

Informing an inclusive strategy for the social integration of young refugees in Cyprus

A Study Summary

Nicosia, 2025
Cyprus Refugee Council

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Introduction

Integration of refugees in the Republic of Cyprus remains a weak link in the asylum system. With an official strategy facilitating the inclusion of migrants and refugees yet to be deployed and in absence of comprehensive, accessible, longitudinal, evidence-driven data on integration outcomes and prospects of the refugee population, policy makers, practitioners, civic society and institutions can only hold a fragmented overview of the situation on the ground.

This is particularly true for the younger generation of refugees in Cyprus, persons who were born in Cyprus or arrived in the country at a young age and have recently transited into early adulthood. These young persons have –typically- followed their families on their journey and settlement in their new homes, have been growing up in a context where experiences related to forced migration realities affect them directly or indirectly, and are now taking their first steps in the complexities of adult life.

Very often, these young people are the indirect beneficiaries of the services provided by governmental and non-governmental actors to their families and existing literature offers few insights on their situation, their experiences, their needs and aspirations. This report hopes to contribute by bringing forward their voices.

This document summarizes prominent aspects of their life experiences, as captured by a study conducted by Cyprus Refugee Council, a local NGO based in the Republic of Cyprus offering legal, psycho-social and integration services to refugee communities.

The project materialized with the support and funding of the Dutch Council for Refugees.

The aim is to inform an inclusive strategy for young refugees in Cyprus, by identifying areas of concern and meaningful interventions by CyRC and related actors, such as youth practitioners, policy makers, civic society, state and local community services, in pursue of better integration outcomes for this segment of Cyprus' youth.

Please contact us at info@cyrefugeecouncil.org for a copy of the full report.

Key methodological remarks and considerations

To the best of our knowledge, very limited similar research has been conducted in Cyprus, to inform the scope of the present study. Due to lack of existing literature on the population of interest and the well-documented difficulties in deploying random sampling techniques within refugee communities, the study employed an exploratory, mixed-method approach, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology to explore an array of issues/characteristics and provide base for further research.

The young refugees who participated in the study were between 18-25 years old, holders of International/Temporary protection or asylum seekers and were able to communicate effectively in English or Greek. Efforts to include both men and women residing in all districts of the Republic of Cyprus were made.

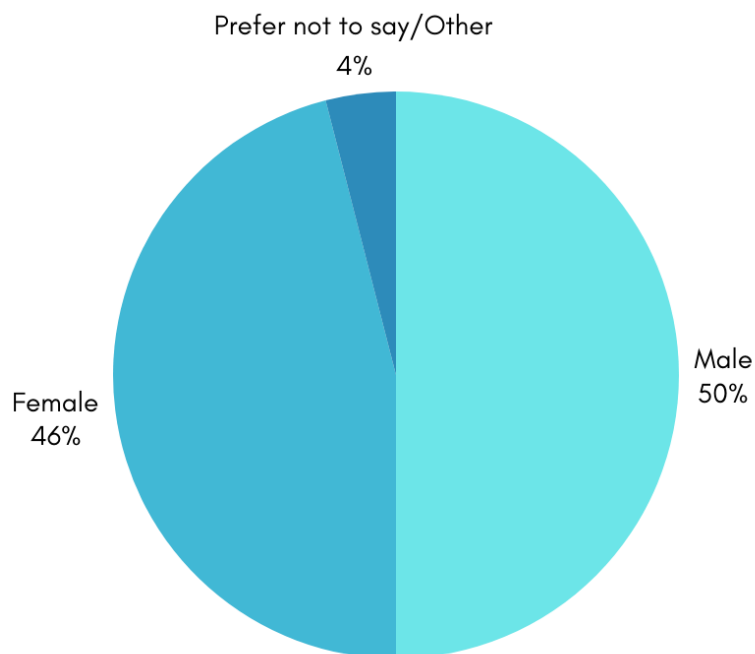
An online questionnaire was completed by 129 persons and two focus groups with 12 participants were conducted. All participants were identified through a purposive, snowball technique utilizing CyRC's network therefore any generalization of findings to the whole population should be cautiously performed.

Recruitment of participants was challenging. The main reasons identified were a. the focus on a narrow age range which significantly reduced the number of eligible participants b. the limited availability of the questionnaire in languages other than Greek and English and c. the fact that population of focus is typically the indirect recipient of CyRC services, as such services are usually requested by the elder members of the households, with whom a direct relation is maintained.

