

# Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

## National Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations in Cyprus

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### Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

This will be the Training Kit, our ultimate deliverable which will address the challenges faced by refugees in integrating effectively in their host countries. The Training Kit will contain content addressing refugee-led groups that wish to be active at a national and/or European level. It will also be available to the public and thoroughly disseminated throughout the Partners' networks.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i Rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the project webpage: <https://aditus.org.mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

## About the author(s)

The Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC) is the first NGO in Cyprus to focus primarily on refugees. The CyRC team follows an inter-disciplinary approach, by providing individualized legal, social and psychological support to persons of concern with the aim to ensure their access to rights. The team is composed of dedicated professionals with extensive experience working directly with refugees, asylum seekers, detainees, trafficking victims and survivors of torture.

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# Refugee population in Cyprus

## National context

In Cyprus, an island with a “long history of migration and forced displacement” (Demetriou, 2019), “the system of refugee protection was put in place in the 2000s” (Demetriou, 2019). However, even though modern history of refugees in Cyprus spans almost 20 years, according to UNHCR Thematic Fact Sheet on Integration (2019) “Integration in Cyprus remains one of the most challenging areas of the national asylum system. The first country integration plan was adopted for the period 2010- 2012, aiming for the integration of migrants in general, whilst a new strategy for integration has been under development by the government for the past few years. The national integration plan for third-country nationals is expected to materialize in 2020 and meanwhile, efforts have been made to implement smaller scale integration projects under the EU’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) since 2014.”

It has been pointed out that insufficient integration is detrimental to self-organization of refugees in Cyprus: “recognized refugees have stayed in Cyprus for a long time and pay taxes, all of them are almost completely excluded from active participation in the political life of the Republic. (...) As a result, no positive encouragement is given to refugees to become a self-organized group and play a role in the public life of the country” (Officer and Taki, 2014, as cited in: Alecu and Mavrou, 2017).

The measures applied during the Covid-19 pandemic, seem to illustrate a negative political mood regarding refugees in Cyprus. During the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, refugees were treated like a sanitarian threat. A few hundreds of them were removed from their accommodations and placed in the Emergency Reception Centre, not suitable to host such a big number of people. In March a boat carrying refugees from Syria was pushed back by the Cypriot authorities and for few months during the lockdown, applications for asylum were not received.

## Demographics

Currently, there are approximately 19,000 pending asylum applications In Cyprus. Approximately 11,000 international protection holders reside in the country. Cyprus had the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants per capita in the European Union in 2019.

During the last 5 years (years 2015-2019) asylum applicants were from the following countries (listed from the highest to the lowest number of asylum applications):

- In 2019: Syria, Georgia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cameroon, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria, Sri Lanka (AIDA, 2019).
- In 2018: Syria, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Cameroon, Vietnam, Egypt, Georgia, Iraq, Sri Lanka (AIDA, 2018).

- In 2017: Syria, India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Cameroon, Philippines (AIDA, 2017).
- In 2016: Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Cameroon (AIDA, 2016).
- In 2015 (until September): Syria, Palestine, Vietnam, Stateless, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Somalia (AIDA, 2015).

The numbers of individuals who applied for asylum during the last 5 years, were as follows: in 2019 - 13,259 persons; in 2018 - 7,761 persons; in 2017 - 4,582 persons; in 2016 - 3,055 persons; and in 2015 (until September) - 1,560 persons (AIDA, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

The numbers of individuals who were granted international protection during the last 5 years, were as follows: in 2019 - 1,296 persons; in 2018 - 1,202 persons (68.2% men, 31.8% women and 14% children); in 2017 - 822 persons; in 2016 - 869 persons; and in 2015 (until September) - 1,170 persons (AIDA, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

The vast majority of individuals who were granted international protection during the last 5 years were from Syria (4,529), followed by: Somalia (85), Cameroon (43), Egypt (31), Stateless (30), Palestine (20), Nigeria (2), Pakistan (2), Bangladesh (1) and Philippines (1; AIDA, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

## Rights-enjoyment

In Cyprus, rights-enjoyment of refugees depends on their status, with asylum seekers having the most limited rights.

Asylum seekers without sufficient financial resources, receive material reception conditions including vouchers for food and clothing, rent allowance (payable directly a landlord) and “the financial allowance for electricity, water and minor expenses is provided by cheque to the applicants”. Total amount of all assistance granted for a single person amounts to 361 EUR (the total amount per person will be lower for family members and individuals sharing accommodation with others; AIDA, 2019).

