through the development and implementation of training tools and programmes.

The Greek operation achieved high levels of **effectiveness** under this measure in 2020, meeting or exceeding most targets on outputs. The significant reduction of backlog was an important achievement. As part of this, sub-measure 1.0, the intervention focused on implementing joint training with GAS that was targeted to new caseworkers to be deployed on the islands and the mainland under the embedded model. During the year, 39 training and coaching sessions were conducted, covering a range of subjects such as interview techniques, inclusion, evidence assessment, Dublin III Regulation and Best Interests Assessment (BIA). A key achievement was the enhancement of capacity in terms of competence and sharing of expertise from EASO staff to GAS staff as a direct result of the implementation of the embedded model.

On asylum support on the islands (sub-measure 1.1), the intervention played a significant role in eliminating the backlog as well. For the first time, compared to previous years, EASO conducted more interviews than registrations. The number of interviews more than doubled in 2020 compared to 2019, increasing by almost 9,500 cases. A reason for this achievement in productivity was the increase of embedded staff. Moreover, the introduction of teleworking measures in response to COVID-19 ensured business continuity. Around 1,500 interviews were conducted remotely and the drafting of concluding remarks continued during the suspension of activities of GAS between March and May 2020. Importantly, the use of technology also gave the opportunity for EASO to reallocate cases between the asylum support teams on the islands, thus increasing the efficiency of deployed staff.

Concerning EASO's support to the asylum system on the mainland (sub-measure 1.2), the Greek operation developed and implemented Project North from September 2020, which introduced seven asylum processing hubs in reception sites of Northern Greece. This initiative effectively addressed the challenges and delays caused by the lack of available working space at the Regional Asylum Office (RAO) in Thessaloniki and eliminated the transport needs of asylum seekers for asylum purposes. This project was a major factor for the increased outputs under sub-measure 1.2, as made obvious by the fact that the vast majority of interviews conducted in 2020 were completed in the last quarter of 2020, i.e. after the implementation of Project North. Specifically, a total of 3,177 interviews were scheduled under the regular procedure in 2020, with close to 90% of them being conducted on the day they were initially scheduled. Only 11% (down from 20% in 2019) of the total interviews needed to be rescheduled.

Increased outputs were also achieved on the sub-measure of support to the Dublin Unit (sub-measure 1.3). In 2020, a total of 5,231 take-charge Dublin cases were processed, marking a sharp rise to 2019 (1,819 cases). Moreover, requests for over 400 persons were sent out each month, an 81% hike compared to the requests sent in 2019.

Lastly, on support at the second instance (sub-measure 1.4), embedded staff prepared a total of 3,598 case files, with an average of 284.2 files prepared each month, more than double that achieved in 2019.

3.1.2 Measure 2: Enhanced capacity of the National Reception Authorities to manage and operate the National Reception System, towards the implementation of the minimum EU reception standards

This measure included three sub-measures:

- EASO support to the national reception authorities to strategically plan and manage the National Reception System
- EASO support to the National Reception Authorities to manage first-line reception
- EASO support to the National Reception Authorities to manage second line reception

The key achievements under this measure include the increased deployment of embedded reception assistants at every reception site in the mainland, which allowed the Greek authorities to take over the management of these sites for the first time (from actors such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)); the introduction of the Reception Helpdesk; and the contribution made by EASO's training to the capacity building of the reception authorities.

EASO's intervention was highly **relevant** in providing the necessary support. The high rates of migrant arrivals, coupled with the slow processing of asylum applications, created a cumulative effect that resulted in the overburdening of the Greek reception system. Many of its facilities, especially the first-line Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on the islands, were operating above maximum capacity and in urgent need of decongestion. In 2020, the sharp decline in arrivals due to the COVID-19 pandemic created the opportunity for the Greek authorities to work towards decongesting the islands by transferring asylum seekers to second-line reception sites on the mainland. Until 2019, the management of the mainland sites fell under different actors such as IOM and not all sites were managed by the Greek reception authorities. Thus, one of the main needs was capacity-building and support from competent embedded staff from EASO to achieve the transition of management of all the sites to the central Reception and Identification Service (RIS), which was delivered.

Concerning **effectiveness**, although some targets were not met, there was significant progress made, especially in comparison to 2019. Under sub-measure 2.0, EASO deployed embedded staff to the Training Department of RIS, RIS Headquarters, Directorate for the Protection of Asylum Seekers (DPAS) and National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA). The introduction of the Reception Helpdesk in May 2020, following months of planning, was an achievement. Moreover, it was acknowledged that training contributed to the capacity building of the reception authorities. Interviews with authorities and other stakeholders identified the need for further development of training of the reception authorities in the future, however.

