EESC Study Group
on Immigration and Integration

Project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees

MISSION REPORT – GREECE
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Mission Report – Greece, 5 and 6 March 2020

Between October 2019 and March 2020, the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees. The delegation to Greece was composed of Evgeniy Ivanov (Bulgaria, Employers' Group), Carlos Manuel Trindade (Portugal, Workers' Group) and Panagiotis Gkofas, (Greece, Diversity Europe Group), supported by Triin Aasmaa, from the EESC secretariat. The EESC President Luca Jahier joined the delegation, accompanied by Cinzia Sechi, member of President Jahier's private office.

1. Purpose of the mission

Between October 2019 and March 2020 the IMI Group conducted five fact-finding missions as part of a project on **the role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees**. The country visits provided an in-depth picture of problems and best practices, documented in individual country reports. The five country reports are to feed into a summary report presenting the project's main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

This project is linked to a previous EESC project on migration: eleven EESC fact-finding missions on migration that were conducted in 2015–2016. These latest five fact-finding missions took place in Member States that were also visited in 2015-2016, namely Greece, Malta, Sweden, Germany and Bulgaria[1].

During the missions, the delegation compared the situation in the five countries with the situation as it was three years ago, talking to organisations that we met last time to see if their projects were still ongoing, if they had matured and increased in scale, if problems identified previously had been overcome, and how, and what the current needs and challenges were. Where relevant, the delegations also met other organisations, paying special attention to measures addressing particular groups that may be more difficult to integrate into the labour market (e.g. women, migrants from a specific country of origin, migrants with a specific educational background and migrants with disabilities). The project tried to identify good practices to see if they could be replicated elsewhere, including those helping to positively change the narrative on migration.

2. Situation in Greece

General situation

After the peak of migrant arrivals to Europe from Turkey via Greece in 2015-2016, arrivals slowed down after the EU-Turkey deal. However, there has been a resurgence in arrivals since around September 2019 – around 860 000 arrivals in 2015, around 37 000 arrivals in 2017 and around 85 000 arrivals in 2019.

By the end of February, there had been more than 6 100 arrivals since the beginning of 2020 (UNHCR). The situation has left Greece's asylum processing system overstretched, with a current backlog of 90 000 cases – which has resulted in some refugees spending over a year in the camps.

[1] A sixth fact-finding visit to Italy was planned, but had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 health crisis.

According to UNHCR, currently some 41 300 refugees and asylum seekers reside on the Aegean islands. The majority of them are from Afghanistan (48%), Syria (20%) and Palestine (6%). Women account for 21% of the population, and children for 29% of whom more than 6 out of 10 are younger than 12 years old. Approximately 15% of the children are unaccompanied or separated, mainly from Afghanistan.

The situation at the Greek-Turkish land border worsened dramatically on 29 February following Ankara's official decision not to respect the EU-Turkey deal any more and to let thousands of migrants try to enter EU territory. This created a very tense situation that shifted the initial focus of the visit. While the numbers are nowhere near 2015 levels, they mean a significant increase if Turkey keeps its borders open.

Political situation at the time of the visit

The conservative government, in power since mid-2019, had declared it wished to accelerate a review of procedures for granting asylum. It had passed a law stiffening asylum requirements for migrants, and has pledged to deploy additional border patrols.

In January 2020, the Government reinstated the migration and asylum ministry six months after it had scrapped it. In February, the Minister for Migration and Asylum announced that Greece would begin setting up closed-type camps for asylum seekers on its Aegean islands in March, in response to growing tensions over the migrants' current overcrowded facilities. In order to obtain land for these camps, the government had decided to expropriate the necessary property and land as a crisis management measure in order to address the urgent need to avoid endangering public health and order. This created strong reactions by the islanders and local authorities. The structures were intended to shelter new arrivals in order to facilitate the identification and asylum processes and are to be used to detain migrants who exhibit abusive behaviour and those who are not entitled to asylum and are slated for return to their country of origin.

Local authorities insisted that the new structures would only serve to further exacerbate the problem of large numbers of asylum seekers on the islands, rather than relieve the pressure. Islanders and local authorities are strongly opposed to the new closed camps and have staged protests in recent months. The asylum seekers, who are tired of the poor conditions at the camps, have also held demonstrations. Clashes erupted between migrants and riot police on Lesvos earlier this year.

The closed centres are part of a broader government plan to resolve the migration problem. This also entailed tightening border security, speeding up asylum procedures and increasing returns. One of the declared aims was to ensure the decongestion of the islands, which carry the greatest burden with respect to the reception of refugees and migrants.

