



EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF EASO OPERATIONAL INTERVENTIONS IN 2020

SUMMARY REPORT – MALTA OP 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Evaluation objectives and scope

The overall objective of this evaluation was to review and evaluate the European Asylum Support Office's (EASO) intervention in Malta during 2020 as per the EASO-Malta Operating Plan (OP) 2020. This is part of a broader evaluation exercise of all EASO OPs for the year 2020 in Italy, Greece and Cyprus, and the Pilot Project for a Resettlement Support Facility (RSF) in Turkey. EASO has contracted the evaluation exercise to Ramboll Management Consulting which further subcontracted experts to carry out the work.

The evaluation offers a retrospective and reflective review exercise of EASO's support in Malta, the degree to which the objectives have been reached, identification of gaps and challenges, and recommendations for the implementation of future interventions.

1.2 Background to the intervention

Malta has been confronted with an increased migratory pressure due to a persistent influx of migrants. Over the past years, the number of sea arrivals has substantially increased (relative to the population size in Malta), such that in 2020 the number of arrivals reached a total of 2,281¹. Accordingly, this had an impact on the total number of registrations and the number of asylum applications. During 2019, Malta received more asylum applications than during the migration crisis years. Malta was also one of the top countries within the EU to receive the most applications relative to its population size (69 times higher than the EU+² baseline)³. This resulted in a large number of pending cases at first instance, as well as a high number of vulnerable people who required attention.

In view of a trend in higher number of irregular arrivals and asylum applications lodged, Malta had specific needs and could benefit from the operational support of EASO. The cooperation between EASO and the Maltese national authorities started in 2017. In December 2019, EASO and the Maltese authorities signed an OP for 2020 whose objectives focused on 4 main measures, namely:

- **Measure 1:** Improving access to the asylum procedure through support with information provision, registration of applicants for international protection and timely screening and referral of vulnerable cases.
- **Measure 2:** Increasing the national authorities' capacity to manage and reduce the asylum backlog at first instance determination.
- **Measure 3:** Enhancing the Dublin Unit's capacity.
- **Measure 4:** Enhancing the capacity of the national authorities to implement the reception standards in line with the CEAS.

The main stakeholders directly affected by EASO's intervention were the International Protection Agency (IPA) and Authority for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS). IPA is the national authority responsible for receiving and examining applications for international protection in Malta. AWAS implements national legislation and policy concerning the welfare of refugees, persons enjoying international protection and asylum seekers. Initially, a total budget of €1,997,723 was allocated to the intervention, which was increased in August 2020 up to €4,069,707.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for the evaluation of the EASO operational support to Malta 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 Malta, and interviews with international organisations and civil society organisations.

One of the key limitations to the robustness of the evidence relates to the baselines and targets, as not all were agreed upon and included in the Results Framework. This made it more difficult to carry out the analysis as the relevant indicator was not measurable. For other indicators whose targets were established, the lack of alignment of these targets to the Maltese scenario meant they were not necessarily achievable. Another limitation to the methodology relates to the Results Framework, which was not exhaustively compiled and updated. Moreover, towards the end of the evaluation process, further data were shared that were not necessarily in line with the Results Framework originally shared, and resulted in conflicting data.

3. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The findings of the evaluation of the EASO-Malta 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 held with the stakeholders.

3.1 Measure-specific findings

3.1.1 Measure 1: Improved access to asylum procedure in Malta, through support with information provision, registration of applicants for international protection and timely screening and referral of vulnerable cases

In view of the high number of sea arrivals and, as a consequence, the high number of registration and asylum applications, access to the asylum procedure required strengthening particularly through the deployment of staff in order to register asylum seekers, to provide information and to identify and refer vulnerabilities. Within the framework of the OP 2020, EASO deployed registration assistants to ensure swift access to the asylum procedure, and timely and efficient registration. In this context, EASO's intervention was **relevant** in providing the necessary support.