Regarding the intervention's support to first-line reception (sub-measure 2.1), multidisciplinary teams supported RIS in implementation of reception procedures related to child protection/unaccompanied minors, vulnerability assessment and special reception needs, communication and information provision. Efforts for transferring vulnerable beneficiaries to second-line reception centres were intensified, with a total of 31,734 transfers to the mainland taking place throughout the year. COVID-19 and the destruction of the RIC in Moria in September were two exceptional challenges that first-line reception faced during 2020. The transfer of all unaccompanied minors residing in RICs on the islands (about 2,500 children) was an important achievement and was highlighted by Greek authorities as a true milestone because it was achieved for the first time in 2020.

On support to second-line reception (sub-measure 2.2), activities of embedded staff included information provision, registration and management of new arrivals, coordination of Site Management Support (SMS) actors and communication with authorities. A key achievement was the EASO support for the reception authorities to take responsibility of the mainland sites for the

first time, with the deployment of two embedded reception assistants in each site. Support to the new camp managers was noted in interviews to be very important, as it would not have been possible for RIS to operate without their support.

3.1.3 **Measure 3: Enhanced capacity of the Greek Authorities to manage and implement relocation from Greece under the common agreed procedure with participating Member States.**

On 8 May 2020, the OP 2020 was amended to include Measure EL REL 3 on relocation. The measure was further articulated in four sub-measures, identifying the following outputs:

- support the Greek authorities to coordinate the relocation activities.
- support the Greek authorities to conduct Best Interest Assessments for Unaccompanied Minors.
- support to the Greek authorities to process relocation applications.
- support pledging Member States in conducting required selection missions.⁵

Under this measure, EASO managed to achieve high outputs and productivity, effectively addressing the needs, even though the relocation measure was added halfway through the year. The Greek operation promptly developed the necessary tools, reallocated resources, organised training and led the coordination between authorities and stakeholders.

The **relevance** of EASO's involvement in the relocation measure was widely recognised by all interviewed stakeholders. As an agency of the European Union, EASO is regarded by the Greek authorities as the most competent actor in coordinating with all the different stakeholders involved, developing the necessary tools, and implementing this measure that is rooted in Member State cooperation. EASO has been able to respond to the increased needs of stakeholders by demonstrating flexibility and preparedness in reallocating financial and human resources and setting up the necessary procedures quickly and efficiently.

In terms of **effectiveness**, the target on tools designed by EASO was met, while the target of the number of applicants who have been relocated to other EU Member States was not met, by a small margin. In collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), EASO developed the main tools for the relocation exercise and immediately began implementing the measure with the quick set-up of the procedures and workflow. Caseworkers, reallocated from other measures, scheduled 4,969 interviews of which 4,627 were conducted and 4,445 finalised. Almost all of the interviews conducted resulted in a final assessment and in almost all cases these assessments corresponded to recommended relocation to another EU+⁶ country. BIA assessments were completed by caseworkers within the next day of the interview; matching was completed within four days of the assessment; and the outgoing request was sent seven days later. By December, a total of 1,852 transfers had taken place in the framework of relocation.

3.2 **Efficiency, Coherence, EU Added Value, Impact and Sustainability**

Concerning **efficiency**, although no in-depth cost assessment was conducted, the invested resources seem to be proportionate to what was achieved during 2020. The actual resource consumption was at a lower rate than planned for most of the sub-measures, mainly due to challenges caused by COVID-19 and due to the re-assessment of needs within the year, especially in human resources. The embedded model resulted in the introduction of optimised procedures and workflows, which have increased productivity. Another positive factor towards this direction was the introduction of teleworking modalities and the implementation of Project North.

⁵ [REDACTED]

⁶ EU Member States and Associate Countries

In terms of **coherence** of the intervention, no overlaps with other activities were identified. A crucial factor for this was the careful advance planning of activities by national authorities, the identification of clear needs and considering in advance any possible overlapping of funding and projects. The change in this regard can be attributed to the fact that, for the first time in the last five years, the Greek asylum and reception system was not pressured to respond to the emergency of highly increased migratory flows.

Regarding **EU added value**, the interviews highlighted the concentrated expertise and know-how that was transferred from EASO to national authorities, especially at the level of capacity-building and planning and the deployment of increased financial and human resources in support of asylum and reception management.

In terms of the **impact**, the Greek operation played an important role in achieving milestones such as the reduction of the backlog, the successful implementation of relocation and the assumption of responsibility by GAS of second-line reception.

More concrete steps need to be taken to ensure the **sustainability** of the intervention, however. The high level of the Greek operation's involvement in all the measures compared with the fact that the Greek authorities do not have the financial and human resource capacity to adequately respond to the identified needs, indicate that the continuation of support from EASO is essential at least for the near future.

