

Baseline overview and assessment of integration policies in the Republic of Cyprus



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Introduction

Migration has become one of the defining features of the early twenty-first century and is high on the policy agenda at both national and international levels. The rapid economic development of the EU, along with the social conditions as well as the solidarity and social cohesion to those in need, resulted in an increased number of migrants from other countries (OECD, 2018). The EU member states, responding to this reality, agreed on common EU regulations, which attempt to ensure the effective management of migratory flows towards both Europe but also within it (World Bank, 2006), and is “a shared responsibility” of both the union and its member states (European Commission, 2020). Legal migration and integration of non-EU nationals was, and still is, one of the most important consultations across the EU (Czaika and Haas, 2014; EC-DG for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2005).

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean. The shifting historical background helps describe the cultural identity of the Cypriot people that has been influenced by different populations and civilizations, which have determined the evolution of the country economically, culturally, and socially. In 1974, it was invaded by Turkey and the subsequent division of the country has created extensive numbers of dispossessed Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Cyprus migration was influenced as a result of the division of the island (due to the absence of a settlement of the Cyprus problem) and this report refers only to the territory under the control of the Republic of Cyprus.

Over the last 30 years, Cyprus has experienced an impressive economic growth based on tourism and services (shipping, financial services etc.) that also shaped the character of migration (Spaneas *et al.*, 2021). Although in the past, it was characterised as an emigration country, the rapid economic development which required additional labour supply transformed the country into a migration destination (Spaneas and Zachariades, 2016). It was in the 1990s when the first economic migrants were registered to fulfil labour shortages.

Currently, the migrant population that lives on the island (apart from the increased numbers of applicants for international protection) can be classified in two main categories:

- ▶ Migrants who have acquired short stay visas and
- ▶ Migrants who have acquired long stay visas

The first category mainly describes some thousands of businesspersons who have established their headquarters in Cyprus, seasonal workers who are invited to Cyprus for a dedicated period of time, and others who pass through Cyprus on the way to other destinations.

The latter category pinpoints the majority of migrants who legally reside in Cyprus for employment reasons (quite often with contracts of 4-5 years), where a second categorisation is necessary to divide them between skilled and unskilled workers, students at colleges and universities, as well as businesspersons and their families who live in Cyprus as permanent habitans.

The migration policy continues to be characterised with a relative delay: it always appears as a reaction to events rather than as a guiding force. Its approach is still one that considers that migrants are temporarily covering a shortage in labour force and that they will leave after a few years. Before Cyprus's entry into the EU, its migration policy was characterised by efforts of the state in the management of migrants as workers, through relevant legislation (Aliens and Immigration Law, CAP 105). In addition, emphasis was placed on managing the large numbers of applicants for international protection with the revisions of the relevant law (cf. Refugees Law, 2000).

A significant level of change in national politics occurred in 2007, when a Committee of Experts on the Integration of Migrants was formed by decision of the Council of Ministers in March 2007. The committee included representatives from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Insurance, Education and Culture, and from the Ministry of Interior. The first national plan was published in 2010 in an attempt to align national migration policy with European and international conventions, in particular the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum.

Numerous actions were implemented towards a living together culture in local societies. Public authorities, local councils, NGOs and the wider public discussed, designed and implemented several actions in an attempt to acknowledge the value of different civilisations, social liberties, rights and obligations for all; building social trust. However, all additional plans and efforts were not achieved mainly due to the financial recession which followed, leading the country to a comprehensive economic adjustment programme agreed with the European Commission, the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Cypriot authorities in April 2013. Thousands of jobs were lost, and unemployment was dramatically increased (Hardouvelis and Gkionis, 2016; European Commission, 2013). Since that time, amendments have been introduced, as a new plan was drafted and was expected to be officially introduced in 2021.

The main scope of this study, which was commissioned by the Council of Europe in the framework of the joint European Union and Council of Europe project “Building structures for intercultural integration in Cyprus”,¹ is to understand and assess the state of integration policies and levels of community cohesion/social integration in Cyprus. The study begins with the illustration of current issues and challenges that characterises the daily practice and highlights areas that need to be further discussed with several stakeholders. It is blended with the views and thoughts of four main groups of participants (i) professionals from the governmental sector, ministries and state agencies, (ii) local authorities, (iii) NGO’s who work on a wide spectrum of migration and integration issues and (iv) migrants who currently reside in Cyprus, aiming to underline the responsibilities and relationships between the interested parties and the governmental procedures.

Obstacles influencing the current conditions of migrants, challenges and ideas that could improve the general framework of integration policies are outlined in this study and they lead to a set of practical proposals - policy recommendations - that aim at achieving a paradigm-shift from a reactive to a proactive national social inclusion policy.

1. The “Building structures for intercultural integration in Cyprus” project is being carried out with funding from the European Union, via its Structural Reform Support Programme, and in co-operation with the European Commission’s DG for Structural Reform Support.

Structure of the research report

Chapter 1

Issues and challenges identified through desk research (literature review) and field research (semi-structured interviews). Revealing the daily practice, reality and challenges faced in all sectors at local and national levels regarding the current conditions of migrant integration policies and strategies.

Chapter 2

Proposals and recommendations for the development of a strategic plan of action towards the creation of a social integration strategy.

Chapter 3

A critical discussion of the field research findings. It reveals the thoughts and perceptions of several stakeholders depicting both the current situation and possibilities for a future plan of integration based on a bottom-up approach.

Chapter 4

A literature review including reports from EU institutional and independent organisations aiming to critically report on developments in Cyprus and to identify gaps and challenges in the Cypriot social policy regarding migrants.

APPENDIX I

The research methodology.

Chapter 1

Issues and challenges

This chapter attempts to shed some light on a range of challenges facing migrants living in Cyprus. It discusses the problems, thresholds, and causes, along with the issues, challenges and opportunities that have arisen within the local and migrant populations residing in Cyprus. It outlines key definitions, methodological approaches and lessons learned from the evidence produced over the past decade. Evidence from the field are combined with the literature review results to depict the current situation.

Housing and living conditions

Housing and living conditions among the diverse groups of migrants who live within the Cypriot Community vary considerably. Legal status, residence and working permissions are influence their quality of life. The living conditions of applicants for international protection have deteriorated during the past few years as their access to the labour market is limited, they cannot afford to live independently in decent private rented accommodation. Beneficiaries of international protection are entitled to material support, they have access to the national welfare system Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) at the same level and conditions that apply to nationals. Non-EU nationals fall mainly under the category of domestic helpers. They usually reside within their employer's property but there have been concerns regarding the conditions of their living arrangements such as restrictions in terms of moving freely within the premises, as well as restrictions on the use of certain facilities. Non-EU nationals who work in the tourism industry or are employed by foreign companies enjoy above average living conditions. A professional from a private/voluntary sector said that:

"It depends on which ethnic groups the reference is made to ... a large percentage of applicants for international protection and third-country nationals reside in poor accommodation conditions due to the low allowances they receive. Beneficiaries of international protection, EU Citizens, and students do not face the same difficulties, as they have full access to the labour market as well as to allowances."

Moreover, the poor quality of accommodation for applicants for international protection was confirmed by a local authority officer. Characteristically, it was mentioned:

"EU nationals and highly skilled migrants are experiencing a better quality of life. Society is far more inclusive towards these groups. On the contrary, asylum seekers are in a very difficult situation. Often, they reside in shared houses/apartments, which they are expected to find on their own. Often due to a lack of language knowledge and relevant resources individuals may be vulnerable to living in debilitated housing without the basics."

Education

The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) policy vision, reflecting the rapid transforming society, is to promote the social inclusion of all pupils and the intercultural dialogue and communication between the different cultural groups (Hadjisoteriou, 2020). All children, regardless of their ethnic background (up to the age of 18), have equal access to education. Public primary and secondary education is free for all children, and the language of instruction is Greek. Participants from both public and private sector corroborated the above statement. Specifically, a public servant highlighted that:

"Migrant children up to 18 years old have access to primary and secondary education under the same conditions that apply to Cypriot nationals. For asylum seekers access is granted immediately after applying for asylum and no later than three months from the date of submission."

Over the past decade, the MoEC adopted various support provisions to allow minority groups to express their cultural identity and facilitate their integration into society. These provisions included measures such as language support actions (Greek as a second language), actions facilitating the integration of groups with diverse ethnic backgrounds, promotion of bilingual students' active participation through mainstream programmes, extracurricular intensive language courses according to bilingual students' specific needs and adult education centres offering classes of Greek as a second language.

However, despite all the efforts and accomplishments of the MoEC there are still several challenges and obstacles preventing the smooth transition and integration of migrants into the educational system, especially for those entering secondary education where a high rate of dropping out of school is observed. Challenges such as learning the language, transportation, bureaucratic procedures, limited childcare arrangements and lack of translated documents are just a few of the problems observed during the research. On occasion, conflicting issues have also been reported between local and migrant children due to language barriers as well as the absence of parents from the school community. A professional from the private/voluntary sector stated that:

"There are cases of children remaining out of the education system for several months. Difficulties such as lack of information/timely arrangements, and the limited school capacities to accommodate additional students constitute important deterring factors."

In the case of adult migrants, access to education is more difficult and complicated. Even though the Adult Education Centres, which function under the auspices of the MoEC, offer afternoon classes for learning Greek as a second language, access to securing a spot for these classes is difficult. This is due to a lack of information, capacity limitations, lack in procurement of translated documents as well as strict bureaucratic procedures, which discourages migrants from participating. Also, access to tertiary education institutions is limited for migrants, especially for those who would like to continue their studies as they need the necessary resources to subsidise their tuition for private universities and public universities require Greek as a foreign language as a prerequisite for entry.

Problems are more apparent among applicants and beneficiaries of international protection who already possess academic qualifications or who were forced to discontinue their studies. The procedures for recognition of their degrees and other educational skills and qualifications, are very difficult and some degrees or qualifications are not acknowledged by the state.

Employment and the labour market

The integration of migrants into the labour market is considered to be an essential part of a sustainable social inclusion in local societies. Access to the labour market is not a straightforward process for migrants in Cyprus. Applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, non-EU nationals and EU nationals enter the labour market with different procedures. An applicant for international protection, expressed his disappointment at the lack of state effort to integrate them through employment:

"I think that with regards to integration in the labour market, the social integration of asylum seekers is inadequate and very unfair. There are a lot of restrictions; I see many people who want to work but cannot."