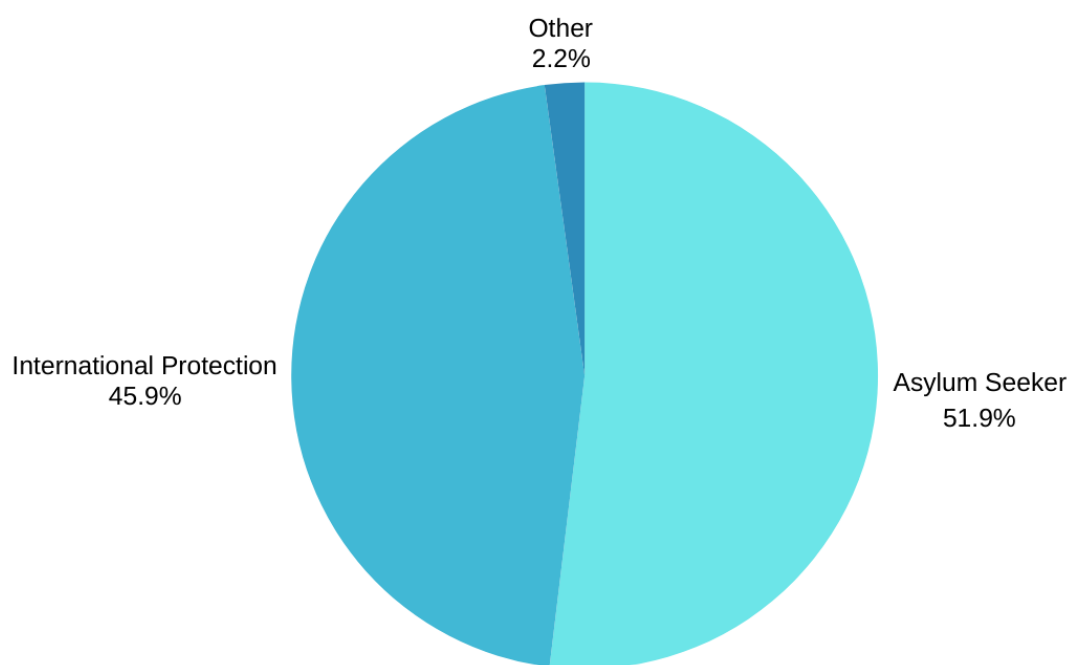
Profile of participants

Based on the quantitative part- 129 questionnaires

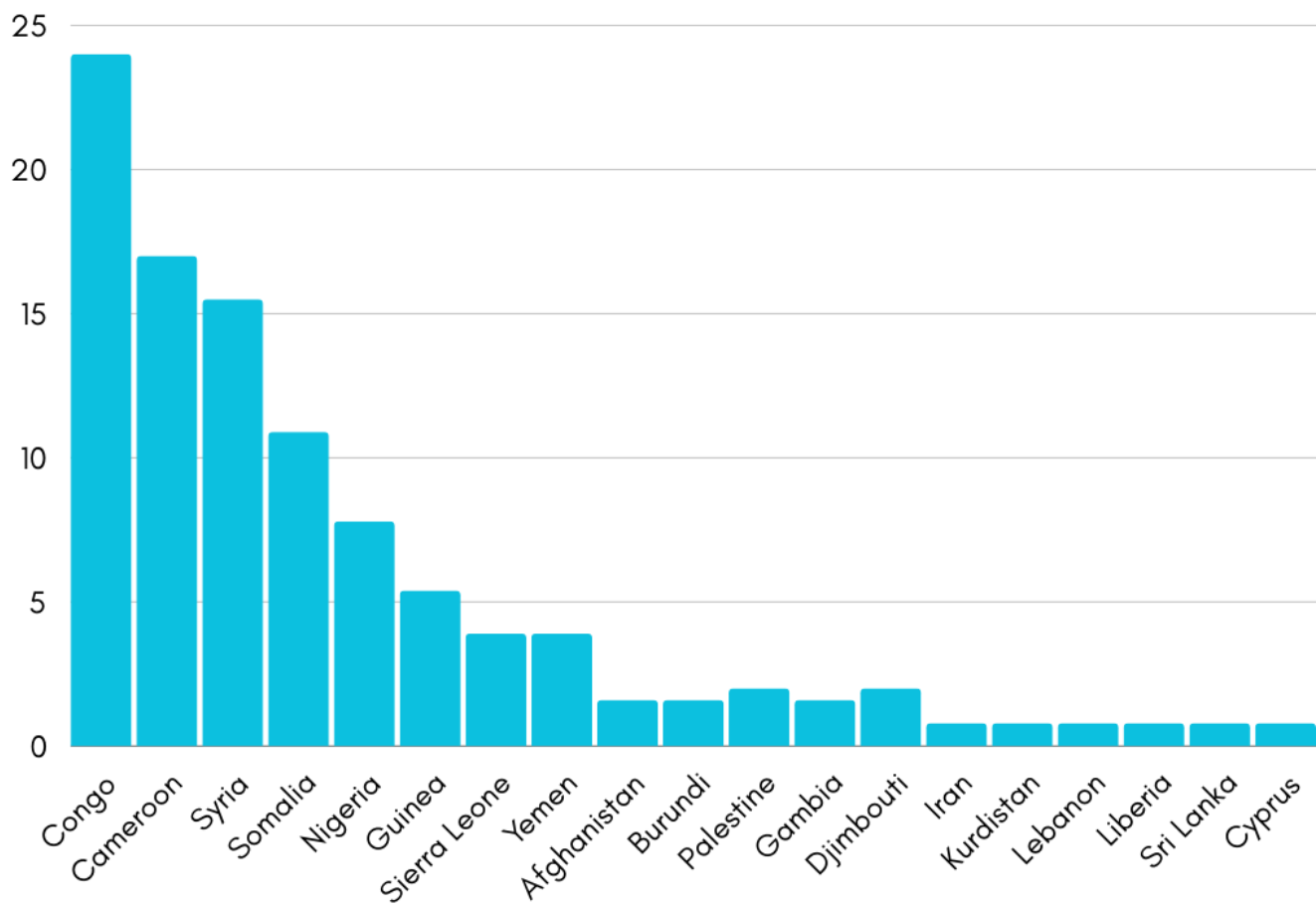