Integration

For Greece, having been mostly a country of emigration and an immigration transit country, the shift to becoming a host country is a rather new development and as a result, migrant integration issues have not been high on the political agenda. The first National Strategy for the Integration of Third Country Nationals was set up in 2013 and it included measures and actions to be implemented in areas as introductory courses, employment, health, housing, political participation, anti-discrimination and intercultural dialogue, but most emphasis was put on training and skills development for both TCNs and public employees dealing with migrant issues.

In July 2019, the previous government adopted a new National Integration Strategy that contains measures regarding education, labour market integration, racism and xenophobia, among others. However, under the current government, the migration and asylum laws have been changed resulting in delays in implementing the integration strategy.

Foreigners have limited access to structured services aiming at social integration. Local/municipal and national authorities, as well as NGOs, provide language courses to newcomers, but Greece does not have a standard integration programme for third-country nationals. For example, there is no civic education programme in place nor vocational training programmes. However, the 2019 integration strategy identifies the promotion of integration in the education system, labour market integration and access to public services as important factors for the integration of immigrants and beneficiaries of international protection.

3. A description of the meetings

a. UNHCR Greece

The previous visit

The meeting took place in Mytilene on Lesvos. UNHCR Greece was supplementing the coordination carried out by the State and which needed improvement. It worked on humanitarian assistance and capacity-building in the hot spots and had launched a bus system with capacity to transfer 1 000 people from the shore to the registration camps. UNHCR had advocated relocation of the reception services to a place where people could stay for 1-2 days, no matter where they came from, so that when Moria and Kara Tepe were full, they could still be accommodated (a place with capacity for 10 000-15 000 people). Regarding relocation, the processing time and the few pledges were hindering the procedure.

This visit

UNHCR works with the Greek Government, local authorities and NGOs and with the help of the EU to provide urban accommodation and cash assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers in Greece. 25 000 accommodation places have been created under the accommodation scheme (as part of the ESTIA programme) for vulnerable asylum-seekers and refugees, with translation services, minimal psychosocial support and cash support for people accommodated in apartments and in refugee camps as well. Urban accommodation helps restore a sense of normality and provides better access to services, including education and health. People are additionally supported by social workers and interpreters who help them with access to medical services, employment, language courses and recreational activities.

UNHCR provides cash assistance in Greece, as part of the ESTIA programme, funded by the European Commission. Cash assistance restores dignity and empowers asylum-seekers and refugees who can now choose how to cover their basic needs. It also contributes directly to the economy of the host community through the purchase of services and goods. In January 2020, 93 976 eligible refugees and asylum-seekers received cash assistance. Since 2017, more than 166 000 eligible individuals have received cash assistance at least once. Eligibility is assessed based on date of entry in the country, legal status and current location.

Greece has been experiencing new challenges since March 2016 when it became the third country after France and Germany with the greatest numbers of arrivals. UNHCR was substituting the state in reception capacities. This was not the case before 2016 as people could proceed to other countries at that time. UNHCR is helping Greece to build capacity and create a functioning reception system. The UNHCR Greece had 650 staff members but is currently reducing the numbers as the Greek government takes over the tasks. Currently, it has 400 staff members.

b. The Migrant Point EKA of Athens Labour Unions Organization

The Migrant Point EKA of Athens Labour Union's Organization was set up in May 2006, in collaboration with the GSEE Institute of Labour. The goal is to help and support migrants and refugees to have equal access to labour and social rights.

The Migrant Point EKA belongs to the Network of Information Services and Counselling of Workers and Unemployed, an initiative of the GSEE Institute of Labour, which provides information and counselling to employees and unemployed people, prioritising the fields of social security, labour relations and employment. The purpose of the Network is to provide reliable information and support to Greek and migrant workers on labour relations, insurance, as well as on employment and training issues.

Unemployment is very high and widespread in Greece among both migrants and locals.
Since 2015, when huge refugee flows started to arrive in Greece, there have been great difficulties in managing the situation. The EKA has been insisting that efforts need to be made to integrate migrants and refugees. Group meetings for refugees have been organised since 2015.

One of the main projects in the field of migrant integration into the labour market is the Labour-INT project. When designing the Labour-INT project, the aim was to draw from the experience of NGOs and also migrant organisations. A very important factor was to place people in training, e.g. Greek language courses, as early as their waiting time in the asylum process. Over the years, fruitful cooperation on migrant integration issues has been developed between the EKA, the Municipality of Athens and the NGOs based in Athens.

c. Meeting with the Labour-INT project partners

Participating organisations: HumanRights360, ELIX, Solomon - Media for social inclusion and diversity, Vocational Training Centre of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchant (GSEVEE), GENERATION 2.0

The Labour-INT project is jointly coordinated by ETUC, CEEP and EUROCHAMBRES, including a large range of partners around Europe, and with the involvement and support of several national, European and international organisations. The objective is to improve the capacity of the target group to activate integration paths based on labour market inclusion together with protection against exploitation and undeclared work. The aim is to activate multi-stakeholder cooperation for integration through labour-related activities (integration training seminars) for the benefit of international protection seekers together with a pilot testing of the EU Skills Profile Tool. The pilot action is implemented by the Athens Labour Unions Organization (EKA) and the Vocational Training Centre

of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (KEK GSEVEE) in cooperation with the Municipality of Athens and a number of local civil society organisations.

