OVERVIEW OF SPEAKERS AND MODERATORS

Expert Conference on

Multistakeholder models in the context of reception of international protection applicants

22 May 2024

Nicole de Moor

State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, Belgian Federal Government

Nicole de Moor (°1984) is the State Secretary in charge of Asylum and Migration in the Belgian federal government.

Since 2014, she has worked in the private offices of the Belgian ministers of Justice, European Affairs, Work and Economy – first in a capacity as political advisor and then as the political director for the Interior, Justice, Security, Asylum, Migration and Equal Opportunities. From October 2020 to June 2022, Ms de Moor was the Chief of Staff of the Belgian State Secretary for Asylum and Migration. She holds a PhD in public international law from Ghent University and has a vast expertise as a legal advisor in immigration and refugee law. Ms de Moor is a member of the Flemish Christian Democratic Party.

Pieter Spinnewijn

Director Operational Services, Fedasil

Pieter Spinnewijn is Operational Director at Fedasil since 1st January 2021, the Belgian agency responsible for organizing the reception network for applicants for international protection, as well as coordinating the assisted voluntary return program in Belgium. The voluntary return and reintegration program fall under his responsibility as Operational Director.

He has been working in the domain of asylum and migration since 2007 by holding various positions. At Fedasil, he was director of the Petit Chateau, Belgium's first and biggest reception centre, and at headquarter he served as the head of the Coordination Unit. He also worked at the policy cell of the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Maggie De Block.

Mikael RIBBENVIK CASSAR

Deputy Executive Director, EUAA

Mikael Ribbenvik Cassar is the Deputy Executive Director of the EUAA as of April 2024.

Before holding this position, he has held several positions within EUAA, including Chairman (2021-2023) and Deputy Chairman (2019-2021) of the Management Board.

He has over 20 years of experience in the field of asylum and migration. Before starting his career at EUAA, Mr Ribbenvik Cassar was active at the Swedisch Migration Agency, where he held several functions, including Director General (2016-2023), Deputy Director General (2013-2016) and Director of Operations (2013-2016).

He holds a Master of Laws (LLM) from the University of Lund, Sweden.

Alix MULLER-RAPPARD

Deputy Head of Unit in Migration Management in DG HOME, European Commission

Alix Müller-Rappard is currently the Deputy Head of Unit of the Migration Management Coordination unit in DG HOME.

This unit's mandate is to coordinate for DG HOME all the operational aspects of migration management in a durable way, including crisis response and management. In terms of geographic scope, the unit oversees migration management in Greece and in Member States along the Eastern borders of the EU, in particular regarding the consequences of the war in Ukraine (and temporary protection) and the preparations for the implementation of the Pact. Alix joined the European Commission in the Asylum Policy unit in 2018. She previously worked as a competition lawyer in the private sector for 15 years.

Moderator: Geert Knockaert

Head of the Asylum and Reception Cooperation and Guidance Unit within the Asylum Knowledge Centre of the EUAA

Geert Knockaert is Head of the Asylum and Reception Cooperation and Guidance Unit within the Asylum Knowledge Centre of the EUAA, the European Union Agency for Asylum.

Before joining the EUAA in 2016 as Reception officer, he was working for the Belgian Federal Reception Agency Fedasil for 25 years. Starting in 1991 as social worker in Belgium's biggest reception centre, he gained first line experience in accommodating new arrivals, information provision, individual guiding and managing the social services. Later, when working at the headquarters of the Agency, he was thereafter responsible for training, quality management, project management and organisational development and change, contingency planning and opening new reception facilities.

Besides his professional experiences, he was also engaged as a volunteer for the Belgian Red Cross in the field of disaster relief for 25 years.
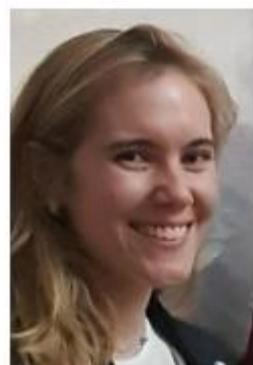
Kadri Soova

Head of Migration and Social Inclusion Unit, Red Cross EU Office

Kadri Soova is the Head of Migration and Social Inclusion Unit at the Red Cross EU Office.

Before that she was working for more than a decade in various positions at the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), most recently as its Deputy Director, and before that as Senior Advocacy Officer on EU Migration Policies. Before PICUM, she worked as an Adviser to the Estonian Chancellor of Justice on child rights. She holds a Master's degree in Law as well as a European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation.

Caterina Gentiloni Silveri

Deputy Director of the Asylum Department of the French Office for Immigration and Integration, OFII

Graduated at Sciences Po Paris in Political Sciences and Middle East Studies, Caterina Gentiloni Silveri has been working in the fields of asylum and social emergencies since 2016.

As an expert in the management of asylum seekers' reception systems, she has worked in different European contexts both for public

administrations (Prefectures of Paris in France, prefecture of Naples in Italy), and for international organizations such as IOM, on the topics of asylum seekers' reception and integration and fight against exploitation of the migrant population.

Since 2022, as deputy director of asylum at the French Office for Immigration and Integration, she is in charge of managing material reception conditions in France for asylum seekers and refugees, including access to accommodation and to a financial aid.

Neelke Vernaillen

Political Advisor of the deputy mayor on poverty reduction, homelessness, health and welfare policies, City of Ghent

Neelke Vernaillen is a policy advisor of the deputy mayor on poverty reduction, health and welfare policies, City of Ghent.

Since 15 years she is taking an advisory role on social policy in the City of Ghent, with a strong focus on migration, homelessness and health issues. Therefore she has a close relation to several stakeholders in Ghent, including the civil society and volunteers working on solidarity toward newcomers. As a sociologist with a helicopter view on social policy in Ghent, she takes up a bridge building role between the city council, the city services, academic researchers and the civil society. Previously Neelke worked on health inequality policies in new EU countries and in Ghent and was also active in academic research on population and family studies.

Paul Fay

Principal Officer, International Protection Accommodation Services - Future Operating Model, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Ireland

Paul Fay is a Principal Officer in the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth. A former head of Ireland's International Protection Accommodation Service Paul is now leading a project to examine options for the future operation and governance of this function within the Irish context.

SESSION 2: Exploring the role of multi-stakeholder cooperation in enhancing information for International Protection Applicants

Moderator: Hanne Beirens

Director, Migration Policy Institute Europe.

Hanne Beirens is the Director of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe.

She specializes in European Union policies related to asylum and migration, and has extensive experience working on topics around

international protection and reception. Prior to joining MPI, Dr. Beirens worked as a Lead Managing Consultant for ICF Consulting, where she focused on impact assessments, feasibility studies, and evaluations for the European Commission, as well as developing products within the European Migration Network (EMN). Earlier, Dr. Beirens worked as a Research Fellow at the Institute for Applied Social Studies of the University of Birmingham. She also has worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and as an independent consultant for the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO). She holds a master's degree in race and ethnic relations and a PhD in sociology and ethnic relations on the participation of minors in armed conflict, both from the University of Warwick (UK).