Furthermore, strict and complicated bureaucratic procedures constituted an important additional obstacle to labour market access. A non-EU national employed as domestic worker mentioned:

"Even though the procedures for us to work as domestic workers have been improved, there are still a lot of complications.... language, availability of employment positions, and the long waiting period for positive reply are some of the major difficulties we face.."

The Ministry of Labour within the framework of formulating a strategic employment plan for immigrants in Cyprus, tried to adopt more rational and objective criteria to reduce the imbalances in terms of labour access (Angeli, 2020). Interviewees from all sectors unanimously agreed that there are no official initiatives aiming to promote labour market intercultural integration:

"There are no organised, publicly announced efforts to routinely promote the integration of migrants in the labour market."

Applicants for international protection are allowed to enter the labour market one month following the submission of their application and only in positions of manual labour such as farming and agriculture. Beneficiaries of international protection are allowed to work in any sector and be employed with the same criteria as the nationals. However, it is evident that language barriers and significant procedural obstacles still create difficulties in their access to the labour market.

For non-EU nationals who are not employed by companies with foreign interests in Cyprus, the procedures are characterised as bureaucratic and acquiring a work permit through their employer can be a time-consuming task. For example, a domestic worker is allowed to change employer twice during their employment period of 6 years and with very few exceptions. They are also allowed to extend their work permit for up to 6 years if they continue to work for the same employer.

Both the literature review as well as the interviews highlight the need to review the policy within the labour market towards the creation of a harmonious 'living and working together' attitude.

Access to healthcare

The General Health System (GHS) has been in effect since 2019 and incorporated important changes in the provision of healthcare services. Since the implementation of the GHS, obligatory monthly contributions apply to all employed persons with the purpose of contributing and accessing healthcare services.

Cypriot nationals, EU nationals and non-EU nationals who work, reside, and provide services in the areas controlled by the Cyprus Government, are entitled to access healthcare services under the GHS. Beneficiaries of international protection are also eligible to receive health care services, regardless of their income levels and employment status.

Applicants for international protection are not included in the GHS provisions regardless of their employment status:

"Asylum seekers, whether they are employed or not, are not entitled to GHS. They have access to medical care according to the Cyprus Refugee Law. In this respect, I am saying that the same opportunities and access to the healthcare system as Cypriots are not the same for this group of employees."

Their access to healthcare continues under the provisions of the previous system which entails treatment by public in-patient and out-patient departments of the public hospitals. The introduction of the GHS impacted migrants due to the delay in official procedures concerning their levels access to the public health services. This created gaps and challenges due to the lack of coordination among governmental departments as well as the lack of translated information regarding access to healthcare.

Another challenge that occurs frequently is the difficulty in communication between the medical staff and the migrants.

"There is language problem. We do not understand the medical terms and other issues that the doctor tells us." (British national)

An applicant of international protection corroborated on the language problems and the lack of interpreters and translation services:

"The most important obstacle is the translation... many times there are no translators available...we cannot communicate and the staff becomes frustrated."

Finally, specialised training of medical personnel and professionals on intercultural matters to better understand and approach the migrants is currently absent:

"It is vital to receive training on intercultural matters...to be able to approach migrant groups and better understand how cultural and religious issues may affect his/her condition, we need to become aware of certain peculiarities."

Improvements in intercultural communication will inevitably create an atmosphere of trust between the medical personnel and migrants.

Social integration – community cohesion

The notion of social integration and community cohesion of migrants and their communities in Cyprus has received extensive attention over the last few years. In the last decade or so, several changes have been initiated to legal, policy and institutional frameworks. Despite several attempts to provide quality services, various areas are still considered challenging, mainly because Cyprus, until recently had not established a formal Integration Policy Framework regarding the integration of migrants into society. This is an area that remains relatively unexplored, and many knowledge gaps still exist for which research initiatives are necessary to build solid evidence for policymaking proposals and recommendations, intervention mechanisms, planning and practice implications.

It has also become evident that there are no formal governmental strategies or mechanisms in place to promote social integration. When it comes to accessing services and becoming self-oriented, newly arrived migrant groups usually face problems which in time minimise their likelihood of meaningful interaction with their host societies. Furthermore, there are no official mechanisms in place for welcoming migrants into the community. Such actions are usually carried out by non-governmental organisations through EU co-funded programmes and through provisions of their own. A participant from a private organisation mentioned that:

"This lack of early accessibility to orientation programmes and participatory procedures makes circumstances more difficult to prevent social tension and mistrust and leads to the prevalence of harmful stereotypes and the alienation of affected communities."

It was also highlighted that the importance of bringing people together from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds in common spaces, creating a sense of community and maximising opportunities for socialisation, co-operation, exchanges and interaction:

"It is essential that interactions occur between the communities. It is even better for any activities to be done through school activities, to have the parents participate, since it is easier to bring students' parents together."

However, such initiatives are very limited and are usually carried out through EU co-funded projects in collaboration with local authorities and voluntary groups. It has been observed that some local authorities have attempted to establish networks of collaboration and create communication channels between the local community and migrants, but a common framework or strategy does not exist nationally, and it depends on municipalities and local authorities to act according to their own agenda.

The Cyprus immigration model has been dominantly separatist, foreseeing little intercultural interaction between communities, while at the same time favouring assimilation where contact is unavoidable. It has also been established that efforts are mostly made through EU co-funded projects regarding the promotion of social cohesion initiatives as these projects promote the participation of migrant minority groups. Migrants have also expressed that there is a lack of initiatives when comes to matters of fostering social cohesion within the community characterising it as inadequate or non-existent.

Conclusions

Analysis of the Cypriot social integration strategy and reception conditions for migrants shows that there are some considerable constraints in relation to the official policies, which reduces the likelihood of setting the foundations for the creation of an intercultural country. A number of practical restrictions were identified for migrants in accessing housing, education, health, employment and social integration activities. It seems that there is a lack of a formal tailor-made social integration strategy towards the specific needs of the various migrant groups in the Cypriot community. Specifically, applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, as well as non-EU nationals (low skilled workers), are facing important hindrances and restrictions compared to other migrant groups (EU nationals and highly skilled migrant workers). It can be argued that, based on this results in these groups not developing a feeling of belonging. There are certain gaps and omissions that prevent active participation, increasing the likelihood of the phenomenon of social exclusion and isolation.

Their social integration is inextricably linked to unofficial networks such as friends, families and most importantly EU co-funded programmes and initiatives implemented by the CSOs, NGOs, local authorities and voluntary organisations. They are heavily dependent on such services, since the private/voluntary sector could be characterised as an informal mediator between the state and the migrant groups. The current lack of social integration intervention mechanisms from the state diminishes the quality and level of social trust and cohesion for these migrant groups. Evidence from both the literature review and interviews indicate that the active participation of migrants in the host communities has to be reconfigured at a grass roots level towards a sustainable integration strategy.

Chapter 2:

The way forward

Introduction

This chapter presents several policy recommendations to fulfil the paradigm-shift from a reactive to a proactive national social integration policy. The recommendations comprise a combination of measures, to be further discussed by several stakeholders, which would attempt to raise a multilevel intervention. The distinct types of entities are classified into six main categories:

- ▶ Ministerial level;
- ▶ Public services at the departmental level;
- ▶ Civil society organisations: any NGO, CSOs, voluntary organisations and formal or informal group that has a special interest in helping the target group;
- ▶ Local authorities: municipalities and communities that are responsible in providing an extensive range of public services in pre-defined geographic areas;
- ▶ Beneficiaries: migrant groups consisting of non-EU nationals, applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, EU nationals, and any other minority groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The focus is on identifying areas that influence the current practices, frameworks and the organisational culture among stakeholders.

The proposals are built under the perspective that migration flows will continue, and a coherent management policy should be introduced along with a number of early integration measures that need to be enabled and implemented from different actors. At a more practical level, it is understood that local societies want migrants to integrate and respect laws, customs and ethics, and participate in the local development. That means that migrants will fill labour and skills shortages, EU nationals would gain a sense of control; individuals or groups with a realistic chance of being able to stay legally – because of work, study, family reunification or asylum reasons – will gain access to services and opportunities to be integrated. Nevertheless, the challenges to achieving this are significant.

It is argued that the acknowledgement of these facts is a starting point to think about alternative solutions. How can such a plan can be implemented? By designing a coherent and effective national social inclusion policy following an open public consultation. Smaller bottom-up social intervention steps at the local level need to be introduced, which in combination with top-down EU-level efforts may eventually lead to an effective, proactive, and fair national policy towards social integration in the future.

The policy recommendations stemming from the present study are grouped into six overarching themes below:

- ▶ Reception management and intervention mechanisms
- ▶ Information and communication
- ▶ Housing and living conditions
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Employment and the labour market
- ▶ Social integration – community cohesion

Reception management and intervention mechanisms

The first set of proposals are directed at both reception management and to early intervention mechanisms which should be initiated from day one. A number of policy initiatives are suggested in order to truly manage migration and maintain long-term co-operative partnerships with several stakeholders. It is also acknowledged that for a period of time funds could be provided by both EU and public funds to sponsor and maintain the implementation of such mechanisms. In addition, as well as funds, technical expertise has to be deployed to support any policies of reception management. On the assumption that many people will try to come anyway, an effective system that will facilitate the entire process should be established and that all stakeholders need to participate in its development and enrich it by identifying needs in the local economies and ways to fill them. Dialogue should be enacted to understand needs and migration quotas adjusted to these identified needs.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Comprehensively review the entire reception, welcome and induction process for migrants based on EU standards, recommendations, and guidelines.	Set up collaborative networks with other public, private, and voluntary services as well as organisations that may assist both the reception and induction conditions.	Adopt an urban design strategy to place/relocate migrant groups within the local community, which will begin with affordable housing solutions and proceed with professional orientation, language learning support and assistance for employment to specific sectors.	Advocate for greater access to the rights of employment, housing, and educational opportunities.	Seek training and technical support to create associations and groups to advocate for their rights.
Introduce quality assurance mechanisms for existing procedures, those related to the welcoming process and the provision of supportive services such as civic orientation.	Develop a comprehensive operational plan and guidance protocols to assist newly arrived migrants become self-oriented to have a smoother transition into the host society.	Introduce migrant advisory committees as consulting bodies for local authorities	Undertake an official mediator role between migrants and the state.	Seek advocacy training sessions to be aware of their rights and set up common forms for streamlined processes and complaints.
Update the national policy strategic plan for social integration based on contemporary issues.		Prevent migrants' segregation in certain neighbourhoods or areas by offering alternative solutions for affordable housing.	Understand and critically interpret the framework and standards set out by the State, aiming to improve them for the benefit of the diverse migrant groups.	Undertake a more meaningful role in organizing themselves and devising community-based solutions.
Involve a wide range of experts in reshaping the reception and induction system, by establishing an Institute of Excellence.		Provide services through community organisations, which will include key leaders from the migrant community as mediators, facilitators and decision-makers.	Identify the principal protection challenges in their respective area of interest and suggest initiatives that could be made at national and/or regional levels.	
		Provide feedback and concrete proposals to the central government about the living conditions of disadvantaged migrants in their areas.		