KEK GSEVEE designs and implements training seminars addressed to migrants and refugees. Their aim is to provide participants with introductory knowledge and bring them closer to the local labour market through vocational training actions in the field of digital competences. The main aim of the training activities is to familiarise beneficiaries with their basic rights in Greece and especially with the knowledge and information they need for their social and labour integration in the country.

The project is being implemented in Athens for a duration of two years (2019-2020).

Two categories of beneficiaries:

- third-country nationals who have submitted an application for international protection in respect of which a final decision has not yet been taken and
- persons who have already been granted international protection.

The actions aim to facilitate equal access to work of these two categories as part of better management of the reception process and preparation for their faster integration in Greece

The period of time between the interview for asylum and the final decision in practice is quite long. This period is used in particular to implement the pilot actions of the project. As the rate of relocations to other EU countries is extremely low, a significant proportion of the asylum seekers will remain in the country and will have to be integrated into local communities.

Positive outcomes

- The training activities were conducted with full respect for the multicultural origin and dignity of the participants (specific catering, personal data used only for the certificates and logistics)
- Active participation; time and programme were respected
- High level of enthusiasm and motivation of the participants. The participants have given very positive feedback to other migrants; they recommend it to their families and friends
- All participants would like to continue the collaboration with in-job oriented training/ internship activities.

Conclusions

- Despite being confronted with a severe economic and social crisis, Greece continues to receive a high number of asylum seekers and migrants
- There is a need to provide information in a language that the target group understands. The training activities provided to third country nationals make clear that integration is a multidimensional process of indicators (learning the local language, access to labour, qualifications, housing, education, etc.) and takes place through a multistakeholder approach and synergies with other international and national projects implemented
- Greek language and access to the labour market are the second urgent issues after the reception
- Flexibility is extremely important.

The target group was 100 persons of whom 83 completed the training and 37 received a diploma, which was considered a very good result.

A very high number of women participated and as they brought their children along it was decided to provide childcare that was initially not planned. The main age group was 25-35 years. Unexpected problems occurred: many of the participants had lived for a long time in Greece but they had no notion of structured ways of working, many suffered panic attacks and anxiety episodes, also the level of knowledge of Greek language was very low in many cases. Another aim was to add a human touch to the training, not only the technicalities of the course, but also to convey the feeling that how they felt and how were they doing was important. It was essential to have mediators who spoke French, Farsi, Arabic and English.

It was very important for people to have a routine in their life; to have a goal and somewhere to go. Then they could commit to their tasks. Most of these people are in the refugee camps, waiting sometimes two to three years for the asylum interviews.

Many participants were university graduates. However, no matter how highly educated they were, they did not have information about their legal status or life in Greece. On many occasions, they were even misinformed. For example, people had no idea how much time the asylum procedures could take and many of them believed that they would be in Greece only for a very short time. After it was explained how long the asylum procedures take, they started learning Greek as they had not deemed learning Greek important before. In general, there was a huge lack of information among migrants and refugees.

There are several initiatives by different NGOs providing language courses but this not nearly enough to fill the cap. Therefore, the Labour-INT project is very important for the participants as it gives them an opportunity to do something meaningful.

The organisers do not have information on what happens to the participants after the course. The obstacle is that the project takes place during the asylum procedure and the people concerned need to wait for their asylum interview and then another six months after the first interview before they are allowed to enter the labour market.

d. IOM Greece

The previous visit

The IOM had launched a new project for emergency returns that would help migrants who voluntarily wished to go back to their home countries to do so with dignity. For migrants who did not manage to cross the border the State had not come up with an integrated and holistic approach. The number of persons opting for the return project was very low.

This visit

It was stressed that the migration situation in Greece was very complicated. One year ago, there were 2 500 new arrivals a month and this was an amount that Greece could manage. If the number is 10 000 a month, it is clear that Greece cannot manage. This requires a solution beyond Greece.

The best solution would clearly be a solid European relocation system. A new asylum law, in force since 1 January 2020 has made the processes shorter and quicker, also as regards returning people to Turkey where relevant. This law applies to new arrivals and the system seems to work. However, the main issue for Greece is that the backlog of asylum application is around 90 000, making people wait for two-three years. There is a strong need for more staff to process the applications but also accommodation is a major problem.