Els Klein Hofmeijer

Policy Officer Asylum, Dutch Refugee Council

Els Klein Hofmeijer is currently Policy Officer for Asylum at the VluchtelingenWerk head office in Amsterdam, working in the area of information provision.

In the Netherlands, VluchtelingenWerk provides the information about the asylum procedure to all asylum seekers on behalf of the other stakeholders. On this matter, she is the contact point for the Immigration Service (IND), lawyers, COA (Reception Agency) and other organisations. She joined VluchtelingenWerk in 2010 as an intern in the Country-of-Origin Information (COI) department, and thereafter worked as COI-Researcher, Project Lead and Program Manager within the Ukraine program. Els has also worked as a Press Officer at both Amnesty International and GroenLinks (the Dutch Greens) within the Dutch Parliament.

Flavia Jerca

Senior Reception Officer, Reception and Vulnerability Sector, EUAA

Flavia Jerca is a senior reception officer at the EUAA since December 2019, supporting the reception related activities of the Reception and Vulnerability Sector.

Before joining the EUAA, she worked for several years with the UNHCR Representation in Romania on reception, integration and information management matters, with brief work experiences in Montenegro, Slovenia and Hungary. She holds degrees in International Relations and European Studies from the University of Bucharest, and in Peace and Conflict Studies from Philipps-Universität Marburg.

Maurizio Molina

Senior protection associate, UNHCR

Maurizio Molina has been working within the Protection Unit of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since January 2004. Since 2013, he has been working as Senior Protection Associate in Rome and he is the Head of the Field Protection Unit, responsible for access to territory, reception and detention. Previously, Mr. Molina represented UNHCR within the Territorial Commission for the recognition of International Protection in Trapani, Sicily. The main role in this capacity was to conduct Refugee Status Determination (RSD). Mr. Molina also served for nearly 5 years in Afghanistan (Herat, Kabul) focusing on the drafting and implementation of human rights and refugee projects and protection strategies in one of the largest humanitarian operations. He holds a degree in International Law (Milan University) and a master's degree in human Rights Law (SOAS - University of London).

Koen Van Rompaey

Head of Service Voluntary Return, Fedasil

Koen Van Rompaey is the Head of the AVR unit at the Belgian Agency for Asylum and AVRR (Fedasil).

He has substantial experience in managing multi-layered partner networks and projects on the provision of embedded information. He holds a strong belief that migration management demands a whole-of-society approach to achieve an ethically balanced program that is at the same time strong in its results. He has a master in philosophy and has been active in the cultural field.

SESSION 3: Pre-integration: Setting the Foundations for Successful Integration

Breakout group 1. Promoting labour market integration during the asylum procedure

Hanne Beirens (moderator)

Director of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe.

Hanne specializes in European Union policies related to asylum and migration, and has extensive experience working on topics around international protection and reception. Prior to joining MPI, Dr. Beirens worked as a Lead Managing Consultant for ICF Consulting, where she focused on impact assessments, feasibility studies, and evaluations for the European Commission, as well as developing products within the European Migration Network (EMN). Earlier, Dr. Beirens worked as a Research Fellow at the Institute for Applied Social Studies of the University of Birmingham. She also has worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and as an independent consultant for the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the Quaker

United Nations Office (QUNO). She holds a master's degree in race and ethnic relations and a PhD in sociology and ethnic relations on the participation of minors in armed conflict, both from the University of Warwick (UK).

Thomas Wauters

General Manager, JobRoad

Thomas Wauters brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the field of employment and social integration as the General Manager of JobRoad. With a passion for making a difference in the lives of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, Thomas is dedicated to guiding them towards suitable and durable employment opportunities, thus accelerating their integration into society. At JobRoad, Thomas leads an innovative and accessible approach to overcoming barriers such as language, mobility, and competency. His commitment ensures that each candidate receives the support they need to succeed in the workforce. By bringing together different parties in the labor market—including employers, temporary employment agencies, cities, and municipalities—JobRoad focuses on matching untapped talent with meaningful job opportunities.

Thomas has been instrumental in fostering collaborations with key partners such as HIVA (Research Institute for Work and Society), Travi (a training fund for the temporary employment sector), and the "Refugees2Work" project. These partnerships enhance JobRoad's ability to provide comprehensive support and resources to job seekers, particularly those seeking international protection. Through these initiatives, Thomas and his team work tirelessly to bridge gaps and create inclusive employment pathways.

Vincent Vandenameele

Director, Travi

Vincent Vandenameele has served as the Director of Travi, the bipartite training fund for the staffing industry in Belgium, since 2006.

Throughout his career, he has championed lifelong learning and labour market initiatives. Vincent specializes in training for temporary workers and candidates, and he brings extensive experience in managing projects that promote diversity and inclusion. His primary goal is to bridge the gap between unemployed individuals and the labour market through agency work. Today, he will share his experience on the 'Work without Borders' project, a national initiative of Travi funded by Fedasil, the federal agency for asylum seekers in Belgium.

Peter De Cuyper

Integration Expert and Research Manager at the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA), KU Leuven

Peter De Cuyper is integration expert and research manager at HIVA-KU Leuven and is responsible for the research unit on migration and integration within HIVA. His main research domains are the labour market integration of migrants and migrant integration policies. Peter and his team have conducted research about newcomers' labour market trajectories, the impact of Dutch language courses on labour market participation, diploma recognition for newcomers, empowerment of female migrants, experiences of migrant newcomers with centres of public welfare, hurdles to enter the labour market for asylum seekers residing in reception centres…

Within the last decade, a main focus of Peter's research has been on "mentoring". Peter developed one of the first mentoring-to-work projects in Flanders, Belgium, and is involved in several projects in the field of mentoring for migrants. His research focuses on "effective elements", governance, quality and the impact of mentoring projects. Peter has authored several publications on this subject, developed evaluation frameworks for social mentoring programs, and leverages his expertise to design programs. He was for example involved as an expert and evaluator in setting up social mentoring programs in cooperation with 55 Flemish municipalities.

Currently he is working on implementing mentoring-to-work in reception centres collaborating closely with three NGO's and Fedasil. He is also involved in the MENT4EU project aimed at establishing a European evidence base on social mentoring.

Breakout Group 2. Ensuring swift access to housing for beneficiaries of international protection

Thomas Jezequel (moderator)

Head of the reception and vulnerability sector at EUAA

Thomas Jezequel has been working in the field of migration since 2005 and is since 2022 the Head of the reception and vulnerability sector at EUAA, which he joined as a reception officer in 2018.

He worked previously in Brussels as a policy officer for migration & integration at EUROCITIES and as a project manager for voluntary return for Caritas International Belgium. He worked previously for the Hungarian Helsinki Committee in Budapest and the Refugee Rights Turkey in Istanbul. Thomas graduated from the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) of Lille and obtained a Master in International Cooperation from the Institute of Political Studies of Bordeaux.