Gender



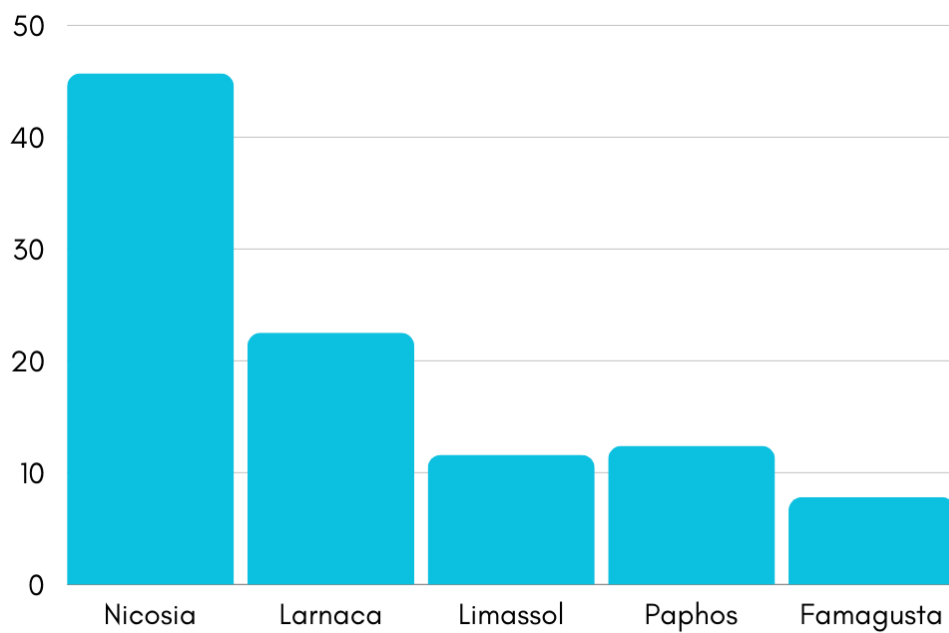
Residence Status



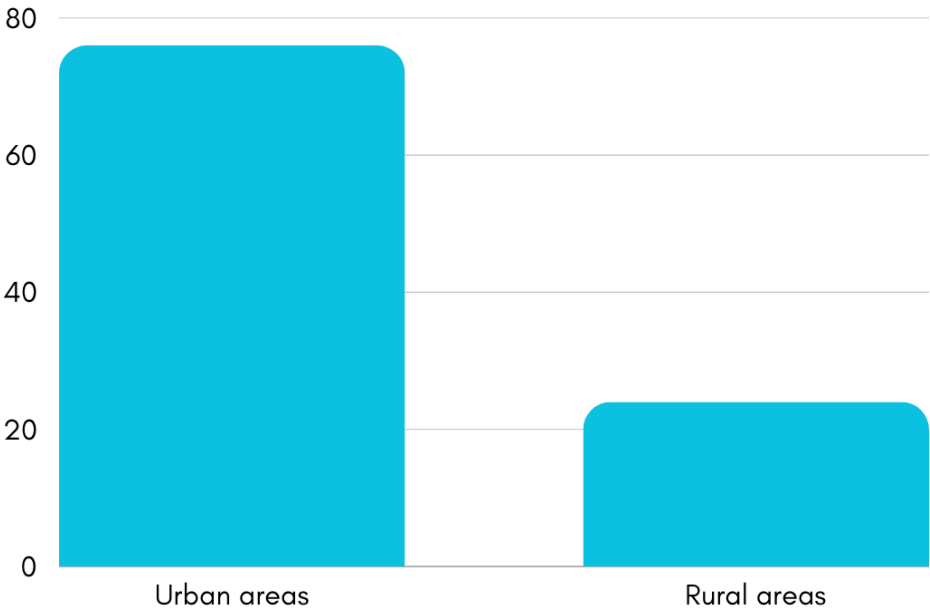
Country of Origin (%)



