Addressing housing needs of vulnerable asylum seekers/refugees in the community

Funded by the US Department of State Embassy in Cyprus; implemented by the Cyprus Refugee Council.

1. Introduction

This report elaborates on the findings of a one-year Project, which was funded by the US Department of State via the Julia Taft Foundation and implemented by the Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC). The aim was to address the risk of homelessness faced by vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in Cyprus.

The need for such a project arose because of the observed gaps in addressing the reception and housing needs of refugees, which worsened after a swift increase in arrivals since the beginning of 2018. The Julia-Taft fund offered a highly anticipated opportunity to contribute to addressing the gap between the housing needs of refugees in Cyprus and the available State assistance.

The objective of the Project was two-fold. First, to provide direct assistance to beneficiaries in order to secure housing and facilitate access to it, by prioritizing the most vulnerable cases; and, second, to explore ways of expanding accommodation options for vulnerable refugees, by reaching out to relevant stakeholders, such as homeowners, real-estate agencies, employers and local authorities.

The following report will elaborate on the refugee situation in Cyprus, focusing particularly on reception and housing conditions of asylum seekers. It will describe the current challenges, their impact on the refugee population and will conclude by presenting the project's findings and recommendations.

All information provided in this report was acquired through the implementation of activities during the implementing period of the Project (26.09.2019-30.11.2020), which mainly involved direct assistance provided to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of International Protection; facts and data regarding the asylum and refugee situation in Cyprus as well as homelessness issues, were derived from CyRC reports and observations; meetings and communications with local stakeholders; literature and press reviews. Moreover, statistics, such as figures of residents in Reception Centers, may vary from the time of writing until the time of publication as numbers fluctuate constantly.

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2. Homelessness in Cyprus and assorted Strategies

Homelessness has been a rare phenomenon in Cyprus. Various factors, such as traditional values placing a high value on housing, families' preference for land and housing investment, strong informal networks and a series of housing policies that have actively subsidized home-ownership, have historically contributed to low numbers of homeless citizens. The only massive experience of homelessness in Cyprus dates back to 1974 and was effectively addressed by the combined efforts of the voluntary sector, informal family networks and the implementation of public policies.

Ensuring adequate housing for families, was pursued through the development of land and housing schemes, which together with the provision of easy access to long-term loans, decisively contributed to high levels of home-ownership among the Cypriot population.

While significant emphasis has been given in promoting permanent housing for families, many fewer resources are allocated in combating the alarming increase in homelessness and housing exclusion, which is observed today. As a result, the policy context in Cyprus does not include any national or regional strategic approaches for addressing homelessness. With the exception of few small-scale, regional housing arrangements targeting very low numbers of vulnerable persons, there is no official national strategy addressing homelessness and risk of homelessness in the general population. This involves a lack of an accurate definition of homelessness, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, which contributes to limited visibility of homelessness and scarce reporting of actual cases.

When it comes to renting a property, although prices in each district may vary, they remain extremely high in every city relative to the average standard of living, especially for an asylum seeker whose monthly allowance cannot cope with such prices. According to data provided by the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Insurance, between 2015 and 2018, the rent prices have increased approximately 40% in Limassol and 30% in Nicosia. In Nicosia an average 2-bedroom apartment is rented for app. €550-600, and a 3-bedroom apartment for about €700-800; in Larnaca an average 2-bedroom is rented for €500, in Limassol €650-700, in Famagusta and Paphos around €400. These are the typical prices for a decent, often unfurnished, apartment in each district. However, it is vital to stress that prices drop significantly in the rural areas of each district.

3. Reception Conditions, Social Welfare Services (SWS)

3.1 Material Reception Conditions (MRC)

During the administrative and judicial instance of the asylum procedure, asylum seekers have the right to access material reception conditions. Within the framework of the Recast Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU) and national Refugee Law, material reception conditions refer to accommodation, food, clothing, and a daily allowance. Material assistance can be provided in kind and/or through vouchers and if this is not possible, through financial aid. In practical terms, if there is no vacancy in the Reception Centre (which is currently the case) asylum seekers residing in the community are allowed to file an application to the Social Welfare Services.

The law provides that material reception conditions are provided to applicants to ensure an *adequate standard of living capable of ensuring the subsistence and physical and mental health.* MRC covers three areas of living: Food/ clothing, utility bills and rent, all provided monthly.

For the most part of the implementing period, and up until October 2020, material assistance for utility bills was provided through a monthly check sent directly to the beneficiary by post. Material assistance for food/clothing was provided through vouchers , collected by beneficiaries at their nearest Post Office, by presenting identification and a relevant SMS on their phones. However, as of October 2020, material allowances covering utility bills and food/clothing come all together in one check, sent to the beneficiary's address.

