



Reception Conditions For Asylum-seekers in the Republic of Cyprus

I. Introduction

At the end of 2016, there were 3,088 asylum-seekers with pending applications. Of these, 307 were accommodated at the Kofinou Reception Centre. Another 112 unaccompanied and separated asylum-seeking children are hosted in special reception centres in Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol. All remaining asylum applicants (2,699) live independently in the community. Some are employed, others receive limited welfare support from the State.

Over the years, UNHCR has worked closely with the authorities to assist in the development and further strengthening of the national asylum system, including the reception conditions for asylum-seekers, and is pleased with the on-going collaboration and dialogue. In relation to reception conditions, UNHCR welcomes the recent expansion of the Kofinou Reception Centre from a facility accommodating 70 persons to a 400-bed capacity.

The present paper presents UNHCR's observations on the reception conditions for asylum-seekers in the Republic of Cyprus. The findings and recommendations are based on observations made in the course of UNHCR's regular monitoring of the Kofinou Reception Centre and meetings with asylum-seekers living in the community in the course of 2016. The report does not address reception conditions in relation to unaccompanied and separated asylum-seeking children, which raise specific issues and is presented in a separate paper entitled "The Protection of Refugee Children in Cyprus, April 2017".

UNHCR offers a number of recommendations to assist the authorities to significantly improve the national reception system and ensure compliance with international and EU standards, in particular the recast *Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection* (Reception Conditions Directive). The recommendations made are not exhaustive, but it is hoped that they will serve as a basis for continued dialogue. Further, UNHCR encourages the authorities to continue to work closely with the European Asylum Support Office to strengthen its capacity to implement the recast instruments, especially in relation to reception.

II. Information and training

Asylum Procedures Directive (APD) Art. 6: Member States shall ensure that those other authorities which are likely to receive applications for international protection such as the police, border guards, immigration authorities and personnel of detention facilities have the relevant information and that their personnel receive the necessary level of training which is appropriate to their tasks and responsibilities and instructions to inform applicants as to where and how applications for international protection may be lodged.

Reception Conditions Directive (RCD) Art. 17(1): Member States shall ensure that material reception conditions are available to applicants when they make their application for international protection.

The Refugee law states that the submission of an application may be made at all entry points of the Republic of Cyprus or at any Police Station in the Republic, and in case the applicant is detained or imprisoned, at the detention centre or prison where the applicant is held. For those who have already entered the country, the District Aliens and Immigration Offices of the Police is the designated office for receiving and registering asylum applications and the hours in which it can receive claims are limited. The limited operating hours means that asylum applicants are often unable to access both asylum procedures and reception facilities. As a result, many asylum-seekers have had to sleep rough unable to register and be referred to reception facilities.

The above situation may be remedied by ensuring, as in accordance with Article 6 of the Asylum Procedures Directive, that all authorities which are likely to receive applications for international protection, such as the border officials at the crossing points and police, have the relevant information and that their personnel receive the necessary level of training to respond to a request to 'make' an asylum application. In the circumstance where the District Offices of the police are not open and persons cannot therefore be referred, police and border officials should be trained to take appropriate details, issue a temporary confirmation of the claim, and refer to the Social Welfare Services to provide reception assistance until such time as the District Office is able to formally register the application.

Even when the District office is open and a referral is made to the Asylum Service for reception facilities, difficulties have arisen because Kofinou Reception Centre only has a limited capacity. In instances where Kofinou is full, applicants should be accommodated by the Social Welfare Services, but there is no procedure in place to ensure immediate accommodation and generally applicants in such situation remain unassisted for a time.

Recommendations:

All authorities which are likely to be the first contacts for international protection, such as border officials and the police, should have the relevant information and adequate training on receiving applications, making referrals for accommodation, cross-cultural communication and the specific needs of particular groups.

The Social Welfare Services must initiate contingency accommodation plans in the event that the Kofinou Reception Centre is at full capacity.

