



Integration into the Labour Market and Skills Training of Migrants in Cyprus

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Introduction

Employment for displaced migrants is a core part of the integration process because it provides not only an income, but also a social network, as well as status, confidence, independence and health (UNHCR, 2018). Integration through employment can also contribute to the host country by boosting the working-age population and contributing to human capital, taxes and social income (OECD & EC, 2016). Also, the more displaced migrants enter the labour market, the less public funding is spent in the form of material assistance (Barslund, Bartolomeo, Ludolph, 2017). Despite the obvious benefits of integration through employment both for displaced migrants and host countries, significant barriers and gaps persist for the integration of displaced migrants across Europe.

This report presents and discusses the results of a research that focused on the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the Cyprus labour market and their skills training. It reviews the legal and policy framework that refugees and asylum seekers must navigate in their efforts to access the local labour market, the different types of integration support measures and challenges, as well as the good practices initiated in particular by the third sector. This report was conducted within the framework of the European project entitled [Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees \(GLIMER\)](#). The aim of GLIMER is to generate research that will help European cities and regions facilitate the long-term inclusion of displaced people in a way that remakes local spaces.

The methods I deployed include desk research, as well as qualitative interviews. I conducted seven in-depth interviews and a focus group with a total of nine stakeholders (Table 1) from public authorities, trade unions, and NGOs that work with or design policies for asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus.

Table 1: Qualitative research sample

Stakeholders	Total number of participants
3 Public authorities	5
3 NGOs	3
1 Trade union	1
Total number of interviewees	9

Semi-structured questionnaires were used in the context of the focus group and interviews. Regarding personal data protection, in order to fully adhere to the ethics protocol, I make no reference to participant names or institutions. Participants are quoted using pseudonyms, and references that might make any person identifiable have been omitted. The research was enriched through desk research, specifically, a literature review on labour market integration and other empirical resources, such as legal and policy documents, academic journals, media articles, as well as project leaflets and websites.



I. Setting the Scene

I.1 The political situation in Cyprus

The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960. The majority of the population at the time consisted of Greek Cypriots (77%), Turkish Cypriots (18%) and small minorities of Maronites, Armenians and Latins (5%). Soon after the formation of the Republic of Cyprus, there were conflicts between Turkish- and Greek-Cypriots. In 1974 there was a Turkish invasion of the island that led to the division of the country. Cyprus is now the only divided country in the EU, with a buffer zone controlled by the UN, also known as the Green Line. The northern part of the island is occupied by Turkey and has declared itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is only recognised by Turkey. In 2004, the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union (EU), with the *acquis communautaire* applying only to the Republic in the south, where the majority of the population is Greek-Cypriot.

I.2 History of migration in Cyprus

Cyprus has historically been a country of emigration, not immigration. Cyprus opened its borders mainly due to the manual labour shortage following the 'economic miracle' that took place in the 80s, which had caused the local economy to rapidly develop and expand (Christodoulou, 1992). 1990 was the year in which Cyprus opened its borders to economic migrants and immigration policy was shaped by an attitude that persists to this day: migrants are considered temporary guests who are here to primarily fill in the gaps of a rapidly growing labour market. As a result, there is still no driving policy that focuses on the need to integrate migrant populations (Officer & Taki, 2013). The first formalised effort by the central government to have an integration policy came in the form of a *National Action Plan (NAP) for the Integration of Third-country Nationals Legally Residing in Cyprus*. It was launched in 2010 covering a two-year period aiming to facilitate the integration of legal migrants, including refugees and those with subsidiary protection (Trimikliniotis & Demetriou 2015). The NAP was extended for two more years for the period 2013-2015. While a third NAP is currently being drafted, 2015 was the last year comprehensive policy was put together by central government. It is very difficult to assess the level of success of the two NAPs that were implemented, as they included no indicators or evaluation mechanisms (Trimikliniotis & Demetriou, 2015). In the meantime, in the absence of an ongoing NAP, all integration activities have been restricted to those falling under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

I.3 Migration flows in Cyprus

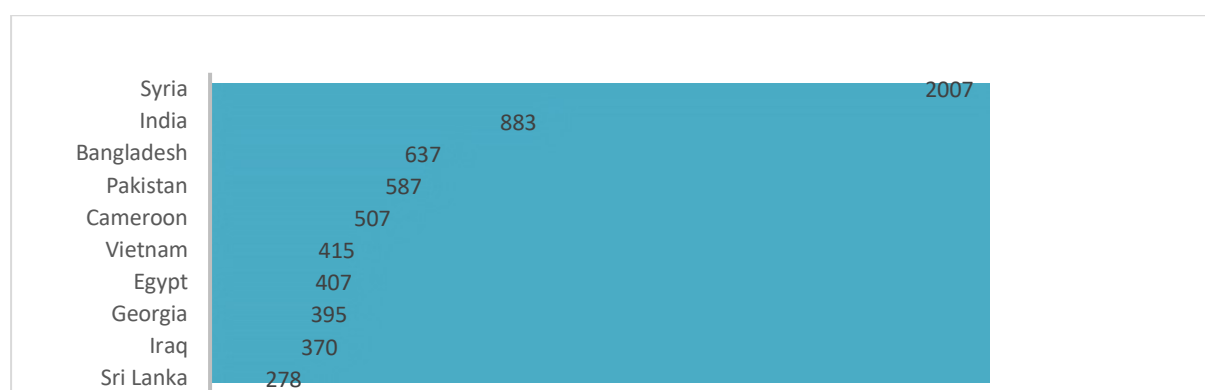
The Republic of Cyprus has recently seen a huge increase in the number of first-time asylum applicants. 2014 saw 1,480 applications; the four years that followed saw the number of applicants rise to four times higher, reaching the 7,713 in 2018 (UNHCR 2019). The number of first-time applicants continues to grow: in the first six months of 2019, Cyprus received 6,554 applications (UNHCR 2019). According



to a Eurostat report, Cyprus had the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants in Europe relative to population in the second quarter of 2019¹.

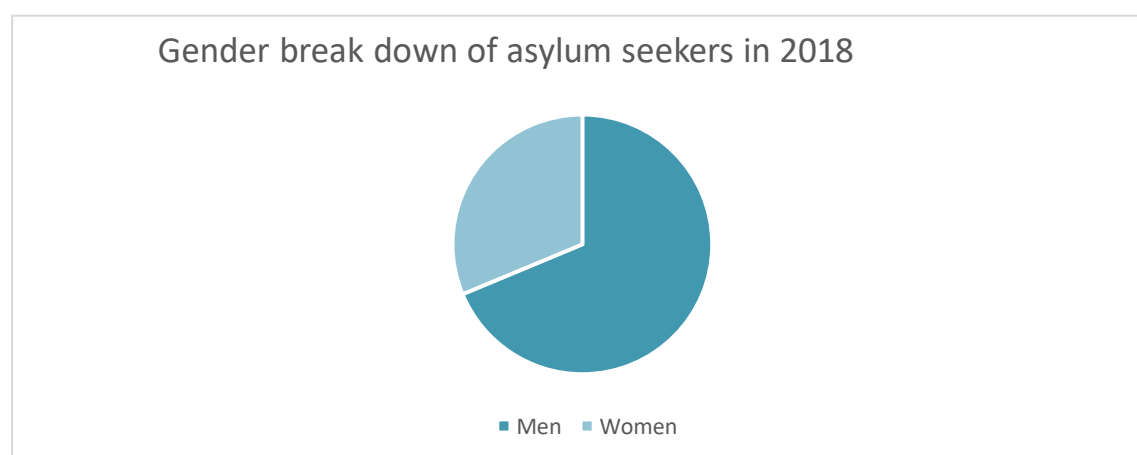
Most people currently seeking asylum in Cyprus come from Syria (Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, 2019). Some of our interviewees mentioned the reportedly common phenomenon of asylum seekers coming to Cyprus as guest workers, and applying for asylum when their visa lapses. This seemingly odd route can be explained by the fact that the process is mired in bureaucracy and tends to take two to five years: as a result, the applicant can in the meantime continue working in Cyprus while their application is under review.

