

# Asylum accommodation governance in Cyprus

## Key findings and recommendations

### Executive Summary

According to Eurostat's records, Cyprus had the highest number of first-time asylum applicants in Europe (relative to population) during the second quarter of 2018. The number of asylum applications in the first eight months exceeded 4,500, marking an increase of 55% from 2017. The growing needs of the increasing asylum seeking population continue to be insufficiently addressed. The vast majority of applicants are unable to secure shelter at the Kofinou Reception and Accommodation Centre, and are instead dispersed throughout the island.

Currently, no reliable statistics are available as to where applicants live, under what conditions, or whether they depend on social welfare benefits. At the same time, local authorities lack the legal framework to design social policies, which limits their scope. NGOs and local authorities, in turn, rely heavily on European and national funding to implement integration projects that are ultimately short term and often unsustainable.

GLIMER draws on rigorous qualitative research on the national level to map and understand accommodation governance policies, while also charting the impact of their approaches on the accommodation experiences of the displaced as well as the capacity of local and devolved stakeholders to shape, adapt or intervene in issues related to housing<sup>1</sup>.

The lack of holistic policies shows both a lack of political will, which in turn feeds Cypriots' negative perceptions towards asylum seekers, while also highlighting the urgent need to improve public services to migrant populations who live and work in Cyprus.

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1. Christodoulou, J. and Michael, A. (2018) *Governance and Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees. Accommodation, Regeneration and Exclusion in Cyprus*. GLIMER WP3 Report. Nicosia: Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies.



## Context

Reception conditions in Cyprus have been evolving on the legal and policy level since the enactment of the Refugee Law 2000. While many positive steps have been taken, a number of gaps and challenges remain, especially concerning the establishment of a long-term, gender-sensitive policy framework for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees.

### Treating asylum seekers as temporary residents

Due to the lack of plan and vision, a number of asylum seekers have continued to be pushed into homelessness, while the state relies heavily on the support of local authorities and NGOs in order to cover the gaps. However, both types of aforementioned institutions rely heavily on European and national funding to implement integration projects that are ultimately short term and often unsustainable.

Experience throughout the years has shown that the arrival of asylum seekers and migrants is not temporary, but Cyprus persists in treating migration and asylum as a temporary phenomenon, resulting in a lack of long term planning, measures and policies.

Cyprus urgently needs to reform its legislation and policies around migration and asylum and provide solutions in order to settle in new communities. Urban regeneration is about using diversity and different skills to secure a vibrant community and make the economy of the state stronger.

### Accommodation

Asylum seekers' first option for accommodation tends to be the Reception Centre in Kofinou, the only one of its kind on the island. The centre was initially designed as a place of temporary residence until more suitable and long-term accommodation could be found.

Specifically, until 2017, asylum seekers were allowed to stay for three months at most, which was increased to six following a ministerial decision. In practice, most asylum seekers, and sometimes even recognised refugees (who are not legally allowed to be accommodated at the centre), are forced to stay for lengthy periods, as private housing is difficult to secure.

When private housing is secured, refugees and asylum seekers end up dispersed throughout the island. Only the most basic data is recorded regarding their employment status and none regarding where they live and/or under which conditions.

GLIMER is informed by a combination of rigorous policy analysis, qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders, and secondary analysis.

This policy brief is especially reliant on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 8 stakeholders who come from devolved and local government, as well as the other sectors, including the University of Nicosia and UNHCR Cyprus.



## Findings

### 1. The Kofinou Reception and Accommodation Centre for Applications for International Protection

The reception centre is located near Kofinou village (Larnaca District) which is a relatively isolated, rural area. Asylum seekers must use bus routes either directly to the city of Larnaca or indirectly to other cities, including the capital, Nicosia, where most services are provided.

As of 2014, given the new reality of the arrival of asylum seekers in Cyprus, the centre expanded its capacity to 350 people.

According to the latest available figures (1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2018) there are 5,871 asylum seekers in Cyprus, which means that beyond the 350 people hosted in Kofinou and the approximately 150 unaccompanied children residing in special shelters, the vast majority of applicants are not being accommodated at the centre.