Information and communication

Although it was not discussed as a separate section in the chapter of issues and challenges, information and communication are key to achieving sustainable solutions in managing migration for social cohesion at local level. The message should be that legal, managed, safe ways exist for those who meet the criteria to migrate; communication channels will be introduced, and all migrants will receive information regarding their legal rights, obligations, provision of services, bureaucratic procedures (through official channels) upon their arrival in Cyprus in a format and language they are able to understand.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Introduce relevant legislation to secure efficient provision of information and communication channels with the relevant stakeholders and beneficiaries.	Introduce an information mechanism through which all migrants will receive information regarding their legal rights, obligations, provision of services, bureaucratic procedures (through official channels) upon their arrival in Cyprus in a format and language they are able to understand.	Set up local collaborative networks to inform and assist migrants on social integration matters.	Activate and train people (including migrants) to work as intercultural mediators and advocates for new arrivals.	Volunteers to receive training to become appropriate interpreters and intercultural mediators.
Set up a mechanism to ensure quality of interpretation services and qualified interpreters whose services will afterwards be used at service provision.	Setup collaborative networks with the participation of statutory and non-statutory organizations and lead professionals.	Translate all public service information (eg. instructions on combating Covid-19) into languages according to the foreign population they accommodate in their local area.	Explore the idea of a collaborative network in which organizations share ideas and undertake different implementation actions towards a comprehensive supportive network.	Establish formal and informal groups to welcome and support newcomers by providing accurate and useful information.
Set up an electronic platform, where all relevant information for each migrant group, as regards to procedures, induction protocols, benefits and services will be displayed (and regularly updated) in several languages.	Set up pooled interpretation services to ensure proper communication between the applicant and the authorities at every step of the induction process.	Set up a virtual space where information about migration issues is available in various languages e.g. (English, Ukrainian, Arabic, Russian, Somali, Bengali, Filipino, Georgian, Hindi, and Farsi).	Set up advocacy services for newly arrived migrants.	
	Introduce a training system for unofficial interpreters, accompanied by an accreditation system for them.	Offer English and Greek courses to enhance the level of communication with the local population.	Offer English and Greek courses all year around to improve the level of communication with the local population.	

Housing and living conditions

This set of proposals are developed under the notion that several stakeholders have the critical capacities to find tailored solutions for the actual protection needs of migrants based on their local assets. Actions and strategies should include the mobilisation of multi-stakeholder networks: state, local authorities, NGOs, migrants' associations, universities and private businesses. Roles should be clarified, funding increased and dialogue among decisions makers across levels and with the rest of society should be improved.

Urbanisation develops in parallel to pluralistic societies, when the needs of all nationals are met it has a positive impact on peoples' economic and social development, and sense of community. The continuation of unplanned migration flows and relocation of migrants in areas and houses which do not meet basic living conditions will have only negative results for local societies. The goal of creating inclusive and intercultural cities can be only applied at different scales - from the neighbourhood, to city-wide, and to the territorial level. Enhancing collaboration amongst urban actors and government authorities and fostering knowledge exchange between local decision makers on successful inclusion policies, strategies and plans, can enable migrants' social and economic inclusion in cities across Cyprus.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Develop early warning system on housing capacities to prepare adequate space for newcomers. Introduce council housing schemes in collaboration with local municipalities.	Set up incentives for both the local authorities and private sector to build social houses for people in vulnerable conditions.	Review alternative funding schemes from both national and European funds that can assist the development of accommodation in a long-term urban development plan.	Set up platforms with information of available accommodation for migrants.	Self-organise to provide information about available accommodation facilities.
Create a system of population distribution quotas for every municipality and local community in Cyprus as seen (Sweden & Finland are good examples of good practices) within the context of social inclusion to avoid ghettoization in certain urban areas.	Initiate schemes that allow the long-term renting of buildings/flats for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection.	Prevent refugees' segregation in certain neighbourhoods or areas by setting up housing schemes.	Advocate for migrants' right to decent and humane accommodation.	Advocate for humane and appropriate accommodation conditions.
Ensure minimal living conditions and avoid marginalizing the target group by actively involving social actors and municipalities	Adopt an urban design strategy to relocate applicants and beneficiaries of international protection within the communities.	Adopt an urban design strategy to relocate applicants and beneficiaries of international protection within the neighbourhoods.	Organise groups of local volunteers to search for available accommodation for migrants.	
Utilisation of ESF (European Social Fund) to fund or support independent living conditions, including co-habitation, in communities away from isolated reception centres.		Explore additional funding sources from programmes such The European Regional Development Fund, the Structural and Investment Fund that can assist in the development of accommodation in a long-term urban development plan.		

Education

To achieve local economic development requires investment in education among other things. It is suggested that the introduction of an educational ecosystem will assist the integration of migrants and offers opportunities to both feel safe and integrated into the local society. It is argued that appropriate instructional models for second language acquisition and the importance of the social environment are just two aspects of ensuring newly arrived migrants are adequately supported.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Introduce an educational recognition system to assimilate to the Cyprus/ EU educational standards.	Introduce goals and quality assurance systems and monitoring mechanisms for the learning achievements of migrants.	Create a mechanism for advising and assisting migrant families on the school admission process.	Advocate for persons who can liaise between home and school.	Key members of the community to act as mediators among families and the school.
Setup afternoon supporting activities for them to become more acquainted with the national education system.	Provide afternoon activities and supportive programmes, as well as adult education courses.	Support children with afternoon activities and homework clubs.	Set up homework support clubs for the children, ideally in mixed groups with local children.	Involve long-term migrant residents from similar background to help students with homework.
Introduce mandatory Greek and English courses during the first six months of arrival in Cyprus, to develop a level of language skills and be able to communicate among other peers and on a local scale.	Place migrant teachers/ teaching assistants in classrooms to support those pupils with language and interpretation needs.	Set up Greek and English courses for migrant groups at different levels.	Support parents to register their children in schools during the first period of arrival.	
Introduce VET policy scheme for migrant groups based on market needs and provide training sessions for them to become accustomed to the cultural and societal ways of life of the host country.	Keep detailed track of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection registration and dropout rates.	Introduce civic orientation courses focused on Cypriot culture and civilization.	Advocate for the necessity for all migrants to be taught and to learn Greek.	
Provide subsidized educational opportunities to those who are interested in continuing their tertiary education. For example, UNHCR and various local academic institutions, have signed an MoU to provide increased opportunities for refugees to access tertiary education.	Invest into Digital Information Technology to create interactive learning material to enable migrants to learn the Greek language at any time.			
	Induction procedures at school level: School faculties should recognize the importance of having good welcoming and induction procedures, even mid-way through the year.			
	'Friendly' school environment: It is important to effectively monitor schools against racism and bullying, and efficiently prevent such incidents; schools must maintain an ethos of inclusion, respect, and diversity built into the curriculum.			

Employment and the labour market

The set of proposals for this section have been developed under the notion that the inclusion of migrants in the labour market is key to ensure their effective integration into the host societies. Ensuring that migrants can learn the language, get their educational and professional skills validated and receive adequate training is essential for their overall integration and positive economic impact in the host societies.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Review the sectors of economic activity in which applicants for international protection are allowed to work, based on national workforce reports and labour needs.	Translate the necessary employment forms into languages other than English and Greek.	Develop a comprehensive plan for employing migrants in several sectors within the municipalities: initiate entrepreneurship schemes.	Set up short courses giving support for job interview preparation and transition into the Cypriot work environment.	Participate in training courses to gain new technical and soft skills that are required to seek for a job.
Introduce a qualification system to recognise previous experience.	Introduce flexible skills assessment and possibilities for modular qualifications.	Create a local job vacancies database where migrants and beneficiaries of international protection can seek job opportunities.	Inform migrants about employment opportunities based on their residency status.	
Introduce short courses that lead to technical qualifications.	Introduce vocational short courses for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection as well as for the non-EU nationals.	Setup and implement short vocational orientation courses.	Set up a database for matching employers with potential migrant employees ²	
Introduce professional orientation and fast track training courses.	Combine language learning with technical orientation courses.	Create subsidized jobs which will be combined with schemes such as language tuition, skills development, and job application training.		
Introduce publicly funded not-for-profit jobs which can bring symbolic returns to the society.	Introduce certification and recognition of previous professional expertise.			
Introduce social entrepreneurs hub scheme with opportunities specifically for migrant groups.	Subsidize jobs for migrants combined with schemes such as language tuition, skills development, and job application training.			
	Open calls for joint social entrepreneurship collaborations among the local population and beneficiaries of international protection.			
	Create a matching virtual database where migrants can match their skills with related job vacancies.			

2. A very good example is the mobile-friendly website of UNHCR, the 'HelpRefugeesWork', which attempts to assist refugees and potential employees to meet one another for the purpose of finding vocational training opportunities and work opportunities

Social integration – community cohesion

A set of proposals are introduced to combat the notion of ‘us vs. them’; it largely depends on how well immigrants can integrate socially and how ready the host society is to receive them. It also means developing a sense of belonging to the host society, accepting and acting according to that society’s values and norms and, if necessary, building up the social capital. In a similar vein, the role of the host society is highlighted, as community cohesion is only feasible once immigrants are accepted as members of the society. Such mutual recognition, apart from improving individual well-being, leads to better understanding, trust, and a living together culture.

