

10th European Conference on the Reception of Asylum Seekers

'Building a reception knowledge centre' • MALTA 5 - 7 March 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

European Conferences on the Reception of Asylum Seekers

At the time that numbers of asylum seekers increased heavily in Europe, the first European conference on the Reception of Asylum Seekers was held in Papendal, the Netherlands, in 1989. Since then the conference has taken place every two years and attracts around a hundred representatives. Observers from the USA, Canada and Japan have attended previous conferences. An important result of the conference in Brussels in 2001 was the expression of the need for a permanent European network. In Canterbury in 2005, the idea of a knowledge centre emerged. At this 10th conference in Malta, the results of the HUB - knowledge transfer - will be presented.

1989: Papendal, The Netherlands	1999: Budapest, Hungary
1991: Malmö, Sweden	2001: Brussels, Belgium
1993: Interlaken, Switzerland	2003: Prague, Czech Republic
1995: Vienna, Austria	2005: Canterbury, United Kingdom
1997: The Hague, The Netherlands	2008: St. Julians, Malta

9th European Conference in Kent, 2005

The 9th European conference, held in Canterbury, Kent in 2005 dealt with practical cooperation between asylum reception organisations. Central themes were the application of the minimum standards of reception conditions and the management of organisational change. The European centre for the study of Migration and Social Care (MASC) of the University of Kent played a prominent role in this conference. In the workshops most agencies concluded that there was a lack of information about practices, policies and procedures in other EU-countries. A need to share information about these issues through an appropriate system of data collection and evaluation was therefore expressed.

To achieve the latter, COA applied for European funding under the ARGO-programme. The proposed project aimed for documenting experience and creating a framework for processing that experience into transferable expertise that could inform professionals and policy makers. In March 2007 the project, entitled The HUB - knowledge transfer, started.

10th European Conference on Malta, 2008 - Building a reception knowledge centre

In order to find a platform where asylum developments are discussed in a broad European perspective, the project team of the Hub decided to adopt the title of 10th European conference on the Reception of Asylum Seekers for its dissemination seminar.

At this 10th European conference delegates of reception organisations and national ministries come together to share experiences and to continue building the knowledge centre. The findings of the HUB form the starting point for discussions on current developments and future challenges to reinforce the knowledge transfer and the sharing of good practices.

Conference Rationale: why building a knowledge centre?

Recent developments in asylum policies and inflow of asylum seekers in Europe and at its borders create the moment to discuss and discover new forms and possibilities of sharing reception practices and to continue building a knowledge centre.

At EU level

- The European Commission (EC) presented in June 2007 a Green Paper on the future developments of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The Green Paper aims at starting the discussion on policy measures for the second phase of the CEAS. In this second stage an integrated, comprehensive approach to asylum will be adopted. As for the reception conditions of asylum seekers a high level of harmonisation will be ensured.
- Moreover, the Reception Conditions Directive (2003/9/EC) has been transposed in the majority of the Member States and has been evaluated. The EC plans to propose amendments to the Directive in order to limit the discretion allowed with regard to the level and form of material reception conditions, access to employment, health care, free movement rights and identification and care of vulnerable groups.
- One of the objectives of the second phase is to boost the capacity of all stakeholders in the asylum process and to provide national administrations with adequate tools enabling them to efficiently manage asylum flows. Systematic coordination of practical cooperation is aimed for.
- A growing feeling of solidarity between Member States to share the burden of migration.

At national level

- Member States face different inflows of asylum seekers. In traditional reception countries numbers of people claiming asylum have dropped. As a result, highly developed infrastructure and staff expertise disappear at national level.
- At the same time, as a means of showing solidarity, there is an increasing willingness to cooperate on a practical basis within the EU and with neighbouring states and to share and to save knowledge and skills.
- More and more asylum seekers arrive in new Member States and at the border states of the EU. These countries are confronted with the need to gain expertise and adequate tools to deal with growing numbers of asylum seekers.
- A specific need for knowledge in the field of receiving vulnerable groups and durable solutions, such as resettlement, return and integration, has been shown.

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ENARO – European Network of Asylum Reception Organisations

In January 2002, representatives of asylum reception organisations from Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, The Czech Republic and the Netherlands launched the European network of reception organizations in Europe: ENARO.

Colleagues from Ireland, the UK, Spain, Norway, Switzerland and recently Malta have joined the network that now holds 11 countries. Representatives of all the members form a steering committee, which meets twice a year. The presidency rotates yearly and COA (the Netherlands) hosts the international secretariat.

