



Caritas CARES!
country report 2019

Cyprus

**Access to services by vulnerable groups:
barriers, obstacles and good practices**

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What this report is about

Caritas Organisations are essential actors and advocates in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, and are champions of social justice. They assist and provide services to vulnerable people in need and work for more long-term, lasting policy change by presenting alternatives to address unfair structures, policies and measures.

The CARITAS CARES Country Reports are used to provide information to local, regional, national and European authorities and to share recommendations, gleaned from Caritas' everyday experiences with people struggling in poverty.

The Country Reports are compiled from the basis of a questionnaire, designed in consultation with the participating member organisations. The Reports aim to ensure that the voice of the weakest members of our societies is heard and even amplified to support the advocacy efforts of Caritas at both the national and European levels.

This Report focuses on the availability, accessibility, affordability and adequacy of the services provided to address poverty and to promote social inclusion and activation in European countries. Further, it attempts to identify concrete causes of non-access to services by the most vulnerable members of our society.



About Caritas in Cyprus

Caritas Cyprus became a member of Caritas Internationalis in 1979 and was registered as an official Cypriot charitable association in 1986. Since then, Caritas Cyprus has responded to humanitarian crises on the island with the aim of providing compassionate care and support, as well as bringing hope to those living in poverty, the most vulnerable and oppressed members of Cypriot society. Increasingly, and against the backdrop of the broader European Migration Crisis that began in 2015, Caritas Cyprus has been supporting and advocating for the rights of the increasing numbers of recognized refugees and asylum seekers who find their way to Cyprus. The work of Caritas Cyprus is conducted by local parish initiatives as well as island-wide programmes that focus on migrants, local community needs, and youth engagement. Caritas Cyprus is managed by an Executive Manager and has 8 paid staff members (including field workers, the managers of the Women's and Men's Houses and the coordinators of the Migrant Centres in Nicosia and Larnaca) and dozens of committed and active volunteers. From time to time, Caritas Cyprus also hosts university-level interns; in the summer of 2019, it had six of these from universities in the UK and USA. The organization is governed by a Board, which represents all regions and parishes.

The **Migrant Sector** provides critical services to thousands of migrants and refugees through the operation of two centres in Nicosia and Larnaca **and a roving team in Paphos**, which serve as resource and information hubs for those in need of support in gaining access to their legal rights and basic needs. Caritas Cyprus also operates two shelters for vulnerable migrants and wraparound case management services, in addition to a learning centre. The migrant sector is supported, in large part, through partnership with Catholic Relief Services.

- **MIGRANT CENTRES:** In Nicosia and Larnaca, Caritas Cyprus's Migrant Centres are open weekdays to provide a place for migrants to acclimatize, to access legal, healthcare, labour, and psycho-social support, to network, to learn languages (English and Greek) and, when necessary, to access food, clothing and other humanitarian services. **Lacking fixed premises in Paphos, many of these services are provided there by a roving team that assists beneficiaries through community outreach.**
- **SHELTERS:** In Nicosia, Caritas Cyprus's refuges provide temporary emergency accommodation to particularly vulnerable migrant men and migrant women with children. The Men's House accommodates up to 14 men at one time and the Women's House accommodates between 9 and 12 women (with children), depending on the composition of the families.
- **THE LEARNING REFUGE: Also in Paphos**, the Learning Refuge offers a safe place for families, mainly women, and children, to seek social and educational support. It offers tutoring for children and language training for adults as well as activities such as gardening and art for people of all ages. It is supported and run by a committed team of volunteers who raise the required funds as and when they can.

The **Diaconia Sector** has been working to respond to people's ongoing needs mainly resulting from the repercussions of the economic crisis in Cyprus. The Job Search Programme seeks to connect jobseekers with potential employers using networks within the community.

The **Youth Sector** supports the work of Caritas Cyprus by providing volunteer and fundraising support, as well as social events to encourage youth to participate in humanitarian efforts.

