

## Consultative Forum Thematic Meeting

*“Access to information: exploring existing resources, good practices and ways forward”*

28<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### 1. Background and objectives

The Consultative Forum Thematic Meeting on access to information took place at EASO Headquarters in Malta on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> March. It brought together more than 30 specialised civil society organisations with relevant experience on the provision of information in order to have in-depth discussions on information tools and activities developed by CSOs that aim at catering to the asylum-related information needs of individuals seeking international protection.

The meeting offered an opportunity for the exchange of resources and experiences, cross-pollination of ideas, and appreciation of the multifaceted work that CSOs carry out in this field.

Prior to the meeting, an online survey was launched to collect baseline information on information activities implemented by CSOs. The survey was completed by 49 civil society organisations.

The results of the survey and the discussions and outcomes of the meeting fed directly into the 2017 Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU. In addition, a Briefing Paper summarises and integrates the results of the online survey with the main discussions of the meeting.

### 2. Summary of the meeting

The following sections of the report provide an account of the key topics presented and discussed during the meeting.

#### **Opening Speech by Jean-Pierre Schembri, Head of Communications and Stakeholders Unit**

The Head of the Communications and Stakeholders Unit, Jean-Pierre Schembri, welcomed all participants and explained the rationale for the meeting; the request for EASO to organise a small-scale thematic meeting was put forward by civil society during the 2017 CF Plenary Meeting. Small-scale thematic meetings, (in contrast to the larger plenary meeting), were felt to have a higher potential for facilitating effective dialogue, capable, also, of creating more impact on EASO’s products and activities. The theme for the meeting (access to information for applicants of international protection upon arrival) was considered an extremely important one; an area in which CSOs play a pivotal role and have rich experience and knowledge. The purpose of the meetings was to exchange information and to learn from each other by exploring different information tools and resources, identifying challenges and lessons learned.

#### **Presentation by EASO on the Annual Report and the results of the Online Questionnaire on the provision of information**

Jadwiga Maczynska, the Information and Analysis Coordinator (Department of Operations), presented background information on the EASO Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU. The report aims at providing a comprehensive overview of the situation of asylum in the EU and is based on a variety of sources, including e.g. civil society, EU actors, UNHCR, EASO networks, Member States, in-house input and in-house desk research. The report includes a dedicated section on the provision of information, which EASO was hoping to enrich in this year’s edition with information collected via the online survey and discussions from the meeting. Reference was made to an evaluation that was

performed on the 2016 Annual Report, which indicated, amongst others, the need to expand the coverage on civil society's views including critical voices and incorporating insights from reports produced by NGOs (especially local and grassroots organisations).

Subsequently, Athanasios Gatsias from the Information and Analysis Unit, provided an overview of the main findings of the online survey that was administered prior to the meeting and which had collected base-line information on information activities by CSOs. A total of 49 responses were received from civil society organisations. These organisations were based in 24 countries and operated in 44 different countries. The survey had collected information on, a.o.:

- Different types of information activities;
- Content of information;
- Types of media used and settings for the dissemination of information;
- Language in which information is provided;
- Institutional framework and models of cooperation with other actors;
- Lessons learned and best practices

Overall, the results of the survey indicate that there is a broad variety of different types of information activities, which differ in terms of target audience, content and types of methods applied to convey information. A good proportion of the CSOs who completed the survey also cooperate regularly with Member State authorities in the provision of information. Whereas the majority cooperates on an informal basis, some organisations are contracted by Member State authorities to provide information to applicants on the government's behalf. See the PPT presentation and the briefing paper for further detailed information on the findings under each theme.