Ministerial level	Public services (Departmental level)	Local authorities	Civil society	Beneficiaries
Review the effectiveness of the existing system of the provision of social assistance; focus on local areas and concentrate on the most vulnerable groups.	Provide comprehensive support to new arrivals; provide humane service, mindful of fulfilling duty of care.	Create a process of lodging and dealing with complaints and suggestions regarding social inclusion issues.	Promote effective communication, including readily available and effective interpretation services, with an understanding of both the cultural and service contexts.	Develop formal and informal social networks to assist newcomers.
Introduce public dialogue for the implementation of reception and social inclusion processes for the diverse migrant groups in Cyprus.	Set up an Independent Legal Aid organisation to support migrants’ rights.	Define and clarify roles as service providers for the material support and social assistance.	Advocate to increase individuals’ choices and access to appropriate services to empower them.	Create migrant community organisations to advocate and assist the improvement of quality of services provided.
Construct a strategic plan for the active social inclusion from an early stage of their arrival.	Provide appropriate psycho-social support to handle current difficulties and support their transition into the local society within a few months of arrival	Develop ‘mainstream’ support services independent of short-term funding.	Set up social inclusion activities, such as intercultural events and skills acquisition workshops.	
Introduce a transparent system with simplified procedures, so all interested parties will be aware of the kind and quantity of support they will receive.		Set up local information points to guide the beneficiaries to the different services they may require.	Promote and support legal assistance as independent organisations.	
		Set up mechanisms to link ‘personal integration’ with measures that promote a wider ‘community cohesion’. An example could be involving both long-term residents and newcomers in drawing together and implementing a ‘community support plan’.	Explore the option of establishing an aid hotline to provide important information, referral to other relevant services and appointments for face-to-face legal service provision.	
		Create intercultural community spaces, to promote interaction among different social groups and migrant communities.		
		Develop local integration policy and inclusion programmes to assist migrants become aware with their social and cultural surroundings.		

Conclusions

This section of the report provided suggestions on the current conditions related to the key areas of interest as summarised in the tables above. The recommendations presented are a call for initiatives from all stakeholders involved to make a positive impact and create opportunities for creating a socially cohesive and intercultural community between migrants and the host societies.

Key stakeholders should reflect on the main areas above and review the current conditions as well as to engage with themselves in an introspection process. Open, reflective dialogue and participatory assessment exercises must be initiated as these can set the parameters for later innovations, thus, significantly contributing to the shaping of policy on social inclusion, cohesion and eventually integration.

Although Cyprus has adopted the notion that the participation and inclusion of immigrants into Cypriot society should be a clear active path, the entire process is still problematic. Changes in thinking at the strategic level which will result in changes to daily operations and decision-making processes will create better opportunities to improve the procedures that shape the migration landscape in Cyprus.

Chapter 3:

Research analysis

Introduction

This section demonstrates the findings of the research collection data phase. A semi structured interview methodology was conducted with various stakeholders and migrant groups. In particular, the research sample was comprised of professionals (key stakeholders), non-EU nationals, and beneficiaries of international protection. The research sample group, through their responses provided their own perceptions, definitions, and experiences on the different research thematic areas.

This section provides a detailed description of the qualitative data gathered, followed by the researchers' interpretation related to the study objectives and answers received. The analysis of the data was validated, and matrices were utilized to analyse the data gathered. The analysis is divided into sections according to the research themes as are described in the literature review (living conditions, education, business and the labour market, access to health services, legislation, public services, mediation, social participation, social interaction, social cohesion).

Discussion details are displayed in each section from which 26 professionals' and 26 migrants' thoughts and perceptions are illustrated. The professionals are presented according to the employment sector they represent (governmental, local authorities, non-governmental organisations). The migrants' comments are presented based on their legal status respectively. To help the reader to follow the analysis and have a general view of what was said in each category, a separate matrix was constructed where the views of each group are displayed.

The discussions are displayed to contextualise professionals' and migrants' recounting experiences and perceptions on the integration policy, and mechanisms of migrants in the local society. As it was anticipated that major gaps and omissions can be identified. The level of community and social cohesion could be characterised as inadequate and minimal. At a first glance according to the participants responses, the integration policy in Cyprus for migrants constitutes a multi-faceted issue that entails a lot of complexities. Listening to both professionals and representatives from the target group was an opportunity to learn in detail about the current multi-dimensional conditions and suggest possible interventions in inappropriate situations. In addition, the professionals from the sample group highlighted the need to define and categorise the various groups of migrants before we delve any further into the data analysis. According to their responses there are five major categories of migrants. The first group is applicants for international protection (asylum seekers) that preoccupies most of the efforts in relation to the integration policies in Cyprus. The second group are the beneficiaries of international protection (recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection). The third group are non-EU nationals (third-country nationals) who have a work permit (visa) such as domestic workers, agriculture workers and so forth. The fourth category are students and high skilled individuals employed in various corporations and business organisations. The fifth and final category is constituted by EU nationals, coming from relatively new EU member states, where some of them in past used to be non-EU national. In the following section an attempt will be made to provide a detailed presentation of the interviews analysis.

Reception management and intervention mechanisms

Participants from different sectors agreed that while some positive steps have been taken in relation to the living conditions, several gaps and challenges remain. This is evident especially regarding the delay of establishing national strategic mechanisms to foster social inclusion by promoting intervention mechanisms.

A public servant pinpointed the efforts of introducing a national reception strategy and the delays that have been noted by stating:

"A national reception strategy, expected to address such issues, is currently being discussed. There is yet no timeframe for its implementation."

Most of the participants stated that there are some measures, mainly funded by EU funds, but they highlighted the absence of practical proactive national strategic measures. One professional from the private/voluntary sector specifically acknowledged that:

"There are not any national intervention mechanisms introduced by the state, apart from the participation in individual projects that receive funding to facilitate integration like Erasmus+ and/or AMIF."

It was confirmed by the various migrant groups that they are not informed about any official mechanism of interventions. Most of them responded that in the case of problems, they turn to NGOs and voluntary organisations for assistance and support.

A non-EU national (business owner) stated that:

"I am not aware of any such official mechanisms. In general, I have never been informed by public authorities about the services and my rights. When I need assistance with my fast-food business, I visit several NGOs which are very supportive and eager to assist me with the complicated bureaucratic system."

To corroborate this even further, a non-EU national representative from the Filipino community pinpointed to the support offered by the private/voluntary sector and local authorities:

"Local authorities in the district of Nicosia and Limassol offer some supportive services to our community in the framework of an EU-funded programme."

A small business owner (British national) highlighted the lack of an induction process and the absence of such mechanisms.

"I have no knowledge. There was no information from the immigration office. I asked for an info pack, about my rights and what I need to do but there was no information available."

Housing and living conditions

The participants from the research sample highlighted that living conditions varied greatly for each migrant category group. Specifically, a common view that could be identified is that living conditions of the diverse ethnic groups depends heavily on their legal and socioeconomic status.

A professional from a private/voluntary sector pinpointed that:

"It depends on which ethnic groups the reference is made for... a large percentage of applicants for international protection and third-country nationals reside in poor accommodation conditions due to the low allowances they receive. Beneficiaries of international protection, EU nationals, and students do not face the same difficulties, as they have full access to the labour market as well as to allowances."

There are important restrictions associated with the legal status of applicants for international protection in relation to employment seeking and financial benefits which are vital for securing important financial resources to improve their living conditions. Therefore, these limitations very often hinder the process of securing a decent accommodation. A participant from the private/voluntary sector stated that:

"Applicants and beneficiaries of international protection's living conditions, compared to other migrant groups, have deteriorated in the past few years, leaving a substantial number of them without dignified living conditions."

Moreover, the poor quality of accommodation for applicants for international protection was confirmed by a local authority officer. Characteristically, it was mentioned:

“EU nationals and highly skilled migrants are experiencing a better quality of life. Society is far more inclusive towards these groups. On the contrary applicants for international protection are in a very difficult situation. Often, they reside in shared houses/apartments, which they are expected to find on their own. Often due to lack of language knowledge and relevant resources individuals may be vulnerable to live in debilitated housing without the basics.”

The participants from the migrant groups expressed similar opinions about their living conditions. It was evident that applicants and beneficiaries of international protection in comparison to other groups expressed very negative opinions.

A beneficiary of international protection strongly expressed negative feelings about the obstacles they are encountering while seeking accommodation due to their legal status:

“As recognised refugees we are stigmatized, and most of times there is a negative image about us. Our living arrangements are very bad, we cannot have easy access to decent accommodation.”

Moreover, they raised the issue of securing decent accommodation arrangements. It was agreed that most of the landlords are reluctant to rent their properties:

“Most of the landlords refuse to rent their apartments and houses. ... They fear we will destroy the facilities. Even if they accept you, it's very expensive, therefore we are forced to share the rent with other people.” (Applicant for international protection)

In a similar vein, a non-EU national (domestic worker) stated that:

“As domestic workers we are facing a lot of difficulties in terms of accommodation. If you are lucky the employer prepares a good room to stay as an inhouse employee. Most of the times the rooms are very small.”

For those who prefer to live away from their place of work, the accommodation difficulties are the same as previously discussed.

Education

Education, at all levels, is considered a key part of the integration process for migrants. Two areas of particular importance are language learning and adult learning. Learning the language is often the first step towards becoming part of a new country, culture, and community. Individuals with diverse backgrounds usually have skills gaps – including language skills. Learning the local language is vital for their entry into the job market. The participants indicated several challenges associated with the education, training, and qualifications as discussed in the following section.

Accessibility of ethnic diverse groups in education programmes

The Pedagogical Institute of the Ministry of Education stated that all children under the age of eighteen have equal access to all levels of education regardless of their ethnic background. Upon their admission to public schools, their educational level is evaluated and they may be placed in programmes of remedial teaching of Greek as a second language, for a period of two academic years.