Graph 1: Top ten countries of origin for asylum seekers in Cyprus in 2018

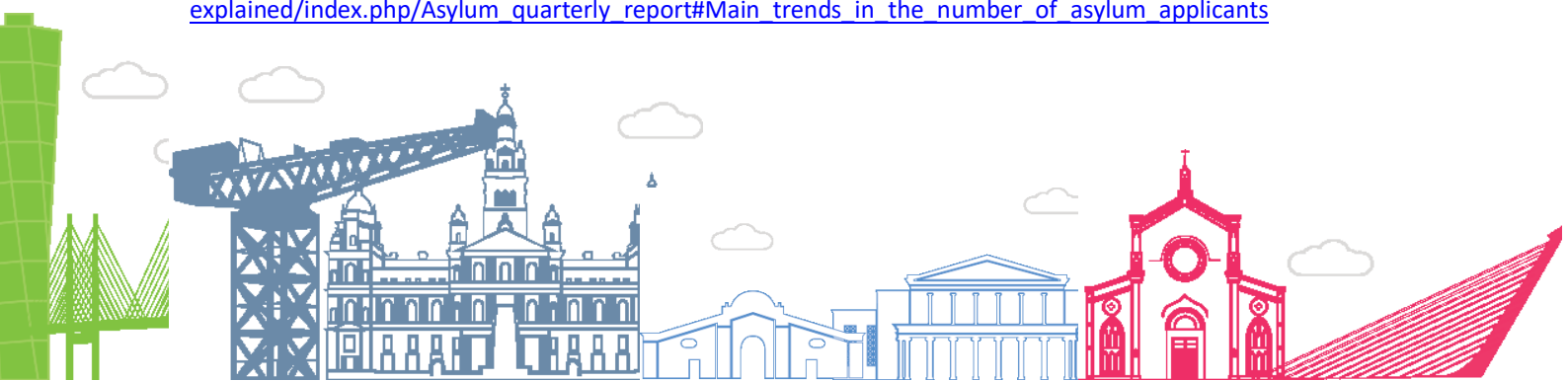


Men make up the majority of asylum seekers in Cyprus. For example, in 2018, out of a total 7,765 of applicants, 5,295 (68.2%) were men and 2,410 (31.8%) were women. 14% were children (Eurostat 2018).

Graph 2: Gender of asylum seekers in Cyprus



¹ Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report#Main_trends_in_the_number_of_asylum_applicants



While the number of applicants continues to grow, Cyprus remains without a comprehensive migration policy, causing asylum seekers and refugees to experience serious difficulties regarding many key aspects of their lives, including education, housing and employment. Following lobbying from the Cyprus government, in September 2019 an agreement was signed between Cyprus and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)² to host a representation of the latter in Cyprus. The EASO's mandate is to help the Cyprus government speed up the processing of asylum applications. As the EASO opened its offices across Cyprus only over the course of this year, we are not yet able to assess its impact.

In 2016, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommended that the authorities develop a new integration plan for non-nationals, including foreign domestic workers, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and other migrants. The recommendation also stipulated a close cooperation with the UNHCR, relevant NGOs and migrant associations, as well as an awareness-raising campaign to inform the public, employers and financial institutions about the rights of beneficiaries of international protection. Whether it was these recommendations that spurred action, or the increasing number of displaced migrants arriving at the borders, the Cyprus government eventually announced an open call in 2018 to invite participants to draft a new two-year NAP that would come into force in 2020. In February 2019 the Civil Registry and Migration Department put together a consortium consisting of an NGO, the University of Cyprus, and a foreign private consultancy. Preparatory actions aside, the ECRI does not, to date, consider its recommendation as having been implemented.

As for the current status of Cyprus and its official efforts towards integration, a recent Migration Policy Group Migrant Integration Index (MIPEX 2015) study ranked Cyprus second to last in the 31 countries covered, concluding that Cyprus discourages integration, as it fosters unfavourable conditions for migrant workers to gain long-term access to the labour market and few real opportunities to participate in democratic life.

Most interviewees confirmed the absence of integration policy on a practical level. One public servant commented:

There is no integration. We have no policy whatsoever. We are in the process of drafting a policy but I think that they (policy makers) do not understand that it's an urgent need. The number of refugees has increased; we have too many applicants. I really think that one day it will all go 'boom' (the system will collapse).

Michaela, public servant

² See here <http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/moi.nsf/All/B5FF4571EA6C3729C225847A002D0071?OpenDocument>. Last accessed 13.11.2019



1.4 The approach of Cyprus to migration

European countries greatly vary in their approach to displaced migrants. One study (Demetriou, 2019) called it a “good cop and bad cop approach” to illustrate how some countries close their borders, while others welcome migrants. Cyprus has not exactly closed its borders, but its protection mechanisms remain limited (see references above as to the absence of consistently/well implemented NAPs). Political rhetoric skews towards and reveals an overall desire to decrease the number of asylum seekers. Redistribution policies are also heavily emphasised. As recently as July 2019, the then Minister of Interior, Constantinos Petrides, gave a speech at an informal Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) meeting in Helsinki calling on European partners “to support the efforts of the Republic to manage the situation effectively” and stressed “the need for effective measures of solidarity in the form of redistributions”³.

In what is an especially revealing trend, when the government approves applications from asylum seekers, they are far more likely to award subsidiary protection, rather than refugee status (Table 2). According to Asylum Service statistics published in 2019⁴, only 2.5% of asylum seekers were awarded refugee status in 2018, compared to 13% who received subsidiary protection. One interviewee — a public servant — confirmed that the state prefers to give subsidiary protection over refugee status, as the former does not come with a permanent citizenship right. While both recognised refugees and persons with subsidiary protection can live and work in Cyprus without restrictions, the latter are obliged to return to their countries when the home situation improves. Subsidiary protection, therefore, grants the host country — in this case, Cyprus — a higher degree of control regarding the residency status of its displaced migrant population. This decision-making trend is especially absurd when we take into consideration the fact that most asylum seekers in recent years have come to Cyprus fleeing Syria, a country that has been dealing with a humanitarian crisis of vast proportions from which it is unlikely to recover within the lifetime of most, if not all, of its displaced population.

Table 2: Statistical data on asylum applications in 2018

Applications	Rejections	Refugee Status	Subsidiary protection	Pending
7761	1260	191	1011	8502

I have noticed that the government gives subsidiary protection status more frequently than refugee status. It really does not make sense because it gives this status to Syrians

³ Article in Brief, published 19 July 2019, <https://www.brief.com.cy/english/interior-minister-solution-migration-flows?page=7>

⁴ Asylum statistics are available through the Cyprus government portal: http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/asylumservice18_en/asylumservice18_en?OpenDocument



whose country will need many years to recover from the war so most probably they will not have the chance to go back.