3.3 Cross-cutting results

Overall, **COVID-19** had a dual effect on the OP 2020. Despite obvious challenges, the pandemic was a decisive explanatory factor for the sharp decline in new arrivals and the reduction in new asylum applications, providing the opportunity to focus on reducing the backlog of pending cases at first instance. To achieve that, the intervention demonstrated the necessary flexibility and adapted to challenges posed by the pandemic, e.g. by shifting to remote modalities on the islands and sharing workloads between the islands. The introduction of such practices could be used more extensively in the future in providing targeted asylum support. Apart from asylum support, the Greek operation was able to adapt to COVID-19 challenges in the reception and relocation measure as well. As a result, effectiveness of outputs has not been negatively impacted.

Project North was an important initiative that contributed decisively to the effectiveness of outputs and to the reduction of the backlog on the mainland. The establishment of asylum hubs in second-line reception sites significantly reduced interview waiting times and improved the efficiency of the interview process. The number of interviews increased, and the problem of lack of available working space was sufficiently addressed. The design and development of this project has set an example of providing targeted support to the authorities that other interventions might learn from. Moreover, according to GAS, the success of this project has led to discussions and planning to expand it in more reception sites, in Southern Greece in particular.

The switch from a direct management system to the **embedded model** was an important milestone for the OP 2020 as well. Its implementation from February 2020 onwards contributed to the effectiveness of the intervention. It was a critical factor for the rise in productivity and the reduction of the backlog, mainly through the setting of common targets with GAS and the deployment of increased embedded staff on the islands and in the mainland. Moreover, the introduction of common training sessions between EASO and GAS staff, the implementation of joint quality review exercises and the joint development and use of common templates and standard operating procedures (SOPs) in the framework of the embedded model contributed to improved collaboration between EASO and national authorities. EASO's support to reception with the deployment of embedded staff was crucial in the capacity-building and further development of reception authorities. According to interviewees, without the embedded model, achievements such as the take-over of management of mainland

reception sites by the Greek authorities would not have been possible. Overall, the shift to an embedded model was appropriate because it enabled understanding and shared responsibility, adaptation to the Greek context, as well as capacity-building of national staff and systems.

Regarding **training**, all stakeholders reported that these were essential and increased the effectiveness and quality of outputs. GAS officials in particular highlighted the importance of training and their contribution in the capacity-building of staff. Overall, the implementation of training tools and programmes was regarded by the authorities as a fundamental part of EASO's support in asylum and reception. Despite COVID-19 challenges, the training sessions continued during the year, albeit digitally. As a result, training targets were exceeded.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The table below presents a scoring of the achievements of each measure of the EASO-Greece OP 2020.

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

	EL-AS 1	EL-REC 2	EL-REL 3
Relevance	Very Good	Very Good	Very Good
Effectiveness	Very Good	Good	Very Good
Efficiency	Very Good	Very Good	Very Good
Coherence	Very Good	Very Good	Very Good
EU added value	Very Good	Very Good	Very Good
Impact	Very Good	Good	Very Good
Sustainability	Fair	Fair	Fair

Overall, the Greek operation was highly **relevant** and well-adapted to the specific needs in Greece. Although arrivals fell drastically in 2020 for the first time in years, the asylum and reception systems continued to face intense pressure.

In general, the Greek operation achieved high levels of **effectiveness** in 2020 as well, which resulted in milestones such as the reduction of the backlog, the support to the reception authorities to take charge of the management of second-line reception sites, and the high outputs achieved in relocation. The most important contributing factors were the flexibility of the intervention to overcome and respond to challenges such as COVID-19 restrictions or lack of working space; the implementation of the embedded model; and the introduction of Project North. Equally as important was the increase in the deployment of embedded staff; the setting of common targets between GAS and EASO; the implementation of training programmes and their contribution to the capacity building of authorities.

Regarding **efficiency**, the actual resource consumption and deployment was at a lower rate than planned for most of the sub-measures, mainly due to challenges caused by COVID-19 and due to the re-assumption of needs within the year, especially in human resources. Nonetheless, there was a notable increase in deployed personnel which was appropriate. Moreover, the embedded model resulted in the introduction of optimised procedures and workflows, which increased productivity.

Another positive factor towards this direction was the introduction of teleworking modalities and the implementation of Project North. Given the above, **efficiency** is considered **very good**.

The **coherence** of the intervention is considered **very good** as no overlaps with other activities were identified. The key **EU added value** of the intervention was the concentrated expertise and know-how that was transferred from EASO to national authorities, especially at the level of capacity-building and planning and the deployment of increased financial and human resources in support of asylum and reception. EASO's intervention played an important role in achieving milestones such as the reduction of the backlog, the successful implementation of relocation and the assumption of responsibility of second-line reception, which will likely have a positive long-term **impact** on the Greek asylum and reception system. However, more concrete steps need to be taken towards the **sustainability** of the intervention because there is still a lack of capacity within the Greek authorities.