III. Information to asylum-seekers

RCD 5(1): Member States shall inform applicants, within a reasonable time not exceeding 15 days after they have lodged their application for international protection, of at least any established benefits and of the obligations with which they must comply relating to reception conditions.

Member States shall ensure that applicants are provided with information on organisations or groups of persons that provide specific legal assistance and organisations that might be able to help or inform them concerning the available reception conditions, including health care.

There is a comprehensive information guide which is meant to be available upon the registration of asylum claims, but in practice it is often not given to applicants. Moreover, the latest version of the information guide is accurate only in so far as it concerns information relating to asylum procedures up until 2009 and is only available in English pending updates being made.

At Kofinou, a leaflet is available in 5 languages (Arabic, Farsi, English, French, and Russian) to be disseminated to newcomers containing information regarding the operation of the Centre and the rights and duties of the residents. It is observed that at times new residents did not receive the leaflet and that it does not include information on available services to asylum-seekers outside the Centre or information regarding the asylum procedure.

Recommendations:

The information leaflet should be updated regularly in as many languages as possible and be freely available at the Asylum Service, public areas of Police Stations and the District Offices of the Police, other government departments (such as the welfare office) and NGOs;

All residents of the Kofinou Reception Centre should receive upon arrival up-to-date and detailed information on the operation of the Centre and the available community services.

IV. Kofinou reception facility

The Asylum Service is responsible for the overall management of Kofinou Reception Centre, which includes its operation and financial management. The Local Council of Volunteerism of Kofinou (SKE) continues its role in the daily management of the Centre, along with social workers from Group 4. Catering services are provided by contractors. There was a bidding process for the out-sourced management of the Center that was completed in early 2016 and new management selected. However, the award of the contract was rescinded following an appeal by one of the candidates. At present, the bidding process has yet to be recommenced.

i. Personnel issues

RCD 18(7): Persons working in accommodation centres shall be adequately trained and shall be bound by the confidentiality rules provided for in national law in relation to any information they obtain in the course of their work.

Administrative staff

The present administrative staff from the Local Council of Volunteerism has been offering services for many years in the Centre (some for more than 10 consecutive years). However, staff members are not engaged in ongoing training to ensure appropriate service standards. In addition, there is no support or relief for staff to prevent “burnout” and institutionalization. It has to be recalled that staff members are working in an isolated and demanding context for prolonged periods

Interpreters

As many persons do not possess an adequate command of English, interpretation is necessary to ensure interaction with the staff, the Asylum Service, administration, the medical unit, etc. There are currently Arabic speaking interpreters appointed by the Asylum Service for both daytime and evening duty. In addition, an extra interpreter has been appointed by the Asylum Service to visit the Centre once a week to assist the French speaking residents from African countries, however this is not considered adequate by the French speakers. Also there is no appointed interpreter for other nationalities, a fact often pointed out by the residents as an issue of concern which creates feelings of discrimination. In many instances, residents often act as interpreters, which is not ideal.

Security staff

UNHCR has observed that both security officers and residents alike are not clear on the exact role of security, i.e. interventions, reporting, and interaction. In addition, residents are not clear on the Centre's rules on security and safety and the consequences in instances of breach.

Cleaning staff

Due to the expansion of the Centre and especially due to the large concentration of people in the family section, the cleaning services are not sufficient. The large wheelie bins are often seen to be overflowing and rubbish strewn in communal areas.

Recommendations:

A Code of Conduct for all staff employed at Kofinou should be instituted and regular refresher training organized;

All reception staff should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and the Asylum Service should provide appropriate and ongoing training and support;

Both male and female interpreters should be readily available (either in person or through remote communication);

The role and responsibility of the security company should be clearly defined and be made visible to all residents;

Residents should be informed of their rights and duties, including the consequence of any breach thereof (warnings, expulsion, etc.);

A procedure for reporting and acting upon security incidences should be established;

There should be a sufficient number of full-time cleaners.

ii. Reception conditions at Kofinou

RCD 17(2): Member States shall ensure that material reception conditions provide an adequate standard of living for applicants, which guarantees their subsistence and protects their physical and mental health.