Natasha, public servant

The disproportional number of accepted applications granted as subsidiary protection compared to refugee status might also reflect the enduring idea that refugees aren't "here to stay". This is influenced by the guest worker model for immigrants that was created in the 80s (Christodoulou 1992) and persists to this day, where work permits are linked to named employers and must be renewed on an annual basis. Over the years, in the absence of targeted policy, the guest worker model began to be applied to refugees and asylum seekers as well.

2. Legal and Policy Framework Concerning Labour Market Access for Third Country Nationals, Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The criteria and procedure for granting work permits to third country nationals were established in 1991. A basic precondition in employing foreign workers is that the employer must show they were unable to fill the relevant position with a Cypriot or, following accession to the EU, a European citizen. The criteria for employing third country nationals, as laid out by the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance (hereinafter, Ministry of Labour), are:

- a) Non-availability of suitably qualified local personnel to satisfy the specific needs of the employer.
- b) Saving and better use of the local labour force.
- c) The provision of specific expertise.
- d) The terms and conditions of employment of foreigners should be the same as those for Cypriots.
- e) Where the hiring of a third country national who has special skills and knowledge that cannot be found in the native workforce is a better fit, the employer must nominate a Cypriot who will be trained during the period of the foreigner's employment.

For displaced migrants, accessing the labour market legally can be a challenge, as this is determined by their residence status. Refugees, asylum seekers, domestic workers, and other migrants access the labour market in unequal ways. Displaced migrants and low-skilled economic migrants experience limitations and restrictions, unlike economic migrants such as employees of multinational companies or wealthy investors. The respective conditions under which these groups can access the labour market are described below.

Recognised refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status have full access to the labour market. According to the Refugee Law, they must receive equal treatment as the citizens of the Republic regarding paid employment; they are not restricted from working in any particular sector; and there is no need for the Labour Department to approve a contract of employment between an employer and a recognised refugee (Law on Aliens and Immigration).



Asylum seekers also have legal, but restricted, access to the labour market. They start by registering at the Labour Office of the Ministry of Labour one month after they submit their application for international protection. The job-seeking process is as follows: The Labour Office sends the asylum seeker to a potential employer for interview. Once the interview has been conducted, the potential employer fills in a feedback form, which we note does not include space for the interviewee to provide their own feedback on the meeting. The interviewee then has to report back to the Labour Office no matter the outcome of the interview. If they reject the position or are rejected by the interviewer, the process is repeated.

If employment is secured, a contract needs to be signed off by the relevant District Labour Office. All employers recruiting asylum seekers are required to be authorised by the Labour Department to employ third-country nationals.

A recent ministerial decision⁵ was meant to ease access to the labour market for asylum seekers, as it brought down the waiting time between submitting their application, and being able to legally look for work, from six months down to one. AIDA, however, reported that this change did not lead to a substantial increase in asylum seekers engaging in employment, and in fact increased their administrative obstacles in accessing material assistance. This is due to the fact that asylum seekers must now register at the Labour Office and actively seek employment while the registration of their asylum application is ongoing (AIDA, 2018).

In terms of what kinds of jobs asylum seekers can have, a 2008 ministerial decree outlined a list of designated sectors and occupations. Following much debate, it was only as recently as this year that the restricted list was slightly expanded to include certain jobs in the hospitality industry. For an overview of permitted sectors/occupations, see the Table 3.

⁵ Ministerial Decision No. 308/2018



Table 3: Sectors of economic activity in which asylum seekers are allowed to participate

Sectors	Occupations
Agriculture, animal husbandry, fishery	Labourers
Manufacturing	Food processing labourers Porters Night shift labourers in poultry farms
Waste management	Drainage and waste processing labourers Garbage and trash collection and processing labourers Recycling labourers Animal waste processing labourers
Wholesale trade-repairs	Petrol stations and car wash attendants Freight handlers of wholesale trades
Other fields	Building and outdoors cleaners Distributors of advertising and informational materials Food delivery Laundry and dry cleaning assistants
Hotel and food industry (since 2019)	Kitchen assistants Cleaners Food distributors

Other than the Collective Agreement of Agriculture and Animal Farming, which regulates salaries at €455 (gross) per month, the listed occupations are not regulated. Accommodation and food may be provided by the employer. The salary may increase up to €769 per month if the employee is considered to be skilled for the position, or if there is a specific agreement with a trade union.

Domestic workers. Domestic work in Cyprus is carried out by third country nationals (TCNs), mainly from developing countries in South-East Asia. The process is highly bureaucratic. An Entry and Temporary Residence and Employment Permit is submitted by the employer to the Civil Registry and Migration Department through the appropriate District Office of the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the Police or at the Central Offices of the Civil Registry and Migration Department in Nicosia. TCNs must register at the relevant District Office of the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the Police, or the Central Offices of the Civil Registry and Migration Department in Nicosia, within seven days of arriving. Biometric data such as fingerprints and a photo are collected. They are allowed to extend their permits (which last 6 years) provided that they work for the same employer. The gross salary for a domestic worker is €460 and the net is €309. Their permits are linked to a specific employer and they are only allowed to change their employer twice during the 6-year employment period, with few exceptions: if the employer dies, moves to another country, or is placed in a nursing home; if the employer is found to be guilty of a criminal offense against the TCN or if the TCN wins a dispute brought to the Labour Disputes Committee.



The Ministry of Labour is aware that the work permit criteria set in 1991 are in dire need of an update. Their website notes that “in the framework of formulating a strategic plan for the employment of foreigners in Cyprus, we are making an effort to adopt more rational and objective criteria that correlate directly with the real developing needs of the economy and reflect EU accession”. However, bar the reforms on work permits for investors and employees of foreign companies that earn a set minimum salary, the criteria remain unchanged.

Third country nationals who work in foreign companies. The Council of Ministers established a policy in 2006 for residence and employment permits for TCNs who are employed in companies that have foreign interests but are registered in the Republic. The incentive behind this policy was to attract foreign investment. In 2008, the policy was further amended to give citizenship to company stakeholders by naturalisation based on economic criteria. Companies that meet certain financial conditions are thus entitled to employ third country nationals in the following categories: directors with a minimum gross monthly salary of €3,872, middle management executives and other key personnel with a gross monthly salary between €1,936 and €3,871, and support staff. Companies are expected to fill positions in this category with Cypriot or European citizens. If they cannot find qualified Cypriots or European citizens, a company may hire TCNs by submitting certificates and supporting documents, after first securing a recommendation from the Department of Labour.

Third country nationals who invest in Cyprus. Citizenship is made possible for high-net-worth TCNs who invest in Cyprus under the Cyprus Investment Programme. The scheme is most commonly known in the media as ‘passports for sale’. While Cyprus is not the only country to engage in this scheme, ostensibly to encourage foreign investment and give the economy a much needed boost following the 2013 recession⁶, it has been singled out for criticism especially over the last few years both in the international⁷ as well as the local⁸ media. The scheme has a number of mostly financial criteria. Migrants secure citizenship via investing in real estate, companies or businesses, or even funds (in every case, the investments must be worth at least €2 million). In 2019, some additional requirements were introduced, such as compulsory donations to the Research and Innovation Foundation and the Cyprus Land Development Corporation, but ultimately, the principle remains the same — those who can afford it can easily secure Cyprus (and consequently EU) citizenship and enjoy the full rights associated therein, including access to the labour market.