Target Groups

Though Caritas Cyprus provides services to all vulnerable groups in Cyprus through parish-run programmes, and its casework is focused almost exclusively on the migrant sector. Of the 1,393 households (including 1,994 individuals) served in 2018, 94% were migrants from outside the EU. The majority were asylum seekers (63.5%), followed by those with refugee/subsidiary protection status (13%), domestic/agricultural workers (9.5%), and others (8%). Others include international students, rejected asylum seekers and those with undetermined status. Caritas Cyprus is one of the only organisations serving this population on a regular basis. EU-funded programmes also provide services when possible based on funding cycles.

EU citizens and Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) with an EU family-tie make up only 6% of the population served by Caritas Cyprus. Though poor and vulnerable, they have far more rights and access to government services than most of our beneficiaries. They are also served by a variety of EU- and government-funded programmes and projects.

As a result, most of the information provided in this report refers to migrants, with an emphasis on asylum seekers who are considered the most vulnerable. Cyprus is witnessing an increase in the number of people seeking refuge and/or asylum and in the complexity of individual cases. As one of the few local humanitarian organisations that provides direct assistance to vulnerable groups, Caritas Cyprus has seen a dramatic increase in the demand for its services. In 2017, Caritas Cyprus registered 733 new individuals. In 2018, that number nearly doubled to 1,363. In the first half of 2019, Caritas Cyprus registered almost 1,000 new beneficiaries – an increase that reflects the increased number of arrivals on the island.

Caritas Cyprus currently considers everyone who registers at one of our Centres as a beneficiary – even though assistance is offered to more people and is available to anyone. Almost all seek information, advice, and assistance navigating the Government's labyrinth of registration and assistance programmes. Many also seek assistance with food, housing, employment, medical treatment, psychosocial support, and schooling for their children. In addition, Caritas Cyprus serves many others through its parish programmes that include food banks, weekly lunches, social and other programmes. Individuals who participate in these programmes are not always formally registered and therefore may not all be counted in the cited figures.

Caritas Cyprus relies on government statistics to monitor poverty on the macro level. Regarding our target population, migrants, we monitor poverty using a combination of Government, EU and our own statistics.

During registration in the Migrant Centres/Houses, Caritas Cyprus performs an initial intake which is immediately transferred to the Caritas database. Case updates are added to the database every time additional advice or a service is provided. The information refers both to individuals and families.

Contact

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Executive summary

The Cyprus population's composition is changing mainly due to migration flows; 12% of the resident population originates from other EU countries and 7% from third countries. In addition, in the second quarter of 2018, Cyprus had the highest number of asylum seekers per capita in Europe (1,656 per million); more than Greece and Malta and more than six times the EU average (267 per million) and the numbers continue to increase.

In 2018, after 2 years of growth following the Cyprus banking crisis of 2012–13, the Cypriot economy continued to expand and the labour market markedly improved. The **employment rate has progressively increased since 2015** and the **unemployment rate has decreased**.

Concerning **poverty**, the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate (AROPE) in Cyprus is progressively decreasing, after the peak reached in 2013. While the **expenditure for social protection benefits** is well below EU average, the impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on poverty reduction is in line with the European average.

The five services outlined below have been assessed, considering their relevance for the most vulnerable group – asylum seekers – and notably, all have been assigned the lowest rating in terms

of their adequacy, accessibility and affordability. However, it is important to clarify that all five services are broadly, if not always effectively, "available". In general, all five services received moderate ratings for other vulnerable groups.

- Public Employment Services exist, but asylum seekers are excluded from all but a few labour categories, most of which are low-paying, and job referrals can be unreliable or inadequate;
- Housing Policies are patchy and must be implemented within a very tight real-estate market. Asylum seekers are forced into overcrowded and unsafe accommodation; homelessness is on the rise;
- Early Childhood Education and Care: a lack of adequate family-support policies leads to, among other things, a low enrolment rate in nurseries and child-care facilities. Due to their exclusionary high costs, these facilities are not accessible to migrant families;
- Weak local systems providing services for migrants and asylum seekers are proving inadequate to address the growing needs;
- Shelters for the homeless do not exist.