RCD 18(8): Member States may involve applicants in managing the material resources and non-material aspects of life in the centre through an advisory board or council representing residents.

Meeting essential needs

A monthly allowance of 40 Euros is allocated to primary applicants and 10 Euros for each dependent. Most residents consider the amount inadequate to cover their basic needs. This is compounded by the fact that the Asylum Service does not provide certain essentials, such as baby-care products (wet wipes, feeding bottles, pacifiers, diaper creams, sterilizers, cots, and alternative milk brands - notwithstanding if this is upon a pediatrician's recommendation). Other essential items not provided

include toiletries (except initially on arrival), clothes, underwear, toys, school supplies (uniforms, school bags, writing books, pencils, etc.).

Essential items are sometimes provided by donations from individuals and groups, although this is not necessarily coordinated. Both material and cash donations are given in order to secure other items not provided by the authorities (e.g. eyeglasses, dental products, lice medication, etc.). Aside from the inadequacy of the allowance provided to meet essential needs, there are also delays in disbursing the payment which causes frustration.

Social and recreational activities

There is a lack of government-funded recreational and social activities, both for children and adults. The absence of activities affects negatively upon the quality of life, especially given the remoteness of the Centre which in itself creates feelings of alienation.

The Asylum Service permits volunteer groups or individuals to provide activities at the Centre, but is not engaged in monitoring, designing and actively facilitating these activities. Volunteer activities (with most of them targeting children) rely largely on the initiatives implemented by volunteers and/or NGOs. The activities include Greek and English classes, educational and recreational activities for children (e.g. art and theatre classes, homework aid, and sport activities), social gatherings with food/music, participation of residents in community events (sightseeing, human library project, etc.). However, due to the reliance on volunteers or NGO, the activities are often not systematic or may even overlap.

The presence of groups and individuals from the local community in the Centre is beneficial as it expands the services available to the population. Equally important, the presence of outside persons acts as a public channel of positive interaction between the refugee and the local community, constituting a possible influential factor on the formulation of positive public attitudes towards the refugee community as a whole.

Civic orientation and language classes

The learning of the Greek language is key to both effective access to services, labour and integration. Toward the end of 2015, the Ministry of Education initiated an on-site series of beginners and advanced Greek and English language courses for adults, divided into separate groups of male and female residents. On-site Greek and English courses are also provided by volunteers. Participation in all classes is voluntary.

UNHCR has observed that the dropout rate increases over time. The feedback received is varied and, in part, may be subjective. Participants will often refer to difficulties related to the pace of the lessons (either too slow or too fast), the fact that they do not understand Greek or English and cannot fully participate, no opportunity to practice, the frequency of the classes, their general education level and learning ability, and the time that classes take place, etc.

In order to maximize attendance, there should be an assessment of the language classes offered and the factors affecting the learning process. This assessment will principally involve gathering the feedback of the residents. The Ministry of Education should gather information to understand how to motivate student attendance and to maximize the learning experience.

In addition, there is no provision of basic information on civic and cultural life in Cyprus. Such information is imperative in order to facilitate the smooth transition of persons from the Kofinou

Reception Centre to the community. A cultural integration project offering basic orientation skills in a series of seminars was offered by the Future Worlds Centre which received very positive feedback from the participants.

Maintenance issues

Residents express concern about delays in addressing maintenance issues (such as hot water, air conditioning), and which are reported to persist for several weeks. UNHCR has been informed that two out of five of the sewage systems do not operate properly causing a recurring overflow, leading to unsanitary conditions.

Participation of residents in decision-making

The involvement of residents in certain aspects of decision-making relating to the operation of the Kofinou Reception Centre may assist to foster some self-esteem a sense of community belonging. Many residents presently feel passive and there is a feeling of dependency. The observation made by residents is that of “not being able to be heard unless you make noise”. Residents should be regularly involved in consultation meetings with Kofinou staff to address various matters relating to its operation and services (i.e. cleaning, food-distribution, on- and off-site activities, and the quality of services).