This measure was **effective** as EASO's support improved access to the asylum procedure to the extent that a substantial number of asylum seekers were registered, the necessary support for the provision of information was provided to the national authorities and the templates for the registration process were simplified. During 2020, EASO developed information materials and provided information on the asylum procedure to all third-country nationals arriving in Malta by boat. With regard to the referral of vulnerable applicants, guidelines on effective screening and referral of vulnerable applicants were also established. On the provision of support for registrations, EASO registered on average 88% (target of 100%) of all registrations of asylum seekers in Malta. It took on average 82 days from arrival for the asylum seekers to be registered (baseline set at 51 days). This did not meet the target mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as between March and June 2020 operations were temporarily suspended, there were delays in medical clearance from the medical authorities, and fewer registration assistants were deployed than initially planned. In addition, global productivity was impacted by the high number of asylum seekers not showing up for registration (no-shows). In terms of training, there were 27

participations by 13 individual EASO registration assistants. The training modules followed by such individuals were the module on Registration of applicants for international protection and the module on Identification of potential Dublin cases.

The **efficiency** of this measure was affected by several factors. The operational team suffered a high turnover of staff, which posed challenges in terms of business continuity and loss of institutional memory. Temporary staff were deployed on a rotational basis and were thus not given enough time to get accustomed to the working procedure. National authorities indicated that some of the temporary staff did not have the level of expertise and experience in asylum and migration, which proved to be particularly difficult when working in the Safi premises (a closed centre), and in turn had an impact on the effectiveness of the measure. The efficiency of the measure was also affected by the fact that fewer registration assistants were deployed than originally foreseen (between five and eight registration assistants throughout the year vs. a target of eight registration assistants) even though administrative support was increasingly provided at IPA at the request of the stakeholder. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic critically impacted the efficiency of this measure as between March and May 2020, registrations were suspended. Even though EASO resumed with remote registrations from June 2020, this was not as efficient as face-to-face registrations.

3.1.2 Measure 2: Malta has increased capacity to manage and reduce asylum backlog at first instance determination

The pressure on the Maltese authorities continued to increase due to an increased and persistent influx of asylum seekers in Malta, and consequently a rising number of cases pending at first instance determination. Within the framework of the OP 2020, EASO supported the reduction of the backlog at first instance by carrying out interviews and drafting evaluation reports. With a large backlog in cases pending at first instance and with the national authority losing more than 50% of its staff while undergoing restructuring, EASO's intervention was highly **relevant**.

In terms of **effectiveness**, EASO managed to clear 653 cases (target of 2,000 cases) by holding an average of 48 interviews per month (target of 180 interviews per month) and drafting an average of 81 evaluation reports in the fourth quarter of 2020 (target of 180 evaluation reports per month). The level of productivity was affected by a high number of no-shows and the full capacity of caseworkers originally planned to be deployed not being reached, coupled with the fact that IPA was undergoing restructuring. In addition, two Country of Origin Information were on hold, thus evaluations were not written. Moreover, the target of clearing 2,000 pending cases was based on an estimation coming from other Member States and was not tailor-made to the circumstances of the Maltese context. Furthermore, no effective and efficient quality control for first instance determination was established due to a difficulty in identifying the right candidates. The quality support received through capacity building activities for caseworkers and team leaders and through thematic meetings and practical guide developed for caseworkers was a partial solution introduced in 2020 to compensate for the lack of having a quality assurance mechanism properly embedded into the operation⁵. In terms of training, there were 73 participations by 45 individual EASO staff to EASO training sessions and 25 participations by Maltese determining authority caseworkers. Overall, all stakeholders reported that this measure was effective to the extent that a substantial amount of backlog cases at first instance were cleared, however, it was acknowledged that more could have been achieved in terms of reducing the number of cases at first instance, as the backlog remains high.