Recommendations

Caritas Cyprus recommends the following changes and reforms, in particular in the following areas:

- Recommendation 1:** Cyprus must redouble efforts to speed up the asylum process so that it is in line with the Refugee Law;
- Recommendation 2:** Cyprus should consider alternative ways to improve the quality and flexibility of services provided;
- Recommendation 3:** Caritas recommends that Cyprus accepts Articles 13, 16, 23, 30 and 31 of the Revised European Social Charter.

1. Socio-economic context

Cyprus's banking crisis of 2012–13 had a devastating effect on socio-economic conditions. GDP real growth fell to –6% in 2013 before returning to growth in 2015, while unemployment peaked above 16% in 2015.

In 2018, after 2 years of growth, the Cypriot economy continued to expand and the labour market markedly improved. The **employment rate** reached 73.9% in 2018, having recovered from its lowest level of 67.2%¹ in 2013. The **unemployment rate has fallen from its peak**, and sank to 8.4% in 2018. However, it remains above the EU 28 average (of 6.8%).²

Concerning **poverty**, Cyprus's at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate (AROPE) is progressively decreasing, after the peak reached in 2013 of 27.8%. In 2017 the percentage fell to 25.2% but this was still above the EU average of 22.5%.³

In general, employment is rising, but relying solely on statistics can be misleading. Much more can be done to support labour and social recovery. Specifically, active labour market policies are needed to improve the valuable participation of vulnerable groups.

The **expenditure on social protection benefits** in Cyprus in 2016 (the last available data) totalled €4,060, with a slight reduction of €102 per inhabitant (at constant prices) in comparison to 2008, but well below the EU average (€7,377). According to the Eurostat data, the impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on poverty reduction is in line with the European average: social expenditure reduces poverty by 35.9% while the EU average is of 34%.⁴

Between 2009 and 2018 the **population** in Cyprus grew by 8.4%, an increase of 67,306 people. Its **population is ageing, but less rapidly than the other EU Member States**. The number of children decreased by 0.3%, while the number of elderly (>65) increased by 38.1% (+37,884) and the proportion of citizens over 85 increased by 32%.

Starkly, the composition of the population is changing due to **migration flows**: in 2018, 71,797 third country nationals were living in the country (not including asylum seekers or others without a residence permit), equal to 7% of the population.⁵ Another 12% of the Cypriot population originate from other EU countries. At a geographical crossroads in a politically complex region – itself divided due to an unresolved conflict – Cyprus is witnessing an increase in the number of people seeking refuge and/or asylum.

¹ Eurostat, 2019, Employment – annual data.

² Eurostat, 2019, Unemployment – annual average.

³ Eurostat, 2019, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex.

⁴ Reduction in the percentage of the at-risk-of-poverty rate, due to social transfers (calculated comparing at-risk-of-poverty rates before social transfers with those after transfers; pensions are not considered as social transfers in these calculations). The indicator is based on the EU-SILC (statistics on income, social inclusion and living conditions).

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/cyprus>.

2. Characteristics of the welfare system

Prior to Cyprus's EU Accession, there was little evidence of widespread social exclusion within the then-more-homogeneous Cypriot society. According to a report commissioned in 2003 by the EU during Cyprus's EU Accession, Cyprus is "a society with strong bonds among relatives resulting in extended families that secure financial support to those in need. Therefore, social exclusion is more likely to be a problem in Cyprus among those outside 'family networks' such as the immigrants ..."⁶

This remained true until the banking crisis, when unemployment, poverty and the risk of social exclusion increased significantly, even amongst Cypriot citizens. As a result, according to the Cyprus National Social Report 2012, Cyprus targeted a reduction of social exclusion for the elderly, people with disabilities, workers with low income and asylum seekers. In 2014, Cyprus passed a law on the guaranteed minimum income and social benefits (GMI).

Social inclusion and social protection for vulnerable individuals and groups is provided primarily through the disbursement of financial benefits as part of the GMI scheme. For many, including students, families with children and people with disabilities, additional benefits are available. That said, benefits for the disabled and people with mental health

issues remain inadequate. There are not enough rehabilitation centres and conditions in State care homes are often substandard. Private facilities are inaccessible to the vulnerable due to their high cost.