Julien Aernoudt

Policy Officer 'De Nieuwe Buren', ORBIT VZW

Julien Aernoudt is policy officer for ORBIT, an NGO which focusses on fundamental rights in a world of superdiversity and migration. He is responsible for a project called '[De Nieuwe Buren](#)' (The New Neighbours) through which ORBIT strengthens both collective and individual bottom-up solidarity with recognized refugees and beneficiaries of temporary protection on the housing market in Flanders. The policy work that ORBIT does is always inspired by the experiences of these volunteer based initiatives.

Catalin Hartwig

Mission Lead at Welcome Alliance, ProjectTogether gGmbH

Catalin works for ProjectTogether, a non-profit organisation that brings civil society, state and private sector together to take joint action on our societal challenges.

At ProjectTogether she is leading the Welcome Alliance, a cross-sectoral network that aims at improving the arrival and integration processes of refugees and newcomers in Germany. One example of multistakeholder collaboration is the project [Helfende Wände](#) (helping walls), which strengthens private accommodation for refugees and was created in partnership with the German Federal Ministry of Interior and Wunderflats GmbH. Between 2015 and 2022, Catalin worked for Caritas on state and national level in the field of refugee protection and integration. She holds degrees in European Studies, International Relations and Human Rights Law.

Milan Colic Humljan

Senior Project Coordinator, HELIOS project, International Organization for Migration

Since 2019 Milan is Senior Project Coordinator of the HELIOS Project (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International protection and Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection), a large-scale integration project of IOM office in Greece, implemented throughout the Country.

Previously he was engaged in IOM Serbia as Project Coordinator of the MICP project, which delivered a comprehensive CCCM tool (online database and application) to the Serbian migration management system, which is currently deployed as the main camp management tool in Serbia. Before that, Milan was engaged as Site Management Support Coordinator in IOM Greece and Field Coordinator in IOM Serbia. He entered IOM in 2015 after 15 years of working with multiple organizations, programs and projects across different Post-Yugoslavian countries after the war, in the fields of trust-building, peace-building, war trauma and conflict transformation, between others. He was born in 1978 in Serbia.

Breakout Group 3. Building a sense of home: Fostering participation in society from day one

Camille Le Coz (Moderator)

Associate Director of MPI Europe

Camille Le Coz is Associate Director of MPI Europe, primarily working on migration and development and EU migration issues. Her research areas include refugee protection and development, climate migration, diasporas and remittances, labour migration, and return and reintegration. She has advised development agencies and multilateral development banks on how to better address associated challenges.

Ms. Le Coz came to MPI Europe from Altai Consulting, a research and consulting organization, where she was a Project Director responsible for the migration practice. She was based in Kenya and Afghanistan, where she managed various studies for institutions such as the European Union, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration. She has conducted research in various countries in Africa and Asia. She holds a dual master's degree in international relations from Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics. She also holds a bachelor's degree from Sciences Po Paris.

Hester van Dijk- de Waal

Policy Director Integration and Participation at the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA)

Hester van Dijk-de Waal is the Policy Director for Integration and Participation at the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands (COA), where she has been working since February 2023.

Together with her team of policy advisors, she focuses on participation in Dutch society, labour market integration, and language education for integration. She participated in a study visit organized by EUAA on labour participation, hosted by the Italian authorities in November 2023 in Rome. Additionally, COA organized an international two-day conference on labour market integration last April. With a background in sociology, Hester previously worked for different municipalities in the

Netherlands as a team manager for public order and safety.

Farah Laporte

General Coordinator, Refu Interim

Farah Laporte is the coordinator of Refu Interim, a social organization that connects newcomers (including applicants for international protection and refugees) with volunteer opportunities in Flanders, Belgium. She initiated the project in 2017 in Ghent, and has since fostered partnerships with 14 local governments. Prior to this role, she worked in the fields of children's rights and international development.

Louise Liénard

Project Coordinator Neighbourhood Initiatives, Fedasil

Louise Liénard is in charge of communication and awareness-raising at Fedasil, where she has been working since January 2024.

In this role, she also coordinates neighborhood initiatives within federal centers. Previously, she worked as a spokesperson at the Federal Agency for Nuclear Control.

Background nota

Expert Conference on

Multistakeholder models in the context of reception of international protection applicants

22 May 2024

Stronger Together: Leveraging Multi-stakeholder Models in the Reception of Applicants for International Protection

Background Note

By Lucía Salgado and Hanne Beirens

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1. Introduction

Reception systems across the European Union are at an inflection point. Over the past years, reception systems have struggled to keep pace with the rising numbers of asylum applications, which reached a seven-year high in 2023 with more than a million asylum applications in the EU.[i] The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the arrival of millions of Ukrainians since 2022 added additional pressure on reception systems and social services, and the widespread lack of affordable housing across the EU has impacted the ability of asylum applicants to move out from reception systems. Media images of overwhelmed reception systems have, in turn, ignited public discontent in some countries. And as the number of pending asylum applications increases,[ii] there are also growing concerns over the negative impact that 'waiting in limbo' can have on both the mental health of asylum seekers and the longer-term integration of those who receive a positive decision.

Following the landmark political agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, formally adopted on 14 May 2024 , there is renewed hope among policymakers that the new legislative framework will enable the European Union (EU) to better manage migration and asylum to and within the bloc. However, the success of the Pact will ultimately depend on its implementation, and establishing resilient reception systems in line with the new recast Reception Conditions Directive will be a key piece of the puzzle.

If the EU and its Member States are to succeed in building and running more performant reception systems, it will be key for all to cast their eyes beyond the role of the reception agencies or authorities. Indeed, across Europe, national authorities carry the primary responsibility for offering reception in line with EU standards to those applying for international protection, a responsibility that, in a few instances, is shared with or delegated to regional authorities. Yet this primary responsibility does not do away with the fact that reception is not a task that can be successfully attained by a single actor (and its respective power, staff and resources). Meeting the goal of offering decent reception conditions to all incoming asylum seekers necessitates access to housing and public spaces – access premised on a mandate to negotiate with and secure cooperation from other Ministries, levels of government (e.g. regions, local authorities), and private actors. In addition, running decent reception facilities is impossible without coordination with those public and private authorities responsible for transport, health, social services, or employment. Moreover, those working daily with asylum seekers need to be able to mobilise specific expertise in, e.g., dealing with victims of human trafficking or unaccompanied minors. Expecting this expertise to be available in-house is not only costly but hard to maintain amid persistent labour shortages.