District of residence in Cyprus (%)



Residence in urban or rural areas (%)



Key findings

A population that struggles.

The majority of respondents struggle financially. App 59% survive on incomes up to 1000 euro, 52% of the employed persons work more than 41 hours/week and app 57% of the respondents stated that up to 5 people are sustained on that income. Overall, almost 70% reported that they find it difficult or very difficult to survive on their income.

A lot of room for improvement regarding employment outcomes

Employment plays a prominent role in shaping these young people's lives.

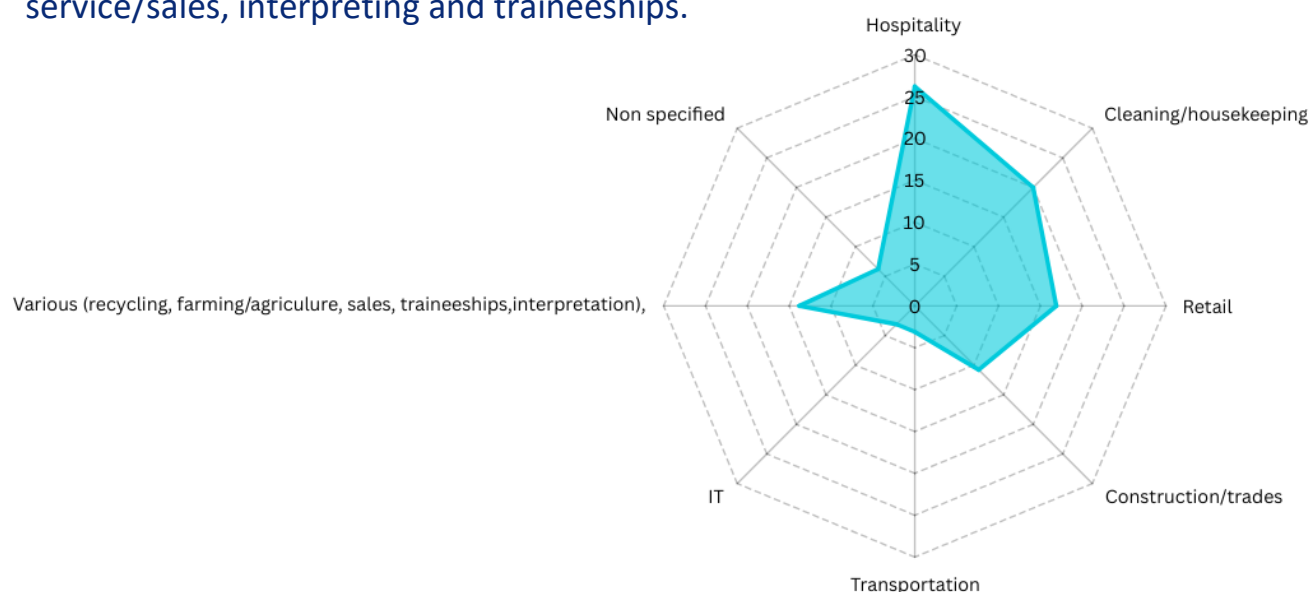
Half of the young respondents are working, with the majority being employed on a full-time basis (62%). The overall satisfaction from their current jobs is medium-to-low. Asylum seekers work more hours per week (app 46 hours) on average, compared to International Protection Holders (39 hours). The same is true for residents of rural areas who reported 6 more working hours per week than those in urban areas.

Employed respondents tend more towards changing jobs/professions and improving their work conditions rather than continuing doing their present jobs under current conditions. This is particularly true for young asylum seekers who, compared to International Protection holders and given their limited access to employment, believe that the gap between their skills/potential and current job is greater.

The vast majority (app. 82%) of the young respondents said that they have not received any professional support in order to make decisions about their career.