Asylum seekers are permitted to work one month after the submission of their asylum application and only in limited sectors, which include only low-skilled jobs (AIDA, 2019). They also face numerous barriers in their attempts to secure employment.

International protection holders, both recognized refugees and subsidiary protection beneficiaries “have access to the national social welfare system Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) at the same level and under the same conditions that apply to nationals”, they have also unlimited access to the labour market, same as the Cypriot citizens do (AIDA, 2019).

International protection beneficiaries have a right to apply for a long-term residence (after 5 years) and Cypriot citizenship (after 5 or 7 years), provided that all the criteria are fulfilled (AIDA, 2019).

## Civil society organisations in Cyprus

According to one of the stakeholders, civil society organizations, especially those focusing on human rights, are relatively recently established in Cyprus. There are not many such organizations in Cyprus, and they differ regarding the levels of activity. There are interactions and cooperation between different civil society organizations but only to a certain extent. Another stakeholder from a non-refugee-led organization expressed his great disappointment about the level of cooperation between non-governmental organizations in Cyprus.

## Refugee-led organizations in Cyprus – research description

For the purpose of the research on refugee-led organizations in Cyprus, interviews were carried out with refugee-led groups, legal representatives, and governmental and international stakeholders, while focus groups were organized with relevant organisations and individuals representing diverse community voices. In total, 53 individuals were either interviewed or participated in focus group discussions.

Regarding the first category, interviews were conducted with 10 refugee-led groups, involving both legal entities (two currently registered as a non-profit organisation and one previously registered as an association) and informal groups. All informal groups but one would like to register as an association, some have already started the process. All the interviews were carried out in person and recorded. In total, 13 persons from refugee-led groups participated in the research.

Representatives from nine non-refugee-led organizations participated in a focus group and a representative of one was interviewed individually. All these organizations either work with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants or, in one case, provide support to non-governmental organizations in Cyprus. None of the NGOs that participated in the research have been in an official partnership with refugee-led organizations. Five of the NGOs expressed awareness of the activities of some refugee-led groups, including on protests and sports activities carried out, while two of NGOs have provided these groups with information or other support.

Requests for an interview were sent to 9 governmental and international stakeholders. Four responded positively and interviews were conducted via phone or in person. Three never responded to the request while two responded negatively. Stakeholders who took part in the research were as follows: Office of the Commissioner for Volunteerism and NGOs; Ministry of Interior; Kofinou Reception and Accommodation Centre; and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Community voices were heard through focus groups. Four focus groups were carried out, with a total of 25 participants taking part. The first focus group participants were women (from different communities, both asylum seekers and international protection holders). All participants were able to communicate in English. The second focus group was composed of LGBTQI+ participants (from different communities, both asylum seekers and international protection holders, both women and men). All participants were French speakers and interpretation services were provided accordingly. The participants of the third group were asylum seekers (from different communities, both women and men), either English or French-speaking – interpretation services were provided. International protection holders (from different communities, both women and men), took part in the fourth group. The participants spoke either English or Arabic and Arabic interpretation services were provided.

Additionally, one lawyer who, within her professional practice, provides services regarding the registration procedure for associations took part in the research. The lawyer had experience of providing one informal refugee-led group with consultancy, as well as assisting another refugee-led group in the process of registration. She is also a board member of the latter.



## Analysis

### Presence of refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in Cyprus

Refugee-led organizations and unofficial refugee-led groups do not have a strong presence in Cyprus. Most of the groups are not legal entities, with limited possibilities of establishing cooperation with other actors and no access to funding opportunities. However, even the groups who are registered, face a lot of challenges – they do not have strong partnerships with local actors and face difficulties in securing funding.

The majority of the groups carry out some of the following activities: provide language classes, receive and distribute donations (food, clothes, toys and other), provide information and advice, translate informative materials, advise their members on where and how to seek support, and focus on cultural or sports activities. Only two groups previously got involved in some form of advocacy towards policy makers, but none is currently active in this area.

Very few groups had some interaction with the media, are in some form of communication with non-refugee-led groups, or with international organizations. The interaction of these groups with governmental stakeholders is mainly in the form of assisting members of their communities with governmental institutions, predominantly through language support. None of these interactions have the form of an official partnership. However, some of the local NGOs expressed great interest in establishing partnerships with refugee-led organizations, provided that the criteria for such partnership will be met.