It is, therefore, key that reception authorities, and those who carry the political responsibility for this portfolio, identify, build and engage an ecosystem of actors to work towards quality, but also cost-efficient, reception systems. Important vehicles to that effect and which are further discussed in this paper are an explorative attitude to new and potentially interesting partners, the commitment and nurturing of genuine partnerships (e.g. consultation of goals, norms and values, and being clear on what each actor's role is), setting up coordination mechanisms and platforms, and enabling access to financial instruments that specifically cater for, or at least enable multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Over the last decade, a growing acknowledgement of the key contribution different actors can bring to reception systems has given way to different cooperation models with, e.g., local and regional authorities, civil society organisations and private actors. With the Pact implementation upon us, this note examines how policymakers can leverage multi-stakeholder partnerships in the reception of asylum seekers. It starts by outlining the challenges that reception systems across the EU face,

including in mobilising the capacity and expertise of different actors. It then explores the potential of multi-stakeholder cooperation in reception systems by delving into the use of collaborative models in three areas: the management of reception systems, the provision of information to asylum seekers, and the provision of support to promote (pre) integration. Finally, it concludes by looking ahead and drawing implications for the future of reception systems in Europe.

2. The Pressures Facing Reception Systems across the EU

Pressure on reception systems has been mounting over the past decade. The rising number of arrivals in 2015-2016 added significant pressure on asylum and reception systems. From 2017 to 2021, 14 EU+ countries reported challenges in accommodating applicants for international protection.[iii] The rise of applications in the post-COVID period and the arrival of millions of Ukrainians – who in many countries were accommodated within national reception systems, at least temporarily – have plunged several national reception systems in a crisis mode, or on the verge thereof. The challenges that reception systems face are multi-faceted and varied, but there are two key challenges affecting reception systems in which stakeholders can play an important role to play to prevent or mitigate these.

First, reception authorities need to plan and manage resources in a highly volatile environment and are often impacted by developments beyond their control. Reception needs – both in terms of the number of places and the specific needs that individual asylum seekers might have– continuously change with the alterations in the volume and composition of asylum and migration flows, which are difficult to estimate in the medium- and long-term.[iv] As a consequence, reception systems need to have mechanisms in place to scale up and down rapidly and accommodate longer trends over time. For example, while authorities might be keen to reduce reception capacity in times of reduced pressure, the capacity and expertise built up during periods of pressure can get lost, and rebuilding it when numbers soar up again has proven costly.[v] In addition, the outflow from reception facilities is also closely tied to the speed with which asylum cases can be processed, and those with a decision can move out of reception systems, which has become challenging in a context of widespread housing shortages. For instance, in the Netherlands, where beneficiaries of international protection are entitled to housing, approximately one-third of places in the national reception system in 2022 were occupied by this group, due to the acute housing shortage and/or high accommodation costs in the country.[vi]

Second, reception is often perceived and treated as the sole responsibility of one government agency or ministry. And while Member States have the legal responsibility to ensure adequate reception conditions for asylum applicants, reception systems operate in an environment where it is often necessary to mobilise other actors to succeed in attaining their goals: from local and regional authorities to facilitate the opening of new reception centres and ensure that asylum seekers have access to local services, to private companies that can facilitate access to the labour market, to NGOs that can provide different types of support to asylum seekers. Yet, the lack of a shared sense of responsibility over the reception of asylum seekers means that reception authorities miss the levers to mobilise the resources and expertise of different stakeholders – and that they can even encounter political and local resistance to the opening of new reception centres. Countries such as Spain, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have faced opposition from regional or local governments to open new reception facilities, obstructing their endeavour to increase reception capacity at a time of rising reception needs. This can be particularly salient as migration becomes increasingly politicised in a year of elections across the European Union, in which some local and regional authorities might have political incentives to oppose the opening of new accommodation centres.

It is unavoidable that the task that reception authorities have at hand – managing resources in a volatile environment beyond their control – will always be difficult. However, identifying key actors and mobilising the expertise of different actors in the field through dedicated coordination frameworks can be an important step in helping authorities fulfil their mandate and make reception systems more resilient, adaptable, and tailored to the diverse needs of asylum seekers.

3. **Exploring the Potential of Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation in the Reception of Asylum Seekers**

Developments over the past years, from the 2015-2016 rise in asylum applications to COVID-19 to the displacement from Ukraine, have engulfed reception systems in a state of 'permacrisis'. This constant state of 'firefighting' has brought reception systems to the limit and left little resources or time for managing authorities to reflect on the future of reception systems strategically. And yet, this has also been an era that has sparked innovations and new (types of) collaborations between authorities and other stakeholders to address existing challenges and better support asylum applicants during the reception stage. This has taken the form of private-public partnerships, dispersal mechanisms to ensure a fair distribution of asylum seekers along the territory, and collaborations with NGOs to manage reception centres or offer support to asylum seekers.

The following sections will explore the potential of collaborative models in three areas: reception; information provision; and (pre)integration support during the asylum procedure. Each section discusses how collaboration between different actors could support reception systems and what is needed, such as adequate governance frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms, to build successful and long-lasting partnerships.

3.1 Collaborative Models to Improve Reception Systems

The growing use of collaborative models in reception systems raises important questions, such as:

- *Securing and maintaining sufficient capacity*: How can multi-stakeholder collaboration support reception systems in diversifying the network of actors providing (buffer) reception places? How can agreements with a diverse set of actors help increase reception system flexibility?
- *Adapting reception modalities to different needs:* How can multi-stakeholder collaboration support the adaptation of reception to the *needs* of specific groups, such as those with vulnerabilities?
- What are the benefits and challenges of *cooperating with regional and local authorities* in reception systems, and what do they need to take up this role sustainably? What are the trade-offs of relying on formal dispersal mechanisms?
- *How to inject innovation in reception systems?* What collective experience is there in terms of involving architects, engineers, and others in reconfiguring the blueprint of reception systems?
- What types of *governance frameworks* are needed to foster positive cooperation, accountability, and quality within collaborative reception models?

Reception systems across the EU are increasingly becoming a mosaic of different actors working together. National authorities usually have overall responsibility for reception, except for some countries where responsibility is formally shared. The latter is the case in Austria and Italy, where responsibility is divided between national and regional authorities, or in Germany, where federal states have responsibility over reception. But even in those countries where national authorities hold the sole formal responsibility for reception, other actors, such as regional and local authorities, civil

society actors or private actors, pop up when we further zoom in.[vii] NGOs, for example, were involved in managing reception facilities in ten Member States in 2022, such as Spain, Belgium and France, while four Member States relied on private companies to manage reception facilities.[viii]

Lessons learnt over the past years indicate that there are a several elements that reception authorities should reflect on when building partnerships with actors in the reception field: who are the actors that can support reception systems and why; what would be their role and the focus of their activities; what is the timeframe for the cooperation; and how to work together and set up adequate governance structures.

3.1.1 Identifying key actors in reception and defining their roles

Reception authorities do not operate in a vacuum: reception is part of a chain involving other government authorities and agencies.[ix] A such, reception authorities often need to cooperate closely with other government actors. This can include asylum and return authorities to coordinate the inflow and outflow of applicants, as well as also other government actors such as the Ministry of Defence, which can help identify new reception facilities, or relevant authorities to ensure support services for asylum seekers, such as health, education and employment authorities.