#### **Tour de Table on the provision of information to applicants for international protection moderated by UNHCR**

A Tour de Table took place where all participants (both EASO as well as CSOs) shared insights on their organisation's work related to the provision of information. Each organisation presented:

1. Its key activities related to the provision of information;
2. Any insights on challenges experienced as regards the effective delivery of information, and;
3. Any innovative solutions to tackle possible challenges

#### **1. Key activities related to the provision of information**

**EASO** explained its key information activities, as summarised below:

- In the context of **operational activities in Italy**: EASO has mobile teams (Catania, Rome and Reggio Calabria) and teams at the hotspots who are in charge of providing information to potential applicants during and after disembarkation. To provide information, experts regularly visit reception centres and do the necessary to follow-up on cases. Information is provided on asylum, relocation, family reunification and the Dublin procedure. Tools via which information is communicated include: leaflets; relocation mobile application; EASO website and social media; relocation videos testimony; social media outreach campaign, and; the relocation hotline.
- In the context of **operational activities in Greece**: EASO provides information at the mainland and hotspots, during site visits at reception centres and at the Regional Asylum Service offices. Tools via which information is provided include: leaflets, hotline and social media (including



FB page on relocation). At the hotspots, a multi-actor information kiosk is also set up to provide information on asylum, reception and AVR(R), where EASO works interactively with other concerned stakeholders (RIS, UNHCR, IOM).

- In the context of **EASO communications campaign**: EASO launched a communication campaign on relocation to inform Member States, the press, and the general public about relocation. This was done via social media (FB, twitter and videos) as well as other leaflets, pop-up banners, mobile application, website, hotline, video testimonies etc.
- In the context of **EASO practical tools**: the EASO Practical tool on access to the asylum procedure helps first-contact officials to identify potential applicants and provides guidance and follow-up assistance (including on provision of information, registration, referral, etc.). In addition, EASO also developed tools to address vulnerable categories of applicants – some of which assist, indirectly or directly, information activities. For example, the child-friendly information booklet on relocation, and a colouring book are tools via which information is communicated. The IPSN tool aims to identify persons with special needs and provides guidance to authorities as to the way in which information can best be delivered to this target group.

During discussion, participants enquired about any changes in information activities following the end of the relocation programme. EASO clarified that the end of the relocation programme was clearly communicated to potential applicants on the ground. Hotline services were adjusted to increasingly focus on providing information on family reunification and Dublin rather than on relocation. The same applied to information activities for roving teams and teams at the hotspots.

Participants also enquired why there was such marked discrepancy between the number of arrivals and the number of applicants who had made use of the relocation hotline. EASO explained that the hotline was an additional measure to provide information, on top of the actual number of officers who are providing information on the ground. As such, the hotline is meant to be a follow-up tool in addition to the information that is already provided on the ground. Moreover, EASO also emphasised it was not the only actor providing information in Italy and Greece and recalled that information is provided in close collaboration with other players such as the national authorities as well as UNHCR and other IGOs and NGOs.

Subsequently, all civil society organisations provided an overview of their key information activities – see also PPT. The table below provides a short overview, per organisation.

*NB: note that the below overview is not exhaustive. Rather than providing a complete overview of information activities, CSOs focused on providing information on their most interesting information activities as implemented by their organisations.*

*Table 1: overview of information activities per participating civil society organisation*

Organisation	Key info services/activities
FRA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research on info activities</li> <li>• Observations and advise on info activities in context of hotspots in EL and IT</li> </ul>
ECRE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runs an asylum database (AIDA) which includes sections on provision of information</li> </ul>
FEDASIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed an activity book for children to provide info on voluntary return</li> <li>• Launched a digital information tool for applicants to inform them on the asylum procedure, reception, integration and voluntary return</li> </ul>