Participants from both public and private/voluntary sectors corroborated the above statement. Specifically, a public servant highlighted that:

“Migrant Children up to 18 years of age have access to primary and secondary education under the same conditions that apply to Cypriot nationals. For applicants for international protection access is granted immediately after applying for asylum and no later than three months from the date of submission.”

Another public servant further elaborated on the free access of children to education by stating that:

“All children, independently of their status or their parents' status in Cyprus, have the right to study in public schools, free of charge like Cypriot children. The main support provided by the Ministry of Education is intensive Greek lessons.”

Regarding adult migrants, a more negative feeling was revealed by the participants. One could argue that their access to education is rather difficult and complicated. The Adult Education Centres which function under the supervision of the Ministry of Education offer afternoon classes for learning Greek as a second language to all people interested in the subject. However, obstacles and difficulties might vigorously prevent migrants from accessing these courses.

Particularly, a professional from the private/voluntary sector stated that:

“Even though afternoon classes for learning Greek as a second language are available to the public, migrants usually face many difficulties in securing access. Lack of proper information, capacity limitations, lack of procedural translated documents and strict bureaucratic procedures prevent migrants’ participation.”

Moreover, it was mentioned that private/voluntary tertiary education is easily accessible to adult migrants if they possess the necessary economic resources to subsidize their studies. In regard to accessing the public universities, it was stressed that migrants are required to obtain a certification of Greek as a second/foreign language and pass the relevant state examinations:

“A very limited number of adult migrants gain access to public or private educational institutions. Financial difficulties and language certifications are the most common obstacles in such cases.” (Public officer)

Obstacles and barriers to accessing educational programmes

Participants agreed upon several key challenges and obstacles which may prevent migrants’ smooth integration into the educational system. Based on the participants’ responses, even though in practice most children may access public education, important obstacles have been indicated and identified. Some of the most significant barriers that may hinder the smooth access to education are language, transport, bureaucratic procedures, and lack of translation. To be more precise, a professional from the private/voluntary sector stated that:

“There are cases of children remaining out of the education system for some months. Difficulties such as lack of information/timely arrangements, and the limited school capacities to accommodate additional students constitute important deterring factors.”

Furthermore, another professional from the private/voluntary sector added that:

“Obstacles such as incompatible working hours, lack of childcare arrangements inability to secure means of transportation and Greek language as a medium of instruction hinder their participation in the educational system. In addition, there is no systemic monitoring of school registration and school dropouts.”

Major problems are more apparent for migrants above 18 years of age, beneficiaries and applicants for international protection who already possess qualifications or discontinued their studies, raised the issue of recognition and accreditation of their previous studies:

“There is a procedure for the recognition of degrees and other educational skills. However, for us it is very difficult that our previous studies are neither recognised nor certified.”

An applicant of international protection complained about educational discrimination, by not allowing them to continue their studies:

“Compared to other migrant groups, applicants for international protection and beneficiaries of international protection with previous attained educational qualifications, are not certified and recognised by the relevant Cypriot authorities. Therefore, I cannot continue my degree.”

Training programmes for the development of intercultural skills

It was agreed by all participants that the responsible authorities are making a decent effort to enhance teachers’ intercultural skills and competences.

“The Pedagogical Institute organises training workshops to support educators and have published the “Reception Guide for Children with Immigrant Biographies” for primary, and secondary education. The guides have been distributed in printed form to all schools. Teachers are encouraged to apply the practices contained in the guides to welcoming newly arrived students throughout the school year.” (Public officer)

Moreover, the training process is corroborated by the implementation of EU co-funded initiatives by local authorities/institutions to support teachers and educators as well as to promote cultural and linguistic integration of migrant students:

“Most of the specialized training programmes for the development of intercultural skills and competences are usually organised through co-funded European projects. However, these initiatives are not structured.” (Local authority officer)

Employment and the labour market

The labour market integration of migrants is considered an essential part of sustainable social inclusion into local societies. However, the professional interviews revealed that although employment increases the opportunities for effective integration there are several challenges. The participants from the public and private/voluntary sector unanimously agreed that official initiatives aiming to promote labour market intercultural integration do not exist in Cyprus.

A public servant elaborated on this issue by stating that:

"I am not aware of specific activities addressing labour market intercultural integration."

This was confirmed by another professional from the private/voluntary sector:

"There are no organised, publicly announced efforts to routinely promote the integration of migrants in the labour market"

It was indicated by all participants that such efforts are mostly initiated by local authorities and non-governmental organisations under the implementation of EU co-funded projects. A local authority officer mentioned:

"Such actions are mainly implemented by initiatives of local authorities and civil society organisations. Several of them have been supported by a variety of labour market stakeholders, professional associations, employers, and training providers."

Another local authority officer gave a practical example of a bilateral joint effort among various organizations to promote intercultural co-existence in the labour market:

"In our district, the local authorities initiated a project on Intercultural Twinning for Sustainable growth. The joint declaration calls on various instances of public, private, civic and academic sectors of Cyprus, Greece and internationally, to develop co-ordinated actions in order to promote the cultural diversity in workspaces, towards sustainable and inclusive growth."

It can be argued that such initiatives, as long as they have the support of the local authorities, can be a compass to promote intercultural integration in local authorities even after the project has ended.

Migrants highlighted the challenges and the difficulties they have accessing the labour market which is a direct result of the lack of a comprehensive and inclusive labour policy in Cyprus. Several challenges were identified: limited or restricted access to the labour market due to legal and administrative barriers, access being hindered due to lack of institutional support or poor resourcing of available support, access to the labour market being further limited by low labour market demand (as a result of high unemployment in the country or a low demand for low-skilled labour), lack of language skills, lack of recognition of existing qualifications, insufficient integration programmes, discrimination and cultural adjustment.

the more educated is a person, the greatest frustration concerns the limitations of their access to the job market:

"I am an accountant, why do I have to be employed in a farm or become a cleaner? I would like to practise my profession and be useful to my family and to the local society."

On a different note, a beneficiary of international protection raised the obstacle of Greek language. It is understood by several people in this group the importance of learning the predominant official language:

"Language is an important obstacle, if you do not speak Greek, an employer, most probably, will reject you."

For another applicant for international protection, integration through labour is disappointing:

"I think that with regards to integration in the labour market, the social integration of asylum seekers is inadequate and very unfair. There are a lot of restrictions; I see many people who want to work but cannot."

Furthermore, strict, and complicated bureaucratic procedures constituted an additional important obstacle to access the labour market. A non-EU national employed as domestic worker mentioned:

"Even though the procedures for us to work as domestic workers have been improved, there are still a lot of complications.... language, availability of employment positions, and the long waiting period for positive reply are some of the major difficulties we face."

The labour market is an area where significant review of current policies need to be undertaken to enable sustainable integration in local societies.

Access to healthcare

This section discusses the current conditions of the public health system. Specifically, it aims to explore the participants' experiences, feelings, and perceptions as regards access to health care services.

Access to healthcare services

It was underlined that migrants who reside in Cyprus with work and residence permits and beneficiaries of international protection have access to the General Health System (GHS):

"Domestic workers, European nationals, recognised refugees and migrants with work visas and who contribute to social insurance have access to GHS and have access to the same health services as natives have."

However, applicants for international protection are not included in the provisions of GHS system. Their access to health services continues under the provisions of the pre-existing health care system, which entails treatment only by public, in-patient and out-patient departments of the public hospitals.

It was also pointed out that even for those applicants for international protection, who contribute to the GHS through the obligatory monthly contributions which apply to all employed persons, the exemption of accessing to GHS still applies:

"Applicants for international protection, whether they are employed or not, are not entitled to GHS. They have access to medical care according to the Cyprus Refugee Law. In this respect, I am arguing that the same opportunities and access to the healthcare system as Cypriots are not the same for this group of employees."

It was highlighted by almost all of the participants that the transition to the new health system was not smooth. The introduction of the GHS impacted migrants access to health care due to the delay in the official decisions on the exact procedures concerning their access level to health services. Several gaps and challenges were noted by several interviewees, including a lack of co-ordination among governmental departments, lack of translated material in a language that can be understood by the beneficiaries and confusion among medical personnel:

"There is language problem. We do not understand the medical terms and other issues that the doctor tells us." (British Citizen)

An applicant of international protection corroborated on the language problems and the lack of interpreters and translation services:

"The most important obstacle is interpretation... many times there are not any interpreters available... we cannot communicate and the staff becomes frustrated."

It is important to note that communication difficulties between medical staff and migrants were reaffirmed by public officers too. The lack of ad hoc interpretation and translation hinder the medical staff's ability to respond appropriately to migrants' medical needs:

"We need available interpreters to support the medical personnel to respond effectively in medical situations regarding migrants. It is very difficult sometimes because we cannot communicate with migrants, who do not speak English." (Public officer)

Furthermore, specialised training on intercultural matters was raised by professionals from both public and private/voluntary sector. A professional from the healthcare services stressed the need for intercultural training among the medical personal:

"It is vital to receive training on intercultural matters...to be able to approach migrant groups and better understand how cultural and religious issues may affect his/her condition, we need to become aware of certain peculiarities."

Public services and legislation

Gaps were identified and highlighted regarding the presence of a mechanism that will inform migrants about the processes of public services, regulations, rights, and obligations. It is very difficult for newly arrived migrants to understand what they have to do and where they have to apply. The current mechanism in place was characterised as difficult and complicated:

"Migrants, in particular applicants for international protection and non-EU nationals such as domestic workers, try on their own to navigate through a complicated administrative system that handles registration and support." (Public officer)

A public service officer admitted that currently information on the administrative system is provided through various civil society organisations, NGOs and voluntary organisations:

"People in this situation end up turning to charities and NGOs for material, legal, emotional and even psychological help during this time." (Public officer)

Recipients of information expressed the view that they do not feel confident about the level and quality of information they have received:

"I'm not quite sure about the information I received from governmental services when I arrived in Cyprus but I have studied about them on my own. I have learned a lot on my own." (Non-EU national)

Informal social networks are also used to require the necessary information, which may result in misinformation and does not guarantee the validity and quality of information received:

"I was informed by friends about my rights as a recognised beneficiary of international protection and the procedures."