A mistake made in the 2015 crisis, also by the international community, was that for a long time activities concentrated on reception and then on raising the standard of the accommodation (refugee camps, apartments, etc.). However, no attention was paid to integration. Integration is an integral part of migration management but it was not carried out in Greece. People have to stay in the refugee camps for a long time: during this period, they cannot access language training, they cannot work and they become dependent on the system. Therefore, it is much harder to act independently later. To take self-responsibility for one's life should be possible from a very early point for those who do not belong a vulnerable group. The worst approach is to send a person out of the refugee camp without any preparation for life outside.

IOM Greece started talks about integration programmes with the government in 2016 and the first integration project, Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection (HELIOS), started in August 2019 and is funded by DG HOME. The Helios project is implemented in close collaboration with national authorities and other partners. It aims at promoting the integration of beneficiaries of international protection currently residing in temporary accommodation schemes into the Greek society, through:

- Integration courses: provision of integration courses within Integration Learning Centres set up across Greece. Each course cycle lasts for six months and consists of modules on Greek language learning, cultural orientation, job readiness and life skills.
- Accommodation support: supporting beneficiaries in moving towards independent accommodation in apartments rented in their names, including by providing contributions to rental and move-in costs and networking with apartment owners.
- Employability support: provision of individual employability and job readiness support, including through job counselling, access to job-related certification and networking with private employers.
- Integration monitoring: regular assessment of the integration progress of the beneficiaries to ensure that they will be in a position to confidently navigate through Greek public service providers once they exit from the HELIOS project and start living independently in Greece.
- Awareness raising of the host community: organisation of workshops, activities and events and production of a nationwide media campaign to create opportunities for exchange between the hosting and the hosted communities, highlighting the value of the integration of migrants into Greek society.

The target group of the HELIOS project consists of beneficiaries of international protection recognised after 1 January 2018.

By April 2020, the project had reached and assisted 12 593 beneficiaries, 7 806 beneficiaries were enrolled in HELIOS and receiving support for independent living, 1 321 beneficiaries received rental subsidies upon finding independent housing.

As for employability of migrants, it was explained to members that there were always jobs for migrants – the challenge was to make sure that they did not end up on the black market and that people were not exploited. IOM has organised job fairs to try to match employers with the potential employees.

IOM Greece works with different counterpart organisations: 11 partners are NGOs and migrant associations. It is developing interaction with the private sector and chambers of commerce.

e. Meeting with Panagiotis Mitarachi, Minister for Migration and Asylum

The visit took place at the time of an extremely tense situation at the Greek-Turkish land border following Ankara's official decision end of February no longer to respect the EU-Turkey deal to let thousands of migrants try to enter EU territory. Eventually the situation had deescalated by mid-March mainly due to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

First, the Minister showed the delegation a video about the latest developments at the Greek-Turkish land border.
The Minister stressed that Greece was effectively protecting the external border of the EU. The European Union needed balanced migration management. Migration had a humanitarian side and it could not be used as a political tool. He pointed out that Turkey was using migrants to achieve its geopolitical goals: visa issues and Turkey's position in Syria.

President Jahier congratulated the Minister on the measures taken and how Greece had been coping with the situation on the Turkish border. He pointed out that Greece had to deal with a double crisis: the difficult situation on Greek islands and relations with Turkey.

He stressed that it was not acceptable that migrants were used by some as a commodity to achieve their geopolitical aims. We needed a correct balance between managing the borders and human rights and the values of the EU. Solidarity with Greece was not negotiable and was a precondition for moving forward on the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum. As a frontline Member State, Greece needed the full support and solidarity of other Member States. It was not acceptable that some Member States opted out of our joint obligations and leave others to carry a disproportionate burden in managing migration flows. We needed to find common solutions with unity and determination, and by strengthening the principle of solidarity so it was not perceived as an empty word. Managing our borders and reforming the EU's asylum law was the responsibility of Europe as a whole and could not be further delayed.

Minister Mitarachi acknowledged that the main problem was integration. Integration must be implemented in an effective way. Integration was very complicated issue and putting more money in it was not enough.

All the migration flows in 2019 were to five Greek islands. According to the EU-Turkey statement – which was the basis of EU migration policy until some time ago – it was not possible to move migrants and asylum seekers from islands.

The issue with the local population on the islands was that they did not believe that the government was going to close old refugee camps: they were convinced that new camps would simply be added. A phenomenon of "riot tourists" was emerging. Violently interfering in societal processes was not acceptable.

Minister Mitarachi mentioned that Greece was getting a lot of support from the EU, moral and financial support. He further stressed that the migration system of the EU needed to move forward, it could not be the front-line Member States alone who had to manage migration for the whole EU. Also, Cyprus was reaching the limit of the pressure it could take from Turkey. Most people arriving in Cyprus and Greece from Turkey had entered Turkey legally, arriving by plane etc.