There are no clear links between the level of self-representation of particular communities and the duration of their residence in Cyprus. However, most if not all persons in leadership positions have international protection or other permanent status in Cyprus, are professionally active and/or have experience working in an NGO or in service provision.

### The reasons why there are so few RLOs in Cyprus

There are multiple factors explaining why there are so few refugee-led groups in Cyprus, and why those which exist, have limited presence, and currently have no involvement in any form of advocacy. The most important factor seems to be an inadequate integration framework in Cyprus. As one of the interviewees stated, “the better a community is able to integrate and the more support they receive on integration, the more chances they have to move beyond their individual struggles and be active community members, working for community purposes”. One of the governmental stakeholders explained why there are so few RLOs in Cyprus by saying that “they are too busy trying to survive”. He then added that It is a luxury to participate in volunteer groups since it requires time and financial resources. One of the interviewees observed that “in countries that are lacking access to opportunities and ways to improve livelihood, the communities are less likely to get organized – find energy,

motivation and resources to organize. When focused on survival as an individual, family or community there is not much space for extracurricular activities.”

It is important to mention that currently, refugee-led groups in Cyprus do not receive any governmental support.

Different factors impeding self-organization and self-representation of refugees have been listed below, as they were identified through the research activity.

#### Difficulties in securing basic needs

Asylum seekers in Cyprus receive very limited financial support. They have limited access to the labour market, are dependent on social benefits and struggle to find accommodation given the limited resources they receive and reluctance of landlords to have them as tenants. Additionally, there are delays in the provision of material assistance. Securing employment is extremely difficult for asylum seekers not only due to limited access to the labour market but also the prejudices and racism they are exposed to, language barriers and other factors.

As one of the interviewees from a local NGO observed, “You first need to be integrated into society, in the labour market, you need to have basic language skills. And then the next step that you want to perform or to establish an organization, you need to first fulfil your basic needs, to have a house or work and then...”

Another interviewee from a refugee community stated that “the environment here is impossible to make this kind of association because we are struggling on a day to day basis.”

The majority of focus group participants discussed their individual struggles, focusing predominantly on racism, the great difficulty in securing employment and accommodation and lengthy asylum procedures. All these challenges create feelings of instability, frustration, anger and fear.

#### Lack of stability

Many research participants are struggling with the insecurity about their future, due to long asylum procedures, and employment and accommodation insecurities. One person mentioned “We don’t know exactly what will happen to us (...) We don’t feel protected. We don’t feel safe. We don’t feel understood.” Some focus group participants were also anxious about the risk of being moved to the emergency reception centre – the practice applied in some cases during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another interviewee commented on the lengthy asylum procedures by saying: “You seek asylum, you wait for two years, three years, never go for an interview. They keep you frustrated; they keep you lamenting. (...) If you are accepted it is better, you look for a job, you work, you pay for your social insurance, you feed your family, you pay your rent, you do not get into crime.”

### Psychological factors

The hardships experienced both in the countries of origin and in the host country have psychological consequences which are often not addressed accordingly. It is difficult to be active and motivated while experiencing psychological pain.

There is a certain level of frustration and anger within the refugee population in Cyprus, especially amongst asylum seekers. During one focus group, participants who were asylum seekers repeatedly expressed their frustration with the way they are being represented in Cyprus. Most of them believed that self-organization is pointless and destined to be unsuccessful, since according to one of the participants even non-refugee-led organizations, which do not struggle with racism, fail to help them. During the focus group, discussion often took a turn to everyday struggles, which were extensively discussed and somehow the aspect of self-representation was lost in the stories of hardship.

“You don’t want to be together or to talk to someone or to help someone when you are really stressed or scared. When you don’t know what you will eat. You don’t know if you are going to have home.” Participants also said that they are afraid of being moved to the reception centre or being deported.

This lack of psychological well-being seems to have a detrimental influence on self-representation. As one participant stated, “it is difficult to give someone something that you don’t have.” She added that if you don’t have peace and confidence you will not be able to give confidence to someone else.

According to one interviewee, who works in an NGO and has daily contact with asylum seekers, another problem is “lack of self-esteem” because once they enter the country and become an asylum seeker, they enter a system in which they are totally underprivileged. “You don’t have any talents, you don’t have any personality, you don’t have any competencies anymore,” she said. The NGO worker further observed how the self-esteem of asylum seekers changes for the worse with time, after “going from office to office”. She concluded that people ultimately lose their identity and self-esteem.