Among the 65 employed individuals, app 26% reported working in the hospitality sector (including cafes, kitchens, or hotels), 20% are employed in cleaning or housekeeping services, and app 17% work in retail (such as fruit markets, supermarkets, or other retail stores). Additionally, app 11% are employed in construction or trades, 3% work as drivers and 3% are employed in the information technology sector. Furthermore, app

14% are engaged in various other roles, including recycling, farming jobs, customer service/sales, interpreting and traineeships.



High levels of unemployment and challenges

Half of the respondents are not working. Among the unemployed, only 8% cannot work due to studying. Almost half of the unemployed young refugees report that they are actively looking for work and app 25% (both men and women) cannot work due to care responsibilities. This is in line with literature and CyRC's observations which indicate extensive care needs among refugee households, due to lack of social support networks and rough financial situation.

Another 20% state that they cannot work due to disability/health problems or restrictions related to their residence status.

Despite the prominent role of employment in young refugees' lives, current job options seem to function more as a means of survival than a source of fulfilment. Employed participants reported higher life satisfaction compared to their unemployed counterparts; however, this advantage did not extend to well-being scores. For most respondents, their current jobs provide financial stability but fail to offer personal fulfilment.

Employment aspirations in sharp contrast with current jobs

Young refugees aspire to work in a variety of sectors. The most prominent sectors mentioned are the following:

Medical Sector (medicine, nursing, medical laboratories) was the most frequently mentioned. Owning a business and Arts (painting, design, singing, acting) followed. Engineering and Architecture were also cited. Hospitality Sector (kitchens, hotels), transportation sector and Information Technology sector followed. Economics and Investments (accountant, investment companies) were also mentioned. International Relations and Politics (politician, international communication) were mentioned and the Humanitarian Sector (ambassador for peace, social worker) had the least entries.



The results indicate a considerable gap between the current employment situation and future aspirations among the young participants, a finding which calls for interventions to reduce this discrepancy.

Regarding entrepreneurship prospects, both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that setting up a business is of interest to a diverse profile of respondents, men and women. Persons who have not been in the country for long time, those who did not attend school in Cyprus and those who evaluated their school grades as lower compared to their classmates' performance, demonstrate somewhat greater interest to start their own business, suggesting that entrepreneurship prospects can be appealing to young refugees who do not see further educational prospects in Cyprus.

Those with stronger aspirations to set up a business tend to value higher networking with Cypriots in order to succeed and tend to be less satisfied from their current job.

Young refugees need support to fulfil their career plans. The vast majority consider as extremely important to get relevant working experience, receive professional advice on the necessary steps, access technical training/higher education and learn the Greek language better. A much lower, but still considerable percentage, (app 53%) believe that knowing Cypriots who can vouch for them to employers is also extremely important, particularly those with holding lower academic qualifications as well as those with stronger entrepreneurship aspirations.

Getting support directly related to employment, in particular relevant work experience and professional guidance is more important for those who have not been in a Cypriot school. Getting related work experience is also particularly important for those with lower fluency in Greek language.

Medium-to-low levels of well-being and life satisfaction

Young refugees report medium-to-low levels of happiness and satisfaction from their lives. This comes as no surprise given the multiple ongoing challenges that come with migration and adaptation process.

Reported levels of well-being/happiness and satisfaction from life are related to several factors. Financial situation, satisfaction from their job, ties with Cypriots, fluency in Greek, holding an International Protection Status and support from school actors as well as peer and family for those who attended school in Cyprus, are all related to how happy young refugees feel.

Especially, for those who attended school in Cyprus and who are typically persons who have stayed in the country for longer, levels of happiness are strongly related to certain aspects of school experience, more specifically, the quality of the support they receive by school counsellors, teachers and specialized programs for refugees, as well as family and friends.

Compared to the actual challenges per se, such as difficulties with transportation to school, discrimination from peers and teachers, language gaps and challenges related to adaptation to Cypriot educational system, the role of those support networks in tackling those difficulties, emerges as a more relevant factor for how happy those young refugees feel.

The finding suggests that focusing on how counsellors, teachers and initiatives within the school framework can maximize their reach and impact on young refugees, could make a tangible difference on latter's capacity to cope with various challenges, enhancing their well-being. It also indicates that the value of support networks of peers and family members is considerable for the education process as well, suggesting the need to explore more how parents and friends can boost their capacity as active facilitators of school adaptation and progress.

Social interactions with Cypriots are important

One of the most significant findings of the study is the importance of having a Cypriot friend. While most respondents report having friends from their own ethnic community, only 40% report having Cypriot friends. Participants meet their Cypriot friends predominately at work, and least frequently in their neighbourhood/school, while the opposite is true in the case of friends from their own ethnic group, where neighbourhood is the major social space of those interactions.