In addition, it is important to highlight that the GMI explicitly excludes asylum seekers. The Government does provide shelter for unaccompanied minors and temporary shelter for a small subset of other particularly vulnerable asylum seekers. The majority, however, must apply for emergency funding and secure their own shelter. Once registered as asylum seekers, they can also apply for vouchers for food, other necessities and a housing subsidy (paid to the landlord directly once a formal contract is in place). The allowances are inadequate to cover basic housing and needs, and are often delayed by bureaucratic procedures, making it impossible for newly arrived asylum seekers to procure any form of adequate lodging. Generally, the Government does not assess the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers (including illnesses, disabilities, etc.). In cases where particular vulnerabilities are identified, additional services, such as counselling, may be made available to a very small subset of beneficiaries (recognised victims of trafficking, for example). But most struggling asylum seekers are left to suffer in solitude and silence.

3. Access to key social rights and to services by people facing poverty or social exclusion

The main goal of this CARITAS CARES country report is to analyse if and how living in poverty or in conditions of social exclusion hinders access to social rights and services.

Several EU initiatives have been promoted in recent years to tackle inequality, poverty and social exclusion, both in general terms and for specific targets groups. The European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission

have spearheaded several policy initiatives to strengthen social cohesion and respect for diversity within the European Union, and the most recent initiative in this context is **The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)**. Another highly relevant instrument is the (revised) **European Social Charter (ESC)** of the Council of Europe. Both the Pillar and the Charter outline the rights of people living in European societies to access equal opportunities in the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion.

The **European Pillar of Social Rights** outlines 20 key principles and rights to support the functioning of fair labour markets and welfare systems. They are fully described here: [Link](#).⁷ Several of the rights cited

by the European Pillar of Social Rights specifically relate to the conditions of people in poverty and social exclusion. This is particularly the case of PRINCIPLE 4 - Active support to employment; PRINCIPLE 11 - Childcare and support to children; PRINCIPLE 14 - Minimum income; PRINCIPLE 16 - Health care; PRINCIPLE 19 - Housing and assistance for the homeless; and PRINCIPLE 20 - Access to essential services.

Another highly relevant instrument is the (revised) **European Social Charter (ESC)** of the Council of Europe. The most relevant articles of the European Social Charter relating to access to services are listed below (Box 1).

Box 1 - Ratification and implementation of the Revised European Social Charter (1996) related to access to services and minimum income

Cyprus has ratified the majority of Articles of the 1996 Revised European Social Charter.

The following articles, some of which have not yet been accepted by Cyprus, could have an impact on access to services and minimum income:

- The right to vocational guidance (Article 9)
- The right to vocational training (Article 10)
- The right to protection of health (Article 11)
- The right to social and medical assistance (Article 13)
- The right to benefit from social welfare services (Article 14)
- The right of the family to social, legal and economic protection (Article 16)
- The right of elderly persons to social protection (Article 23)
- The right to protection against poverty and social exclusion (Article 30)
- The right to housing (Article 31)

Cyprus has accepted the **Additional Protocol** providing for a System of Collective Complaints. More information on the provisions accepted by Cyprus can be found in the [Country Factsheet](#).

⁶ Social Protection in the Candidate Countries, Cyprus, Malta, Turkey, Volume 4.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en.

Caritas Cyprus has determined that access to these rights is moderate for the vulnerable in Cyprus. Programmes and services are available, but the GMI and related schemes are not yet delivering the 'dignified' living conditions that are ideally envisioned. For asylum seekers, however, the situation is critical: active support for employment, childcare and support to children, minimum income, long-term care and access to essential services are considered completely inaccessible (ranked as 1 out of 5, where 5 means that the service is completely accessible); and housing and assistance for the homeless is considered barely accessible and mainly unable to respond to people's needs (ranked 2 out of 5). Health care is the only right regarded as moderately accessible (rated 3 out of 5).