### Unwelcoming environment, racism and prejudice

The population of refugees in Cyprus, especially those from African communities, struggle with racism. While one male research participant from the Arab community insisted that throughout his long stay in Cyprus, he has never experienced racism, women from the Arab community who wear their religious attire are often refused employment, with their attire on occasion being explicitly referenced as the reason why. Hence, the level and type of prejudice will affect different communities to a different extent, and the gender factor should not be ignored.

For those who, due to prejudices, struggle to find employment, even in low-skilled jobs, the concept of self-organization seems near to impossible. Additionally, during one of the focus groups, members of local NGOs discussed institutional racism. Since, in order to legally register an organization, complicated bureaucratic procedures need to be followed, it is possible that members of refugee communities would find it to be additionally stressful.

One of the focus group participants stated that she would rather be represented by an organization with members from the local community because she believed it to be more effective, due to racism.

#### Limited access to information

All the official information on the registration of an association as well as the Law on Societies and Institutions and Other Related Matters (104(I)/2017) is accessible only in the Greek language, and the procedure of registering an association is considered to be quite complex and not easy. According to one of the governmental stakeholders an official English translation of the Law 104(I)/2017 does not exist and will not be prepared.

#### Fear of consequences of being active

Due to the lack of information about registration procedures and responsibilities the founding members have, one of the refugee-led groups interested in registering an association, has difficulty convincing its members to be founding members of the association. The members are afraid that official involvement in the refugee-led organization will negatively affect their refugee status and the benefits they receive from the government.

One of the groups, more active in the past than now, mentioned that their members were approached by the government and were offered employment as interpreters in the governmental services, which, according to him, led to the dissolution of their team.

#### Commitment

Some of the groups struggle with the commitment of their members who often react with enthusiasm to a new initiative but do not put any effort or show initiative in carrying out different activities in practice. One interviewee, whose organization provides language classes, mentioned that while beneficiaries/members are saying “we need to learn the language, we want to learn the language, you cannot go to a language class and expect that the language will just magically come into you.”

Also, a member of another refugee-led organization mentioned that he would like to know how to motivate members of the refugee community to get more involved.

#### Identity

According to one interviewee, refugee identity, which is attached to hardships, is an “identity that people would like to forget. It is not something that people would see themselves to fall under for the rest of their lives. Nobody wants to feel a refugee forever.”

While refugee communities want to be heard and represented, it is questionable whether they want to invest their efforts in self-representation as refugees, if a refugee is not something they want to be.

### Limited funding opportunities

There are currently no funding opportunities for groups that are not legal entities, while financial resources are needed in order to register and sustain an association. One of the research participants from the local NGO pointed out: “It is expensive for organizations to sustain themselves.” The majority of refugee-led organizations and groups cover their expenses using their personal funds.

## Ideas for the Training Kit

### What RLOs would like to learn

The vast majority of RLOs interviewed would like to receive legal advice and assistance in the registration process as well as information on the Societies and Institutions and Other Related Matters Law of 2017 (104(I)/2017).

Other points mentioned by refugee-led groups were as follows:

- how to manage an organization
- how to design a project
- how to apply for funding
- how to motivate community members to get more involved
- information on how associations work in Cyprus, how they are structured
- how to manage an association
- how to work with people
- how to manage a website
- how to get new members
- information on whether it is possible for an asylum seeker to get involved
- information on what members of an association can and cannot do
- information on how donations work
- basic accounting knowledge.

It is possible that refugee-led groups without previous experience of registering and running an organization in Cyprus do not have clarity on what exactly they need to know; as one of the interviewees said, *“if someone doesn’t explain to me exactly how things work, I won’t be able to tell him exactly what we want”*.

### What RLOs should learn according to other stakeholders

According to other stakeholders, training should have theoretical parts but should also include real-life examples and practical exercises (e.g. on how to prepare a statute). Additionally, one part of the training should be carried out in the form of mentoring. One participant mentioned that *“the training kit should recognize that there is a diversity of needs”*. Another added that the training should be delivered to mixed target groups, refugees and participants from the local community, *“because this is also a kind of bottom up way to create networks and integration”*.

In particular, the training should include:

- Information on the registration procedure and basic legal framework

- Management skills
- Decision-making skills
- Communications skills
- Dispute resolution skills
- Basic accounting knowledge
- Training on social media
- Training on national institutions – who is doing what
- Information on operational aspect of organization, e.g. how often and how to organize meetings and how to take minutes
- Social entrepreneurship
- Essential life skills
- Networking skills
- Language skills



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