Minister Mitarachi said that Frontex should have a stronger role: currently it could not protect or control the border. In principle, it only could count how many people cross the border and patrol.

f. Roundtable meeting with NGOs

Participating organisations: Melissa Network Team, METAdrasi, Doctors of the World-Greece, Generation 2.0, Praksis, Greek Council for Refugees, International Rescue Committee, Solidarity Now, Babel, ActionAid Hellas, Greek Forum of Migrants, Arsis, EKA Migrant Point.

The participants stressed that the EU needed migrants and integration must take place from day one. Interpreting was considered very important, as integration would not work without it. However, the quality and integrity of the interpreters needed to be guaranteed. Unfortunately, sometimes interpreters could be involved in corruption.

The situation of unaccompanied minors was a huge problem. There were projects conducted by NGOs to improve their situation or remove them from the refugee camps. For example, more than 90 children had been allocated to Greek foster families. One of the activities described was to take children from Moria refugee camp and bring them for days of educational activities. Children needed to go outside of the refugee camps. However, there were not enough shelters for unaccompanied children and refugee camps were not safe for these children. As an example of good practice, a project was mentioned where shared apartments were provided for unaccompanied minors of 16-18 years.

The organisations stressed that there was no comprehensive approach towards language courses. The NGOs were doing their best to fill the gap but it was not nearly enough and language courses on a permanent and structured basis were needed.

The lack of vocational training for migrants and refugees was highlighted as one of the main problems, as well as recognition of skills. Many migrants and refugees had diplomas and professional experience but those were not recognised in Greece. The NGOs had tried to bring the issue of recognition of skills and competences to the attention of the Ministry of Education but so far, there were no developments.

As regards the labour market, migrants and refugees did not know their rights. Lack of information was a great problem. Legal access to the labour market was very difficult, more and more migrants and refugees found themselves on the black market. Asylum seekers could not enter the labour market. They used to be able to work as soon as they were recognised; now they have to wait for six months after the asylum interview.

Some NGOs offer employability services to migrants and refugees, supporting newly arrived and recognised refugees in their transition to the labour market and to securing a paid job. A project was described that offers various services, including information, skills development and enrolment to vocational training and where the employment counsellors provide job placement services to the project beneficiaries. It was further explained to members that the employers did not have a negative image of migrants but they needed support when hiring them. Mostly, migrants were hired in tourism, catering, construction, agriculture, interpreting and care sectors.

There was an urgent need for psychological or social support as many of refugees and asylum seekers suffered from traumas and had fragile mental health. Integrating was very difficult for them. They needed a different mechanism that would take care of their trauma from the beginning. There were projects conducted by the NGOs to provide mental health services to migrants. A programme was mentioned that focused on integration of people who received mental health services. It supported them in finding jobs and housing, as well as guidance and explanations on their obligations.

Since 2019, the asylum seekers do not receive a social security number anymore, so they do not have access to health services, free access to hospitals etc. Apparently, it was up to doctors' discretion if they got an appointment or not.

As regards housing, it was considered very difficult to find apartments for migrants and refugees. A more racist attitude had recently emerged and it would take months to find an apartment for a recognised refugee. Refugees did not have access to social housing.

According to the information of the National Statistics Authority, published in February 2020, around 71% of employees in the agricultural sector are foreigners. As this is the official data, in reality this figure is probably even higher. The organisations mentioned that there was an internal problem in Greece - a huge number of undeclared workers in agriculture. The country depended on them but they were invisible. Some NGOs provided help to migrant agricultural workers as they were at a risk of exploitation and needed protection.

An example of good practice described was a community centre, run by an NGO since 2017, offering a wide range of services, language classes for refugees and migrants, employment counselling, legal advice, a social unit etc. It targeted the whole community: its services were also for the citizens of the community. All in the community involved together in a wide range of activities.

The participants stressed that integration did not receive the necessary attention in Greece. Integration activities at state level were very limited and there was no sustainability of these activities. People in refugee camps waited a long time to know what would happen to them. This reduced their chances of integration even more and they lost motivation.

It was pointed out that coordination was a huge problem. The NGOs felt that they were used by the state when there was a need to fill gaps, but the state did not trust NGOs. When problems occur, the NGOs do not get the necessary support from the state. The NGOs had made proposals to the state on how to recognise reliable NGOs. The NGOs felt that recognition of their work was lacking. Rather, they tended to be accused concerning issues that were not under their control. They explained to the members that criminalisation of solidarity was a problem they increasingly faced, especially under the difficult circumstances Greece was facing. There had been attacks on NGOs on the islands but no official statement had been published condemning them. All the desperation of the island populations caused by the intolerable situation there, was turning against the NGOs. International volunteers were leaving.