The gravest reality is that asylum seekers are not eligible to participate in the GMI scheme that provides most of these benefits and services, with the exception of access to basic and emergency healthcare, to which they are entitled. A benefits scheme for asylum seekers exists, however it provides only a fraction of the GMI and is therefore inadequate. The overall system has been overwhelmed by the large increase in the number of asylum seekers over the last few years.

The difficulties in accessing a selected set of services available for those in need are described in detail in the following section, with greatest emphasis placed specifically on the experience of asylum seekers.

The assessment has been based on a scale ranging from 1 (the lowest score, meaning that the service is completely inadequate, or inaccessible, or unavailable or unaffordable) to 5, which means that it is completely positive.

All services have been assessed for their potential for the most vulnerable group (asylum seekers). Notably, all services have been assigned the lowest scores in terms of their adequacy, accessibility and affordability. However, all services have been deemed to be moderately available.

4. An assessment of the availability, accessibility, affordability and adequacy of key services and benefits in Cyprus

Caritas Cyprus asserts that, within the Cypriot welfare system, some groups of vulnerable people face considerable barriers and obstacles in gaining access to key services and benefits. The most affected vulnerable groups are the homeless, asylum seekers and undocumented persons.

The three services selected for analysis are common to all country reports; they are: **public employment services, housing policies and early childhood education services**. In addition, **services for migrants and asylum seekers and services for homeless people** were identified by Caritas Cyprus as particularly relevant to the case of Cyprus – to illustrate, 94% of Caritas Cyprus's beneficiaries are migrants and asylum seekers. Moreover, unless they fall into a group requiring special protection (families with children, victims of trafficking or undocumented minors), migrants and asylum seekers are vulnerable to homelessness.

Services are analysed under four main criteria: adequacy, accessibility, availability and affordability, for asylum seekers only:

ADEQUACY: the service is of good quality and is satisfactory: it is able to respond to the needs of the user;

ACCESSIBILITY: the service can be reached or obtained easily, and it is easy to understand and to use;

AVAILABILITY: the service exists and it is available for those who need it;

AFFORDABILITY: the service is cheap enough for people who need it to be able to afford it.

	Adequacy	Accessibility	Availability	Affordability	AVERAGE
Public employment services	1	1	3	1	1.5
Housing policies	1	1	3	1	1.5
Early childhood education/ECEC	1	1	3	1	1.5
Services for migrants and asylum seekers	1	1	3	1	1.5
Services for the homeless	1	1	3	1	1.5
AVERAGE	1	1	3	1	

a. Public Employment Services exist and have the potential to be provided through European Union-Funded programmes, but job referrals are unreliable or inadequate for migrants

In theory, some of these services exist and are to be provided through European Union-Funded programmes. In practice, however, asylum seekers can only be employed in a few (mostly unskilled, low paying) labour sectors and job referrals from the Labour Office can be unreliable. The same potential job lead may be given to multiple applicants and often there are mismatches in skills and expectations.

According to the 2019 Cyprus Country Report by the European Commission, "In 2016, only 7% of people wanting to work participated in active labour market policies, which is well below the EU average."⁸ Though a formal figure for asylum seekers participating in active labour market policies is not available, we are certain that it would

be close to 0%. Barriers and obstacles for migrants include language and transportation. In addition, asylum seekers are restricted to manual work in low-wage areas, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, waste management, custodial services and food/advertisement delivery. Discrimination, exploitation and mistreatment are common.

Women with children are particularly affected by these barriers because none of these jobs pays enough to cover the cost of childcare, if it is available at all.

Another barrier is the requirement that the employer has to have a special permit to employ third country nationals. Obtaining such a permit can take as long as 4 months. The delay and amount of paperwork required often discourage employers from even trying.

It needs to be noted that in April 2019 the Cypriot Government expanded the categories of jobs

⁸ European Commission, 2019, Cyprus country report, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-cyprus_en.pdf.

open to asylum seekers and added cleaning jobs in hotels and restaurants to the list. However, the Labour Office has not yet granted permits to most of these establishments and, as a result, asylum seekers still cannot be employed there.