Civil society

In addition, several countries have stepped up cooperation with civil society organisations to expand reception capacity in a context of often-stretched national resources. For example, in Portugal, collaboration with civil society organisations and private actors was found to have facilitated the increase in reception capacity in response to a surge in arrivals of Afghan nationals.[x] Spain attributed its ability to respond to the large number of arrivals from Ukraine and the surge in asylum applications to its cooperation with NGOs and other actors, with the government stating that 'there was a collective effort to respond to a historic challenge'.[xi] In addition, cooperating with civil society organisations can also help national authorities improve reception conditions and diversify the reception network to meet special reception needs. For example, a study from the European Parliament found that the involvement of NGOs and other non-profit actors in reception systems had a positive impact on reception conditions in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain,[xii] which could be linked to the ability of NGOs to establish links with local communities[xiii] or the expertise of some civil society organisations in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. For example, in Sweden, the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) cooperates with a school specialised in sign language to accommodate and support asylum seekers with a hearing impairment,[xiv] and in Portugal, the NGO Portuguese Council for Refugees manages the Refugee Children Reception Centre (CACR), a facility dedicated to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.[xv] Moreover, civil society organisations with an established reputation for supporting and accompanying vulnerable groups might increase citizens' trust in reception systems.[xvi] At the same time, cooperation with civil society organisations also brings specific challenges, such as finding common ground between the mission of NGOs and their normative approach and the goals of reception authorities.[xvii] In this sense, recognising NGOs' mandate and mission, agreeing upon tasks and priorities, but also clearly demarcating where NGOs will be involved and deemed co-responsible and where not, are essential to establish mutually beneficial and long-standing partnerships.

Private actors

In some EU Member States, reception authorities have also established partnerships with private actors, such as hotels. In some instances, private companies manage reception facilities; in others, they provide dedicated services (e.g. cleaning, security, catering). For example, Ireland has

contracted more than 20 private companies to manage reception facilities in the country, and the UK also has contracted three private companies to accommodate and support asylum seekers. Several countries across Europe have also resorted to the ad-hoc use of hotels at times of pressure – even if this type of ad-hoc arrangements often come at a higher cost and can also lead to lower quality accommodation.[xviii] Last but not least, reception authorities can also explore cooperation with architects and other actors specialised in organisation, building and design not only to help construct reception facilities that can adequately meet reception needs but also to potentially inject innovation in reception systems, such as the design of reception facilities that can easily flex up and down based on changing needs.

Regional and local authorities

Apart from NGOs and private actors, cooperation with local and regional authorities can help national authorities expand the reception network and ensure adequate capacity. Collaboration with subnational authorities is also important to relieve pressure from some regions and ensure more equitable distribution across the territory. Collaboration with local authorities is crucial to ensure asylum seekers' access to services at the local level, such as schools and healthcare, as well as to facilitate connections between local communities and asylum seekers and foster social cohesion. Consequently, in many countries, national authorities cooperate closely with local and regional and local authorities. In Sweden, for example, municipalities are encouraged to sign agreements with the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) to accommodate asylum seekers, and the majority have done so.[xix] Other countries, such as France, Portugal, and Belgium, cooperate closely with regional and local authorities.

Yet, despite the attempts of governments across Europe to ensure the political buy-in and collaboration of regional and local governments, cooperating with some subnational authorities has proved challenging in many countries, leading to imbalances in the distribution of asylum seekers and problems in scaling up capacity. For instance, in Sweden, the number of asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants in 2017 varied from almost 0 to 59, and most of the recipient municipalities were rural communities with lower income and employment opportunities.[xx] In the Netherlands, nearly a third of municipalities have not accommodated asylum seekers over the past decade despite growing reception needs in the country.[xxi] In Italy, municipalities can decide whether to adhere to the Reception and Integration System (SAI), where asylum seekers are accommodated after receiving first assistance. The decrease in local involvement has, in turn, led to a chronic lack of places in the SAI system.[xxii]

Some countries have established mandatory distribution or dispersal mechanisms to overcome the resistance of some local and regional governments and ensure sufficient reception capacity and a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers. This is the case in Germany, where asylum seekers are distributed through the 16 federal states through a computerised quota system that takes into account the tax revenue and the number of inhabitants in each state.[xxiii] The British government announced in 2022 a new dispersal law so that all local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland participate in the reception of asylum seekers.[xxiv] Meanwhile, in Spain, the government is working on a proposal to render the distribution of unaccompanied minors mandatory across the territory to relieve pressure from the Canary Islands, and the potential use of a compulsory dispersal mechanism is also part of political discussions in Belgium.[xxv]

While mandatory dispersal policies can help ensure a fairer distribution of asylum seekers, these laws have often faced strong political opposition – and, even when in place, they have not always done away with political tensions between the local and national levels.[xxvi] In some cases, these tensions

are heightened by the lack of involvement of subnational authorities in the decision-making process over the distribution of asylum seekers. For instance, in Italy, the lack of consultation with regional authorities ahead of the declaration of a state of emergency in April 2023 aiming to step up reception capacity was rejected by several regional authorities and led to criticism over the lack of involvement of municipalities in decisions affecting them.[xxvii] In this sense, coordination mechanisms also at the design or policy-making stage have the potential to help build trust and ensure fruitful cooperation between stakeholders. In Luxembourg, for instance, municipalities and other actors are involved in the decision-making process for creating new accommodation facilities.[xxviii] In the UK, the government launched in 2022 a consultation process with local authorities to shape the design of the new dispersal system.[xxix] In Portugal, a steering committee - composed of ministries, municipalities, and NGOs - decides where asylum seekers should be dispersed in the country once they receive a temporary residence permit[xxx]

In addition, dispersal policies also bring important questions to the forefront, such as the criteria used to distribute asylum seekers. For example, the quota in Germany considers the tax revenue and number of inhabitants in each Federal State, while in Portugal, future work opportunities are also considered.[xxxi] Other aspects, such as social connections or access to support services, are often left out of the equation, even if they can have long-lasting consequences for the integration of asylum seekers. Some governments have invested in developing digital tools and algorithms to match asylum seekers or refugees with different regions or municipalities, which could support distribution mechanisms. Yet, these algorithms also bring specific risks, such as unnoticed machine errors, and authorities still need to identify the main allocation criteria and establish safeguards to minimise risks.[xxxii]

3.1.2. Establishing the timeframe for cooperation

Apart from identifying the different actors that can support reception systems, reception authorities should also reflect on the timeframe to establish such partnerships. Importantly, successful partnerships cannot be built overnight. And when there is a surge in asylum applications, the time it takes to find new partners to expand reception capacity and establish agreements can be ill-suited to the speed at which crises develop. In this sense, having pre-arranged contracts or agreements with different actors can help authorities increase the flexibility of reception systems and make sure they can quickly scale them up when needed. In 2022, at least 8 Member States used pre-arranged contracts with different actors to embed flexibility in their national reception systems. In Norway, for instance, flexible agreements and contracts with service providers allowed the government to adjust capacity in reception centres by increasing or reducing the number of beds by 40% based on needs.[xxxiii] Having pre-existing agreements in place on the potential use of some facilities with regional or local authorities can also avoid lengthy negotiations when numbers rise, and national authorities need to open new reception centres.[xxxiv]