It therefore becomes obvious that this access very much depends on TCNs’ legal status and financial situation. On the one hand, asylum seekers are forced to work in low-skilled, low-paid jobs regardless of the qualifications they hold. On the other, economic migrants such as investors and employees of multinational companies can acquire citizenship and access to the labour market as long as they — directly or indirectly — funnel a certain amount of money into the economy. Following the recent recession, reforms regarding residence permits for investors and third country nationals who work in

⁶ In March 2013, the government agreed to a bail-in arrangement that included a ‘haircut’ on all bank accounts holding deposits over €100,000, austerity measures such as salary cuts and an increase to VAT rates.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/17/the-billionaires-investing-in-cyprus-in-exchange-for-eu-passports>

⁸ <https://cyprus-mail.com/2017/09/18/cyprus-accused-selling-eu-citizenship-russian-ukrainian-super-rich/>



foreign companies were clearly prioritised in order to attract foreign capital and investment. Current integration policies have therefore created a two-tier system with regards to the labour market, one that perpetuates an unfavourable integration environment for asylum seekers and other displaced migrants (MIPEX 2015). As such, the need to better integrate refugees and asylum seekers into the local labour market has yet to be addressed.

3. Barriers for Displaced Migrants in Accessing the Labour Market

In light of the differing treatment of asylum seekers/refugees and economic migrants, as discussed above, this next section will focus on the specific barriers and restrictions the segment experiences in accessing the labour market. According to Eurostat's 2019 report, the main obstacles to getting a suitable job by first or second generation immigrants, are a) difficulties in attaining or retaining citizenship or a residence permit, b) a lack of language skills, and c) unrecognised qualifications. As outlined by the latest Asylum Information Database report (Drousioutou & Mathioudakis, 2019), asylum seekers may experience additional obstacles such as: a) low wages and lack of basic and supplementary material assistance, b) transportation issues which make commutes to remote workplaces impractical, if not impossible, c) language barriers, d) low rates of asylum seeker recruitment by the agricultural and farming sectors, and e) a lack of gender and cultural sensitivity in the recruitment procedure. Our research also confirms that asylum seekers have extra obstacles, something that is echoed in a recent Asylum Information Database report (2018). We found restrictions on the employment sectors in which they can legally work, excessive bureaucracy and delays in the processing of their application, gender inequality, unemployment, lack of transportation, and discrimination from the side of the employers.

3.1 Asylum seekers restricted to low skilled / low paying jobs

One month following the date of submission of their asylum application, asylum seekers can legally seek paid employment, but only in specific sectors that are low skilled and low paid. As stated by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "in practice, asylum seekers are employed as unskilled labourers and in businesses where there is no presence of unions. Therefore, their wages remain at minimum levels". Screening mechanisms to assess asylum seekers' qualifications being wholly absent, they are forced to enter the specific sectors even if they are overqualified or skilled in other sectors. This has negative consequences both on asylum seekers' quality of life, as well as on the local economy, which fails to benefit from asylum seekers' talents and expertise across a variety of professions. As one NGO worker said:

So, you may have, as I have had here, doctors, lawyers, translators, biochemists but they can only work in the very limited fields that are prescribed by the government. That is not something that we can change, and it's also not good practice, because instead of helping refugees or asylum seekers to contribute to the local economy, and letting the market work, you are limiting the market.

Niki, NGO worker



Following their asylum application, asylum seekers must register and be actively seeking a job. If an asylum seeker refuses a position on grounds that are deemed 'unreasonable', they can lose their material assistance. Following the financial crisis of 2013, anti-immigrant discourse increased in the political rhetoric, targeting migrants and asylum-seekers in particular, framing them as disproportionately benefiting from welfare allowances and health care services (Miloni, Spyridou, Vadratsika, 2015). This discourse has had a knock-on effect on both the creation as well as the implementation of public policy. One public servant who was interviewed within the framework of this research commented:

[Asylum seekers] often try to fool the authorities. You know there was a case of an asylum seeker who was sent for an interview to be a bartender. He rejected the job because he said 'I am Muslim, I cannot touch alcohol'. They find excuses like this when they do not want to work, but the labour office can tell whether the job was rejected based on valid reasons or not. If not, they can kick them off the system and they lose their minimum wage benefit.

Aris, public servant

If an applicant refuses two jobs consecutively for reasons deemed not acceptable or justified, as mentioned above, they are indeed struck off the register of the Public Employment Service and as a consequence lose any assistance they may have been entitled to. This policy is particularly problematic for women who face extra layers of discrimination and limitations in accessing the labour market. It is evident that asylum seekers as well as refugees are pushed towards low paid and low skilled jobs, resulting in precarious working conditions. As one recent report summarises: "Refugees represent one of the most vulnerable groups of migrants on the labour market.... It takes refugees up to 20 years to have a similar employment rate as the native-born." (OECD 2016, pp. 5-6).

3.2 Women face gender inequality

Although gender-segregated data on the employment rates of displaced migrants in Cyprus have yet to be collected, we can look to the OECD, which in 2016 reported that the employment rate of refugee women in Europe is 17% lower than that of refugee men, despite the fact that they tend to be better qualified than their male counterparts among the arrivals in the last 10 years. Refugee women also have a significantly lower rate of employment than EU women (OECD 2016). As women *and* refugees, these migrants are at a particular disadvantage, which has given rise to the need to integrate the high rate of female migrants in the EU who are not active in the labour market.

As one NGO worker commented:

We hate to admit it, but we look at the world on gendered terms. Women have got all the migrant problems, they've got all the gender problems, they've got all the cultural problems, then they have the childcare problem.

Niki, NGO worker



The research data indicates that integration policies are gender-blind: policies do not cater to the specific needs of women displaced migrants in Cyprus. This is very problematic as fewer labour market opportunities lead to weaker social integration. As mentioned, Syrian migrants make up the highest percentage by nationality coming to Cyprus to seek asylum. At the same time, the economic activity rate of Syrian women stands at less than 15% in their country of origin. One study (Bertelsmann, 2016) highlights that, in order to successfully integrate women in the labour market, host countries must take into account the cultural background of displaced migrants. The lack of dedicated programmes for women means the state fails to take into account whether the migrant women — who are now expected to take up any work available to them — had actually been active in the labour market in their country of origin.

Gender blind labour market integration policies in Cyprus also overlook migrant women's double role as family providers and caregivers. This has an impact not only on their access to the labour market but also, in the case of asylum seekers, on their access to material assistance. A number of research interviewees reported that women asylum seekers sometimes refuse job offers because these clash with their role as mothers and caregivers, resulting in a loss of material assistance. According to one trade union representative:

What happens when the labour office sends a woman to a farm? She can't really go. We had case where an asylum seeker had her material assistance cut off because she refused to work on a farm. It's crazy you know. They offered her a job in a field to harvest fruit, it was far away, in a village outside Nicosia, so she refused to go because she lived Nicosia with her two babies and had no car.