Though some employment services and labour referrals are available to asylum seekers from the Labour authorities, language barriers make them inadequate, lack of transportation can make them inaccessible, and minimal wages make them untenable.

Designed to limit eligibility for government benefits, the system exposes already vulnerable individuals to unscrupulous employers on a regular basis. The Labour Office seems unable/unwilling to vet employers or even remove abusers from their system, even after valid complaints. In addition, the system limits permitted sectors, excluding those with even rare, unique and desirable skills such as languages. The Government, the UNHCR and the NGOs have no one who can easily translate into the Kurdish language and dialects, for example, thus compromising and delaying trafficking and asylum cases.

b. Housing Policies are patchy and must be implemented within a very tight real-estate market. Asylum seekers are forced into overcrowded and unsafe accommodation; homelessness is on the rise.

The Cyprus housing policy as it exists is directed at young Cypriots who are entering the housing market for the first time. Currently the real-estate market is quite tight, with rents rising. In May 2019, the Government announced new policies designed to make housing more affordable. According to the Cyprus Mail on April 22, 2019, Labour Minister Zeta Emilianidou explained that the Government provides rent assistance in the form of the Guaranteed Minimum Income scheme and claimed that “today, there is not one person living on the street, not even one homeless person, but there are people seeking shelter, and it is to these persons that the Ministry responds to immediately, housing them temporarily in hotels.”

The reality, however, is that **asylum seekers are provided with less than €100 per month in housing subsidies and, even when they are able to pool their resources in order to live in modest accommodation, they are unable to provide deposits and the first month’s rent while they wait for their benefits.** As a result, they are essentially locked out of the housing market altogether.

Indeed, asylum seekers do receive a very small housing allowance. Therefore, the service is available. However, the allowance is inadequate and accessing it is a great burden (rent cheques are regularly late and delayed, making landlords reluctant to accept beneficiaries). **Asylum seekers are forced into overcrowded, unsanitary and unsafe accommodation.** Further, they are currently being preyed upon by unscrupulous real estate agents and others who promise accommodation, collect fees and then promptly disappear, leaving the asylum seekers homeless and penniless.

In the last few years access to housing services has further diminished as the numbers of asylum seekers has increased. This housing shortage has been further exacerbated by the influx of large numbers of foreign tertiary education students and the end of the financial crisis. This increase in demand for housing puts a dramatic strain on the housing market, causing rents in the cities to rise (more than 50% in the last couple of years). There are few if any affordable properties available, a situation that is made even worse by the reality that **the government system is overwhelmed.** Payments to landlords are inconsistent, delayed and hard to track, dissuading potential landlords from renting to anyone on government assistance.

The following testimonies help to illustrate the restricted access to this service:



MB is a 32-year-old female from Cameroon. She was placed in the Caritas Women’s House in May 2018 and applied for asylum.

In addition to housing, Caritas provided medical, psychological and social support to help her cope with depression. By September 2018, she was stable and moved to independent living. She began training to become a community facilitator. In November 2018, her landlord threatened to evict her due to late Social Welfare rent payments. Caritas intervened and Social Welfare paid for two months of back rent and promised to pay going forward. In both December 2018 and January 2019, the landlord threatened eviction again because the rent payments were not made on time. During this time, MB gave birth.

DNS is a 26-year-old male from Cameroon. He came to Caritas for help in October 2018, panicked, because he was about to be evicted from his home. We contacted Social Welfare and learned that they were four months behind on his rent cheques. We were told the cheques had been ordered but

were either in the Central or Regional Office and the landlord should pick them up. They advised the beneficiary not to get involved. For a time, the situation was stable. In April 2019, DNS returned home to find his belongings in the street. The police were called and are investigating the landlord. DNS was put up briefly in a hotel, then given €70 in emergency funds to find a new apartment, which took months.