The situation on the islands was extremely difficult for the NGOs. Island citizens attacked the NGOs' staff, they received threats, their vehicles are set on fire, they are followed home. Very nationalist, far right movements were conducting this dangerous behaviour. Many NGOs had left the islands. Due to the tense situation, the NGOs were currently concentrating on their own physical safety more than on services to their beneficiaries. They felt that their energy was wasted. The NGOs were falsely blamed for cooperation with smugglers and for triggering migrant revolts.

The organisations mentioned that there was a severe lack of projects and funding. The NGOs had tried to organise some projects, hiring trainers etc. but these were one-off projects without any follow-up. The EU financing was considered to be very important but also very difficult to obtain because of bureaucracy. It took a lot of time and effort. In addition, the organisations felt that there was not enough transparency on how the EU funds were used.

The organisations were of the opinion that the biggest challenge at this moment was the political change and the change in the government's narrative. Integration was not the focus of the government that, in the field of migration, was mainly involved in reception, speeding up asylum, returns and borders. The previous government had adopted an integration strategy but it had not been implemented. The NGOs were pushing for the revival of this integration strategy.

Local authorities did not have the rights or powers to deal with integration issues. They had a very limited role despite the fact that integration happened on a local level. One aim of the abovementioned integration strategy was to increase the involvement of the LRAs in migrant integration. It also contained measures on labour market inclusion and education, but e.g. nothing on housing.

There was a general problem with data collection, therefore it was not possible to estimate how many migrants Greece could integrate, and without statistics it was not possible to develop viable integration strategies.

Integration work in Greece was carried out in a project-based way, there was no long-term planning and the experience and lessons learnt from previous projects were not used. There was little point in conducting pilot projects repeatedly.

Relations between the NGOs and government authorities were rather tense: there seemed to be an issue of mutual trust. The NGOs felt that their services were used by the state to fill urgent gaps, e.g.

in providing language courses, interpreting services etc., but their work was not recognised and they did not receive the necessary support.
The NGOs were trying to establish more contacts, e.g. with the relevant ministries, but there was a lack of cooperation.
Cooperation with international organisations and the trade unions functioned well, many projects were implemented on the basis of cooperation. Also, contacts with municipalities and local authorities had been made and worked but there, the issue was the limited role and competences of the LRAs in migration and integration management.

g. Hellenic Confederation of Professionals Craftsmen and Merchants (GSEVEE) and GSEVEE Small Enterprises' Institute

It was stressed that the financial impact of the refugee crisis over the last five years was enormous. There were approximately 115 000 migrants in Greece. On the Greek islands there were more than 40 000 migrants – more than the regular population of the islands. The EU relocation system did not work (in 2016-2018: Portugal took in 1 000 people, France 400 and Finland 175 from Cyprus, Greece and Malta. Serbia accepted 100 unaccompanied minors). The EU-Turkey statement was not functioning and Turkey was not meeting its commitments.

The proposals of GSEVEE for managing the migration inflows:

1) Proportional relocation: to inhabitants or GDP
2) Registration of applications outside of the EU borders, e.g. in Turkey or Syria.
3) Revise the Dublin regulation. It was not viable that the countries of first reception were obliged to manage the migration alone.

The delegation was told that the social and political situation was worse than five years ago and the lessons from the 2015-2016 crisis had not been learnt. A critical point had been reached, where the EU Member States needed to realise that migration was not a Greek problem or a single Member State's problem, it was an EU problem.

GSEVEE worked on migrant integration programmes and was a partner of the Labour-INT programme (see above). In 2016-2018, it participated in an international integration programme MigrAID that aimed at educating social partners toward ethnic diversity in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises. The project was active in five EU Member States: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, France and Denmark. It focused on the integration of migrants working in the sector of SMEs and ethnic diversity. Apart from the research study, the project implemented a range of other activities including the production of educational VET materials, guides and tools, the delivery of sectoral training workshops and seminars, digitalisation of the materials produced and the creation of a simulator, the organisation of a conference on the subject, and the dissemination of the respective outcomes and outputs. GSEVEE prepared a "Ethnic Diversity Guide for SMEs", in order to help social partners to better identify the most appropriate principles, tools, and procedures for enabling SMEs to promote ethnic diversity in the workplace: improving the understanding of social partners on ethnic diversity; improving skills on managing conflicts at the workplace; promoting migrants' integration.

h. **Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee Issues** (ACCMR)

ACCMR is a coordination mechanism with around 90 NGO and civil society members. There are six committees on different areas, e.g. health, women, legal rights of refugees in Greece and housing. These committees meet once a month. The aim is to develop different tools. There is a digital platform for the exchange between the NGOs and the municipality.

The ACCMR Digital Coordination Platform aims to support the effective mapping of services and activities concerning migrants and refugees in the City of Athens and thus to facilitate the exchange of information and resources between the different stakeholder groups involved in the provision of services/organisation of activities and between their professional staff. It also connects organisations with individuals, businesses and other actors who want to offer support. It is open to local and international NGOs, international organisations, migrant and refugee community groups, citizen groups and other stakeholders who organise and/or support initiatives in support of migrants and refugees.