The **efficiency** of this measure was affected by several factors, namely understaffing due to high turnover of staff, and transportation issues with the Detention Services that resulted in several interviews being rescheduled and a high number of no-shows. The efficiency of the measure was also affected by the fact that fewer caseworkers were deployed than originally planned (11 caseworkers vs. target of 15 caseworkers). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic critically impacted the

efficiency of this measure as space constraints at the Safi premises was a challenge when social distancing had to be ensured which, in turn, resulted in fewer interviews. The pandemic also affected the deployment of staff with some Member State experts being repatriated back to their home country.

3.1.3 Measure 3: Malta Dublin Unit capacity is enhanced

The Malta Dublin Unit within IPA is under pressure to process high numbers of files due to an increase in arrivals, especially in relation to the relocation of asylum seekers arriving through ad hoc disembarkations. Within the framework of the OP 2020, EASO continued building on the experience gained under the OP 2019, aiming to increase the capacity of the Maltese Dublin Unit through the deployment of Dublin experts and technical support to the Unit towards addressing increased demands. EASO's intervention was **relevant** in providing the necessary support.

This measure was highly **effective**, and all targets were met. The Dublin procedure evaluation was completed for cases concerning 2,623 persons, with EASO personnel performing 84% of all the Dublin procedure related activities. EASO processed 100% of the take-back Dublin requests, reaching the set target. EASO also performed effectively with regard to the take-charge requests (temporary relocation) as it processed over 80% in February, while between July and December, the Agency processed 100% of these requests (target of 70%). The level of productivity was affected by the difficulty in deploying Member State experts, which resulted in no take-back and take-charge request being processed during certain months, as well as IPA being closed for some months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **efficiency** of this measure was mainly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in the repatriation of Member State experts, making it difficult to deploy other Member State experts during the pandemic, as no nominations were made by the Member States' national contact points. To mitigate this, temporary staff was deployed in the Malta Dublin Unit. This adaptation proved essential in ensuring the efficiency of this measure such that by the end of 2020, two temporary staff were deployed as Dublin Procedure Assistants, and the experience was so positive that for the OP 2021, EASO will seek to deploy temporary staff rather than Member State experts for this role.

3.1.4 Measure 4: Malta has enhanced capacity to implement reception standards in line with the CEAS

Due to Malta experiencing high numbers of arrivals, the reception system was under high pressure. By 2020, the total population in the reception centres amounted to 2,925. Consequently, AWAS required support to identify and refer vulnerable cases. Within the framework of the OP 2020, EASO started supporting the Maltese authorities by carrying out vulnerability screening and referring vulnerable people. Towards the end of 2020, the OP was amended so that EASO would also start providing support with age assessment. EASO's support was **relevant** in ensuring the consistent identification of vulnerable people by enhancing AWAS' capacity through the deployment of vulnerability assessors.

In terms of **effectiveness**, several tools were developed by EASO, namely the Referral Form, used to refer vulnerable people to AWAS; the Vulnerability Assessment Tool; a Dry Screening Tool to prioritise cases of registered applicants that need to be assessed; a screening tool for the prioritisation of cases for assessment of residents awaiting access to the asylum procedure; and a recording tool to keep track of the stage of each referral. EASO deployed 12 vulnerability assessors (target of 10 vulnerability assessors) and carried out 209 vulnerability assessments, while identifying and referring 179 vulnerable cases to AWAS (no baseline nor target was set). Relevant training was also provided to 23 participants by 15 individual EASO staff and 24 staff from the national authority (no baseline nor target was set). However, no standard operating procedures

(SOPs) and tools for age assessment were reviewed and agreed between AWAS and EASO due to pending feedback from the national authority. In addition, no entry/exit system in the reception facilities to manage the reception system was to set-up.