4.1 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Enhance the provision of support at a strategic level. The reduced pressure placed on the Greek asylum and reception systems in 2020 in comparison to previous years allowed the Greek authorities to begin planning ahead and establish strategies and procedures that will lay the foundations for a more comprehensive response to asylum and reception challenges in the future. It is therefore recommended that EASO target to a greater extent its support at a strategic level in Greece. Suggested areas of focus for further enhancement include building capacity of the relevant authorities; providing support to training and quality procedures department; incentivising coordination between reception and asylum authorities; and designing an emergency response plan in case of an increase in migrant flows.

Recommendation 2: Identify concrete steps to strengthen the sustainability of the operation. The increased need for support of the Greek asylum and reception system, combined with the limited financial and human resources capacity of the Greek authorities, create significant challenges for the sustainability of the Greek operation. In order to address this issue, EASO could seek to identify means to strengthen sustainability (including through the points listed in recommendation 1) and, accordingly, design a long-term action plan with concrete steps to be taken in future interventions.

Recommendation 3: Develop a concrete workplan and establish procedures for the use of teleworking. The introduction of remote interviews and opinion-drafting through teleworking on the islands resulted in increased effectiveness and efficiency of resources. Moreover, remote settings allowed for more flexibility as it was possible to reallocate cases between islands. Given the positive results identified, it is recommended that EASO look into expanding the use of remote settings on the mainland and clearly establish where their use is most beneficial, in order to ensure quality of outputs and compliance with CEAS standards. Thus, it is suggested that EASO firstly evaluate specifically the use of teleworking in order to generate learning and subsequently develop appropriate guidelines and clearly defined procedures.

Recommendation 4: Replicate Project North, keeping in mind the different contexts that implementation modalities need to be adapted to. EASO's establishment of an asylum infrastructure for reception sites in Northern Greece was an important initiative that resulted in a more effective and accelerated asylum procedure. Thus, it is recommended to develop this project further and identify more reception sites on the mainland that might be relevant to expand the Project to, should such a need be identified by EASO and the Greek authorities. Any expansion of the Project North model should likewise be adapted to the specific context in which it is introduced. According to interviews with GAS officials, discussions on replicating the project in sites of Southern Greece are already taking place and Project South is currently in the planning stage.

Recommendation 5: Further develop and implement a training programme for reception authorities. The implementation of a comprehensive training programme that involved both EASO embedded staff and GAS staff as part of measure 1 resulted in increased quality of outputs and efficiency gains. Thus, it is recommended that EASO expand this initiative in support of reception. Training modules could include induction training for newly recruited deployed personnel in reception; training of managers of first and second-line reception sites; training of reception staff on the different steps of the asylum procedure, from registration to the final decision. EASO has already taken action in this direction in 2021.

Recommendation 6: Expand joint target setting with authorities to the reception area. The setting of common indicators and targets with GAS in measure 1 as part of the embedded model was an important factor in the increased effectiveness of the measure. It enabled a common understanding between EASO and the authorities, ensured that the targets set were feasible and achievable given the context of the asylum system in Greece, and increased buy-in on the side of the authorities. Accordingly, the development of common indicators and targets with reception authorities is recommended.

Recommendation 7: Focus support on the implementation of a monitoring tool for reception conditions. In the framework of enhancing the capacity of the reception authorities in terms of building expertise and procedures at a strategic level, it is recommended that EASO support the authorities to implement the monitoring of reception conditions. Although the Greek operation already developed a monitoring tool, further steps should be taken towards its implementation by the authorities. Due to reduced arrivals and targeted efforts to reduce the pressure on the first-line reception centres, RIS is currently in a position to plan the further enhancement of the reception system and facilities. EASO could provide support to the authorities towards the development of monitoring procedures according to EU standards, with a view to ensuring sustainability and enhancing the EU added value of the intervention.

Recommendation 8: Focus on provision of targeted support at the second instance. Interviews with Appeal Authority officials indicated that there is a need for courses on professional development for judges. The contribution of EASO personnel in providing updated COI research through the creation of a COI database was reported to have contributed to the quality of the work of the rapporteurs. Given the above, it is recommended that EASO further expand its support at the second instance in these two directions. Specifically, it is suggested that EASO further explore the need for professional development of the judges of the Appeal's Authority and establish a tailored seminar programme on specific subjects. Moreover, EASO could further develop its provision of updated COI research, through the expansion of the COI database. Given EASO's expertise in these two areas, i.e. capacity-building and updated COI research, further development can be expected to increase the EU added value of the operation with regard to second-instance support.