An additional negative factor which was strongly reaffirmed by the participants was the lack of development in public services, to reflect the needs of the ethnic/culturally diverse nationals. A non-EU national, a business owner, replied that:

"I am not aware at all of any recent changes. I don't use public services. Although I would be willing to if they were more easily accessible."

According to the status of each interviewee, priority and importance were relevant to the anticipation of their needs' fulfilment. An applicant of international protection discussed the legal restrictions and provision of services:

"Our legal status is quite problematic and limits the social services we are allowed to receive. We are not very well informed about our rights, nobody told us anything."

The situation is exacerbated due to the lack of regulated, systematic participation/representation of migrant groups at all levels of public administration or the local communities. This was indicated as a gap that requires both legislative and administrative changes to promote meaningful participation and formation of monitoring and implementation mechanisms.

In addition, participants reflected on the Covid-19 situation and the resulting restrictions that also hinders their access to important public services:

"The Covid pandemic brought additional challenges in accessing supporting services. Access to Covid related support schemes was challenging, including the lack of access to the government departments and registration with the Labour Office, and it badly affected the standard of living of migrants."

It was commonly acknowledged that the existing legislative framework may need additional changes and modifications regarding the prohibition of segregation, the prevention of discrimination and the promotion of equality. Particular attention should be given on nationality, ethnic, and religious basis.

Intercultural mediation

The process of intercultural mediation is considered essential for the creation of a dynamic intercultural environment. This specific section provides information regarding the mediation strategies adopted on a local and national level as well as how situations are managed as a host country.

Existing mediation strategies

Participants from different sectors, when questioned on existing mediation strategies, agreed that there are no mediation strategies in place. Their responses strongly indicated the lack and absence of official mechanisms to address and effectively respond to disputes that may occur among community members of different backgrounds quickly and resourcefully. Specifically, a public officer discussed the importance of introducing an official mediation strategy to resolve disputes and conflicts and to promote community cohesion:

"An official strategy does not exist. it is necessary to introduce an effective mechanism to foster direct communication of migrant groups with local municipalities; but something structured and official does not exist."

The lack of mediation strategy was confirmed by a local authority officer:

"I do not know of any mediation strategies. I am aware of the intervention of the police or the Immigration Department in cases of conflicts, disagreements, and tensions between members of the community or between immigrant groups and locals."

Moreover, it was pointed out unanimously that public and/or local authorities do not have trained personnel or professionals to settle disputes or provide support (both linguistic and cultural) when disputes may occur.

Public servants pointed out a lack of focus on this issue by the central management. The only training programmes carried out within the public administration are mostly techniques about conflict resolution and management:

"In the public services, from time to time, there are conflict resolution and conflict management programmes for executives which are carried out by the Academy of Public Administration."

According to the participant's experiences and responses, non-governmental organisations are the main providers of professional and cultural mediation services, some of the trade unions also assist migrants, in particular, regarding labour related matters. A public servant who has direct access to applicants and beneficiaries of international protection and other vulnerable groups mentioned:

"NGOs, mainly through co-funded programmes provide professional mediation services. Also, experts from EU Agencies working on the ground and with vulnerable groups also provide professional mediation services related to conflict resolution."

The participants from the migrant groups also expressed similar opinions regarding the types of organisations who perform mediation strategies in matters concerning intercultural communication, health as well as labour matters:

"NGOs and specifically the Migrant Information Centers (miHUB) are the ones helping provide professional mediation services in the society." (Applicant for international protection)

A non-EU national who is employed as domestic worker added:

"Labour-related matters such as disputes and conflicts with our bosses are dealt with by the labour unions like PEO, which have significant experience in those and highly inclusive policies, including the gender related matters."

On the other hand, it has to be noted that the rest of participants who are EU nationals, and former EU nationals (United Kingdom) depicted a different opinion regarding mediation services and strategies. They mentioned that due to their country of origin (the level of integration and acceptance by the local society has to be taken into consideration) or even status the community is more lenient and flexible. They do not frequently face any significant cultural disputes and/or conflicts.

Social integration – community cohesion

The participation of migrants in social, political, and communal activities contributes to the development of an intercultural community based on the principles of respect, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Intercultural cities seek to promote initiatives for the active participation of their residents to co-operate, interact and socialize within the community to reduce social exclusion and possible conflicts. Therefore, this section will attempt to scrutinise the existing local policies for the promotion of social participation, interaction, and cohesion within the Cypriot community.

Social participation

Through the participants' responses it is apparent that there is no formal governmental strategy or mechanism in place to promote social integration of migrants into society upon their arrival. Newly arrived migrant groups usually face obstacles when it comes to accessing services and becoming self-oriented within their new environment which decreases the likelihood of meaningful interaction with the local society. A participant from a private/voluntary organisation mentioned that:

"This lack of early accessibility to orientation programmes and participatory procedures makes circumstances more difficult to prevent social tension and mistrust and leads to the prevalence of harmful stereotypes and the alienation of affected communities."

Furthermore, the participants' responses indicated that an official mechanism for welcoming migrants into the community does not exist. Such actions are mainly carried out by non-governmental organisations through the provision of psychosocial services. An applicant of international protection stated that:

"There are some supportive actions welcoming newcomers.... mainly from Dignity, Caritas, MiHUB as well as individuals who are kind and supportive."

Another interviewee acknowledged that there is a gap in the welcoming process of newcomers to Cyprus. He specifically mentioned that:

"It would have been nice to have a welcome pack upon arrival, even though I am a UK Citizen and when I arrived the UK was still part of the EU. Nevertheless, if I did not have family and friends here who knew the language and the customs, it would have been more difficult for me to adjust because all the information that was necessary for me know upon arrival." (non-EU national, UK)

Social interaction

All the participants highlighted the importance of bringing people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds together in common spaces creating sense of togetherness as well as maximizing opportunities for diverse groups of nationals to socialise, co-operate and interact as a community. A participant from a governmental organisation mentioned that:

"It is essential for interactions to occur between the communities. It is even better for any activities to be done through school activities, to have the parents participate, since it is easier to bring students' parents together."

However, such initiatives are quite limited and/or selective. Most of the work is carried out through EU co-funded projects from the local authorities, NGOs and voluntary groups. A participant from a private/voluntary organisation stated that:

"The municipality of Paphos has organised various activities that aim to bring together people of different origins living in our city. The results are not what we would like but there are activities that bring the communities together via EU funded actions."

Local authorities, furthermore, attempt to establish formal networks of collaboration and communication channels with various associations or unions formed independently by the people as well as with national organisations. However, it depends on the municipality to act, as a lack of local integration plan is noticed.

Nevertheless, most migrant participants expressed negative feelings and opinions regarding the availability of social interaction activities. Such opportunities, as was indicated by their responses, are very scarce, inconsistent, and inadequate. An applicant of international protection stated:

"Bringing people together maybe through sports or cultural events would maximize opportunities for people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds for social interaction. But unfortunately, we do not have such opportunities on a regular basis."

Another beneficiary of international protection elaborated even further by highlighting the significance of interacting with the local community as it might be considered a vital component to reduce stereotypes and prejudices:

"Create opportunities to work and interact together with locals, it can initiate a sense of self belonging and strengthening the bonds between us.... Many local people do not have a very good opinion about migrants... because they do not know us."

Therefore, social interaction is a predeterminant factor for the creation of a successful social integration strategy. From what has been learned from the above statements, recreational activities, cultural programmes and public spaces may contribute to enhancing interculturalism through exposure to diversity and opportunities to interact.

Social cohesion

Social cohesion can be defined as the extent of solidarity and connectedness amongst various groups in society. It stems from a democratic effort to establish social balance among individuals of a community, with the goal of founding a system of equality, sustainability, and avoidance of social fractures. The immigration model of Cyprus has been dominantly separatist, foreseeing little intercultural interaction between communities, while at the same time favouring assimilation where contact is unavoidable.

When asked about the levels of effectiveness and efforts to promote social cohesion between nationals of different cultural backgrounds, a participant from the governmental sector stated that:

"The effectiveness of efforts to promote social cohesion between nationals from different cultural backgrounds is quite low and limited."

An additional professional from an NGO confirmed that:

"Mechanisms which allow all nationalities to participate in decision-making processes regardless of their ethnic / cultural background are not in place."

When discussing with local authority officers, it was mentioned that efforts are mostly made through EU co-funded projects regarding the promotion of social cohesion initiatives as these projects promote the participation of migrant minority groups.

"Even though a gap can be noted in relation to the promotion of social cohesion initiatives, various co-funded EU projects attempt to cover this gap through the implementation of various interactive recreational activities to reinforce social cohesion and interaction among members of the community."

Furthermore, participants from migrant communities expressed negative opinions about the concept of social cohesion. Applicants and beneficiaries of international protection pointed out and elaborated on the lack of initiatives that could support and foster social and community cohesion:

"Social cohesion is non-existent especially with the African community. People of Cyprus are good; but we need support from public stakeholders."

Similar feelings were expressed by beneficiaries of international protection and non-EU nationals stating the levels of social cohesion in Cyprus are very low. Moreover, it was generally agreed that the mechanisms which promote social cohesion may be characterised as inadequate and non-existent.

Conclusions

Analysis of the Cypriot social integration strategy and reception conditions for migrants shows that there are some considerable constraints in relation to the official policies, which reduce the likelihood of setting the foundations for the creation of an intercultural society. A number of practical restrictions were identified for migrants in accessing care, health, education, and employment. According to the research analysis, practical restrictions could overall be divided into (i) lack of awareness of available services, (ii) language barriers, (iii) cultural barriers, (iv) structural barriers and lack of official state mechanisms for mediation.

The overall conclusion from the interview analysis revealed that some efforts have taken place and there are established laws and regulations (both at national and EU levels) on migration issues. However, it seems that there is a lack of a formal tailor-made social integration strategy towards the specific needs of the various migrant groups in the Cypriot community. Specifically, applicants and beneficiaries of international protection as well as non-EU nationals (low skilled workers) are facing important hindrances and restrictions compared to other migrant groups (EU nationals and highly skilled migrant workers). It can be argued that, based on the results attained, these groups have not developed a feeling of self-belonging. There are certain gaps and omissions that prevent active participation in society, hence increasing the likelihood of the phenomenon of social exclusion.