Organisation	Key info services/activities
AIRE Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advice line for clients and organisations</li> <li>• Electronic resources available on their website (handbooks, info factsheets)</li> <li>• Advice and activities (e.g. capacity-building and training sessions) to various professionals working with trafficked children and trafficked asylum seekers</li> <li>• Development of a handbook and e-curricula on international law and legal practice of the ECtHR on asylum/migration</li> <li>• Training of lawyers and judges on asylum matters</li> <li>• Country background info notes and case studies for training participants</li> </ul>
Associazione My Lawyer Informattiva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of video clips to provide info to applicants in SPRAR centres in IT</li> <li>• Direct assistance to applicants in SPRAR centres</li> <li>• Electronic information on website</li> </ul>
Asylex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides legal aid on Swiss asylum law</li> <li>• Electronic resources on website: handouts, templates, video's etc.</li> </ul>
Cyprus Refugee Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runs a web-based platform (<a href="http://www.helprefugeeswork.org">www.helprefugeeswork.org</a>) that aims to support refugee integration by helping them to find employment, vocational training, enhancing their digital literacy, etc.</li> <li>• The platform functions as the first portal for labour-related information</li> </ul>
Greek Council for Refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group and one-to-one information sessions to provide social and legal assistance to applicants (on e.g. asylum procedure and their rights and obligations)</li> <li>• Tools developed: leaflet, website, hotline and mobile application</li> </ul>
HFHR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides information to applicants through leaflets, handbooks, website, trainings and duty days</li> </ul>
HHC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information leaflet for asylum seekers</li> <li>• Information leaflet for UAMs</li> <li>• Hotline for guardians</li> </ul>
Metadrasi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of interpretation and translation services to applicants</li> <li>• Advice on education through a multilingual guide for education in EL explaining the right to education in EL and the education system</li> <li>• Escorting UAMs and separated children, providing them info on risks of trafficking and smuggling, explaining their rights and providing legal support</li> <li>• Guardianship Network for UAMs , informing minors on legal/social rights, asylum procedure and relevant options</li> <li>• Legal assistance to applicants via informal consultations with Metadrasi's lawyers</li> <li>• Counselling and support on legal issues related to employment</li> <li>• Leaflet for torture victims</li> </ul>
IOM in BG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information campaigns including videos, brochures, posters etc.</li> <li>• Individual consultations and group info sessions</li> <li>• Capacity-building activities of relevant authorities</li> <li>• Camp management and camp coordination</li> </ul>



Organisation	Key info services/activities
Mediterranean Hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparatory workshops for migrants targeted at the humanitarian corridors programme</li> </ul>
Migrant Integration Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The centre provides information to applicants through a community centre information desk, leaflets, website, telephone and e-mail. Main focus of info is on where and how to apply for asylum</li> </ul>
People for Change Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal and policy research in MT</li> <li>• Carried out a comparative analysis on “legal and procedural information for asylum seekers in the EU” (INFORM project)</li> </ul>
Queer Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face to face social and legal counselling to migrants, runs a website, leaflets, calling cards, hotline and whatsapp groups, posters, facebook, twitter, etc.</li> <li>• Focus is on supporting LGBTI applicants during the asylum procedure and after decision on the asylum claim</li> </ul>
Dutch Council for Refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informs all applicants upon arrival in NL</li> <li>• Via face-to-face meetings (preferably individual) and supported by an animation movie and leaflet</li> </ul>
NOAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides information to applicants at its offices in arrival reception centres in NO</li> <li>• Face-to-face meetings with presence of multi-lingual counsellors and advisors, information movie, website, leaflet, contact information for future consultations</li> </ul>
Refugee Rights Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducts research and documents the situation of refugees and displaced persons seeking protection in the EU</li> <li>• Has conducted relevant research on the provision of information and provides support to organisations mandated to provide information to applicants</li> </ul>
University of Coimbra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides educational information and support to access the education system in PT</li> <li>• Website, internal flowchart information, one-stop-shop office for refugees</li> </ul>
OPU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides info to applicants in CZ via: a hotline for UAMs in combination with a short guide, a mobile phone application, and a nr of leaflets</li> </ul>
Missing Children Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed a smartphone app for children on the move called Miniila</li> <li>• Aim of the app is to provide children with information including legal support and how to access practical services within 70 km of their location e.g. shelters, hospitals, health services, support to victims of trafficking, legal support, recreational and educational services/activities</li> </ul>
BOLEG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides educational and training programmes targeted at migrant women aimed at facilitating better integration into Lithuanian society</li> <li>• Seminars, hotline service, one-to-one contact, assistance in developing women’s language skills</li> </ul>
Save the Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides information to children about their rights and safety at child friendly spaces in south and west of Sweden and at first reception centres in Italy</li> <li>• Tools: leaflets, innovative visuals, helplines and a mobile app in Sweden</li> </ul>