The amounts provided for the coverage of MRC, depend on the number of family members (Table 1).

Table 1: Material Reception Conditions

No. of persons	Food, clothing (until recently provided in coupons) - provided in check	Allowance (electricity, water and other bills) - provided in check
1	€186	€75
2	€279	€100
3	€372	€140
4	€465	€170
5 or more	€558	€200

3.2 Rent Allowance

Rent is paid by check sent through the post directly to the landlord. In order for the Social Welfare Offices to approve a rent benefit, an asylum seeker must provide a rental agreement containing certain information required by the SWS (see below). It is important to stress that if the yearly rent exceeds the amount of €5,000 then it should be stamped by a registrar at the Inland Revenue Tax Department. However, as of August 2020, the landlord may buy the relevant stamps from the local Post Office, and sign it themselves.

Information required in a rent contract:

1. Name of the landlord, his/her phone number, and address
2. Full name, alien registration number (ARC) and telephone number of the tenant
3. Full names, ARC and telephone numbers of the rest of the tenants living in the same household
4. Address of the accommodation
5. Signature of relevant parties - tenant, landlord and at least one witness.
6. Stamp (only if the total yearly rent exceeds €5,000)

The amounts currently provided as rent allowance the following (Table 2):

Table 2: Rent allowance

No. of persons	Nicosia	Limassol	Famagusta	Larnaca	Paphos
1	€100	€100	€100	€100	€100
2	€200	€218	€146	€174	€146
3-4	€290	€317	€211	€252	€211
5 or more	€364	€397	€265	€315	€265

4. Types of Accommodation for asylum seekers

4.1 Kofinou Reception and Accommodation Centre for asylum seekers

The main reception centre is located in the remote area of Kofinou, a small village in Larnaca District with a nominal capacity of approximately 400 people (the actual number varies depending on the composition of the residents, currently accommodating around 300 persons). Provided there is space, It currently accepts only families and vulnerable cases.

4.2 Pournara First Registration and Reception Centre

Newly arrived asylum seekers are transferred to the First Registration and Reception Centre in Kokkinotrimithia (Pournara) to undergo identification, registration and lodge their application as well as undergo a medical screening and vulnerability assessment. Their movement is restricted within the premises of the facility for 72 hours, until the results of the tests are concluded. In practice, if asylum seekers have negative medical tests they will leave in five-seven days, although this practice has been stretched numerous times during the current year, partly due to measures related to Covid-19, which extended accommodation periods to approximately one month.

After a prolonged period of inability to exit the Centre and due to the low standard conditions, asylum seekers (both newcomers and those removed due to Covid-19 measures) were allowed to exit the facility by providing a legitimate home address. Unfortunately, at the time of publication (January 2021), the latest Covid-19 measures have, again resulted in banning residents from exiting as well as deteriorating living conditions.

This rapid destabilization of housing conditions in the community led to a vast deterioration of Pournara living conditions and considerable new homeless persons. Currently, approximately 900 persons are accommodated, including 92 minors of whom 41 are unaccompanied children, accommodated in both tents and prefabricated structures. A segment of the centre is used as a quarantine area, and currently there are five quarantine areas where approximately 500 people are accommodated, including a safe zone for vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied children and other vulnerable persons. The rapid increase of the number of accommodated persons, due to measures taken by the authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to considerable deterioration of living standards.

4.3 Private accommodation

Most asylum seekers reside in private houses/apartments, which they are expected to find on their own. Due to the Kofinou Reception Centre being full at most times, the Welfare Services bear the responsibility of processing applications for MRC and addressing asylum seekers' needs in the

community, including the allocation of an allowance to cover housing expenses. The asylum seeker is expected to find accommodation and provide all necessary documentation, as described above.

4.4 Homeless Shelters

There are no State-run homeless shelters in Cyprus, which has led civil society organizations (CSOs) to establish shelters with very limited capacity and for limited stay. The Migrant Information Centre (MiHub), a Project co-funded by the European Commission from the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (90%) and the Republic of Cyprus (10%), recently opened a homeless shelter for temporary stay in the centre of Nicosia. It has a capacity of 12 people who can stay for up to 7 days, though there have been some cases of more vulnerable people (mothers who have recently given birth, cases with physical disabilities) who have stayed longer. The shelter accepts referrals from other organizations and/or the SWS.

The Centre for Support and Reintegration of Homeless People, SCHEDIA,is an initiative of the Limassol Municipality implemented by social workers of the SWS in the district of Limassol. The centre provides psychosocial support to homeless persons (Cypriot nationals or Third Country Nationals (TCNs)). Overnight stays are not yet provided but they are expected to take place in the second-phase of the project. Since the commencement of their operations in July 2019 and up until January 2020, 150 persons required support to find housing; half of their cases were cases of non-Cypriot nationals, among which, 50% EU nationals and 50% TCNs (including both migrants with a work visa and asylum seekers but no International Protection holders as of yet).