The finding suggests that existing accommodation and livelihood realities do not facilitate the formulation of bonds with locals. On the contrary, social interactions in workplaces and schools remain salient for such networking opportunities. Young respondents report that they meet their Cypriot friends more frequently than their compatriots.

Having a friend from the local community relates strongly with participants' life satisfaction and well-being, fluency in Greek and is linked with more positive attitudes towards Cypriots in general. The finding calls for interventions which encourage the formulation of such networks, given their importance to young people's lives.

Results provide indications that being to school in Cyprus is an important pathway to establishing connections with Cypriot peers. School emerges as a more salient route in that regard than employment, possibly because interactions with locals is -more or less- unavoidable in public education system, while staff composition in work environments, especially in the sectors where respondents are employed, might as well involve very few Cypriots.

Notably, a considerable 63% of the young persons who did not enroll in the Cypriot education system, does not have any Cypriot friends, a finding that which calls for targeted interventions in the community level to bridge this gap.

In overall, young refugees hold a positive attitude toward the local population in Cyprus, and this positivity is stronger among those who have lived in the country longer or are more fluent/frequent users of Greek. Positive attitudes toward the local population are also notably linked to higher well-being and life satisfaction.

Trust in local people and institutions

Respondents report medium to high levels of trust in the local people and institutions.

Local NGOs received the highest trust ratings, a finding that characterizes young refugees irrespective of their general attitudes toward the local population. The Social Welfare System received the lowest trust rating.

Trust in official institutions and the individual level with everyday people is interconnected. The highest trust is directed primarily towards the local NGOs and secondly towards the local people, in line with the finding of the relatively positive attitudes towards Cypriots. This might suggest that interventions involving locals may resonate more with these youth than those led by the government or other authorities. As such, a promising integration strategy could involve fostering grassroots initiatives by local actors, including civic society, volunteer groups and local authorities.

This finding also highlights a need and willingness among young respondents to come into contact with the local population. This aligns with insights from focus group

discussions, particularly among respondents who were not born in Cyprus or had spent less time on the island. They shared examples from their daily lives—such as at work or in local stores—where they experienced positive interactions with locals. Many expressed genuine satisfaction in these everyday exchanges.

The above positive interactions were contrasted with negative interactions with employers in the welfare services for example, something that is also insinuated by the low trust towards the Social Welfare Services.

Diverse life experiences and integrational challenges

Although small/unequal sample sizes between respondents of different ethnic groups limit seamless generalization of findings to the whole population, the study provides indications of noteworthy differences between persons of different ethnic backgrounds, on a variety of issues, such as school experiences, employability, engagement with local community etc.

Indicatively, young Syrian and Somali women provided considerably different perspectives on the obstacles they faced in their capacity to integrate in the school system (study methods, exams), their readiness to navigate in the labour market and secure work, their levels of interest in Cypriot politics, the number of Cypriot friends they have, the extent of the support they receive from their networks of family and friends.

Similar indications also emerged between other ethnic groups, pointing out that despite any common challenges, the actual life experiences, support networks, coping strategies and integrational outcomes among them may vary considerably and on many levels.

Understanding those perspectives in good detail is extremely important for practitioners and policy makers in order to inform policies and services that acknowledge this diversity and allow for tailored interventions which can effectively promote local integration and well-being. Further research is required.

School Support networks matter

27% of young participants have completed tertiary studies and 33% have completed secondary education. 10% of the participants did not attend school.

Two out of five persons have interrupted their education at least once, mainly due to financial difficulties. Still, most participants who have been in school, either in Cyprus or elsewhere, rate their academic performance positively and report active involvement with school community and social networking with peers.

Educational prospects are important for integration. Most young refugees consider accessing technical training and pursuing higher education studies as very important pathways for fulfilling their career aspirations. A good part of positive interactions with locals, social life and formulation of friendships takes place in school settings.

A 20% of participants has attended school in Cyprus. Although sample size restricts seamless application of results to the whole population of young refugees, notable findings emerged, requiring further exploration.

Communicating in Greek language and commuting to the school were reported as the most prominent obstacles in attending education in Cyprus.

Young refugees need support to overcome educational challenges, and they primarily rely on their own capacities and skills to resolve issues at school. Support from personal networks such as family, friends, teachers and counsellors are also valued and are considered more impactful than the support received by “institutional” sources, such as antidiscrimination policies, specialized educational programs, NGOs and governmental services. Still, all supportive factors are utilized when needed.