Organisation	Key info services/activities
FARR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides advice on the asylum procedure via electronic resources on their website, available in six languages and downloadable</li> </ul>
Asylum Protection Centre Serbia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launched mobile application “asylum in Serbia” which provides information on rights and obligations, reception conditions, asylum procedure, news, logistical information, service information etc.</li> <li>Information is also provided to applicants through face-to-face contact, via leaflets, brochures, etc.</li> </ul>
France Terre d’asile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual information and counselling at reception centres, registration offices, mobile outreach teams in Paris and Calais as well as in detention centres</li> <li>Development of leaflets and a mobile website for migrants in the streets</li> </ul>
NIDOS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NIDOS is a guardianship institution for UAMs</li> <li>Develops child friendly and age appropriate info through videos</li> <li>Launched a digital platform for UAMs (Nidos-app)</li> </ul>
IRC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Launched <a href="http://www.refugee.info">www.refugee.info</a> as platform which provides info on legal rights, integration, education, employment, services, etc.</li> <li>Social media moderators are available to chat with TCNs on this platform and provide information in the migrant’s own language (Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, French, etc.)</li> <li>Webpage, blog, Facebook page etc.</li> </ul>

## 2. Challenges

During the Tour de Table, the different participants also highlighted the main challenges experienced when it comes to providing information. Many challenges were similar and can be sub-divided according to different themes as set out below.

### *Reaching the target audience*

Many organisations stated that it is difficult to reach the full intended target audience. Although there are multiple occasions in which applicants/beneficiaries can be reached (at entry points, when applying for asylum, at reception centres, in detention centres, etc.), instances of omission of information were signalled in addition to cases, where many applicants/beneficiaries go “under the radar” and who are subsequently not in contact with public authorities and/or civil society organisations providing information. Another reason for not reaching the full target audience could be related to the fact that information is not always equally available throughout a country’s territory (e.g. information may not be provided in remote areas), or, could also simply follow on from insufficient information activities due to a lack of resources allocated to the provision of information.

### *Accessibility of information*

Many organisations stressed that even when the intended target audience is reached, it still proves a challenge for them to *effectively understand the information communicated*. Various factors challenge the accessibility of information, including:

- Language: information is often not user-friendly, too complex and too legalistic

- Interpretation/translation: information may not always be available in different languages due to high costs involved for translation of material as well as costs and availability of interpreters. Moreover, even when information is translated, it is difficult to keep it up-to-date.
- Level of education: applicants may not have the capacity to process complex information
- Amount of information provided: applicants may be provided with too much information to process, and the information is often also not tailored to the applicant or the stage of the asylum procedure
- Literacy (including digital literacy): applicants may be illiterate and may not have the digital literacy to be able to look up electronic information available online
- Cultural differences: due to the various beliefs, behaviors, languages, practices and expressions, there is higher potential for applicants to misunderstand the information communicated
- Mental condition of the applicant: applicants may be mentally affected by their experiences in their home country and their flight to the EU and this may be an obstacle in understanding information communicated
- Mistrust or credibility issues: some organisations referred to instances where applicants do not trust information providers. For example, this could be the case when an applicant has no trust in public authorities (due to the situation in their country of origin) and simply does not trust that the information provided by them is correct. Other instances cited included occasions where CSOs provided information which was not up-to-date (due to constant changes in practices), which then led to undermine their credibility. Moreover, rumours or misinformation may also lead to mistrust and credibility issues and it often proves extremely difficult to shake any misinformation.

### *Meeting the information needs of the target audience*

Thirdly, some organisations emphasised that, even when information reaches the target audience and even if effectively understood, information may still not meet the needs of the target audience. A straightforward example of such situation includes occasions where information is provided in retrospect (for example, when information on access to the asylum procedure is provided after the lodging of the application). Other examples include instances where information provided is too general and not tailored to the individual concerned or the stage of the asylum procedure. Furthermore, some organisations reported in particular that it is also often difficult to meet the information needs of specific target groups, such as UAMs or other vulnerable persons with special needs. The main reason underpinning this includes a lack of availability of tailored information to vulnerable groups, e.g. child-friendly information and/or lack of gender-specific information.