4.5 Hotels/Hostels

The Social Welfare Services provide assistance with regards to housing arrangements mainly to newly arrived refugee families with minor dependants and not to single persons. Placements are usually in budget hotels and apartments / houses in both urban and rural areas. In most cases persons are placed for short periods of time and the cost of the hotel is deducted from the already low amount allocated for covering their reception conditions (in such cases the family will not receive a rent allowance and the remaining amount for the rent is deducted from their monthly allowance). In certain instances, it was observed that referrals/placements included premises with very low standards or were unsuitable, especially for families, had poor infrastructure and a lack of necessary equipment / amenities.

Following the announcement of stringent measures in order to tackle migration flows and, soon after, the implementation of measures related to Covid-19 in March 2020, asylum seekers accommodated in such hotels received notification that they should immediately evacuate them, in certain cases with no prior warning or time to collect their belongings. This followed a relevant ministerial order in relation to Covid-19 requiring hotels to close down. A number of those asylum seekers (approximately 860 persons) were transferred to Pournara First Registration Centre, with the exception of some vulnerable cases which were moved to Kofinou Centre. These hotel transfers mainly involved coastal districts, namely Paphos, Larnaca and Famagusta, whereas hostels in Nicosia remained in operation only for vulnerable cases.

5. Beneficiaries of International Protection

Holders of International Protection (IP) Status are required to secure accommodation on their own. Although they enjoy access to a variety of governmental social schemes under the same conditions that apply to nationals, they are not entitled to housing-related schemes, typically involving low-interest loans, low buying prices, subsidization of cost for housing or placement in residencies, funded by the State.

IP holders can access the General Minimum Income Scheme (GMI), under the same conditions provided to Cypriot nationals,which includes a rental allowance. A serious gap, however, is the period of examination of the GMI application which in most cases requires 6 months; during this period, IP holders' access to MRC is terminated and they can only access an emergency allowance of up to a certain amount, depending on the family composition and the amount available by the district's Social Welfare Office. IP holders are entitled to this emergency money under Article 11 of the GMI scheme.

As previously mentioned, IP holders need to identify and secure accommodation on their own. In regards to the rent granted under the GMI scheme, the amounts are shown in the following table:

Table 3: Rent allowance provided under Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme

	Nicosia	Limassol	Larnaca	Paphos
Type of household				
Single person/couple w/out children	€223,30	€242,55	€192,50	€161,40
Couple with one child/ 2children of same sex	€324,80	€352,80	€280	€235,10
Single parent with one child	€324,80	€352,80	€280	€235,10
Couple with 1 child	€406	€441	€350	€294
Couple with 3 children	€406	€441	€350	€294
→ person with disability	Extra €101,50	Extra €110,25	Extra €87,50	Extra €73,50
→ For bigger families (for every 2 children or 1 child above 18 y. o.)	Extra €81,20	Extra €88,20	Extra €70	Extra €58,80

6. The Project

Over the last years, the country has seen an increase of asylum applications. In an environment characterized by a swift boom in housing prices, limited employment opportunities for asylum seekers and insufficient housing arrangements by the State, a critical situation has developed with a significant rise in homelessness and sub-standard living conditions.

Taking these factors into account, the project was proposed with an aim todecrease the risk of homelessness for vulnerable refugees by identifying proper accommodation, facilitating access to housing and conducting outreach activities to relevant actors, such as property agents, homeowners, companies, local authorities and charity organizations, in order to expand available housing options; liaise with Social Welfare Services to develop an effective mechanism of identifying suitable housing for vulnerable refugees; and map existing opportunities through extensive reach-out to urban and rural areas all over Cyprus.

For this purpose, the following outputs were planned and respective activities to be implemented:

a. Provide direct housing-related assistance

Activities of the Project in terms of direct assistance included:

- Daily interaction with beneficiaries who needed assistance in securing housing and/or monitoring the quality of their accommodation;
- Direct communication with homeowners, real estate agents in order to identify and secure proper accommodation;
- Facilitating access to shelters by mediating between those in need and the relevant benefactors;
- Provide information and tips to facilitate individual search for housing options and provide them with the necessary skills and tools to be able to become more independent in their search for housing;
- Referring urgent and vulnerable cases to SWS and NGOs;
- Mediating with authorities for purposes of conveying information to and from the beneficiaries;
- Mediating with authorities in order to secure adequate documentation and eliminate risk of homelessness.

b. Explore possibilities of increasing housing options through outreach activities.