There is a network of cities for integration comprising 13 municipalities. Coordination and cooperation between them is supported by the IOM.

In 2015, Greece was not prepared for the refugee crisis. The City of Athens set up the Eleonas refugee camp for 2 000-3 000 people. Athens was the first to participate in the UNHCR migrant housing project. Many organisations started to work on migration issues. ACCMR was established with private funds, and is now funded by the IOM. Many cities and NGOs were involved. A coordination mechanism was created. Then integration programmes were created.

It was explained to members that ACCMR provided services to third country nationals: two social workers, a psychologist and legal counselling. No appointment is needed and the office was open every day. Two job counsellors helped to draft CVs etc. Some Greek language courses and computer courses were provided, together with advice on how to find jobs. There were cultural events for children in Eleonas refugee camp: theatre visits, events, visiting monuments, organising games. The main aim was to provide a one-stop shop for services. The office had been fully functional for the last year. Teachers were hired and cultural courses provided. The migrant integration centre was considered to represent very good practice.

ACCMR collaborated with the job centre to provide legal jobs, in cooperation with businesses. Those who have asylum, had the same rights as Greek citizens and could work legally. There was no permanent national programme for e.g. language learning. Municipalities did not have a budget or competences to deal with integration.

The members were told that integration was a very recent topic in Greece and it had not implemented any integration strategies so far. Many things have been done over past years by different actors but they were not sustainable and they took place on a very small scale. All integration activities were project-based and permanent mechanisms on the state level were lacking. International organisations - IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF - were important actors in integration activities.

Statistics was a problem and it was very hard to estimate numbers. Cities and municipalities could collect this data.

The main problem was that newcomers did not speak Greek or English. Many more language courses were urgently needed to enable them to enter the labour market. Recognition of skills was mentioned as a problem, however compared to the lack of language skills, recognition of diplomas was at first rather a secondary problem.

There were many jobs that Greeks did not wish to do and these would be jobs for the migrants. Tourism, care, agriculture and catering were the main sectors where migrants found jobs. Job fairs were organised and many migrants came to them.

A new programme for refugees was described that provided a holistic approach: help to lease apartments, find jobs, learn the language. It provided counselling and helped the target group to get to know Athens. So far, 300 refugees had been reached. The main objective was to connect refugees to local people so that they could come out of isolation and change from being service beneficiaries to choosing the life they wanted and become independent. The programme lasted two years and the aim was to help take the next step. It contained creativity courses and a buddy programme. It experimented with different approaches. The programme was conducted in cooperation with the University of Athens, e.g. language courses without books through practical skills – going to the market, museum etc. Currently, it was at the action research stage: trying out which approaches worked.

It was crucial that the state should recognise LRAs as an essential actor in migrant integration, and provided competences and funds for integration activities.

i. Social Integration Directorate, Secretariat General of Migration Policy, Reception and Asylum

As the meeting was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Social Integration Directorate sent its contribution in writing.

The Directorate of Social Integration reports to the Secretariat General of Migration Policy. Its objective is the design and implementation of the Strategy for the integration of third-country nationals as well as planning and monitoring implementation of sectoral integration policies in institutional cooperation with the co-competent Ministries in this field.

The Directorate of Social Integration had set up an informal interministerial team for systematic mapping of integration actions of migrants and beneficiaries of international protection. This group recorded the social integration actions implemented by each Ministry and aimed at networking and exchange of best practices between the relevant Ministries.
In cooperation with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the IOM was implementing the HELIOS project, with direct funding from DG HOME (see above). The project aimed at the transition of new refugees from the reception phase, which included basic reception conditions (housing, financial assistance, access to health, etc.) into the integration phase through access in particular to the labour market, health, insurance and education.

Social Integration Programmes

Actions to enhance intercultural mediation and interculturalism:

- Establishing intercultural mediator as a professional profile

The Directorate, in cooperation with the social partners and other specialised bodies, had developed has prepared a professional profile of intercultural mediators, which should ameliorate the services offered in the field.

- Mapping of people working as intercultural mediators in Greece

In March 2019, the Directorate of Social Integration launched on the website of the Ministry for Migration Policy an open invitation to map people working as intercultural mediators in Greece. The purpose of this mapping was to collect data that could be used for designing and implementing relevant programmes and to create a pool of individuals, consisting mainly of third-country nationals, to further promote intercultural mediation services. So far, 167 people had been recorded.

- Programme to enhance the participation of third country nationals in museums and archaeological sites

The role and contribution of recognised CSOs was crucial for the representation of third-country nationals in institutional mediation. In 2019, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum issued a call to record recognised entities for the collective representation of third-country nationals. The main goal was communication and cooperation between these entities and the Ministry. The Directorate of Social Integration launched a series of meetings with the recognised entities for collective representation.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

As a front-line Member State for migrant arrivals since 2015, Greece is clearly overwhelmed with the situation and urgently needs help from other EU Member States to manage the migratory situation.