### *Lack of monitoring and evaluation*

Some participants stressed that there is a lack of monitoring and evaluation, preventing to draw lessons from implementing information activities and thereby improving activities.

### 3. Innovative solutions

Some innovative solutions as mentioned by participants which could help overcome the challenges cited above, include:

#### *Solutions to help reach the full intended target audience*

- Resorting to a combination of different channels of communication to maximise outreach (e.g. face-to-face, leaflet, video, electronic resources online, hotline, helpdesk, etc.)
- Mobilising and cooperating with public authorities, civil society organisations, diaspora community groups and actively involving members of the target audience in the distribution of information to expand outreach
- Deploying mobile teams including different profiles of professionals (legal advisor, social worker, cultural mediator, psychologist) to provide information, perform assessment of needs, etc.
- Gathering information resources in one place/service/platform to facilitate easy access. Such initiatives may be particularly useful for integration-oriented information resources (e.g. gathering multiple resources on access to education and information on different education opportunities in one place for the use of the intended audience)

#### *Solutions to facilitate effective understanding of the information communicated*

- Shortening and simplifying information material
- Developing innovative videos with simple language
- Proofreading information by the target group to make sure that what is published is accessible
- Providing information on multiple occasions and in different settings to increase the likelihood that information resonates with the target audience and to allow for provision of tailored information depending on the profile of applicants and stage of the asylum procedure
- Using a multi-actor stakeholder approach to convey information. In particular, involving individuals that the target audience can relate to (individuals with a migrant background) may increase the level of trust
- Utilising staff's language skills and or volunteers for translation of written information material (to reduce costs of translation)
- Ensuring that information is communicated in confidential settings, especially for individuals with vulnerability
- Resorting to trained interpreters and cultural mediators to communicate the information
- Ensuring that information is culturally sensitive, including by providing information and training on cultural specifics and possible vulnerabilities of the target audience to officials and professionals in the field of asylum
- Connecting personally through one-to-one interactions with the target audience to help build trust and develop positive connections. Personal interactions also allows for tailoring of information and personal questions to be asked relevant to the needs of the individuals
- Openly communicating on what applicants can expect from the asylum procedure, including by providing information on aspects of the procedure that may be psychologically straining to help reduce stress levels
- Updating information to ensure its accuracy; regularly consulting with public authorities may facilitate timely communication of any relevant changes in law, policy and practice

#### *Solutions to facilitate meeting (specific) information needs*

- Ensuring that information is provided proactively immediately after disembarkation/arrival





- Tailor information to the profile of applicant and stage of the asylum procedure
- Developing child-friendly information (e.g. animation movies, infographics, leaflets, maps with pictures and games, participatory activity cards, infographics, storytelling, treasure hunts, focus groups, etc.) to ensure that children's information needs may be met
- Developing tailored information to vulnerable groups, including e.g. child-friendly information, information on protection from sexual and gender based violence and abuse, information on LGBTI, etc.

#### *Solutions to help improve the quality and effectiveness of information provision*

- Incorporating regular routine in everyday practice to monitor and verify that information is properly understood
- Evaluate information activities to improve the design, delivery and implementation of future information activities

#### **Stocktaking of findings and follow-up – led by the AIRE Centre**

During the concluding session, Adriana Tidona from the AIRE Centre, summarised horizontal findings in terms of the type of information activities implemented as well as common challenges and solutions identified (see for a full overview above).

In terms of next steps, it was agreed with participants to take the following forward:

- Develop a Briefing Paper integrating the survey and discussions of the CF Thematic Meeting;
- Explore the possibility to continue discussions on information provision by organising a follow-up meeting. Themes/topics to be further explored during a follow-up meeting could focus on the analysis of impact of different information activities (especially the impact of mobile applications), guidance on monitoring and evaluation, how to further strengthen cooperation between different stakeholders, and exploring ways of further providing information on integration.