It is important to mention that their social integration is inextricably linked to unofficial networks such as friends, families and most importantly EU co-funded programmes and initiatives implemented by civil society, non-governmental and voluntary organisations, and local authorities. They are heavily dependent and rely on such services, since the private/voluntary sector could be characterised as an informal mediator between the state and the migrant groups. The utilisation of European funds has been quite effective and covered gaps and omissions in regard to social integration services. Nevertheless, these funds are linked to important limitations and restrictions such as the implementation timeframe of specific actions that had positive impact

on the migrant group's social inclusion process. As a result, this inconsistency and short-term implementation of the EU co-funded projects very often reveal the states' lack of co-ordinated established official network of service provision towards social integration. Relying solely on the private sector does not constitute a viable long-term solution or strategy. The current lack of social integration intervention mechanisms by the state diminishes the quality and level of social trust and cohesion for these migrant groups.

While moving towards a sustainable integration strategy, the results indicated that the active participation of migrants in the host communities must be reconfigured at a grass roots level. It is deemed as necessary to introduce official welcoming induction packages, including civic education and language courses available to newcomers to reduce social disorientation. Learning about the official institutions, services, history and culture of the host country are considered as crucial parameters to support and assist migrants become more socially active and provide them with a sense of belonging and security.

Despite the implementation of certain EU co-funded actions for social integration at local level, a more robust consistent strategy is required to increase community cohesion. Local authorities need to become more active and involved, as they constitute the fabric of local communities. The development of formal mechanisms and the adoption of regulations which will ensure the inclusion of ethnically diverse groups in decision making centres will eventually provide the opportunity to migrants, to become more engaged and responsible towards their communities.

Furthermore, through the analysis, new innovative initiatives were suggested and recommended. For example, one initiative entails the development of a human resources department specialised in intercultural matters within the community to provide mediation, psychosocial and conflict resolution services to ethnic minority groups. An additional recommendation is the establishment of a local cultural recreational office that would promote shared community events, including community festivals, sports events, outings/excursions, as part of a wider integration strategy to promote community cohesion and community engagement.

In a nutshell, both bottom-up and top-down activities could facilitate the process of social participation and integration. A small amount of progress has already been carried out by civil society organisations, and the willingness for additional development is quite apparent. However, more official, and widespread actions are urgently needed. The adoption of a new improved agenda on social inclusion and integration is considered vitally important to set the foundations for future activities in this field.

CHAPTER 4:

Literature review

Introduction

Migration has become one of the defining features of the early twenty-first century and is high on the policy agenda at both national and international levels. Migration is an important enabler of the notion of sustainable development of a country and has significant potential in the contribution of the well-being of individual migrants and their communities of origin and destination, on a social, economic, and physical scale (IOM, 2018). However, for migration to be deemed beneficial in such respects, migration governance actors must ensure that all immigrants are successfully integrated into society.

This report attempts to present the case of Cyprus, proceeding to a critical analysis of what has been achieved the last few years and raising arguments about the integration policies on how migrants could be potentially social included harmoniously into the local society.

Cyprus integration policy

The process of social integration of migrants into the economic, social, cultural, and political fabric of any society constitutes an important question to be answered across the whole European continent (UNHCR, 2022). In Cyprus, the first national social integration plan for migrants was adopted for the period of 2010-2012. The most important factors driving the fresh integration momentum were the development of the migrant-rights and support movements and the accession to the EU which brought the country into contact with various groups, trade unions and research centres which were combating discrimination and informing workers and the public. The primary objectives of the national social integration plan included:

- ▶ The integration and participation of immigrants in the social and public life of the Local society
- ▶ The recognition of social, economic, political, and cultural rights
- ▶ The exploration and identification of the specific needs of immigrants
- ▶ The introduction of antiracism and antidiscrimination initiatives (Trimikliniotis, 2015; UNHCR, 2022).

To achieve the above objectives, specific activities were suggested such as raising awareness, training of key stakeholders encountering non-EU nationals, including public authorities, teachers, and civil servants. Moreover, additional actions such as Greek language training, vocational training, promotion of anti-discrimination raising awareness campaigns, provision of psychosocial support to individuals and families, were recommended (Trimikliniotis, 2015).

The action plan of 2010-2012 had no reference to social cohesion, participation, and the promotion of social interaction with the local community. In addition, no indicators were used by authorities to assess, monitor, or support social cohesion policies. It could be argued whether the action plan was assessed or evaluated in relation to the level of positive impact of its actions. Furthermore, important weaknesses can be identified during the design and implementation stage. For instance, there was an absence of any consultation with the migrant population, the activities targeting asylum seekers were quite limited, the needs of irregular migrants were not included, and important sensitive issues were not taken into consideration such as gender, religion and culturally specific traits.

In 2013, just before the previous government stepped down, the Council of Ministers proposed the adaptation and renewal of the National Action Plan. However, no further concrete actions were taken to ensure the adoption of an improved plan aiming towards the social integration of migrants (UNHCR, 2022).

Since then, in order to fill in the gaps and omissions regarding migrants' social inclusion, several initiatives through EU co-funded programmes (i.e. Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund) were implemented (UNHCR, 2022). However, depending solely on EU co-funded projects raised concerns as there are many inconsistencies when it comes to the implementation of such initiatives. One of the main issues was the implementation timeframe as many projects had a specific end-date. Therefore, the sustainability of such actions could be questioned, and several discrepancies were created throughout the service delivery process.

A few years later, the intention of drafting a new national plan was announced; a first version was published in October 2020 for the creation of new strategy for social integration. The new strategy considers parameters, which point to the human face of migration and focuses on the condition that permits the formation of an environment that takes note of the following:

- ▶ An expression of solidarity and support toward these populations that would allow them to integrate in the Republic of Cyprus as equal and active members
- ▶ The liberation of the labour market to create jobs for everyone
- ▶ The formation of an inclusive integration framework

One could argue whether the actions and initiatives included in the national action plan were addressing the specific needs of migrants as well as reflecting the current living conditions. The deriving products of this specific plan could be characterised as general observations and remarks on the migration situation in Cyprus.

Housing and living conditions

The living conditions among the diverse migrant groups in the Cypriot community vary greatly. Non-EU nationals fall mainly under the category of domestic helpers. They usually live inside the house where they are employed; however, it must be noted that there are some important concerns about their living arrangements. They usually reside in small rooms and sometimes employers impose certain restrictions in terms of using and /or moving freely within the facilities of their residency (Trimikliniotis, 2015). Furthermore, incidents of labour exploitation and psycho-emotional abuse have been noted on the workers (Ombudsman, 2018). non-EU nationals working at hotels have slightly better living conditions since they have their own individual space to reside. However, in general terms, the housing is of poor quality, as this is all they can afford (Spaneas *et al.*, 2018). Regarding highly skilled non-EU nationals employed by foreign companies, their living standards can be characterised as decent and are above average living conditions.

On the contrary to the above group, the living conditions of applicants for international protection have deteriorated during the past few years. Upon their arrival (for those who enter into the Republic through illegal ways), they are temporarily accommodated in the First Reception centre (FRC) situated in Kokkinotrimithia (Nicosia district). The purpose of their temporary stay is to ensure that all the necessary asylum procedures will be completed, such as medical screening and testing, registration and asylum processing, vulnerability assessments and collection of fingerprints. After their release vulnerable groups such as families, single women with children and people with disabilities can either be transferred to Kofinou Reception Centre, located in the Larnaca district which serves as a place of long-term residency. It is important to note that only a small number of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection can be accommodated there. However, it was reported by participants that they tend to overstay at the Reception Centres because they cannot afford to live independently in private rented accommodation. This phenomenon may lead to prolonged isolation from the local society (Aida, 2021). Lately, the Social Welfare Services, following a vulnerability report and their score as high-risk groups, arrange to accommodate them in private shelters, or hostels for a period, which may vary and be extended for a maximum of two years; until they will receive a decision on their asylum application.

The main issue contributing to the struggle of securing suitable accommodation are the labour market restrictions which accompany their legal status. They are unable to generate sufficient income, therefore creating substantial obstacles in securing decent accommodation arrangements (OECD, 2018; UNHCR, 2022; Aida, 2021).

Beneficiaries of international protection have better living conditions since their legal status is associated with fewer socio-economic restrictions. They enjoy similar rights regarding the provision of social benefits as the indigent population as well as an unrestricted access to the labour market. In addition, they are entitled to material support and access to the national social welfare system Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) at the same level and under the same conditions that apply to nationals (Aida, 2021).

Education

The Ministry of Education and Culture's (MoEC) policy vision, reflecting the rapidly transforming society, is to promote the social inclusion of all pupils and the intercultural dialogue and communication between the different cultural groups (Hadjisoteriou, 2020). This policy is constituted into two main pillars. The first one mentions the creation of a democratic school, inclusive for all children and combating 'dropping out' of the system and social exclusion. The second one is the adherence to the principles of respect, pluralism (cultural, language, religious) and intercultural tolerance.

It is important to note that over the last decade, the MoEC adopted various support provisions in order to enable cultural minorities to express their cultural identity and facilitating their smooth integration to the local society. To be more precise, these provisions included measures, such as:

- ▶ Language support actions (Greek as a second language)
- ▶ Actions facilitating the integration of groups with diverse ethnic background
- ▶ Promotion of bilingual pupils' active participation through mainstream programmes
- ▶ Extracurricular intensive language course and specialised assistance according to bilingual pupils' specific needs
- ▶ Adult education centres offering afternoon classes for learning Greek as a second language

Looking back at the history of Cyprus education, the first efforts to react to the increased numbers of immigrant children, MoEC introduced in 2003, a pilot project known as Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP). The project for the Zones of Educational Priority derived from the UNESCO strategy of combating discrimination and inequalities. The proposed scheme was primarily implemented in somewhat excluded locations characterised by high concentration of migrant students as well as high rates of school failure and drop-outs (Demetriou, 2019).