Outreach activities in order to widen the network of actors who could potentially benefit the Project's objectives involved communication and meetings with municipalities, smaller communities and government organizations, local Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), real

estate agents, home owners and potential employers in all five districts. The objectives of these activities were to:

- Map existing services facilitating housing
- Explore alternative arrangements such as combining employment with accommodation
- Network with willing homeowners and real estate agents in order to inform them on the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus, including access to rights, as well as encouraging them to actively engage with refugees and challenge stereotypes, misinformation and negative stances against them; all in an aim to expand the pool of homeowners and real estate agents willing to offer services to beneficiaries

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the implementation of strict measures by the government, affecting the asylum reception system, urgent interventions were also conducted in order to ameliorate turbulences in the living and housing conditions of large groups of people, mainly asylum seekers.

7. Data analysis

7.1 Beneficiaries

There have been 94 cases - a total of 139 persons, including families and single people - recorded during the implementation period. Out of the 94 reported cases, 87 were Asylum Seekers,6 were holders of International Protection and 1 holder of a residence permit as a mother of a Cypriot national.

Out of the 94 cases, 29 were assisted during the strict lockdown measures through interventions and communications with authorities and other stakeholders, to address rapidly-changing and urgent housing situations. Those persons were directly affected as a result of decisions taken by authorities in the peak of the pandemic and involved:

- Groups of people, mainly residing in Famagusta and Larnaca district were given the option to transfer to the First Registration Centre Pournara for quarantine measures or return to their country; instead they left the hostels and attempted to secure private accommodations. Intervention was conducted for these cases through daily communication with the Social Welfare Services and relative district offices in order to ensure that the persons were provided with rental allowance as well as receiving updates on developments during that volatile period of time. Simultaneously, these people were being constantly informed on the situation and actions taken by authorities and were advised accordingly. The outcome for many of these cases was the ceasing of their MRC provision and the closure of their SWS files for a period of 3 months until government measures were lifted and procedures were operating as usual. However, the outcome of the intervention in some cases, was their transfer to the Pournara centre, as they could not cope without any material assistance from the SWS.

- A group of asylum seekers sleeping rough in a Mosque in Nicosia, who were facing monetary fines if found by the Police outdoors in big clusters or walking around without a legitimate reason past curfew. Intervention involved informing the authorities of their situation, and asking for their assistance in securing shelter. A positive outcome came when the competent authorities dealing with such fines, responded to our interventions by letting people pay their fines in more affordable doses.
- Vulnerable cases including pregnant and elderly women, who were in need of appropriate shelter, especially due to sanitary and health concerns due to the pandemic. Actions involved interventions to authorities urging for immediate action especially for cases involving women living in dire conditions at the Pournara First Registration Camp as a result of quarantine measures.

The other 65 cases were assisted throughout the Project's implementation period. Out of those 65 cases, 25 were assisted to identify and secure accommodation and 40 were assisted to access various types of benefits to reduce or eliminate risk of becoming homeless.

All six cases of International Protection holders were successfully assisted in securing accommodation as well as the individual case (IC) with a status of mother of a Cypriot national.

7.2 Types of accommodation

Of the 25 cases who secured accommodation through the Project, 14 secured private accommodations, whereas 9 were placed in shelters, hostels and apartments by Social Welfare Services.The latter concerns cases which are deemed vulnerable and thus prioritized by the SWS, and the apartments, hotels/hostels, expenses are covered by a specific budget provided by the Ministry Labor.

All cases of International Protection holders, including the one case of the mother of a Cypriot National, secured private accommodation, specifically apartments.

Overall, of the 65 cases assisted by the Project, 41 cases were able to secure or remain in private accommodations with rental contracts and 21 cases were able to secure accommodation via referrals by the SWS to apartments, hotels/hostels; such accommodations do not require a rental agreement between landlord and tenant as the landlord has a direct agreement with Social Welfare Office (SWO) in Lakatamia of the district of Nicosia.

7.3 Outreach Activities

- Contact was established via formal letters to municipalities all over the country, to introduce the Project, provide information material to be disseminated regarding its objectives, and request meetings with representatives of the municipalities. The Project implementer met with the Municipalities of Pafos, Larnaca, Athienou (district of Larnaca) and Germasogia (district of Limassol). The Municipality of Limassol responded through

their new Project SCHEDIA, an initiative of the Municipality together with the district's SWS, which is a day centre for homeless and at-risk homeless people and assists persons with their housing needs.

- Contact was established with the Director of the Cyprus Hotel Association and the possibilities of combining accommodation with employment were discussed. Furthermore, other members of the association were encouraged to engage with the Project for further collaborations.
- Meetings were conducted with real estate agencies to exchange knowledge and information regarding the housing market and the housing situation within the refugee community in Cyprus. The outcomes intended from those meetings were to establish cooperation between the Project implementer and the real estate agents who could provide potential accommodation opportunities.
- Correspondence with homeowners who were interested in providing accommodation to tenants holding technical skills in order to explore possibilities of agreements where lower rent prices would be offered in exchange for the provision of maintenance/minor repairs in the properties by the tenant.