Recommendation:

All essential items that are not presently provided by the authorities (baby-care products, toys, school items, toiletries, clothing, etc.) should be provided;

Greek and English language classes should be readily available at Kofinou;

The Ministry of Education should undertake thorough assessment of the special classes offered at Kofinou and take appropriate steps to motivate student attendance to maximize the learning experience. Feedback from students should be periodically gathered;

There is a clear need for various social and recreational activities to help overcome the distress and boredom resulting from inactivity in the Centre;

Free bus tickets should be available for Kofinou residents to be able to access available services (state and non-state), attend classes, and/or to seek employment;

A study room with access to internet and a play area for children should be provided;

Classes on civic and cultural life in Cyprus should be introduced to facilitate integration;

Maintenance issues, including problems with the sewage system, should be addressed adequately and in a timely manner;

Residents should be regularly involved in consultation meetings with Kofinou staff to address various matters relating to its operation and services.

iii. Referrals to Kofinou Reception Centre – appropriate housing

RCD 18(1): Where housing is provided in kind, it should take one or a combination of the following forms:

.....

- (b) accommodation centres which guarantee an adequate standard of living;
- (c) private houses, flats, hotels or other premises adapted for housing applicants.

18(4): Member States shall take appropriate measures to prevent assault and gender-based violence, including sexual assault and harassment, within the premises and accommodation centres referred to in paragraph 1(a) and (b).

Following the amendments to the national Reception Conditions Regulations in 2013, the placement of asylum-seekers in Kofinou Reception Centre is the primary means of providing reception. Therefore, asylum-seekers in need of assistance have no choice other than to move to Kofinou Reception Centre as long as there is capacity.

The problem is that Kofinou Reception Centre is not suitable for all asylum-seekers, especially persons with specific needs (i.e. mobility, medical, or psychological), and an adequate standard of living may not therefore be guaranteed. In relation to mobility, there are no ramps to access rooms or offices (with the exception of the medical centre), there is no specialized access equipment installed either in the private or the common toilets/bathroom, there is not enough space for wheelchair users to access *en suite* toilets, and the ground is steep and difficult for them. The Centre is not suitable for persons with medical/psychological needs, including those who have experienced gender-based violence, given its remote location and the limited on-sight support services. Furthermore, certain persons, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals (LGBTI) may face stigmatization in a collective living environment. In addition, it may not be appropriate to force persons to relocate to Kofinou when they have been living in the community for a long time. Indeed, at a consultation meeting held in March 2015 organized by the Ombudsperson, the Asylum Service stated its willingness to exempt persons who have been in the country for a sufficient period of time and have strong community ties from referral to Kofinou.

Despite the above, there is no procedure in place to assess the suitability of Kofinou and no exempting criteria. Instead, asylum-seekers may be transferred from Kofinou to community living should it transpire that the Centre is not suitable, which is a less efficient method. Asylum-seekers who decline the initial referral to the Centre, for any reason, are excluded from welfare support.

Recently, the asylum authorities have permitted asylum-seekers to make an application for independent living after six months of living at Kofinou, however, it is unclear as to how this policy is to be implemented and whether all applications will be accepted.

Recommendation:

The Asylum Service should establish clear and transparent procedures for assessing the suitability of Kofinou for every asylum-seeker that applies for welfare assistance. Exempting criteria should be introduced (i.e. on mobility, medical, psychological, or social grounds).

V. Identifying and addressing specific needs

RCD 21(1): Member States shall take into account the specific situation of vulnerable persons such as minors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence, such as victims of female genital mutilation, in the national law implementing this Directive.

RCD 22(1): In order to effectively implement Article 21, Member States shall assess whether the applicant is an applicant with special reception needs. Member States shall also indicate the nature of such needs.