During the pilot implementation of the ZEPs plan, the Ministry of Education took the following measures:

- ▶ Reduction of the number of children per classroom
- ▶ Employment of teachers speaking the mother tongue of foreign language speaking pupils
- ▶ Offer of afternoon activities (groups, clubs) at the gymnasiums included in ZEPs
- ▶ All-day functioning of the primary schools and gymnasiums covered by ZEPs
- ▶ Evening classes for parents (Greek as a second language, cultural lessons, etc)
- ▶ Afternoon lessons for children learning Greek as a second or foreign language

Moreover, the MoEC, published two guides: "Reception Guide in Cypriot Education" and "Welcome to Cyprus ... welcome to school". These guides aimed to assist migrant children with their transition into the local educational system and inform them about their rights and obligations. Finally, the MoEC, in collaboration with the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, introduced a series of intercultural training to teachers of primary and secondary education (MoEC, 2016).

The experience gained through these years, in parallel to critical voices which highlighted potential segregation and child stigmatisation, led to the discontinuation of ZEPs. They were replaced by 'first induction classes' in primary schools. Nowadays, almost every school has such classes to assist pupils to quickly learn the language and then included in normal classes. Linguistic and cultural barriers are still significant obstacles for young students, especially those entering secondary education, where a high rate of dropout is observed.

Covid-19 deteriorated the standard of education for migrant children. Schools suspended operations for prolonged periods of time due to Covid-19 measures. This resulted in hundreds of migrant children not to be able to attend classes to learn Greek and become active members of their schools. From April 2021 onwards, children were able to attend school in person, under the same provisions applying to the rest of the student population (Aida, 2022).

Despite the improvement of the overall conditions within the last decade, there are continuing difficulties with the integration of migrant children into their new school environment. Their parents are usually absent from the school community, while they are being informed either through their children, or with the aid of NGOs and volunteers who undertake the role of interpreter. Occasionally, conflicts have been reported between indigent and migrant children due to language barriers.

For migrants to follow higher education, the conditions are more difficult. Although there are a number of state and private universities across the island offering undergraduate and post-graduate study programmes in a wide range of subjects, their entrance is rather difficult. For the state universities, the language of instruction

is Greek, and you have first to sit Pancyprian exams in Greek. The majority of the programmes in the private universities are in English. However, the annual fees are very high for the average salary of migrants. There are some scholarship schemes in Cyprus for refugees, mostly offered by private universities (UNHCR, 2022).

Selectively, and for a period of time, there are courses or diplomas available for a number of migrants which are offered by smaller colleges.

The educational policy needs to be reviewed and undertake a significant leading role in helping migrant children to integrate, i.e. through sustained language support, building the capacity of schools, avoiding the concentration of disadvantaged children, and demonstrating the added value of cultural diversity.

Employment and the labour market

Employment of migrants is a core part of the integration process because it does not only provide an income, but also contributes to the development of social networks, as well as status, confidence, independence, and health (UNHCR, 2018). Also reading the literature, there are articles that make arguments about the necessity to allow migrants to enter the labour market, as less public funding is spent in the form of material assistance (Barslund *et al.*, 2017). Despite these advantages which are created through employment, both for migrants and host countries, several barriers and gaps persist across Cyprus and Europe.

The criteria and procedure for granting work permits to non-EU nationals were established in 1991. A basic precondition in employing foreign workers is that the employer must show they were unable to fill the relevant position with a Cypriot or, following accession to the EU, a European national. Their access to the labour market legally is a challenge, as this is determined by their residence status. Applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, domestic workers, and other migrants access the labour market in unequal ways. Amendments have been made, however, the separation still remains. The Ministry of Labour within the framework of formulating a strategic employment plan for immigrants in Cyprus, tried to adopt more rational and objective criteria to reduce imbalances in terms of labour access (Angeli, 2020). Nevertheless, low-skilled economic migrants experience tremendous obstacles, limitations, and restrictions, unlike economic migrants such as employees of multinational companies or wealthy investors.

Applicants for international protection are permitted to access the labour market one month after the submission of their application. However, their access could be characterised as limited to mainly low skilled, manual jobs with an emphasis on agriculture and farming. In 2019, following a consultation by the relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Social Welfare and Social Insurance, it was decided to expand the labour access to additional employment sectors, such as restaurant and kitchen assistants. However, this access created frustration among applicants for international protection due to the lack of procedural clarity and bureaucratic procedures (Aida, 2021; Aida 2018).

The situation was exacerbated due to prohibited factors, such as the language barrier, which, quite often, obstructs the effective communication with Labour Office staff, as well as potential employers. Potential employers very often demonstrate lack of interest and refuse to employ applicants for international protection. In fact, many employers especially in the farming and agriculture sector often prefer to employ non-EU nationals who arrive in the country with an employment permit and are authorised to work for a period of up to 4 years (Aida, 2021).

For the case of beneficiaries of international protection, the law stipulates that they are allowed to work in any sector and be employed with the same criteria as the nationals, having to register with the Public Employment Service (PES). They also have the right to participate in vocational training courses offered by the state institutions, although no official data is available regarding their participation. Nonetheless, significant procedural obstacles as well as language barriers obstructing their access to the labour market can be noted. Moreover, the employers are not adequately familiarised with beneficiaries' rights of full access to the labour market.

For non-EU nationals who seek employment in Cyprus, the procedures are characterised as somewhat bureaucratic. For example, a domestic worker requires an Entry and Temporary Residence and Employment Permit which is requested by the employer to the Civil Registry and Migration Department through the appropriate District Office of the Aliens and Immigration Unit of the Police; or at the Central Offices of the Civil Registry and Migration Department in Nicosia (Angeli, 2020). A domestic worker is allowed to extend their work permit up to 6 years if they continue working for the same employer. They are allowed to change employer twice during the 6-year employment period, with few exceptions (i.e. employers' death, moves to another country, placed in a nursing home, in case of a proven criminal offense against the employee) (Angeli, 2020).

The labour conditions for the high skilled non-EU nationals employed by foreign companies and organisations, are rather different. In 2006, the Council of Ministers established a policy for residence and employment permits for non-EU nationals who are employed by companies which have foreign interests but are registered in the Republic. This was carried out to attract foreign investment and in 2008 the policy was amended to grant citizenship to company stakeholders by naturalisation, based on economic criteria (Angeli, 2020).

Access to healthcare

In June 2019, a National Health System known as General Health System (GHS) is in effect for the first time in Cyprus, in which important changes can be noted in the provision of health care services. The new system introduced the concept of the personal GP in the community as a focal point for referrals to all specialised doctors. A network of private practitioners, pharmacies, diagnostic centres and a number of private hospitals were incorporated into the new health system for in-hospital treatment. Since the implementation of the GHS, obligatory monthly contributions apply to all employed persons with the purpose of contributing (and accessing) the health care services of this new system. For most of the population such as Cypriots and EU nationals in Cyprus, health services are now provided almost exclusively under the new health system (Aida, 2018; Aida, 2021).

Moreover, non-EU nationals (eg. domestic workers) who are legally working and have their ordinary residence in the areas controlled by the Cyprus Government are also entitled to healthcare services under the GHS. In addition, beneficiaries of international and subsidiary protection, regardless of the level of their income and employment status, are eligible to receive health care services under the auspice of the new GHS.

On the contrary, applicants for international protection have not been included in the provisions of the GHS regardless their employment status. Their access to healthcare services continues under the provisions of the previous system. Their access entails treatment by public, in-patient and out-patient departments of the public hospitals.

The transition to the new system was a bit abrupt thus creating confusion among medical and hospital personnel regarding the access of the various migrant groups residing in the local community. The most problematic aspect of the implementation that has not been yet fully addressed is the provision of medical prescriptions which are delivered under the new health care scheme. Therefore, applicants for international protection enjoy a bare minimum of health services and often need to pay for medicines not offered through the hospitals (Aida, 2021).

Social integration - community cohesion

The European Union is built on diversity and provides residency to various diverse ethnic groups of different racial, ethnic, religious, and of distinct cultural, religious, social and national backgrounds (Carrera and Wiesbrock, 2009; Urso, 2013). A key requirement of European member states is to formulate and ensure a long-term and comprehensive migration policy based on solidarity and equal treatment of all migrant groups within the local communities (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2011).

Within the above framework, in October 2020, a new strategy for social integration was published in Cyprus. The new strategy aims to promote the notion of social integration as an important tool for managing relations and encouraging community cohesion in the local Cypriot context. According to the new action plan several actions and initiatives were recommended to promote migrants' fundamental human rights and ensure their equal active participation in the social, economic and political life within the local community.

However, the implementation of the various proposed actions can be quite challenging and difficult to achieve. Over the past few years migrant groups benefited from small improvements in social integration policies in Cyprus. Specific initiatives and actions were introduced to address the major areas of weakness in the integration policy, by providing basic rights and opportunities in some areas (Mipex, 2020). Nevertheless, as it was scrutinized in the above sections, certain migrant groups face significant barriers during their integration process. For example, poor accommodation conditions, lack of welcoming and induction process, restrictions on accessing the educational system, limited access to the labour market and lack of social participation activities were identified as some of the most crucial obstacles to social integration.

Through the analysis of previous research studies, it can be argued that the system is largely concerned with deterring certain migrant groups from arriving rather than encouraging a multifaceted sociocultural, political, and economic integration (Mipex, 2020). The current integration policies do not fully acknowledge the unique

multifaceted needs of the various migrants. Furthermore, the negative portrayal of migrants by mass media and on social media has created public conservative perceptions and contributed to the adoption of negative stereotypes by the general population (Trimikliniotis, 2013). Consequently, such unfavourable conditions very often generate feelings of insecurity and doubt among the general public which prohibits co-existence and mutual understanding within the local Cypriot communities (Kwok-bun and Pluss, 2013).

Only a very few actions have been implemented to promote mutual respect and community cohesion, mainly funded by AMIF and only for the period the action is implemented. Therefore, Cyprus needs to invest in strengthening community cohesion through local initiatives that will promote social interaction, participation, and collaboration.

Finally, based on the findings of migration policy index (Mipex) in 2019, Cyprus was categorised as “Immigration without Integration”. According to these findings, migrant groups in Cyprus face more obstacles than opportunities for integration in Cyprus (Mipex, 2020). The implementation of strict policies has either denied or limits the access to important key elements of social integration. Even though immigrants may find ways to settle long-term, they are not supported adequately by official mechanisms introduced by the state.

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