Melissa, trade union representative

Women's exclusion is greatly exacerbated by the lack of public childcare services. Asylum seekers who are mothers are therefore severely limited in the work they can take on, at least until their children are of school age. When mothers are the sole caregivers, the support system sometimes fails them due to a lack of interdepartmental coordination. According to some interviewees there have been incidents where the Labour Office did not register mothers who admitted to not being able to work because of the lack of child care. The unfortunate knock on effect is that the Social Welfare Service can only provide material assistance to those registered at the Labour Office as job seekers. Here we note that both the Social Welfare Services and the Labour Office are in the same ministry.

Childcare is not the only restriction women asylum seekers face in integrating into the labour market. Women face multiple forms of discrimination, including gender and religion. For example, women wearing hijabs have reported discriminatory incidents (Cyprus Mail, 2019). A Syrian woman living in Cyprus said in an interview to the Sunday Mail:

Employers say if you want the job, take your hijab off and you will get it, and that's not fair to us. They don't respect, us so we don't get the job.



3.3 Bureaucracy and delays in the application process

As mentioned in section 2, the waiting period to access the labour market for asylum seekers was recently reduced from six months to one. However, as confirmed by our research interviewees, this was a poorly thought-out change that did more harm than good. The policy did not lead to a substantial increase in asylum seekers accessing employment. Rather, they have seen an increase in administrative obstacles to access material assistance. An NGO worker, explained:

The other reality with the one month is that they changed that without thinking. Again, it's a piecemeal approach. It used to take six months except that now it takes one month, and it takes longer than one month for an asylum seeker to get their alien book. So, you force them to register at the labour office but without an ARC (Alien Registration Card) number they can't look for a job, nor can they get a contract. In other words, by bringing it down to one month most people are illegal because they don't yet have their ARC. They didn't fix the problem. Back when it used to be six months, they couldn't work for six months but in any case it usually takes around six months to access your benefits and get your paperwork. Now, they expect you to register and be active in the labour market without an ARC number, without your medical clearance. So, you are illegal with the labour authorities because you are not yet legal with the Republic as an asylum seeker. They set up another barrier.

Niki, NGO worker

So expecting asylum seekers to have their paperwork complete, and also launch a search for employment one month upon arrival simply doesn't work on the practical level. According to the government's own rules, the application submission process must be complete before the job search can begin, and all that the change in policy has done is squeeze the timeframe for asylum seekers, while not benefitting them in any way.

3.4 Unemployment and risk of labour exploitation

Cyprus is a small economy that in many ways is still recovering from the recession that hit in 2013. Unemployment among the general population is currently at 6.5% and higher among young people at 16.4% (Eurostat 2019). Unemployment tends to affect both recognised refugees as well as asylum seekers particularly badly. Due to the fact that they can only work in specific sectors, their options are limited. As one NGO worker explained:

It's a small economy. I mean the other thing is, how many jobs exist? Especially in certain fields. I mean, we are now at a point where you have a thousand asylum seekers a month and you require them to register after a month of applying for asylum, even before they have their paperwork processed. Then there aren't enough jobs to absorb them into the market. Even if no one was racist, there aren't enough jobs.

Niki, NGO worker



In April 2019, around a hundred asylum seekers conducted a peaceful protest in Nicosia to raise awareness regarding their limited employment opportunities as well as the ongoing work conditions which they declared to be both exploitative and abusive. According to one protestor who gave an interview to the Cyprus Mail, 2019⁹:

When we registered, they asked, “What can you do?”, and we listed a couple of things, but even when you find a job related to one of those things that falls under the category of asylum seeker jobs, they still tell you, “You can’t do this”.

Image 1: March of asylum seekers in Nicosia, April 2019



Photo taken by Caritas Cyprus, in Cyprus Mail 16.04.2019

The high (and ever increasing) number of unemployed — sometimes even homeless — asylum seekers increases the risk of exploitation. They can be taken advantage of in the labour market or trafficked for sex or other work. As one trade union representative commented:

The private sector wants asylum seekers to do the ‘donkey work’. In any case, they are pushed towards undocumented work. I pass by the ‘OXI’ roundabout every morning in [central] Nicosia and I see around 20-30 Africans. Pickup cars pull over, they get in and go work in construction; they have them working for 2-3 days non-stop in order to finish something. This is slavery. I saw the police being witness to this.

Leonidas, trade union representative

⁹ Article available here: <https://cyprus-mail.com/2019/04/16/asylum-seekers-mobilise-over-limited-work-opportunities/>



One of our interviewees also commented on another paradox: asylum seekers and refugees are unemployed in high numbers, partially due to being restricted to specific sectors and occupations, while at the same time there is a dearth of domestic care workers and other manual labourers, for whom Cyprus has opened its borders and continues to be in need of. As the interviewee explained:

Nobody is looking at the big picture. Asylum seekers will keep coming because migration patterns are what they are. So we should come up with a way to integrate refugees and asylum seekers. Ways that will actually address the needs of the economy and will turn off the flow from places like Nepal and Vietnam, and focus instead on people who are committed to staying here, people who have been granted subsidiary protection, people who are under the protection of the Republic and integrate them into the economy. Instead we have Vietnamese, Indian, Bengali domestic workers. Agricultural workers.

Niki, NGO representative

3.5 Transportation

The majority of the sectors in which asylum seekers can work are located in remote rural areas. Asylum seekers may face difficulties travelling to these workplaces. Even if they use low-cost public transportation, their meagre monthly income would be unduly burdened by such travel expenses. Also, working hours may start as early as 4 or 5 a.m., when buses have not started running for the day.

Most jobs offered to asylum seekers are in isolated areas far away from the city centre. As they do not get bus passes, they can struggle to cover the cost of transportation.

Anna, public servant

Work carried out in rural and isolated areas are also less likely to be subject to workplace inspections by relevant governmental departments, such as the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the police, the Department of Labour Relations, and the Inspection of Labour Department. In her 2018 report, the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights (the Ombudsman) highlighted the widespread violation of contracts not only for domestic workers but also for asylum seekers and other migrants working in agriculture and farming. One public servant said:

We have noticed that there are fewer inspections in rural and isolated areas and we have received complaints about serious violations of the labour rights of migrant workers. However, the number of inspections by the mixed inspection groups of the Aliens and Immigration Unit and the Department of Labour of the Ministry of Labour remain limited. This is happening either due to limited sources or lack of political will, we need to find out how many inspections take place and why they are limited.

Natasha, public servant



When asked to comment on the difficulties of physical access to remote work places, another public servant said that they believed the problem had been addressed in the 2019 decree that added the hospitality industry in the list of sectors open to asylum seekers.

This [difficulty] was before the decree. Before, asylum seekers could only work in agriculture and handling livestock. Now the decree covers [employment in] hotels, restaurants, leisure centres. It includes night shifts in bakeries.

Andreas, public servant

While the decree does extend the list of occupations asylum seekers can take on (see Table 3), the scope remains severely limited. Job positions to cover the needs of the migrant population and job opportunities for asylum seekers remain inadequate.

3.6 Language restrictions

Language skills are a key component to integrating into the labour market and partaking in a host country's socio-economic activities (European Migration Network, 2019). According to Eurostat's 2019 report, after citizenship or residence permits, the second main obstacle for first-generation migrants trying to secure a suitable job in a host country is their lack of language skills (Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex annual aggregated data, 2019). In Cyprus, only around 10% of migrants rated their Greek-language skills to be at the native or proficient level (Eurostat 2014).