This was a new measure which was implemented from the second half of 2020, with the first months of 2020 being utilised to establish a working relationship with the national authority. The **efficiency** of this measure was impacted by a proportion of vulnerability assessments that were rescheduled or postponed due to residents not being located; AWAS' support workers not delivering the invitation letters; unreliable AWAS information about the residents; and the voluntary nature of the vulnerability assessment resulting in a number of no-shows or postponement of the assessment. The pandemic also had an impact on efficiency, as carrying out online assessments was considered inappropriate because vulnerability assessments are better carried out in person due to their sensitivity. In addition, adapting to the pandemic was difficult as the measure was new, newly recruited staff could not travel and it was more difficult to establish a smooth working relationship with the national authorities.

3.2 Coherence, EU Added Value, Impact and Sustainability

All interviewed stakeholders reported that the intervention is **coherent** with other actions in Malta, and that there are no overlaps. On the **EU added value**, the intervention established governance, procedures and standards within the national authorities which will be utilised beyond EASO's intervention. EASO's operational support and technical knowledge were seen by other stakeholders as an added value, which was also timely as both national authorities were undergoing some form of restructuring process. Dealing with the backlog of pending cases which needed to be interviewed and evaluated was another EU added value, as the same results could not have been achieved without EASO's support.

The overall **impact** of EASO's intervention was that a substantial number of asylum seekers were registered and the backlog of cases at first instance was to a certain extent addressed, with a large bulk of pending cases having been cleared by EASO. In addition, stakeholders acknowledged that identifying more vulnerable people and prioritising their cases, as well as developing the necessary tools which will be utilised to screen and identify vulnerable people, were steps in the right direction.

In terms of **sustainability**, governance has been established within IPA, along with the necessary procedures and standards which will be utilised beyond EASO's intervention. However, IPA is still undergoing restructuring and, as acknowledged by EASO and IPA, the agency does not yet have enough capacity to function effectively and efficiently without EASO's support. More needs to be done to ensure sustainability within AWAS, as several activities still need to be implemented. Considering that measure 4 was new and the intervention is still in its early days, more work will be required to ensure that procedures and standards are put in place and, as acknowledged by the national authorities, EASO's support will still be required.

3.2.1 Cross-cutting results

Generally, the **COVID-19 pandemic** added more pressure and, to a certain extent, impacted the effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention. At the height of the pandemic (March to May 2020), productivity was hampered by the suspension of registrations until later in the year when they were carried out remotely. Teleworking slowed down the efficiency of the intervention although it did ensure a certain level of business continuity; social distancing had to be ensured which required adapting the working environment; and the deployment of EASO staff was more difficult due to travel restrictions.

With regards to the **capacity of the national authorities**, capacity building and a more effective workflow for both IPA and AWAS are essential in ensuring that the asylum system in Malta functions effectively and is sustainable.

There were challenges to the **monitoring of the intervention** throughout the entire year as several baselines and targets were not established, which made it difficult to monitor progress against given indicators. For the EASO-Malta OP 2021, joint monitoring is foreseen in order to try and mitigate the issues faced during 2020.

In terms of **operational training**, although four out of 30 training modules are on reception and are part of the training, they have only recently been incorporated, as most of the training modules focus on asylum. A total of 97 individuals participated in 14 training sessions (four sessions for measure 1, six sessions for measure 2, one session for measure 3 and three sessions for measure 4).

As for the **human resources** allocated to the implementation of the intervention:

- Four statutory staff were deployed and contributed to 786 days or 10% of the workdays;
- 18 Member State experts were deployed and contributed to 774 days or 10% of the workdays;
- 63 temporary staff were deployed and contributed to 6,556 days or 80% of the workdays.

On the **financial** side, the total allocated budget was €1,997,723, which was increased in August to €4,069,707. The commitment consumption of the allocated budget was set at a minimum of 95%. However, throughout the whole year, the budget was underspent by -27% which is equivalent to €982,601.85.

A major **risk management** concern is that the Malta OP operated without a risk register in place.