Hygiene facilities are insufficient and disability-friendly spaces are rarely available. According to UNHCR Cyprus, the situation has been aggravated by the fact that male asylum seekers who are single are no longer admitted at the already overcrowded facility at Kofinou. These conditions are in direct violation of asylum seekers' human rights, the most important of which, in the context of this issue, being the right to an adequate living standard.

Due to the above, homelessness has become an issue of increasing severity for asylum seekers in Cyprus, as Kofinou has reached capacity and private housing is simply unaffordable on the currently provided rent allowance. Vulnerable groups, such as families with young children and the disabled are forced to sleep in public spaces (churches, parks) or be temporarily housed in small, overcrowded flats by relatives, friends or strangers.

**“Families are exploited financially, and in several cases, vulnerable women were asked to sell their bodies to sleep on a sofa.”**

### 2. Insufficient material assistance

Those that do not manage to secure accommodation at Kofinou can apply for material assistance from the Social Welfare Services. That said, research found that the application process does not run smoothly with the main problem being administrative: applicants must produce extensive documentation, resulting in delays in receiving assistance. When assistance is provided, this is usually in the form of vouchers for food and clothing. The rental allowance is payable directly to landlords and financial aid to cover the cost of utilities such as electricity and water is provided to the applicants by cheque.



## Findings

Landlords are reluctant to rent out to asylum seekers: for one, the government pays landlords directly, which almost always results in delayed settlement of rental dues. For another, the allowance itself is nowhere near sufficient to cover the standard cost of housing in Cyprus.

Number of persons	Food, clothing and footwear (in voucher)	Rent allowance	Allowance for electricity, water and minor expenses	Total amount of assistance granted
1	€ 150.00	€100.00	€70.00	€320.00
2	€225.00	€100.00	€95.00	€420.00
3	€300.00	€150.00	€130.00	€585.00
4+	€375.00	€200.00	€160.00	€735.00

## Conclusions and recommendations

Reception conditions in Cyprus are in dire need of reform. The state has a legal and social obligation towards migrants living and working in the country; regardless of their status, the state must protect them. At the same time, we recognise that asylum seekers and refugees also have obligations towards the state. In order for parties on both sides of the issue to be able to fulfil their obligations, a workable framework must be in place. In our research, we identify and discuss a number of systematic gaps that act as obstacles to full integration, starting from housing.

- Decentralising power and putting it in the hands of local authorities to design and implement social policies on asylum seekers and refugees.

### 3. NGOs and local authorities

The role of NGOs and local authorities is crucial to the issue of housing and the overall process of integration. NGOs and local authorities are in everyday contact with asylum seekers and refugees, making them the best placed to argue for the needs of the latter group. That said, funding remains a huge obstacle. While the police and social welfare services have signed memorandums of understanding with NGOs, formalising the relationship, this move has not led to decentralised actions, but instead to the setting up of a framework whereby the state buys services from the third sector in order to implement key activities. It is also unclear whether NGOs effectively 'filling in the gaps' is the best way to go about helping migrants integrate into society. It is not the intention of our project to provide definitive answers to such questions, we do however make certain recommendations.

- Incorporating gender mainstreaming across strategies and policies. The experiences and therefore the needs of women differ from those of men and should be taken into account when designing and implementing policies, including regarding housing.
- Social Welfare Services should be flexible and offer immediate, on the ground support to newly arrived asylum seekers.
- The Asylum Service should reconsider the sustainability of the Kofinou Reception Centre. A centre created as a temporary residence is being used for long term housing, when evidence has shown that it does not adequately protect the mental and physical health of its residents.

The GLIMER (Governance and Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees) Project is jointly funded by JPI Urban and Horizon 2020. Bringing together researchers and practitioners from five lead institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Università della Calabria, Malmö Universitet and the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies – it researches how issues relating to governance impact displaced peoples' experiences of integration in contemporary Europe