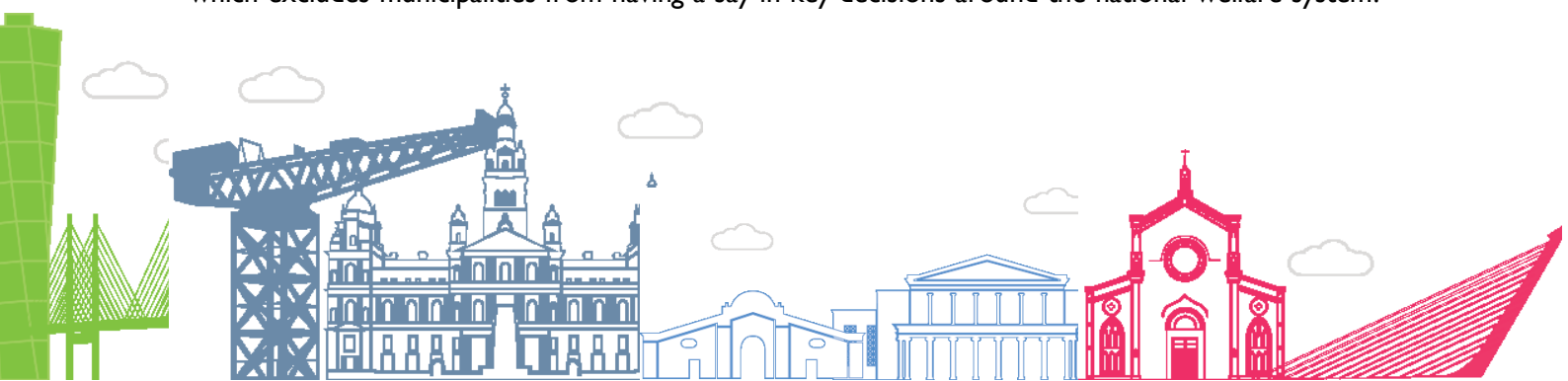
The Cyprus government has made no targeted provisions for vulnerable asylum seekers or asylum seekers held back from the labour market due language issues (AIDA & ECRE 2018). What language training for adult asylum seekers and refugees there is, lacks a holistic approach: courses are provided sporadically and only as part of standalone, time-limited projects (Angeli, 2019). As one public servant explains:

Certainly, language is an obstacle to workplace integration and conversely, language skills acquisition can create opportunities. Language training is another area in which we have fallen behind, although there used to be language programmes available. In terms of language education, we need better coordination and to be a little more targeted in the activities.

Demetris, public servant

4. The Role of the Local Authorities

Local authorities (e.g. municipalities) are very limited in their ability to be proactive on social issues (Municipalities Law, art 84). Government reforms that have recently been passed are expected to change this, giving more responsibility to local authorities in the social field (Union of Cyprus Municipalities 2019). Their official role is currently restricted to areas such as road works and maintenance of infrastructure, sanitation, and the water supply. Social policymaking is centralised, which excludes municipalities from having a say in key decisions around the national welfare system.



Funding is also an issue: The taxes and other municipal fees that local authorities levy can only go to the areas mentioned above. The central government does not provide additional funding for integration actions. This can only be described as a lost opportunity, considering that local authorities are those closest to citizens (Union of Cyprus Municipalities 2019), and therefore best placed to assess displaced migrants' integration needs. As municipalities face a growing population of migrants and asylum seekers, they have sought out alternative ways to raise funding and support integration. For example, the municipality of Nicosia works with the Municipal Multipurpose Centre, an NGO that uses European funds in order to implement integration programmes that include childcare and language training for TCNs. Our research data has shown that the local authorities are now more than ever involved in integration policies. As one NGO worker said:

If we look at where (the municipalities) started and where they are now there has been huge progress. However, it is time to go further now and play a bigger role in integration.

Mario, NGO worker

Municipalities promote integration mainly through the implementation of European projects. Although good practices have been developed and successful projects have taken place, the funding model is clearly inadequate in the long term, as it lacks both continuity and sustainability, meaning that the impact can only be felt by a limited number of beneficiaries at a time.

I think municipalities are trying to help; I mean they have some projects ... Apart from service provision, they maintain the bathrooms at the parks which asylum seekers use but I am not sure how else... I mean again, you know I think because they don't have funding, they don't have a role... In other countries you would have the municipalities getting involved with the local government in some sort of welfare provision. That's not the case here. It's in the margins. I mean they do what everybody else does. They get EU funding to implement projects, but is this enough? No! They do not cover the needs of the population and their services are limited.

Niki, NGO worker

5. The Role of the Private Sector in Providing Routes into Employment

According to our research, both public sector and third sector participants who offer frontline services for displaced migrants report evidence of discrimination and stereotyping that negatively affects labour market integration. Racist incidents—both overt and covert—were recorded in the research data. One participant mentioned racism as one of the clear barriers for displaced migrants to access the work place.

I think that racism really abounds, not just institutional racism.... we get calls for job placements all the time and the answer is "en mavros" ("s/he is black"), it's just like that. I mean, we can all comment on it, but it is what it is. So, I think I would say there is the



legal/regulatory [racism], then there's the structural and then there is the personal.

Niki, NGO worker

Natasha also described more subtle racism that limits job opportunities for recognised refugees, even as the latter are legally granted full access to the labour market.

I once had a brilliant beneficiary. He was a recognised refugee; this means that he had no legal restrictions in accessing the labour market. His university degrees were fully recognised by the national authority, he had extensive working experience back home but it was really hard for him to find a job in his field.

Natasha, public servant

There is no official data publicly available on the number of asylum seekers who are in employment in Cyprus. According to one of our research participants, the services do record these, but keep them for internal use. This research did however reveal that many stakeholders are concerned about the high number of unemployed asylum seekers. One public servant, commented that this is due to the fact that the private sector is reluctant to employ this population:

Companies say that they want to employ migrants.... However, the data shows that they do not employ thousands. The numbers are low.

Dino, public servant

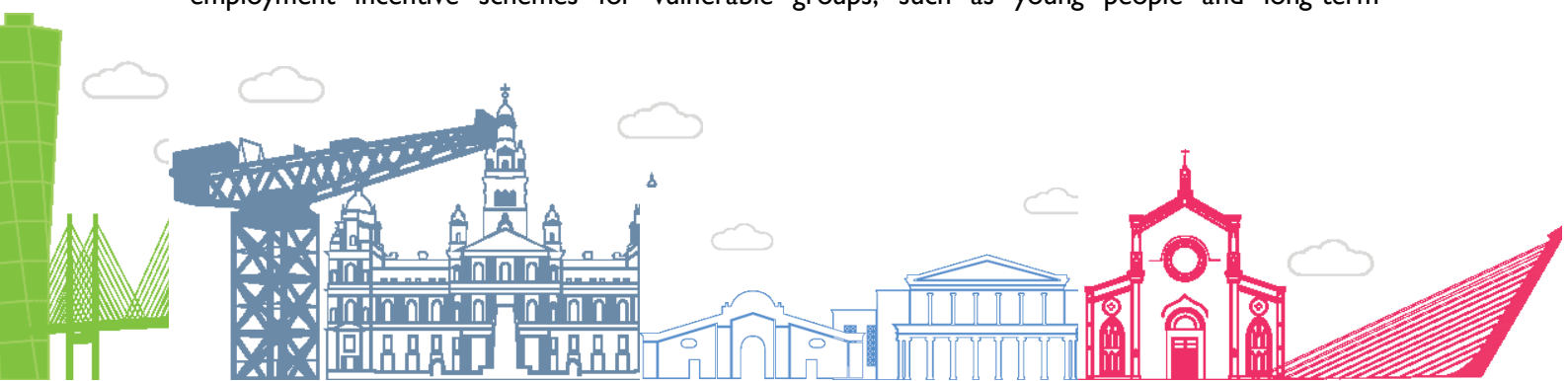
Anna, an NGO worker, said the private sector prefers economic migrants to asylum seekers due to the fact that asylum seekers might leave the job if their asylum application is ultimately rejected.