RCD 25(1): Member States shall ensure that persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious acts of violence receive the necessary treatment for the damage caused by such acts, in particular access to appropriate medical and psychological treatment or care.

RCD 25(2): Those working with victims of torture, rape or other serious acts of violence shall have had and shall continue to receive appropriate training concerning their needs, and shall be bound by the confidentiality rules provided for in national law, in relation to any information they obtain in the course of their work.

There is no procedure for identifying and assessing any specific needs asylum-seekers may have in order to ensure their access to the services required. It is imperative that the needs of asylum-seekers be routinely assessed, preferably by Social Welfare Staff. At Kofinou, it is only upon a request made by the Asylum Service and/or the Future Worlds Centre's psychosocial support team that the Social Welfare Services intervenes on specific occasions (on issues related to children, such as allegations of abuse). However, there are concerns over the response time, the efficiency and the consistency of interventions. Of particular concern are cases concerning vulnerable persons for whom Kofinou is not suitable and await a move to community living.

Recommendations:

A method for the early and on-going identification and assessment of specific needs and how such needs must be addressed should be established. At Kofinou, the Social Welfare Services should be involved in undertaking a vulnerability assessment and establishing a care plan in cooperation with an on-site psychosocial support team.

VI. Health and community services

RCD 19(1): Member States shall ensure that applicants receive the necessary health care which shall include, at least, emergency care and essential treatment of illnesses and of serious mental disorders.

RCD 19(2): Member States shall provide necessary medical or other assistance to applicants who have special reception needs, including appropriate mental health care where needed.

Health services

There is a medical centre located in Kofinou Reception Centre with 24-hour nursing staff. A medical doctor visits the medical centre once a week for a few hours. In the absence of a doctor on duty, the nursing staff is not allowed to administer any medicine, except in cases of emergency. Residents will be referred, if deemed necessary, to government medical facilities which they access for free. Free bus tickets are provided for that purpose and a free taxi service is also used for the more vulnerable cases. In cases of an emergency, an ambulance is called. There are no interpreters dedicated to the medical centre.

There is no procedure for acquiring the medical history of residents. The medical centre is only aware of the results of the mandatory blood and x-ray tests undertaken at the time that asylum applications are made. In order to be able to ensure the medical welfare of all residents, the medical history of all residents should be taken at the point of arrival or shortly thereafter. In addition, a comprehensive filing system needs to be introduced.

It is noted that newly arrived persons may be admitted without having concluded the mandatory medical tests and amongst the persons there were carriers of contagious diseases (e.g. Hepatitis B). The lack of proper information to carriers, residents and staff may create unnecessary fear and reluctance to come in contact with the persons with medical issues resulting in their isolation.

Access to community services

The remote location of the Kofinou Reception Centre is an obstacle for the residents to access the community and familiarize themselves with the geography of the Republic, thus potentially compromising their integration.

The Asylum Service provides monthly free bus passes for commuting within the Larnaka district, where the Kofinou Reception Centre is located. More recently, free buses now run more frequently direct from the Reception Centre to Larnaka town, this is a welcome development. Free bus tickets to other cities, mainly Nicosia and Limassol, are only provided for the purpose of attending appointments with specific government services, such as the Asylum Service, the Civil Registry and Migration Department, the Labour Office, or hospitals. Persons at Kofinou typically become familiar only with the Larnaka district, which in the past has resulted in the disproportionate conglomeration of refugees remaining in the area.

Asylum-seekers are not provided with free bus tickets to other cities for the purpose of accessing any available services, to attend Greek language classes or other training, or to seek employment. Bus tickets are also not provided for private legal, psychotherapeutic or social services provided by NGOs or private professionals outside the Larnaca district, or to attend UNHCR offices for information or advice.