3.1.3 Developing adequate governance frameworks

Another important aspect to tap into the potential of multistakeholder models is the development of governance frameworks to ensure adequate reception conditions and promote accountability. For instance, Ireland has contracted more than 20 private companies to manage reception facilities in the country and has faced criticism over varying standards across the country.[xxxv] To address this issue, the government established in 2019 National Standards for Accommodation Centres to improve the quality of care and ensure consistency across centres.[xxxvi] While still to be implemented, the government has also announced the establishment of an independent monitoring mechanism to monitor compliance with these standards.[xxxvii] Similarly, the UK, which also contracts private

companies to provide asylum accommodation, added new contract requirements in 2019 that required the companies to monitor the experience of asylum seekers through regular surveys regularly.[xxxviii] The government also created an Asylum Support Contracts Safeguarding Board to discuss the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals across the contracts with partners.[xxxix] Importantly, involving reception partners in the design of monitoring mechanisms can help build a sense that monitoring is part of a common mission to ensure appropriate reception standards, instead of an imposition on partners involved in reception systems.[xl]

In addition to monitoring, establishing formal coordination mechanisms is also important to ensure effective coordination and address any problems. This can take several forms, such as creating dedicated task forces, groups or committees, which can be formally codified and regulated. For example, in Portugal, the government created in 2020 through a Ministerial Decree, the so-called Single Operational Group (SOG) to coordinate reception and integration. The group meets in a 'restricted' version composed of key government actors such as the Immigration and Borders Service and the Agency for Migration, Integration and Asylum (AIMA), as well as in several technical groups involving different government actors such as the Public Employment Service and the Health Directorate General, international organisations such as UNHCR and IOM, and other NGOs involved in the reception system.[xli] In Sweden, the government formally codified and regulated in 2018 the role of civil society organisations in the provision of services during the reception stage. This included the creation of a national structure for dialogue and collaboration between the government and civil society organisations, which are coordinated under one umbrella organisation.[xlii] Coordination can, however, also be done at a lower level – in the Netherlands, for example, all actors involved in each reception centre meet quarterly to discuss any issues in the centre.[xliii]

Last but not least, successful partnerships also require reflecting on how to make these partnerships sustainable in the long term, which requires long-term planning and allocating sufficient resources and funding. In Austria, for example, the lack of adequate funding combined with rising living costs led NGOs running reception centres to threaten to close them.[xliv] Similarly, local authorities in several countries have raised concerns over stretched resources not only in relation to accommodation but also local services such as schools and kindergartens.[xlv] While structural problems in service provision that also affect the local population will not be easily solved, reflecting on how to allocate sufficient funding for both contracted partners and local authorities could help develop more sustainable partnerships and avoid social and political tensions over the reception of asylum seekers. In addition, decisions to reduce capacity and terminate agreements in moments of lower pressure can have a detrimental effect on the sustainability of partnerships with local or regional authorities, which might not be keen to start new partnerships when numbers rise again.

3.2 Collaborative Models to Enhance Information Provision

Collaborative models have also been developed to enhance information provision during the asylum procedure. Yet, there are still important questions, including:

- How to coordinate information provision within collaborative models to ensure asylum seekers receive *coherent information* and understand the role of each actor?
- How to *ensure quality* in the information provided by different partners in collaborative models? What quality assurance mechanisms should be in place?
- What information provision models are more *effective*, and what are their benefits and challenges?
- Can collaboration with different partners improve information for *hard-to-reach groups*? How to provide information for asylum seekers who do not live in reception centres?

- How can information be made accessible for applicants in a *vulnerable* situation or with *specific communication and information needs*? What strategies are more effective to address cultural and linguistic barriers?
- What role can *digital technologies* play in information provision efforts?

The provision of information about the asylum procedure to asylum applicants is not only a legal obligation that Member States need to fulfil under the EU legal framework. Importantly, it is also a crucial element to ensure fair but efficient asylum procedures. Information provision on the different steps of the procedure can ensure that asylum seekers engage in the process, can gather evidence to support their protection claim and meet relevant time limits.[xlvi] In addition, the lack of clear information can arguably impact the mental health of asylum seekers, as prolonged periods of uncertainty in lengthy asylum procedures have been linked to worse mental and physical health.[xlvii] Therefore, effective information provision is important both for asylum seekers and for the efficiency of asylum systems.

Providing clear and timely information to asylum seekers, however, is not an easy task. In addition to the rising number of arrivals in a context of stretched resources, asylum seekers have different informational needs. They speak different languages and can have specific informational needs, both in terms of the information they require about the procedure and how it is conveyed. Children, for example, require child-friendly material, and those who are illiterate cannot benefit from written materials. More broadly, the legal terminology used in written or oral exchanges with government representatives can inhibit the asylum seeker – but other citizens in general as well – to fully understand the procedure and what is expected from them and when. Making sure that this information is understood is crucial. As such, authorities need to reflect on how to provide clear information to asylum seekers and tailor information to specific needs. This will be key for successfully implementing the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will require asylum seekers to navigate not only the regular asylum procedure but also other procedures such as Dublin, return, and the procedures at the border.

In this context, multi-stakeholder models hold the potential to help authorities meet asylum seekers' informational needs. In many countries, different actors, such as legal counsellors, NGOs, and international organisations already play a role in providing information to asylum seekers. This can help ensure asylum applicants have the right information about the procedure – and, given the expertise of some civil society organisations in supporting vulnerable groups, they can also support governments in providing information to hard-to-reach groups and those with specific informational needs. For instance, in Greece, an NGO has been providing information to asylum seekers and refugees since 2016 through dedicated WhatsApp and Facebook hotlines, which is in line with the growing tendency to leverage digital tools for information provision (see box 1).[xlviii]

> **BOX 1**
> **The Growing Use of Digital Tools in Information Provision**
> The use of digital tools to provide information about the asylum procedure has increased since COVID-19, and the majority of European countries currently use digital tools to provide information. This includes mostly using web platforms and videos or animations in different languages, with a minority of countries such as Bulgaria, Ireland, and Italy also using hotlines. Austria has also developed an app that enables refugees and asylum seekers to access information and updates from the authorities. In some cases, digital information material and tools have been developed in cooperation with different actors such as NGOs or UNHCR.

The use of digital tools to support information provision has several advantages. It can widen outreach and ensure consistency in the information provided. The use of animated videos can also be particularly useful for children. However, they can also exclude asylum seekers with limited digital skills or access to digital technologies, particularly when information is available through apps or web platforms. In this sense, complementing digital information provision with written and oral material and ensuring that asylum seekers also have the opportunity to ask questions about the information provided can minimise these risks.