The outbreak of the new coronavirus, Covid-19, in the first few months of 2020 and subsequent measures taken by the government to avoid further spreading of the virus, such as the prohibition of large gatherings, travel restrictions and strict lockdown measures, had an impact on outreach activities of the Project. Face to face meetings were postponed, conferences and other events, where one would socialize and network, were either cancelled or conducted virtually through online platforms; affecting social interaction with important stakeholders.

8. Findings

Undoubtedly, the process of identifying and securing appropriate housing by refugees is particularly challenging. A series of gaps and procedural limitations were observed throughout the project and are demonstrated below, pointing to the need for developing an effective housing strategy.

8.1Asylum Seekers are at higher risk of destitution and homelessness in comparison to beneficiaries of International Protection

Many more cases of asylum seekers, in comparison to IP holders, were in need of housing and at risk of destitution, as well as in need of assistance to identify and secure housing. This can be attributed mainly to the differences between the rights of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of International Protection; however other factors also have an impact, such as the duration of stay in the country, community support networks, language barriers etc. Asylum seekers find themselves in the most precarious of positions. Their access to material reception conditions entails insufficient

amounts for maintaining a decent standard of living and at the same time they face high unemployment rates, access to limited sectors and mainly to low-paid jobs.

The amount allocated for rent to the beneficiaries of SWS, is provided a month after the rental agreement is submitted, if all the necessary documentation - as described above - is included. However, a very common occurrence is that rental agreements submitted by people do not meet the criteria required by SWS; thus creating further delays as intervention is needed by NGOs to gather information from their relative social welfare officers in order to inform beneficiaries. Therefore, even in the best case scenario, which is a month‘s delay, in order for an asylum seeker to secure accommodation, he/she will be required to utilize any savings or pocket money, to pay for the first month‘s rent as well as a deposit or become indebted to landlords and other persons. This situation leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, gender-based violence, and eviction.

On the other hand, beneficiaries of International Protection are entitled to a higher amount of rent benefits by the government under the GMI scheme, and enjoy full access to the labor market. Once beneficiaries get passed the initial delay when the GMI application is being examined from then on the capacity to identify, secure and maintain housing is sufficiently more effective.

8.2 The role of Homeowners, Real Estate Agents

Asylum seekers and third country nationals (TCN) in general experience an overall unwillingness from homeowners to rent properties to them. This has been confirmed by the accounts of asylum seekers assisted via the Project as well as direct communication with homeowners. The majority of contacted homeowners do not trust that TCNs, especially those who are dependent on Welfare benefits, will be able to pay the agreed rent. Typical comments were that they did not trust the government would pay on time or at all; as well as a general reluctance to rent their homes to non-Cypriots.

Furthermore even in cases where asylum seekers were able to secure rental contracts many homeowners become frustrated after the first couple of months renting to asylum seekers realizing that rent benefits arrive delayed and more often than not, do not cover the full monthly rent for each tenant; especially in situations where asylum seekers share accommodation and the SWS reduces the rental allowance as per a new policy practiced, which is explained in the next section. This results in an all-too-often vicious cycle where asylum seekers get evicted after a very short period, search for other accommodation, from which they will often get evicted as soon as the next landlord becomes frustrated with the situation.

Through the Project’s activities there were also indications that a number of landlords and real-estate agents, who know how to navigate themselves in this flawed system, take advantage of the housing situation of asylum seekers. They rent or sublet rooms, often of substandard quality, to large groups of people, giving out individual rent contracts for each room, which are usually shared between two or more tenants with the aim to profit as much as possible.

On the other hand, according to the Project’s findings, refugees with International Protection status are more positively perceived by homeowners and landlords, as they know that they have a

permanent status in the country, are often employed or are recipients of GMI which provides sufficient rental allowance. This also leads to fewer instances of exploitation makes less likely for the tenant to be evicted

8.3Rent benefit practices

The Social Welfare Services (SWS), in an effort to address instance of overcrowding in rented accommodations and exploitation by homeowners, introduced a cap in the amount paid for each accommodation. For example, whereas one asylum seeker is entitled to €100 rent benefit, when sharing an accommodation with others the group is treated as a family unit and the allowance provided to each individual is reduced. The maximum amount allowed per household - which varies per district - , for example in Nicosia, is €364, which equates to the amount a 4-5 member family is allowed. Therefore, even if a house/apartment, with multiple bedrooms accommodates five people, it can only receive the maximum amount, which is €364, instead of €500, which is equivalent to €100 for each tenant. This puts tenants in extremely difficult positions as the homeowner continues to charge €100 for each tenant and the tenant will have to secure the remaining amount.