Recommendations:

A full medical history should be taken of all persons at the point of arrival or shortly thereafter and a comprehensive system of recording information should be introduced;

Medical and psychosocial support staff should be engaged in the dissemination of public health information (drug safety, family planning, pre-natal and post-natal care, child care, etc.) and provide individual confidential information to persons with medical needs;

VII. Access to education

RCD 14(1): Member States shall grant to minor children of applicants and to applicants who are minors access to the education system under similar conditions as their own nationals for so long as an expulsion measure against them or their parents is not actually enforced. Such education may be provided in accommodation centres.

The Member State concerned may stipulate that such access must be confined to the State education system.

Member States shall not withdraw secondary education for the sole reason that the minor has reached the age of majority.

RCD 14(2): Access to the education system shall not be postponed for more than three months from the date on which the application for international protection was lodged by or on behalf of the minor.

Asylum-seeking and refugee children's access to education is dealt with in detail in a separate UNHCR paper *"The Protection of Refugee Children in Cyprus" (April 2017)*. The paper notes that while the principle of access to education is reflected in law and policy, there have been some difficulties in actual practice. At the Kofinou Reception Centre, for example, there were sometimes delays in children accessing education although nearly all were eventually enrolled in school. Following the incident in November 2016 at the local gymnasium, which led to a fight between local children and child asylum-seekers residing at the Kofinou Reception Centre, three child asylum-seekers were expelled and no further enrollments to the local school have been permitted since. At present, four children are being taught the Greek language for 3 hours per day at the Kofinou Reception Center. The main problem is with respect to unaccompanied/separated asylum-seeking children residing in the special reception centres. Of the 100 children presently in the four shelters in Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol (the number fluctuates weekly), only 46 are attending school at the time of writing this report. The children in Larnaca and Limassol who are out of school are attending afternoon State institute classes (τα Κρατικά Ινστιτούτα Επιμόρφωσης) in Greek, Mathematics, and Computer Studies. UNHCR finds that within the cohort of children attending the State institute classes, some express frustration as they are in fact keen to continue with formal education while some others are happy with these classes as they previously have had no formal education in their countries of origin, or have only been educated to primary school level.

UNHCR's position is that refugee and asylum-seeking children should have access to national education programmes at all levels rather than in refugee-exclusive systems. Ensuring access to mainstream education requires, obviously, careful planning and preparation on the part of the school management and teaching staff to ensure the effective integration of asylum-seeking and refugee children into their new school environment. Successful mainstreaming also depends on appropriate placement of newly-arriving children by academic level on the basis of a comprehensive assessment of their educational background to ensure that refugee students are not placed in lower levels due to language barrier alone.

VIII. Employment

RCD 15 (1): Member States shall ensure that applicants have access to the labour market no later than 9 months from the date when the application for international protection was lodged if a first instance decision by the competent authority has not been taken and the delay cannot be attributed to the applicant.

With the recent amendments to the Cyprus Refugee Law, the waiting period for asylum applicants to access the labour market has been increased from six months to nine months from the lodging of their application. However, the previous six-month policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance seems to remain unchanged. Also unchanged is the policy decision restricting the employment of asylum-seekers to only certain economic sectors such as agriculture, livestock and fisheries, regardless of their academic qualifications or professional experience. Most are able to find employment only in farms and animal husbandry. This type of employment is typically at the lower end of the pay scale and often requires constant separation from their families, as it is carried out in remote areas which provide on-site sleeping arrangements. In many instances, the cost of getting to and from the employment site may render engagement in these forms of work cost-prohibitive.

Many asylum-seekers (particularly from countries such as Syria and Iraq) are professionally qualified or highly skilled individuals who wish to actively engage in employment relevant to their field and contribute to life in Cyprus. If they do not attend a job referral by the Labour Department because they consider the job not commensurate with their qualifications, they can easily be declared 'wilfully unemployed.' Such a determination may prevent asylum-seekers from accessing reception benefits or assistance for up to six months.

There is no active policy to assist asylum-seekers to gain access to employment and many remain at Kofinou for years, leading to frustration and de-moralization. The inability for asylum-seekers to engage in employment *per se* during the time that they are awaiting a decision on their asylum claim impacts negatively on their ability to integrate in the long term.