When examined in the context of social interactions in the school and formulation of close friendships, the impact of those actors is clearer. The young students resorting to receiving support from those actors, also report a higher number of close friends in school.

Still, young persons who routinely use Greek language in their everyday life, tend to be less in need of support from their teachers, counsellors and NGOs, highlighting the crucial role of efficient Greek language learning for navigating through the challenges within the official education system.

Considerable indications of vulnerability

A high percentage of participants (app 24%) reported a physical or mental health impairment, pointing out the particular realities attached to the refugee experience. Despite any methodological limitations, this finding is in line with literature which consistently indicates higher prevalence of physical and mental health difficulties among refugees and asylum seekers.

Both groups can be exposed to various stressors, such as violence, torture, detention, death, losses of resources etc. which can affect their overall functionality.

Compared to the rest of the participants, respondents with disabilities reported much lower life satisfaction and happiness levels and had experienced more disruptions in their schooling life.

Greek language is important

Greek language fluency is pivotal for the particular youth group as it was found to be related to many different aspects of participants' life, including wellbeing, bonds with natives, education experiences, employment prospects etc.

Better command of Greek language and higher frequency in its use were associated with higher job satisfaction, more confidence in searching for work, higher chances to have Cypriot friends, more positive attitudes towards Cypriots, higher reported levels of happiness and higher satisfaction from life. For those who had attended school it emerged as the most prominent challenge for their school progress, it was strongly associated with higher numbers of close friends and less need for support from teachers, counselors and NGOs for resolving educational challenges.

However, approximately 75% of the respondents describe their Greek language level as very low and only 8.5% consider themselves fluent, typically persons being in the country for longer time and having attended school. This calls for offering substantially more opportunities to learn the language, especially for those who have not attended school.

More than half of the respondents (56%) use Greek daily or very frequently while app 12% never use Greek. A 20% of the young refugees mentioned that they are currently or very recently enrolled in Greek classes, with the majority of them learning Greek through popular online applications.

The need to improve command of Greek language for purposes of fulfilling career aspirations emerged as very prevalent one in the study. Interestingly, that need was highlighted regardless of how good Greek one speaks, i.e by both those who have been longer in the country and have a good command of the language, and those who don't.

For young refugees, Greek language is perceived as a key element for local labour integration. It is a goal which they pursue and heavily invest onto, but at the same time, a very challenging one to be fully met. Even for proficient users, persons who have been in the country long enough, there is always room for improvement in parallel with the perceived distance to achieving better integration outcomes in their employment lives.

Different social bonds in rural and urban places of residence

Respondents living in rural areas reported an average of 6 extra hours of work per week compared to those living and working in urban areas.

At the same time, respondents in rural areas reported stronger ties with Cypriots and higher trust to local institutions, compared to urban residents. Rural residents find it easier to become friends with Cypriots, they report higher enjoyment of having Cypriot friends, and indicate stronger trust towards the local police. Employment rates were also indicated as somewhat better for those living in rural areas.

Although small/unequal sample size calls for cautious generalization of these findings, results provide strong indications for the facilitating role of rural social context on integration and sense of belonging, requiring further exploration.

Strong aspirations for the future, determination to succeed and resilience

Young refugees report medium-to-high levels of resilience and demonstrate strong motivation to progress personally and professionally. They are determined to succeed, relying more on their own efforts and family support, rather than on institutional support and guidance. Despite the population's evident challenges, these individuals remain steadfast in their aspirations. They demonstrate the drive and energy to actively contribute to Cyprus's labour market and educational system.

Interestingly, for all participants, both employed and unemployed, being resilient relates to how confident they feel to navigate through work related challenges and possessing employability skills, indicating the central role of employment in everybody's lives.

For those currently working though, resilience levels also depend on the frequency of interactions with their Cypriot friends, highlighting how central bonds with locals can be when it comes to the ability to cope with everyday challenges. Not surprisingly, this is not the case for unemployed persons. Being more cut off from the opportunity to interact with Cypriots, their resilience is influenced more by the frequency of interactions with friends from their own ethnic group, which constitute an accessible support group.

While young participants' well-being and life satisfaction levels suggest that they are struggling with their current employment and living situation, they manage to maintain remarkable resilience and strong aspirations for the future. This is also reflected in their high pragmatic aspirations, indicating a strong desire to improve their circumstances.

To address these challenges, initiatives should prioritize stability in their daily lives while simultaneously supporting their educational and career aspirations, further enhancing their need for self-fulfillment. This need was also evident in the focus groups, where

participants expressed a strong desire to continue their education but struggled to balance earning a steady income with the demands of student life.

