European Asylum Support Office

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EASO Consultative Forum Plenary
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Breakout Session 1: **Producing and Sharing EU-level COI**

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1. Aim
- To update participants on new developments with regard to the sharing and producing of common COI by EASO   - To identify and discuss possible input from different stakeholders on the production of COI by EASO.

2. Background
The involvement of civil society organisations in EASO COI activities has significantly increased over the past year. Although EASO still to a large extent depends on COI capacity in national asylum administrations, and is in practice often bound by the limitations set out by the core group of stakeholders, it has actively sought to engage more non-state actors in its activities and to highlight their expertise. In 2014, EASO has organised a number of COI-related events in which members of courts and tribunals and civil society organisations actively engaged. In April 2014, a COI Conference on Online Research Tools aimed at increasing the efficiency of COI research by using new tools for retrieving, processing and storing COI was organised. The majority of presentations were made by academics and representatives of selected civil society organisations. Good practices and methods presented during the Conference were highlighted in the EASO publication "Tools and Tips for Online COI Research", published on the EASO website in August 2014. In May 2014, a thematic workshop was held on COI and LGBTI, in which civil society organisations actively participated. In October 2014, a Practical Cooperation Conference on Syria and Iraq has allowed all interested stakeholders, including civil society organisations, to obtain updated information on asylum-relevant topics related to Syria and Iraq and engage in policy discussions. The line-up of academics and representatives of selected international and non-governmental organisations contributed to the success of the conference. Although Specialist Networks (on Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russian Federation, Somalia and soon also Eritrea) remain restricted to COI researchers working for national asylum administrations – upon the request of Member States – academics and representatives of specialised civil society organisations have been invited to contribute with expert presentations to COI Specialist Network seminars (e.g., on Somalia and Pakistan) and Practical Cooperation workshops (on Ukraine, Eritrea). When it comes to EASO COI Production, the EASO COI Network Approach, adopted in spring 2013, has started to produce some tangible results. In a joint effort, public EASO COI Reports on Somalia and Chechnya have been drafted and peer reviewed, with Terms of Reference based on COI needs identified in Specialist Networks. The Somalia report is a general country overview report, which aims at providing information about a wide number of issues relevant for international protection status determination.

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The report was drafted by researchers from the Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia, Switzerland and EASO, and its quality has been reviewed by peers from Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom and EASO. The Chechnya report is a topical report focusing on the situation of women and related issues. It was drafted by Norway and peer reviewed by Poland, Estonia, the Netherlands and EASO. These reports have been widely distributed both in electronic and hard copy and can be downloaded from the EASO website.

Currently, a group of EU+ countries are producing a report on the Security Situation in Afghanistan. UNHCR is member of its peer review group. Another important EASO COI product currently in the pipeline relates to COI and LGBTI. A workshop in May 2014, in which civil society organisations actively participated, paved the way for the drafting of a Guide for COI research on LGBTI-related issues. One of the co-drafters of the guide is a specialised NGO and UNHCR acts as peer reviewer.

EASO aims to further expand and consolidate its production of EU-level COI in 2015, as expressed in the EASO Work Programme 2015. Both the network approach and EASO COI Production will be evaluated. After gaining more experience with the production of different types of COI products, the EASO COI Report Methodology will be revised, taking into account the outcomes of the evaluation and a wide consultation among stakeholders.

A recent positive development that will increase the transparency of EASO COI activities in the future, is the agreement at the Management Board on 1 December 2014 on the widening of access to the Common European COI Portal. In the future, the Portal will on the one hand be re-oriented to become a specialist tool rather than a one-stop-shop, and, on the other hand, the access to the Portal will become public, thus allowing equal access rights to first and second instance decision-makers, legal representatives, asylum applicants, and the general public.

3. Expected outcomes

- To explore possibilities for input from participants on the EASO COI activities, including EASO COI production and peer review

- To obtain feedback from participants on the usefulness, relevance and added value of recently published EASO COI products

- To obtain feedback from participants on the possible impact of rendering a new version of the European COI Portal public.

4. Discussion points

- How does civil society evaluate their involvement in EASO COI activities? What can be done to make EASO COI activities relevant for civil society organisations and more accessible?

- How do civil society and Member States evaluate the new EASO COI products and EASO COI methodology? Does COI produced at the EU-level have an added value compared to nationally produced COI?

- How could civil society contribute to the process of identifying, designing, producing, reviewing, and distributing common COI products? And under which conditions?

- What interest does civil society have in gaining public access to the European COI Portal? How can public access improve the work of e.g. decision-makers, civil society, tribunals and all others involved in the Refugee Status Determination process?