In order to avoid eviction asylum seekers are forced to utilize the benefits or coupons they receive for food and other expenses in order to cover the rest of their rent. However, this only adds to the vicious cycles, as the utility bills coming in bimonthly are often left unpaid which the homeowners may eventually have to pay. This has also led to exploitation by shop owners, who accept coupons, and charge a fee to people who ask to exchange them for cash. Thus, creating a whole new spectrum of exploitation; however this might come to an end soon, as coupons have now been replaced with checks, as it used to be the case before 2013, which can be deposited in their bank accounts.

8.4Addressing housing needs of vulnerable individuals

A positive practice was observed by the Social Welfare Services (SWS) and the assistance provided to particularly vulnerable asylum seekers in regard to securing housing. Although this often comes as a result of mediation and support activities implemented by local NGOs, SWS demonstrates willingness to respond to urgent housing needs of persons falling under the following categories.

- Pregnant women
- Single parents
- Families with children
- Victims of Trafficking
- Persons with a disability - mental or physical health
- Elderly

SWS assist such cases usually by placing them in hotels/hostels in their district of residence. These hotels/hostels are often located in rural areas, or lower-end hotels in central areas of the city, which are turned into hostels so as to accommodate as many people as possible. Hoteliers usually charge the SWS a daily or weekly amount, similarly to what they would charge a tourist. However,

the conditions of such accommodations are often questioned by beneficiaries, especially families, and includes complaints about poor living conditions, noisy environment, overcrowding related problems etc. In an effort to address this issue the district SWS in Nicosia allocates staff and budget resources for purposes of identifying (usually 3-4 bedrooms) apartments rather than hotels, to which vulnerable women (single mothers and pregnant women) are referred. Unfortunately, this practice, which can lead to safer and more appropriate living arrangements, is not replicated in the other 4 districts by SWS.

Although assisting vulnerable people in finding shelter is undoubtedly a positive practice, according to the information provided by SWS officers around Cyprus and the Project's observations, such assistance is not provided to a very large segment of the asylum seeking population, i.e. single persons, including persons in acute risk of being homeless or people already living in the streets, with the exception of cases that may draw public attention.

8.5 Observations related to the geographical distribution of refugees

There are areas in each district, which more commonly accommodate communities of refugees. In each city, it is more likely to find urban areas more heavily populated with refugees, although rural areas have significantly lower rent prices. This is due to a variety of reasons. Firstly, many people cannot afford to use -the limited- transportation system, on a daily basis and therefore choose to search for housing where facilities are more accessible. Secondly, many run-down buildings exist in the old towns of each city, which have turned into accommodations as they are cheaper to rent out and as a result lure in larger groups of people who put their money together and rent an accommodation of substandard quality. These were more evident in the city centers of Nicosia and Larnaca.

Further, there are areas in each town, for example Paphos, where bigger communities of refugees, mainly Syrians reside, solely due to the fact that other family members have been living there for many years, in some cases more than a decade. Furthermore, a growing number of other nationalities of refugees have begun settling in Paphos as the rent prices are the lowest in comparison to other districts.

In the district of Famagusta, the most common location in which refugees reside is Ayia Napa, where there are many hotel apartments which stay empty during off-peak seasons of tourism. These hotel apartments, which are usually rented out short term to tourists who visit the country, turn into accommodations for refugees and, mostly, asylum seekers which are rented for a 6-month period. This year, due to the pandemic the numbers of tourist visiting Cyprus have been extremely low leading to an increase of apartment owners willing to rent out to refugees, as they were in need of the income.

8.6 The role of Local Authorities/Municipalities

Throughout the Project‘s implementation period, meetings were conducted with Municipalities of Paphos, Larnaca, Athienou (Larnaca District) and Germasogia (Limassol District), with the aim to introduce the Project, to get an idea of the housing problems in their respective districts, and explore the possibility of alternative housing opportunities, such as identifying and utilizing available vacant properties. The meetings showcased the need for expert‘s guidance and support in identifying, recording, securing resources and addressing homelessness at local level.

The approach on the issue of homelessness between municipalities varies. While, for example, in Paphos and Athienou, homelessness was not considered as a major issue, something which was attributed to the close family ties between the communities of refugees (Pafos) or relatively

low numbers of refugeesin the area (Athienou) in Larnaca and Germasogia, it was identified as an increasingly alarming issue that needs to needs to be addressed timely.

It became evident from meetings with local authorities that recording homelessness cases, identifying and utilizing vacant properties, calls for the development of an action plan which will include experts' guidance and support. In line with this, there is an even stronger need to secure financial resources, such as EU and/or State funds, in order to actively provide support to homeless persons and persons at risk of homelessness.