The most burning issues are still reception and a vast backlog of asylum applications, currently at around 90 000. The waiting times can be two-three years, during which the applicants have no access to language training, they cannot work legally and the long waiting time without purpose and commitment makes the integration process even harder. The government has sped up processing the asylum applications but this only applies to new applications filed after 2019.

The EESC stresses that a sound and functioning EU relocation system must be put in place to reduce the pressure on Greece and other front-line Member States. Without relocations from Greece to other Member States, it is not realistic to expect that Greece would be able to integrate all migrants and refugees currently on its territory.

As Greece has been mostly country of emigration and an immigration transit country, the shift to becoming a host country is a rather new development. Migrant integration issues have not been high on the political agenda and a structured and holistic approach to migrant integration has not yet been established.

NGOs therefore have a crucial role in migrant integration in Greece, filling gaps where integration measures are lacking. There are good relations between the NGOs, trade unions and municipalities and many integration projects are conducted in cooperation between these actors. International organisations are important actors in migrant integration as they implement major projects in partnership with NGOs and municipalities. Relations between NGOs and state authorities seem to be

rather challenging. The NGOs we met felt that they did not receive the support and recognition for their work from the state and that trust was lacking between them and the state level. The EESC urges the state to find ways to strengthen the cooperation with CSOs to ensure that their expertise as practitioners is used more in designing integration policies to increase their efficiency.

There has not been an official register of NGOs and therefore the landscape of the NGOs active in the field of migrant issues could be described as fragmented. The Ministry for Migration has launched a registration system for recognised NGOs active in the field of migration.

The local and regional authorities have limited competences in the field of migrant integration. The EESC stresses that considering that integration takes place mainly at local level, it is crucial that the state should recognise LRAs as an essential actor in migrant integration and provide them with competences and funds for integration activities.

As there is no structured integration system, integration activities are project-based and there is no coordination between different projects. Most of these projects are one-offs without any follow-up and as a result the experience gained and lessons learnt in those projects remains unused. The EESC strongly recommends designing integration projects and measures in a longer context and in a sustainable way. They should include a follow-up phase in order to use the experience gained in future projects.

Different stakeholders stressed that there is a severe lack of language courses for migrants and refugees. As language skills are the first step towards integration, the EESC urges the state to set up a permanent structure for providing language courses.

Migrants and refugees lack information about their legal status and rights, and misinformation is a common problem. People in refugee camps do not know what will happen to them and how long the asylum procedures might take. This reduces their chances of integration even more and they lose motivation. Often they are under the false impression that they will soon leave Greece and so do not need to learn Greek. Access to good quality information is key to successful integration and needs to be improved.

Legal access to the labour market is very difficult, with more and more migrants and refugees finding themselves on the black market. Asylum seekers cannot enter the labour market. They used to be able to work as soon as they were recognised; now they have to wait for six months after the asylum interview. Since 2019, asylum seekers no longer receive a social security number, which is needed to access the labour market, health services, free hospitalisation etc.

Lack of vocational training is a major problem, together with the fact that the skills and diplomas of migrants and refugees are not recognised. This leaves their potential unused on the labour market.

Another severe problem is the exploitation of migrants and refugees, e.g. in the agricultural sector. As legal access to the labour market is very difficult, many migrants and refugees end up on the black market were they are exposed to abuse and exploitation. The EESC urges the state to recognise the severity of the problem and to take immediate action to eliminate this phenomenon.

There were around 5 500 unaccompanied minors in Greece at the time of the visit. There are not enough shelters for them and staying in refugee camps puts them in a very vulnerable situation. They urgently need protection and accommodation in suitable shelters. However, soon after our visit, the European Commission announced a separate scheme to relocate 1 600 unaccompanied minors from Greece to other European member states. Eleven EU Member States – Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia, Luxembourg and Lithuania, as well as Switzerland – have agreed to accept a total of 1 600 children and adolescents from Greek refugee camps.

The position of society towards migrants and refugees is complicated and ever-changing. There are some who have a positive attitude and some who are hostile towards migrants and refugees and then there is a middle ground that moves according to the general situation. The EESC recommends designing integration measures in a way that benefits the local population as well, to avoid tensions between the host population and the newcomers. In addition, this would facilitates encounters, which reduce the level of distrust and animosity that are often seen in societies welcoming newcomers in their midst.

Finally, as regards statistics on the migrant population and refugees, several organisations and bodies mentioned difficulties due to not having sufficiently structured and densified statistical data. Solving this problem would be a very important step towards improving policies and their subsequent monitoring.

European Economic
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