Sources: Jean-David Ott and Eleonora Testi, *Digitalisation of Asylum Procedures: Risks and Benefits* (European Council of Refugees and Exiles, 2022)

Despite the role that different actors already play in information provision, in some instances, the information provided by NGOs or other actors is not coordinated by authorities through a formal coordination mechanism or contract with the government, which can lead to duplication of work or to asylum seekers receiving incoherent information from different actors. To effectively mobilise different stakeholders, some governments have established formal agreements with different actors to provide information to asylum seekers. This is the case in the Netherlands, where the government has contracted the Dutch Council for Refugees to provide information to asylum seekers in government-managed reception centres. In Germany, the Federal State of Baden-Württemberg has established in the arrival centre at Heidelberg an independent 'qualified social and procedural advise service' together with welfare organisations to provide advice on the asylum procedure.[xlix]

Apart from collaborations between national authorities and civil society organisations, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) also supports Member States in meeting informational needs. The agency, for example, has established a dedicated portal with a toolbox of information materials, such as leaflets, visuals and animations.[l] It has also cooperated with some Member States on the ground to enhance information provision. For instance, the agency supported Spain with the creation of an information protocol that is now used by NGOs managing reception centres.

Even when formal agreements with different actors exist, capacity constraints have posed challenges for contracted partners in some cases. For instance, the British government contracted in 2019 the NGO Migrant Help to support asylum seekers navigate the asylum system and support services, including through the creation of a help line. Yet, the rise in asylum applications during the first months of the service meant that one-fifth of the calls could not be answered, as the volume of calls was twice the expected number.[li] In this sense, embedding flexibility in contracts so that contracted partners can respond to rising needs could help partners increase capacity in times of pressure.

In addition, effective cooperation with different actors in information provision requires establishing adequate governance frameworks and coordination mechanisms to identify any gaps, ensuring the quality of information, and establishing a coherent message across different stakeholders. For example, in the Netherlands, reception authorities share regular information with the Dutch Council for Refugees, contracted by the government to provide information, and quarterly meetings with all actors involved in each reception centres supports coordination.[lii] Moreover, there is a need to develop robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to detect informational gaps and improve information provision – something that, in general, has been lacking across Europe.[liii]

3.3. Collaborative Models to Facilitate (Pre) Integration

The increasing policy attention to promoting asylum seekers' integration and self-sufficiency has led to many new initiatives to foster the integration of asylum seekers. But there are still questions over how to capitalise on multi-stakeholder approaches in this area effectively:

- *Who are the key actors* who need to be involved in facilitating the integration of asylum seekers?
- What governance and coordination structures are needed to foster a *coherent strategy*? How to ensure *quality* in the support provided and *prevent issues of abuse and discrimination* in the labour and housing markets?
- Can collaboration with different actors *inject innovation* into the provision of support for asylum seekers, for instance, in terms of housing solutions?
- Should collaborative models develop *tailored strategies for asylum seekers*, compared to referring asylum seekers to mainstream support for other migrants and refugees?
- What collaborative models have proved to be more effective, and what are the *key ingredients* of successful partnerships? How to ensure their *sustainability*?

Against a backdrop of widespread labour shortages and increasingly stretched reception systems, promoting integration and enhancing asylum seekers' self-sufficiency has become an increasingly important goal for European policymakers. This is one of the main goals of the recast Reception Conditions Directive, proposed by the European Commission in 2016 and recently approved by the European Parliament, which reduces the maximum time asylum seekers can wait to access the labour market from nine to six months.[liv] Over the past years, several Member States have also reduced within their national legislation the waiting time to access to the labour market[lv] and have put measures in place to foster the integration of asylum seekers, such as employment support, language classes, and activities to promote social integration. There is thus a growing consensus that capitalising on the time that asylum seekers spend waiting for their asylum decision can not only reduce public resources but also foster long-term integration by using that time to gain work experience, acquire new skills, and build links with the local community.

As policy attention to promoting the (pre)integration of asylum seekers has increased, so have initiatives from different stakeholders – from national authorities to municipalities to NGOs – to achieve this aim. Yet, the field is still fragmented. Some countries offer mainstream support to asylum seekers during the asylum procedure, such as language courses open to all migrants or general employment support. In contrast, other countries, such as Belgium, have developed specific programmes or dedicated structures to support asylum seekers during the procedure. Moreover, while NGOs and other actors, such as employers, play a crucial role in the integration of asylum seekers, the initiatives from different actors are often not sufficiently coordinated. For example, according to a 2023 EMN report, several countries reported the fundamental role of NGOs and social partners in promoting the labour market integration of asylum seekers, but only six countries had established measures to foster cooperation between relevant stakeholders in this area.[lvi] This, in turn, can impact the effectiveness of existing initiatives. For instance, in Ireland, asylum seekers can access the employment support offered to jobseekers through the public employment service (PES), as well as different initiatives implemented by NGOs. Yet, while informal cooperation exists, the lack of formal coordination mechanisms was identified as an obstacle to labour market integration.[lvii]

To address this challenge, some countries are trying to develop multi-stakeholder partnerships and improve coordination in this fragmented landscape. For example, Portugal has established several

one-stop-shops for integration services called National Migrant Support Centres, which are open to all migrants, including asylum seekers. These centres bring together different authorities and NGOs under the same roof, supporting coordination.[lviii] In Sweden, the Public Employment Service is tasked with mapping asylum seekers' skills and qualifications during the asylum procedure, while County administration authorities coordinate activities for asylum seekers in cooperation with civil society organisations and municipalities[lix] In Belgium, the reception agency Fedasil has created the 'Participation in Society' department which focuses on implementing and coordinating actions with different stakeholders to promote the activation and participation in the society of asylum seekers.[lx]

In different countries, national and local authorities have also developed targeted multi-stakeholder initiatives in specific areas, such as labour market integration. Fostering labour market participation at the reception stage and capitalising on the time asylum seekers spend in the asylum procedure can have multiple benefits. First, the evidence suggests that being able to work during the asylum procedure can have a long-term impact on employment outcomes. For instance, in Germany, a longitudinal study examining the impact of a court ruling in 2000 that shortened the time to access the labour market for asylum seekers found that it took a decade for those barred from working for just seven additional months to have similar employment levels than the cohort allowed to work earlier.[lxi] In this sense, promoting the labour market integration of asylum seekers or skills training can have long-term benefits for those who obtain a positive decision – and can also support the reintegration in their home countries of those who return. Moreover, in a context of acute labour shortages across Europe, European societies can also benefit from the early labour market integration of asylum seekers. Despite these benefits, asylum seekers often find multiple challenges to accessing the labour market, ranging from limited knowledge of the host country language, to delays in the recognition of skills and qualifications, to practical challenges such as the isolation of some accommodation centres and the lack of transport to the workplace.[lxii]

To address these challenges and facilitate labour market integration, some countries have developed collaborative models with different stakeholders. For instance, in Italy, the government signed in 2022 a Memorandum of Understanding between the government, employer associations and trade unions to offer training and job placement opportunities in the construction sector to various groups, including asylum seekers. The project is coordinated through local communities bringing together representatives from the prefectures, the reception system, and construction training schools run by social partners, which select eligible candidates and support them during training and work experiences.[lxiii] In Belgium, Fedasil has established partnerships with private companies and NGOs to facilitate the employment of asylum seekers, including through social mentoring.[lxiv] Importantly, the engagement of companies and other actors to facilitate the labour market integration of asylum seekers needs to be accompanied by safeguarding measures to prevent and address issues of exploitation and discrimination. While more research is required to determine how multi-stakeholder cooperation can best prevent these risks, preventive measures could include providing information to asylum seekers about their labour rights, introducing regular monitoring of asylum seekers' experiences, or involving trade unions or other actors that can support asylum seekers if their rights are violated, among others. Moreover, while there is a growing number of initiatives involving different stakeholders to support the labour market integration of asylum seekers, some key questions remain such as how to attract and prepare employers to work with asylum seekers, how to continue supporting asylum seekers after they are recruited, or how to ensure the continuity and scalability of promising initiatives, among others.