Recommendations:

An active policy should be pursued by the Ministry of Interior in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour to assist asylum-seekers to gain access to employment at the earliest possible.

Asylum-seekers should be allowed to seek gainful employment appropriate to their qualifications and work experience

IX. The voucher system and rent allowances

Given the limited capacity of the Kofinou Reception Centre, the vast majority of asylum-seekers live autonomously in private accommodation. They are, however, excluded from the national Minimum Guaranteed Income scheme adopted in 2014. Instead, assistance for asylum-seekers is provided in-kind and/or through vouchers and a small amount of cash to be used for utilities and other expenses as follows.

| <i>Family size (persons)</i> | <i>Coupons for food, clothes, shoes</i> | <i>Rent allowance (paid to the landlord)</i> | <i>Utilities and pocket money</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|------------------------------|---|--|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | €150 | €100 | €70 | €320 |
| 2 | €225 | €100 | €95 | €420 |
| 3 | €300 | €150 | €130 | €585 |
| 4+ | €375 | €200 | €160 | €735 |

The vouchers can only be redeemed at specific local shops in different cities, very few in each city, where prices are reportedly much higher than big supermarkets and choices limited. There is also the problem of the particular societal sensitivities to the reality of shopping with vouchers that may lead to prejudices and discrimination against asylum-seekers.

But the greatest concern is that the amount of social assistance the State provides to asylum applicants falls significantly below the minimum standards set out in the EU Receptions Directive. It does not “ensures a standard of living adequate for the health of applicants and sufficient to ensure their subsistence.” For this reason, very few asylum-seekers even bother to apply for social assistance. According to data from the Welfare Office, only about 20 percent of asylum-seekers living outside reception centres presently receive State social assistance.

In comparison, Cypriots, other EU nationals and refugees enrolled in the national Minimum Guaranteed Income scheme receive €760 per person per month. For a family of four, it is €1,480. There is no capping of maximum amount, unlike the situation of asylum-seekers. Beneficiaries of the Minimum Guaranteed Income also receive additional allowances if they have special needs, which is not the case for asylum-seekers.

According to the Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus, the risk-of-poverty threshold in 2015 was € 8,276 per person per annum and €16,944 for household comprising two adults and two dependents aged under 14 years. The total amount an asylum-seeker receives in State social assistance is €3,840 per annum, and €8,820 for a family of four. **Living at the very bottom of the risk-of-poverty threshold, they are severely materially deprived.** This means that they cannot afford to pay rent or utility bills, eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day, face unexpected expenses, or own a washing machine.

Recommendation:

The government policy in force that has placed thousands of asylum-seekers below the national poverty line should be reviewed as a matter of urgency so that the assistance provided to asylum-seekers is set at a level that indeed “ensures a standard of living adequate for the health of applicants and sufficient to ensure their subsistence,” as stipulated in the EU Reception Directive.

X. Transitional arrangements

There is an absence of a transitional policy to assist asylum-seekers who receive international protection status. This affects those who are resident at Kofinou reception centre, those who are in receipt of welfare and are in private accommodation, and those who were held in detention and released upon recognition. In all cases, there is no interim financial assistance to obtain or continue

to pay for privately rented accommodation, and no guaranteed prioritization of an application for state social assistance (Minimum Guaranteed Income). This results in a lack of voluntary departure from Kofinou reception centre, especially where community support is not available. For those living independently, there is a risk of losing accommodation due to a gap in welfare. Those released from detention can only rely on community or charitable support, if available.

Recommendation:

Adequate measures should be put in place to ensure timely access to the Minimum Guaranteed Income scheme for asylum-seekers granted international protection while in the Kofinou Reception Centre, in detention or living autonomously in the community. This could include prioritization of processing applications for MGI, interim payments for rent, list of rental properties, etc.)

UNHCR Cyprus, April 2017