There are additional barriers mainly due to the legal framework and the restricted sectors in which asylum seekers can work. Even businesses that have been willing to employ refugees face restrictions as the law does not facilitate their employment.

Large employers such as supermarkets and bakeries, they need as much staff as they can get, but the government makes it hard for them to register, adds crazy things like asylum seekers can only work overnight shifts... the supermarkets don't have night shifts.... If you let the businesses participate, then they would probably want to hire people with languages and skills. They would interview them, and they would give them a fair shake if they felt that they could, and they didn't have to go through undue bureaucracy to get them registered. If they didn't have to get them through approvals for whatever. I think the private sector would work.

Niki, NGO worker

This research revealed that the government gives no targeted incentives to the private sector in this area: there are currently no public-private partnerships that specifically facilitate refugees and asylum seekers to access work placements. While the Human Resource Development Authority has several employment incentive schemes for vulnerable groups, such as young people and long-term



unemployed graduates — co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Republic of Cyprus within the framework of the “Employment, Human Capital and Social Cohesion” Operational Programme — none target displaced migrants. The most likely scheme under which displaced migrants could be assisted, the “Scheme for providing incentives for hiring disadvantaged individuals”, does not consider asylum seekers and refugees to be disadvantaged individuals.

That said, the private sector has in the past participated in third sector initiatives, joining them to help create career opportunities for refugees in Cyprus and further develop their skills and competences.

6. Third Sector Initiatives

Civil society initiatives are the most common way in which migrants and asylum seekers can acquire free skills training. These initiatives are mostly implemented by European projects supported by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)¹⁰. In the absence of a comprehensive NAP, funding from European institutions remains the only avenue for third sector organisations to implement integration projects. As described by one research participant:

National integration policies have gaps. There was one action plan that was drafted in 2010 to cover a two-year period and following a Ministerial decision, it was re-adopted without any adjustments for the next term which was 2013 - 2015. So the AMIF fills in the gaps on integration policies left by national action plans.

Demetris, public servant

Below is a summary of the most significant third sector initiatives currently taking place in Cyprus.

6.1 The Help Refugees Work job platform

[Help Refugees Work](#) is a job platform that supports refugee integration through facilitating employment opportunities. It is an initiative by UNHCR Cyprus, in collaboration with the Cyprus Refugee Council. The platform connects job-seeking refugees with employers offering jobs and organisations that provide job skills. It is meant for refugees, employers, institutions running vocational education and training (VET) programmes, and individuals and organisations committed to promoting social participation, inclusion and diversity. The service is free of charge both for asylum seekers as well as employers who seek to advertise job positions. In December 2019, the platform had 130 vacancies for refugees, featured 371 refugee work profiles, and 51 online training programmes covering a wide range of skills, including language and vocational training.

¹⁰ See full list of integration projects funded by AMIF since 2015 here http://www.moi.gov.cy/MOI/eufunds2015.nsf/page13_en/page13_en?OpenDocument

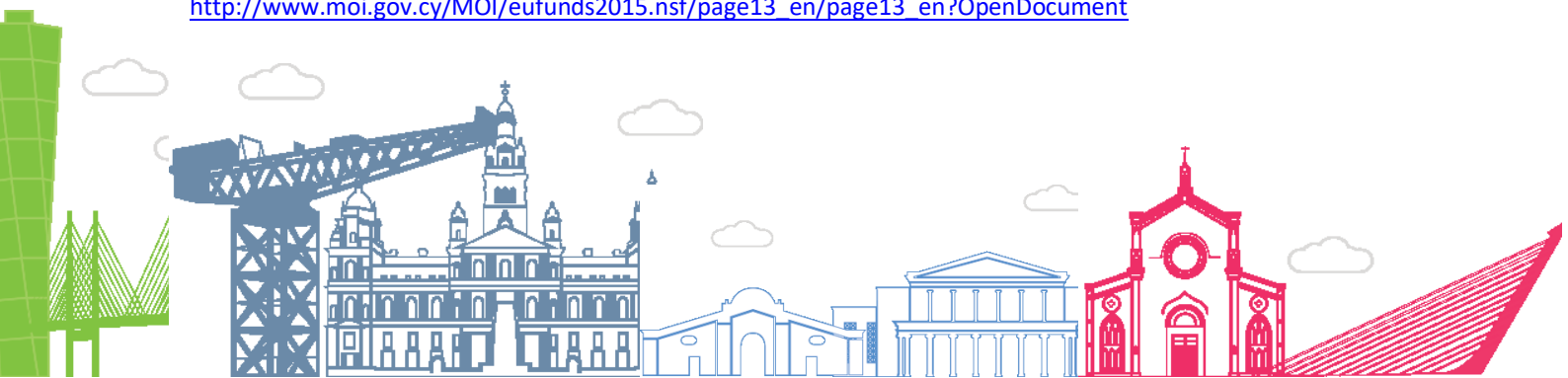
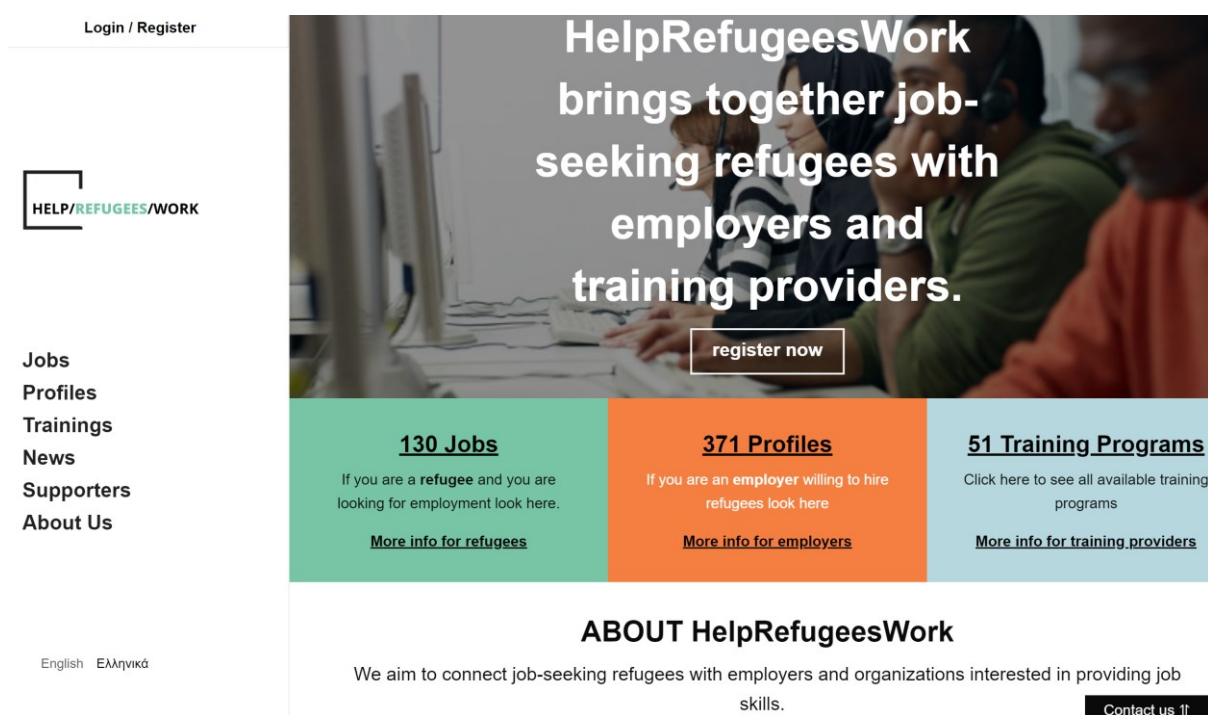