To foster (pre)integration, building links with the local community is also crucial. This, however, can be challenging, especially when asylum seekers are accommodated in reception centres that are

isolated from local communities and where they have thus few opportunities for meaningful interactions. To address this challenge, innovative, collaborative projects have also been launched in some European countries to support social integration. In Utrecht, for example, the local government launched in 2016 a partnership with NGOs, companies and universities under the so-called Plan Einstein to offer a wide range of activities to asylum seekers, as well as to create opportunities for interaction with the local community (see Box 2). Some countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands also cooperate with different organisations to offer volunteering opportunities, which can support social integration and skill building, as well as promote more positive attitudes in local communities thanks to the opportunity to have meaningful interactions.

BOX 2
Fostering Participation and Integration Through The Plan Einstein

Between November 2016 and October 2018, the city of Utrecht built a partnership with local NGOs, enterprises and universities to create a co-housing and co-learning reception facility where asylum seekers and refugees were housed together with local young tenants in the district of Overvecht and where they could participate together in courses and activities, from entrepreneurship to English classes. The project was financed by the EU programme Urban Innovative Actions and aimed at supporting asylum seekers and refugees while fostering community building and social cohesion. This multi-stakeholder approach brought benefits to the different actors involved. It allowed the local government to experiment and trial new solutions, while for the district, the plan offered opportunities and accommodation for young people. For NGOs, the plan allowed them to foster social interaction through dedicated activities, and local businesses saw it as an opportunity to build links between social entrepreneurs and asylum seekers/refugees. Educational institutions also provided English lessons.

An independent evaluation conducted in 2020 found that the project was moderately successful. The centre built social connections between local residents and asylum seekers, although the evaluation found that only a minority of residents actively engaged in the centre. Co-living between asylum seekers and refugees and local tenants was convivial, but the lack of shared spaces and the short length of stay of asylum seekers limited opportunities for meaningful interactions. Importantly, the project also found that the horizontal network arrangement made expectations and coordination between different actors ambiguous and that a clearer leadership would have helped address issues. Moreover, while the project was independently evaluated, some partners regretted the lack of more opportunities for collective reflection and identification of any issues as the project evolved. Last but not least, the lack of continuity of the project means that only a small number of asylum seekers could, in practice, benefit from it.

Sources: Caroline Oliver, Karin Geuijen and Rianne Dekker, *Utrecht's Urban Experiment on Asylum Seeker Reception Executive Summary of Independent Evaluation* (2020); Karin Geuijen, Caroline Oliver & Rianne Dekker, '*Local Innovation in the Reception of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands: Plan Einstein as an Example of Multi-level and Multi-sector Collaboration*', in *Geographies of Asylum in Europe and the Role of European Localities*, eds. Birgit Glorius and Jeroen Doomernik (IMISCOE Research Series, 2020).

Lastly, a third important area where different stakeholders can cooperate is access to housing for beneficiaries of international protection. Swift access to housing for those with a positive decision is crucial to ensure that newly-recognised beneficiaries can move out of reception centres and that space is liberated for new arrivals – or that they do not end up in poverty after receiving a positive decision. While the lack of affordable housing across Europe is a challenge also affecting local populations, refugees can face specific challenges, from lack of knowledge about their housing rights and difficulties navigating the housing market to discrimination. Consequently, some countries and local authorities have established partnerships with different actors to promote access to housing.

This is the case in Greece, for example, where the government-funded programme HELIOS implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides integration support to beneficiaries of international protection. As part of the project, IOM cooperates with real state agencies and landlords to identify affordable housing options for refugees and has created a dedicated portal with verified housing options. IOM also supports beneficiaries with apartment visits, administrative steps, and a rental subsidy. [lxv]

Therefore, a plethora of initiatives have emerged to foster the integration of asylum seekers in different areas, from housing to labour market integration. Some of these initiatives have sprung up independently and are not formally coordinated. But acknowledging that successful integration requires the involvement of a wide range of actors – from NGOs to local communities, from private companies to real estate agents – a growing number of initiatives tap into the potential of multi-stakeholder cooperation to capitalise on the expertise of different actors. Yet, as in other areas, cooperation with stakeholders also brings specific challenges, such as identifying relevant actors, ensuring consistent quality, establishing a coherent strategy, and establishing effective coordination mechanisms. Moreover, some of these initiatives are one-off projects that are insufficiently evaluated and replicated, and longitudinal research examining the impact of activities during the asylum procedure in long-term integration is limited. As such, more research is needed not only to determine what initiatives have the biggest potential to improve longer-term integration but also to identify the key ingredients of successful, long-lasting partnerships.

4. Conclusion

Providing adequate reception conditions for asylum seekers and supporting them through the asylum procedure cannot be perceived as the task of one government agency alone. The difficult task that reception authorities have at hand, from managing reception capacity in a highly volatile environment to supporting asylum seekers throughout the asylum procedure requires them to use all resources at their disposal – and effectively mobilising different actors, from local authorities to NGOs and the private sector, is an important element that can help develop more flexible and resilient reception systems.

Different stakeholders already play an important role in many national reception systems. Over the past years, several countries have increasingly worked with different stakeholders to accommodate and support asylum seekers. However, their involvement is not always sufficiently coordinated, particularly when it comes to information provision and the provision of (pre)integration support to asylum seekers. Moreover, while the involvement of different actors has the potential to improve reception capacity, flexibility, and the provision of tailored support for those with vulnerabilities and specific needs, it also carries risks, such as the lack of a coherent message when different actors are involved in information provision or the risk of varying quality standards. To fully tap into the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships, authorities need to set up adequate governance frameworks, coordination, and quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms. They also need to reflect on how to make these partnerships sustainable, which requires trust-building, regular communication and information exchange, and allocating sufficient funding for the services provided by different actors. And, importantly, they also need to nurture a sense of shared responsibility over the reception of asylum seekers and the idea that all actors – from the local communities in which asylum seekers live to NGOs and private companies – have a role to play and can, together, make a difference in how asylum seekers are welcomed in Europe.

Notes

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