4. CONCLUSIONS

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

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

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

Overall, the **relevance** of the entire intervention is considered **very good**. Considering the high influx of migrants and high numbers of asylum applications Malta experienced during 2020, the national authorities required support from EASO, notably in the form of human resources. Likewise,

the **coherence** of the intervention is considered **very good** as there is no overlap with other interventions and actions in Malta. The **EU added value and the impact** of the intervention are considered **good** as, overall, the intervention provided support to the national authorities to deal with the pressures resulting from the high influx of asylum seekers.

The **effectiveness of measure 1** is considered **good**. EASO carried out 88% of all registrations in Malta even though the operation faced several inefficiencies, including operating with five to eight registration assistants (initial target was eight registration assistants) and having a higher median duration time from arrival to registration both for ad hoc disembarkation and the national procedure than the baseline (baseline of 51 days vs. median duration of 84 days). While the intervention operated with fewer registration assistants than originally foreseen, this was not due to budgetary limitations but rather due to external factors (including the pandemic) which affected the deployment of staff. With regard to the referral of vulnerable applications, particularly unaccompanied minors (UAMs), the number of UAMs was still considered very low. The **efficiency of measure 1** is considered **fair**. There was a high turnover rate among EASO's registration assistants deployed at IPA, which impacted the rate at which registrations could take place. The high turnover of the team posed challenges in terms of business continuity and loss of institutional memory. In addition, the stakeholders were critical of the level of experience, commitment and professionalism of the temporary staff deployed under this measure which affected the efficiency of the measure. Furthermore, there was a high number of asylum seekers who did not show up for their appointment for registration.

The **effectiveness of measure 2** is also considered **good**. The productivity levels in relation to the number of interviews and evaluation reports carried out were below the set targets, with the total number of cleared backlog cases reaching 653 cases (target of 2000 cases). However, the target of clearing 2,000 cases was established on the basis of data of another Member State and was therefore not necessarily adapted to the Maltese scenario. The **efficiency of measure 2** is also considered **good**. EASO operated with fewer caseworkers than originally planned (11 caseworkers vs a target of 15 caseworkers) and dealt with a high number of no-shows, yet a substantial number of interviews were held and evaluation reports written (598 interviews, 651 evaluation reports), despite IPA undergoing restructuring. The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the efficiency of the intervention such that some Member State experts were recalled to their home country and people did not relocate to Malta, interviews were held remotely and fewer interviews were held due to space constraints to ensure social distancing.

The **effectiveness and efficiency of measure 3** are considered **very good**. Despite IPA undergoing restructuring and Malta operations facing challenges in deploying Member State experts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the team adapted fairly quickly by deploying temporary staff instead. This resulted in the targets set to process take-back requests and take-charge requests being met and the Dublin Unit's capacity being effectively enhanced.

The **effectiveness of measure 4** is considered **fair** even though the intervention only started towards the end of 2020 and it is still too early to establish its effectiveness. This was also echoed by the external stakeholders who emphasised that the relevance of EASO's intervention in Malta is very important to identify vulnerable people as early as possible. It was also acknowledged that despite the late start of the EASO intervention, it increased the capability of the Maltese authorities to identify and prioritise vulnerable people. This was considered a positive trend and is important to ensure this measure's effectiveness in the future. In addition, relevant SOPs/guidelines were not established for the identification and access to the procedure by UAMs, as they were still pending the national authority's feedback. The **efficiency of measure 4** is considered **fair** as well. The COVID-19 pandemic had a great influence on the efficiency of the measure particularly for recruitment, and even more so when the largest reception centre (Hal Far Tent Village) went into quarantine. On the other hand, the total number of vulnerability assessment officers deployed

was considered sufficient to deal with the workload as, by November, the backlog in the vulnerability reports was cleared.