The main activity of ENARO is to offer staff the possibility to participate in exchange programmes and to share knowledge and expertise. These exchanges often pave way for alliances between organisations for practical co-operation. In 2007, colleagues of neighbouring states of the European Union, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, also joined the exchange.

The staff exchange is offered twice a year. The following elements define the programme:

- The duration of the exchange program is two weeks;
- The overall theme of an exchange is the practical implementation of the Reception Conditions Directive. A specific theme of the exchange program is decided upon by the individual participants and the organisation they represent in consultation with the hosting country;
- The task division during the exchange is 50% study time and 50% work;
- The participants have a tutor during their stay abroad. The tutor works at operational level.

The challenges of this network of reception organisations are to further enhance its presence in Europe and to incorporate more organisations dealing with reception and asylum in Europe. Furthermore, its challenge is to improve the transfer of knowledge, to build and extend the knowledge centre and to continue exchanging 'good practices' between its members.

The HUB - knowledge transfer

One of these challenges has been tackled with the project The HUB. The project is undertaken by COA (the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum seekers) and the research centre MASC of the University of Kent. Other partners in the project are Fedasil, Kent County Council and the ENARO consortium. The European project has been funded by ARGO and implemented between March 2007 and March 2008.

The dictionary defines a Hub as a centre around which other things revolve or from which they radiate, such as the hub of a wheel. The word is commonly used to symbolise a knowledge centre or a centre of excellence. In the case of the current concept, the title HUB refers to bringing together knowledge and experiences, which are collected in several different locations and organisations, and which are shared and discussed.

The challenge of the HUB was to consider the use of research, systems for data collection, ways of documenting and evaluating practices and how to value 'in-house knowledge'. In order to do so, the HUB used the already existing structure of the ENARO staff exchange. In total 49 reception workers took part in the exchanges in 2007, representing 15 different organisations dealing with reception and asylum in Europe.

The HUB introduced the following new elements to the ENARO-exchange programme:

1. Formalised content to the exchange
The HUB used shared topics for everyone to focus and facilitate the research. The topics were taken from the EU-directives on minimum standards: general provisions on reception conditions and provisions for persons with special needs.
2. Formats and templates to structure data collection
MASC developed an interview guide based on the topics of research in order to structure the data collection. The guide also includes directions on interview techniques and reporting.
3. Joint briefing and debriefing of exchange candidates
In a joint briefing session in Brussels the candidates were prepared for the exchange, use of the interview guide and their role as researchers. How to value 'good practice' was one of the topics of the briefing. After the exchange the candidates met again in Brussels to deliver the results of their data collection and share their experiences of 'good practice'.
4. Evaluation of good practices
Besides sharing experiences of good practice during the debriefing, the candidates produced a written report on each country to be delivered right after the exchange. The candidates were encouraged to make a descriptive report, which contained personal observations, remarks and recommendations. In addition, factual information on each participating organization was updated in so-called country profiles. Reports were sent as feedback to the host countries, published on the website and used by the researchers for the analysis.

Findings of the Hub

The findings of the Hub are based on personal observations of practitioners in the field of asylum and reception. Participants have given overviews on how the EU directives on general reception practices and vulnerable groups have been implemented.

The findings offer a basis for further development of the knowledge centre. The analysis of the University of Kent provides insight and information on:

- The pedagogical aspect of information transfer;
- Different types of good practices as identified by the practitioners;
- Mapping of good practices versus wider standards of good practices in Europe;
- Potential future of knowledge transfer.

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Malta – location of conference

Malta faces the severe pressures of migration influx in the Mediterranean Sea. Its geographical position and the recent accession to the European Union (2004) have led to an increasing demand for asylum. The Maltese government has actively reached out for support within Europe to manage this new challenge of asylum and reception issues.

The Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs (MJHA) runs the detention services, the closed reception facilities, where the immigrants spend the first period of arrival. Necessary basic facilities are offered to the immigrants. After a period of time, which may take up as much as 18 months, the immigrants are released from the detention centres.

The Organisation for the Integration and Welfare of Asylum Seekers (OIWAS) is responsible for the open accommodation centres and falls under the responsibility of the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity (MFSS). OIWAS was officially founded in June 2007.

Currently OIWAS runs centres that offer accommodation to over 2000 asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Due to the huge expansion in numbers of asylum seekers, the Maltese government felt the need to operate in a more holistic manner. Centres are run directly by the government or by voluntary organizations in partnership with the government.

Running a centre includes managing the centres; directing those who require protection towards integration on Malta or in another country; and assisting those who have to return to their country of origin.

OIWAS has recently joined the ENARO network and has formed several other alliances in order to tackle the problems Malta faces as a result of the growing influx of asylum seekers.