It was also indicated that housing issues especially for non-nationals are not included in formal discussions between local authorities representatives. This isolated approach to homelessness largely characterizes local authorities, both in regards to the collaborations on the matter between them, but also with the central government and SWS. In orderto identify homelessness issues while simultaneously address the gaps between local and State authorities, which is a joint challenge of our times, a relevant discussion, exchange of opinions and development of tools should be facilitated.

A promising initiative is that of "SCHEDIA" by the municipality of Limassol implemented together with the district's Social Welfare Services. This initiative proves that if more local authorities had the tools and resources to tackle such issues, more would be done in addressing the growing problem of homelessness in Cyprus.

8.7 Mediating between homeowners and beneficiaries

Part of the Project's networking activities involved communication with homeowners who were interested in accommodating refugees in big properties and exploring options such as combining accommodation with employment, or getting lower rent prices in exchange for maintenance/repairs work done by tenants holding the necessary skills. Although such alternative ideas were in some cases well received by homeowners as mutually beneficial to both parties, they would come to a stall, when the realities of rent arrangements by SWS would come into play, creating hesitation even to willing and positive homeowners. Further exploration for such arrangements could be pursued directly with employers who can offer accommodation and are in shortage of staff, such as the hospitality/catering industry.

9.Recommendations

9.1 Development of Strategies

There is a strong need to develop official strategies for addressing homelessness on a national level. Setting-up mechanisms of reporting, monitoring as well as timely addressing homelessness and associated risks within various geographical areas and populations, will provide opportunities for uniform, better informed and more effective interventions and collaborations between actors.

The utilization of EU funds for this purpose combined with a growing number of relevant reports and reviews, sharing experiences and best practices, can increase the readiness of the State and local authorities to address this complex issue. EU funds provides room for long-term, comprehensive solutions instead of local, scarce and uncorrelated actions.

Indicatively, EU funds and other financial sources could be used in order to:

- Invest in long-term solutions such as expanding housing options and developing public housing schemes. In the case of asylum seekers, the practice of spending substantial amounts for payments to private hotel/hostel owners and homeowners leads to temporary solutions, inadequate living standards, administrative burden and low added value. A reallocation of funds to pursue long-term solutions could benefit both the State, as well as beneficiaries.
- Expand existing staff capacity in SWS, municipalities and smaller communities, allowing timely identification of homelessness and risk of homelessness, mediating actions between beneficiaries and homeowners and providing of information and assistance to beneficiaries who find it hard to navigate through the housing system in the country.

9.2 Encourage and Support local authorities ‘engagement

There is a need to incentivize more active involvement from local authorities. Being in direct contact with all community actors, local communities are in the most advantageous position to record homelessness cases and trends, monitor effectiveness of relevant policies and practices, identify housing opportunities, collaborate with national public services as well as networking with relevant actors and the general public.

An action plan should be elaborated to provide local communities that identify homelessness and assorted risk as an alarming issue, with the capacity to play this key role. Relevant initiatives at both central and local level (which could also utilize available funds) could provide local authorities with the necessary tools, resources and guidance in order to respond to the housing issues within their responsibility.

The example of ''SCHEDIA" initiative in Limassol, is an encouraging example of action at the local level, as it can lead to the collection of valuable real-time information, mobilization of local community and case-appropriate interventions. The critical situation in which many refugees in many districts find themselves, calls for the need for such initiatives to be replicated and reinforced.

9.3 Review of SWS practices

Current SWS practices play an important role in the overall capacity of asylum seekers to secure housing, as well as the willingness of homeowners to provide affordable and quality accommodation options. Uniform, simplified and non-bureaucratic and procedures across all five districts is required. In addition, replicating the example of Nicosia SWS, where staff actively engages in identifying housing options through networking with owners is needed, to alleviate obstacles faced by beneficiaries.

Regarding procedures of granting rent allowance to asylum seekers, a more efficient system is required in order to keep the necessary balance between preventing overcharging by homeowners and securing appropriate options for beneficiaries. The composition and systematic monitoring of the quality of housing, instead of simply capping the amount of rent, would be a more effective measure.

Finally, and as observed in cases of beneficiaries of the GMI system, the level of rent allowance provided is detrimental in accessing housing and can help significantly in reducing homelessness and assorted destitution.