Recommendations

Financial situation and employment outcomes

Young respondents typically survive on low incomes and do demanding jobs which do not align with their diverse career aspirations. Unemployed persons face barriers to access work. Employment is central for their well-being and creating vital links with the local community. Very limited career guidance. Entrepreneurship aspirations.

Suggested interventions:

Interventions need to bridge the gap between career aspirations and employment options, through a combination of individualized guidance and creation of opportunities:

Career counselling services are important for young refugees and need to:

- Provide informed, individualized professional career advice and guidance to young refugees both in school and in the community.
- Focus in bridging the gap between aspirations and immediate employment options, though long-term planning and providing support services for identifying job opportunities which can be of immediate reach but also act as pathways to better employment outcomes in the future.
- Provide detailed and updated information/guidance for accessing relevant education and training opportunities.
- Acknowledge the particular situations in which young refugees live, including the diversity among refugees' life experiences by building rapport with refugee communities and offering culturally sensitive services

Efforts to provide more employment opportunities are required. They need to:

- Utilize or develop opportunities for meaningful job/skills training, internships, and mentorship
- Pursue closer partnership with industries and sectors which are growing and in demand of expertise to create entry-level opportunities for refugees.

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- Encourage entrepreneurship and explore opportunities through mentorship, training, and access to funding, including for those with limited academic qualifications and professional networks.

Greek Language

Fluency in Greek is central for all aspects of living. It is related to better outcomes in school, employment, sense of social inclusion and personal well-being. Most respondents report low proficiency.

Suggested interventions:

- Expand available classes and tailor language learning opportunities to meet demand of the refugee population both in schools and in the community.
- Offer accessible Greek language courses with varied teaching methods to accommodate the needs, background and goals of refugee population; Document and assess learning outcomes.
- Link language learning programs with employment, training and education placements, especially in sectors of interest to refugees to ensure they gain both linguistic and professional skills.

Social interactions with Cypriots and support networks

A significant number of young refugees lack Cypriot friends, which is a barrier to integration and social support. Residents in rural areas report stronger bonds with Cypriots and trust more local institutions. For those who have been in school, support network of teachers, counsellors, peers and family is more critical for their well-being, than actual hardships.

Suggested interventions:

- Promote social interactions between young refugees and Cypriots, by offering community-level programs, such as cultural programs, youth participation opportunities, shared community projects and peer mentorship.

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- Strengthen school networks: Schools are key environments for social integration. Expand programs that pair refugee students with local peers, ensuring that educators are equipped to support refugee students' emotional and academic needs.
 - Community-based support networks: Focus on creating local support systems through NGOs, community centers, and local municipalities that offer social and psychological support tailored to refugees.

Education

Approximately a third of respondents hold higher education titles. Greek language command is crucial for school integration. School support networks are crucial for overcoming obstacles, especially those entailing direct contact with teachers, counsellors peers/family, and they are more related to well-being levels compared to actual challenges per se.

Suggested interventions:

- Greek language learning is crucial for all aspects of school life. It must be further facilitated for young refugees entering the education system.
- Further explore the role, facilitate and systematize interaction with in-school support networks, primarily with teachers and counsellors. Explore and enhance the facilitating role of family and peers support on educational progress.
- Invest in career counselling services and explore viable tertiary education options, including technical training, through addressing the financial and social barriers of refugee experience.

Well-being and resilience

Many young refugees report medium-to-low levels of happiness and life satisfaction related to financial difficulties, job dissatisfaction and social isolation. They are determined to succeed mainly through their personal and family support networks. Frequent interactions with Cypriots and peers, and being competent in navigating through employment related challenges is important for their resilience.

Suggested Interventions:

- Build resilience through mentorship and networks: Create mentorship programs where refugees can receive guidance from both peers and established professionals in pursuing careers in their desired fields.
- Strengthen well-being and mental health: Develop accessible mental health support systems, including counselling and community support groups to address the psychological impact of displacement and marginalization.
- Promote empowerment through personal development: Focus on skills development that enhances confidence and autonomy, such as leadership programs, soft skills training, and self-advocacy workshops.

Vulnerabilities

A significant portion of the refugee population faces physical or mental health impairments, making their integration process more complex. Disabilities and health challenges often result in lower life satisfaction and hinder educational and career progress.

Suggested Interventions:

- Provide targeted support to vulnerable refugees: Ensure that refugees with disabilities or mental health issues receive appropriate support, including accessible workspaces, education/training options, job coaching, mental health services and social mingling opportunities.
- Health and disability integration programs: Work with healthcare providers and NGOs to address the health needs of refugees, ensuring they can access proper care and employment without discrimination.