



Cyprus

The Integration process in Cyprus – The impact of misconceptions about refugees

“Strengthening the Social fabric together #WithRefugees”

Second Annual Refugee Integration Conference (Virtual), 9-10 December 2020

Opening speech, 9 December at 9.30-9.40

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Ladies and gentlemen, good morning

Good morning and big thank you for being online with us today. I’m very pleased to welcome you at our second annual integration conference that will be taking place today and tomorrow. Last year in December we held the first conference to explore with a diverse set of stakeholders the Opportunities and Challenges entailed in the integration process. This year the aim is to take this discussion further and explore with all of you – members of the refugee community, governmental and non-governmental participants, legal practitioners, activists and journalists - how the public narrative affects refugees’ efforts to be included in the Cypriot society.

The year 2020 unfolded under very challenging circumstances with the pandemic affecting us all in one way or another. However, for refugees around the world the pandemic was another layer of emergency on top of the existing one. We will certainly explore in our discussions how the pandemic has further impeded the efforts of refugees in Cyprus to become self-reliant and feel that they belong in Cyprus.

The timing of this conference could not have been better as it takes place at a time when a national integration plan is expected to be finalized. I take this opportunity to commend the efforts pulled together to develop a long needed National level plan to serve as a framework for actions focused on housing and empowerment of refugees through employment, education, vocational training and fostering awareness and empathy; the plan is thus a step in the right direction and I certainly hope this conference will further contribute to successful implementation of a holistic integration plan.

The integration of refugees into the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of European societies constitutes an important question across the continent. And despite the narrative

we have all heard about Europe being faced with large numbers of refugees, eight out of ten refugees are not in Europe but in countries neighbouring their own.

However, in 2015-16 Europe was faced with an emergency situation caused by the surge in arrivals through the eastern Mediterranean with more than 1 million refugees and migrants. Cyprus at the time remained unaffected, and now, while the number of refugee arrivals in Europe has dropped significantly since 2016, Cyprus has been faced with an increasing trend, particularly from neighbouring Syria but also from other countries producing refugees, such as Somalia, Cameroon, Nigeria, as well as from so called safe countries of origin.

By the end of September 2020, some 19,560 applications for international protection were pending in Cyprus. In addition, some 13,210 persons were registered as having been granted refugee or subsidiary protection status since 2002.

Cyprus is in need of support and solidarity to face the additional challenges created by the increased mixed flows over the last years. An efficient asylum system that also promptly rejects claims from those who are not in need of international protection is paramount to the management of these flows including both refugees and migrants. UNHCR fully supports Cyprus in its efforts to quickly return rejected asylum seekers to their countries of origin, while ensuring the scarce resources are used to cover the reception and integration needs of those who come to Cyprus to flee wars and persecution. A holistic migration management is required to tackle mixed situations, including migrants who resort to the asylum system in the absence of legal migration alternatives.

UNHCR believes that Cyprus can win the bet of successful integration. While there is no magic recipe for integration, there certainly are key ingredients: Access to education, to employment, to housing and to family reunification. But the first step towards winning the bet is to create a welcoming society, without discrimination, xenophobia and racism. Without understanding that refugees are a resource when integrated, rather than considering them a long-term burden, integration programs are likely to fail.

According to an opinion Poll commissioned by UNHCR in 2018, the general feelings of Cypriots towards refugees, migrants and the phenomenon of migration in general, were neutral to negative. There is still a long way to go in terms of dispelling myths and enhancing awareness and understanding for refugees; and fostering in general acceptance and inclusion.

The acceptance of refugees should also translate into legal integration with long term residence permits and naturalization. Without a long-term perspective that enables refugees to construct a life plan in Cyprus, integration attempts will be reduced to short term survival plans. Family reunification is a key element in this regard; apart from the humanitarian and moral argument in ensuring that families divided by war or persecution are traced and reunified in the countries of asylum, it is also not realistic to assume refugees will integrate in Cyprus, if their close family members are in other countries.

Integration starts from the moment refugees arrive in a safe country. Addressing the challenges that refugees face upon arrival is crucial. That means that reception policies for asylum-seekers should be designed to promote social inclusion, rather than isolation and

separation from host communities. Regrettably, many of the asylum-seekers who are staying in the cities – the majority in Cyprus- become destitute, homeless or stay in inappropriate conditions.

The social allowances are insufficient to secure private housing, and the homelessness issue remains a major challenge to address, as it also leads to exploitation of asylum seekers. At the same time, employment policies are not conducive enough to alleviate the situation caused by important delays in the asylum processing. While many of those arriving in Cyprus are professionally qualified or highly skilled and wish to work and contribute to their host society, they can only work in a few sectors of the economy until they have been granted a protection status. This can take several years.

The Government of Cyprus is working very closely with UNHCR to streamline the asylum system and I wish to commend on the efforts of the Government to establish a fair and fast asylum processing that will also facilitate early integration. Of course, finding a job remains problematic also for refugees due to language barriers and xenophobic attitudes some employers still portray.

It is also important to improve the conditions at the reception centers for a smoother transition of asylum seekers and refugees to the life outside the camps. Prolonged stay in overcrowded and closed camps, especially during the pandemic, has generated immense frustration, boredom and feelings of dependency.

Hence, where possible UNHCR suggests to States to identify and promote alternatives to camps, particularly alternatives to closed camps and detention centres. Meanwhile, it is important to address these negative feelings, including through skills training, educational, recreational and income generating activities, particularly among the "long stayers" and adolescents.

UNHCR acknowledges the pressures that increased arrivals over the last years have put on the Cypriot asylum system, including on integration. We appreciate the government's recent efforts to improve reception conditions and to speed up the processing of asylum claims. The national integration plan for third-country nationals is yet another important step towards addressing integration in a comprehensive manner, and I trust that the discussions during the next two days will further tackle the main integration challenges.

I hope you enjoy the conference – your active participation in the discussion is one of the ways we all can advance the integration agenda in Cyprus.