9.4Faster Access to better employment options for asylum seekers

The procedure of hiring an asylum seeker requires the drafting of a personal contract of the employee by the employer, along with submission of a series of documents proving that the company meets certain conditions of legal operation and submitting it for approval at the local Labor Department of the Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance. The competent officerexamines the eligibility of the employer (settled social security contributions, insurance, etc.) and the candidate (personal data, valid residence status), and then the contracts are sent to the central offices of the Labor Department, where a group of officials examines the terms of employment (e.g. salary, overtime, etc.). Although the processing time of the whole process has been reduced compared to the past, it still remains lengthy and there are often considerable delays. This often discourages employers from hiring an asylum seeker, while other times employment might commence irregularly. Decisively reducing the processing time of this process, either by increasing the staff or (and) by reviewing the process itself, can lead to higher numbers of recruitment and better utilization of workforce that is already in the country.

A possible revised procedure model could include licensing the employer to start hiring, at the time the contract is filed with the Employment Bureau. This way, the hiring can start without delays, and the employer will be fully informed of their obligations. At the same time, when the (final) approval process is completed, the Department of Labor will be able to ascertain whether the agreements are being complied with so that it is able to either give final approval or revoke it and potentially refer the case to the Department of Labor Relations.

In regards to the currently allowed sectors of employment for asylum seekers, it is suggested that they are expanded to cover more professions. Given the variety of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, this will provide more opportunities for both covering staff needs of businesses while facilitating more stable and better paid jobs, reducing the risk of homelessness.

9.5 Inclusion of International Protection Holders in existing housing and micro credit schemes

The Project findings indicated that a sufficient number of IP holders will also find themselves in destitution and homelessness despite access to employment under the same conditions as nationals, higher level of rental allowance under the GMI and community ties or support. The risk of homelessness although lower, remains, including households who reside for many years in Cyprus.

IP holders are excluded from existing housing and finance schemes targeting households with medium or lower financial capacities. Furthermore very few IP holders receive Cypriot nationality or other long term status, including persons who have been born or lived in the country for over a decade, which excludes them indefinitely from such schemes. When addressing the housing options and long-term solutions, it is vital to stress the importance of providing more opportunities to IP holders to secure appropriate shelter, reinforce their ties with the local community, and address the needs of their families in the long run. Still, only a handful of those people including persons with financial stability and good prospects will be able to become homeowners, in a country that holds very high records of home ownership.

10. A note on the new coronavirus outbreak, Covid-19; impact on the population

In early 2020, the Council of Ministers of Interior announced stringent measures in regards to the Material Reception Conditions system for asylum seekers, including the creation of closed reception centers. At the time, measures were also being taken due to Covid-19. Before completing construction of the First Registration and Reception Centre at Pournara, all new arrivals in the country were referred to the Centre and were not allowed to leave. This led to a rise in the number of persons in the Centre to approximately 700 without the infrastructure in place to host such a number, especially given the long duration of obligatory stay in the Centre which was introduced at the time.

After strong reactions from asylum seekers in the Centre and the community, the Asylum Service started allowing 10 persons per day to leave, giving priority to vulnerable persons and women but only if they could present a valid address. In view of the obstacles in accessing reception conditions, identifying accommodation was extremely difficult even for those being in contact with persons in the community.

In relation to the project, activities placed much attention on the most vulnerable who were facing unprecedented difficulty due to the virus outbreak. This included single mothers, pregnant women, undocumented third country nationals, who were facing the threat of homelessness during the height of the pandemic. This required maintaining daily communication with Social Welfare officers, in order to stay updated on any changes to the accommodations provided by State services, such as hotels/hostels providing shelter to asylum seekers.

During strict lockdown measures, homeless shelters ceased to accept new arrivals;, hotels/hostels accommodating asylum seekers by Social Welfare Services (SWS) referrals subsequently evacuated their premises and, by orders of the Ministry of Interior executed by the Asylum Service, hundreds of asylum seekers were transferred to the First Registration camp in Pournara for quarantine measures.

The authorities gave asylum seekers residing in these hotels two options: to either transfer to the First Registration camp in Pournara or sign a waiver agreeing to withdraw their asylum applications and be moved back to their country, with some financial assistance. This resulted in hundreds of individuals, including vulnerable people, being transferred to the camp to quarantine in clusters, living in substandard conditions.

Furthermore, many asylum seekers decided to search for and secure accommodations on their own rather than transferring to Pournara, not knowing that this would be considered a refusal to abide by the government‘s orders; thus, resulting in the closure of their Welfare files and having all their benefits cut off.

To this day the community is suffering from these measures, while the second phase of the pandemic is again highlighting the gaps in implementing an effective reception and accommodation policy. At the time of publication of this report, around 70 asylum seekers, including minors, have been sleeping rough for days, as a result of being turned away when attempting to lodge their asylum applications, due to the Pournara Centre being in full capacity and lack of proactive alternative suitable arrangements. As the Covid-19 pandemic is continuing, and given the overall stricter political context regarding the handling of refugee and migrant flows in the country, the need for further monitoring, mediation and support remains vital.

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