The **sustainability of measures 1, 2 and 3** is considered **good**. Governance has been established within the national authorities, particularly within IPA as the necessary procedures and standards have been put in place and will be used beyond EASO's intervention. However, IPA is still undergoing restructuring and has not yet employed the necessary people to be able to cope with the workload which is crucial to ensuring sustainability. On the other hand, the sustainability of **measure 4** is considered **fair**. AWAS has already increased its capacity and is looking to consolidate this growth by establishing a clear structure within the agency, as well as to revise SOPs. Nevertheless, this being a new measure, it is still early days and there are several activities that remain to be implemented to ensure sustainability in the long term.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Establish a methodological approach when launching a new measure. A more methodological approach should be taken when planning and starting the operation, particularly when a new measure is being introduced, to ensure that targets are aligned to the operation in the host Member State. It is also recommended that a period of time is dedicated during the inception phase of the operation to ensure a smoother start of the intervention, and maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention. This also includes agreeing on baselines and targets in the inception phase of the intervention.

Recommendation 2: Adjust and tailor targets to the situation in Malta to ensure they are realistic. The target set under measure 2 on clearing a total of 2,000 backlog cases at first instance determination was based on an input coming from another Member State. While it was expected that Malta would have a similar rate of carrying out interviews and drafting evaluation reports, this was not the case. It is recommended that targets are adjusted and tailored to the respective intervention to ensure that they reflect the local circumstances. Moreover, along with quantitative targets, EASO should consider establishing qualitative targets where appropriate, as these complement each other when implementing an operational intervention.

Recommendation 3: Put in place a clear structure for the coordination team to ensure that the mandatory roles for an operation are covered. Irrespective of the type of operation, certain positions (measure coordinator, field coordinators, etc.) are essential and need to be secured to ensure the implementation of the operation.

Recommendation 4 Explore the possibility of setting-up a pool or roster of people who are, to a certain degree, already trained. The temporary staff deployed, particularly under measure 1, did not necessarily have the required level of experience to work efficiently and effectively. With a pool or roster of trained people at the disposal of EASO, staff can be deployed quickly whenever on-boarding is necessary, and the selected staff would already have a level of training.

Recommendation 5: Further improve EASO staff training in Malta vis-à-vis reception conditions. In the framework of EASO's comprehensive reception strategy, EASO is strengthening training offered in the reception field. The training plan established at the start of measure 4 is still ongoing – the first phase was completed in December 2020, and the second phase is due to take place during 2021. It is recommended that EASO keeps on building and improving its training plan vis-à-vis reception conditions. This is, to a certain extent, already being done in 2021.

Recommendation 6: Systematically address the inefficiencies encountered in the implementation of the OP. Working procedures should be further streamlined so that the

organisation of invitations to applicants for their registration appointments avoids no-shows, which caused inefficiencies. EASO should maintain its close collaboration with the national authorities, particularly the Detention Services, to ensure timely transportation of the asylum seekers for their registration appointment. Smart communication means should also be considered to ensure timely updates of appointments for applicants who have been released or placed under medical care. In addition, to mitigate the inefficiencies caused by the high turnover of EASO personnel, it is recommended that EASO staff are deployed for a minimum period to have adequate time to adjust to the work, the procedures and be able to work efficiently.

Recommendation 7: Complete and adjust the Results Database in an exhaustive and timely manner to allow for better monitoring and reporting. The results database used for the Malta OP 2020 was not exhaustively completed and not entirely updated throughout the year, and data contained therein was not consistent with EASO's validated information reported in the Operational Analysis report for Malta in 2020. It is recommended that the results database is completed in an exhaustive and timely manner, and that the Malta operation put in place an official, validated Results Framework, as was done for the other operational interventions in 2020.

Recommendation 8: Conduct joint monitoring with the Maltese national authorities, where appropriate. In order to ensure proper distribution of resources, streamlined data collection (rather than data being collected separately by EASO and the national authorities), and to ensure that targets and indicators are established and interpreted in the same manner by both EASO and the national authorities, it is recommended that joint monitoring is carried out with the Maltese national authorities, where appropriate. This is already being addressed in the OP 2021.