Image 2: Print screen of the online platform Help Refugees Work (Dec 2019)



6.2 The *First Step* project

The [First step](#) project aims to help third country nationals integrate through employment and language skills. TCNs here include recognised refugees, resettled refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, asylum seekers, students, those with work permits, and TCNs married to Cypriots. First Step is co-funded by AMIF (90%) and the Cyprus government (10%), with a budget of €250,000. The duration of the project is 18 months and it has been running since February 2019.

The first stage of implementation is between July 2019 and January 2020; it foresees training courses targeting 300 participants. The second stage of implementation includes training courses that will take place from January to April 2020. Following a professional orientation development course (April to July 2020), the project will conclude by awarding a 1-year scholarship at the European University Cyprus to the highest scoring candidate. The project assesses skills, qualifications, provides training programmes and offers tailored career counselling. It also provides social, language, as well as vocational training to facilitate the integration of TCNs into the Cyprus labour market as well as local economic and social life.

One interviewee was sceptical regarding projects like First Step that demand a lengthy time-commitment from their beneficiaries.

From our experience, the biggest problem is getting people to stay in the programme. The problem is not getting them to register, because registration is only the first step in



a very long process. But when you are talking about having someone commit to six hours over the course of six weeks or months, I'm not sure which one it is, for training, that is a huge commitment for someone who has nothing... The incentives have to be there to keep them coming back. Because they are unhappy, they are marginalised, they are away from home, they don't have normal structures in place, and this takes away the motivation. That is the lack of integration. It's not signing them up, that's easy.

Niki, NGO worker

6.3 Vocational training

There are several EU-funded projects — mainly in the framework of the Erasmus Plus and Justice programmes — that provide vocational training and skills-building for migrants in Cyprus. The training sessions address topics like soft skills, computers, CV building, entrepreneurship, and language and are mainly provided by NGOs, universities, and other organisations. Vocational training and the building of soft skills can be enormously beneficial to refugees and asylum seekers. That said, such trainings are not usually linked to employment opportunities, thus greatly weakening their impact.

Project-based training also makes long-term evaluation impossible, as indicated in prior research (Angeli 2019):

We don't know what happened to these thousands of people we trained in Greek language, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, leadership and teamwork. We don't know if the training sessions were in any way useful to them. The project ends, and we move on to the next one without being able to evaluate the long-term impact.

Simon, NGO representative

As mentioned above, the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) conducts a number of vocational training schemes. These are at times targeted to particular segments of the population, such as the long-term unemployed, women, youth etc., but targeted programmes for displaced migrants have not yet been arranged. While the latter are not intentionally excluded from taking part in HRDA schemes, it is worth noting that the announcements around course schedules are communicated exclusively in the Greek language, which migrants often do not speak.

6.4 Training seminar for employers

The Mediterranean Management Centre (MMC) and the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI), two Cyprus NGOs, have implemented projects aiming to increase the capacity of employers to manage cultural diversity and prevent discrimination in the work place. The MMC conducted 22 seminars on cultural diversity (handling diverse cultural backgrounds in job recruitment, teamwork, etc.), as well as interactive activities and case studies. The CSI focused on raising awareness on diversity and diversity management in the work place. The main activities were: a) informing and communicating



the project diversity charter and guide, b) conducting training on diversity management and inclusion, and c) producing an online collaborative platform¹¹.

As seen above, while important developments and activities are taking place, a common challenge for integration projects is the lack of financial sustainability. The projects end as funding runs out, no matter how impactful and useful they might be. Integration programmes through skills training and work are provided sporadically and on a project basis. This creates difficulties for asylum seekers and refugees in accessing the programmes and also for organisations to sustain the provision of relevant services. Also, as projects are implemented within a specific timeline, there is no opportunity to evaluate the long term impact.

Conclusion

This research report highlighted the lack of integration policies in Cyprus and the ongoing absence of a comprehensive National Action Plan on integration. The gaps in relevant policy reflect the fact that Cyprus is a country that prioritises border security and desires the redistribution, rather than integration, of refugees (Bendel 2018). The lack of a solid integration policy has left many migrants to struggle to find gainful unemployment, exposing them to much higher rates of homelessness and labour exploitation.

In addition to the policy gaps on a national level, local authorities have been held back from taking useful initiative on social policy. The legal framework that governs the operation of municipalities in Cyprus was drafted back in 1985 and does not do justice to the important role these institutions can play in the shaping of integration policy. In order to meet the growing needs of a rising population of displaced migrants, municipalities can only implement short-term EU-funded projects, thus aggravating the issue of lack of sustainable policy.

The third sector is also trying to fill in the gaps left by weak national and local integration policies. While some good practices for labour market integration have been identified within the framework of this research, there are many challenges faced by the third sector, such as sustainable funding.

Integration programmes in Cyprus are in general provided sporadically and on a project basis. This creates a clear disadvantage for asylum seekers and refugees seeking to access them, and also for the organisations, NGOs and municipalities that seek to offer relevant integration services on a sustained basis.

Based on our research results we recommend that the Cyprus government:

- I. Decentralise policymaking powers and put more competence in the hands of local authorities where these are better placed to design and implement social policies for asylum seekers and refugees.

¹¹ More info on the project here <http://www.dimain.eu/en/>



- II. Make radical changes to the current Refugee Law, so that asylum seekers have access to the full spectrum of the labour market.
- III. Finalise and implement a comprehensive NAP on integration, which includes robust indicators to measure success (both short- and long-term evaluation).
- IV. Allocate existing European funds towards integration through employment as this is a key aspect of integration.
- V. Ensure gender mainstreaming of the activities in the foreseen NAP as well in integration policy in general. As the research has shown, women face multiple forms of discrimination and experience the impact of policies differently. Therefore, gender mainstreaming should be built into every level of policymaking.
- VI. Make existing vocational training policies more accessible to displaced migrants and link them to job placements.

Integration through the labour market is one of the more weakly developed and under-explored fields in Cyprus government policy. However, current conditions such as the upcoming NAP for integration, the impending reforms on the legislation governing local authorities, and the broad expertise of local NGOs working with and for migrants and refugees can provide the momentum for the challenge to be turned into an opportunity.

Disclaimer:

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