These two cases highlight the reality that even when asylum seekers avail themselves of the Government benefits, the system does not work as intended. Procedures are not standardized, resulting in confusion for social workers, beneficiaries and landlords. Cheques are often late, missing and/or mislabelled, which puts the asylum seekers in impossible positions. Emergency provisions are wholly inadequate. Even women

who have transitioned out of our shelter and into independent living and who try to begin their integration in earnest, live in constant fear of eviction. They are intimidated by landlords who do not receive the Government cheques regularly or on time, receiving threatening messages and late-night visits. In fact, some have been unlawfully evicted and made homeless, but there is no affordable legal recourse available to them.



c. Early Childhood Education and Care: a lack of adequate family-support policies leads to, among other things, a low rate of enrolment in nurseries and child-care centres

According to the Sustainable Governance Indicator Network,⁹ **some recent policies aim at providing education to all children as part of the compulsory education scheme**, including access to language classes. These efforts, along with weak family-reunification policies, remain insufficient for achieving integration. The latter introduce restrictive criteria such as full-time employment, high fees and limited access to the labour market by dependents.

A lack of adequate family-support policies leads to, among other things, a low rate of enrolment in nurseries and child-care centres. **Families typically seek care for children under five years old primarily in the private sector**, or in a small number of community centres under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance. In fact, there is no child care available to asylum seeker mothers and families with children under the age of 3, making it impossible for them to combine child care with employment.

To compensate for the lack of adequate State policies and facilities for mothers, child care is commonly provided by family members, in particular grandparents; this has beneficial effects, including a reduced child-poverty rate. **Parents with children attending kindergarten face additional expenses and need to provide transportation for their children, as the public-transportation infrastructure remains insufficient.**

The establishment of full-day pre- and primary school in many communities benefits only some families, but certainly not those who have no family network on which to rely.

Beyond a 2017 law advancing paternity leave, more policy actions are needed to remove the dilemma for young mothers of having to choose between

employment and the care of their young children.

In the last few years the service has improved, based on the compulsory education scheme.

A testimony can help to illustrate the access to this service:

TL is a 26-year-old female from the Democratic Republic of Congo. F is her infant son. TL moved into the Caritas Women's House in April 2018 with F and applied for asylum. She was suffering from deep depression and received a host of services from Caritas and Social Welfare. Unfortunately, since public childcare is unavailable to asylum seekers, F suffered from a lack of appropriate socialisation bordering on neglect during TL's recovery. Eventually, a private nursery school offered F a free place in its programme but because of inappropriate behaviour, it was forced to rethink F's placement.

While this is an extreme example of the harm of this policy on children, the lack of childcare for asylum seekers means that even in the best-case scenario, mothers are excluded from the labour market. Private childcare is well beyond the means of all asylum seekers. There are also a host of other bureaucratic hurdles that asylum seekers face when educational opportunities are available in elementary or middle school. For example, in the autumn of 2018, Caritas Cyprus had to facilitate the enrolment of over 40 asylum seeking children from Iraq. Because they were living in temporary hostels with no permanent address, the children were denied their right to education. After months of advocating with the UNHCR, the local authorities and the Commissioner for Children's Rights, the children were finally accommodated in schools three months after their arrival.

⁹ http://www.sgi-network.org/2016/Cyprus/Social_Policies.



d. Weak local systems providing services for migrants and asylum seekers are proving inadequate to address their needs

In the second quarter of 2018, Cyprus had the highest number of asylum seekers per capita in Europe (1,656 per million), more than Greece and Malta, and more than six times the EU average (267 per million). Weak local systems are proving inadequate to address the resultant needs. The main barriers include the system itself, which has broken down due to the large number of asylum seekers arriving on the island. **Currently, newly arriving migrants can wait up to six months to be fully registered with the authorities and to start receiving the full set of their benefits. Additional**

barriers include language, fees and expenses (for photos, transportation, etc.) and a complex and largely unresponsive (Greek-speaking) bureaucracy.

In the last few years the service has worsened. The authorities have failed to respond to the increasing number of asylum seekers arriving on the island. At some points in time, newly arriving refugees had to wait for six weeks in order to register with the authorities. During this time, they had no access to any benefits and they had no rights.

A testimony can help to better illustrate the access to this service:

SIJ is a 38-year-old male, who heads an Iraqi family of six that speaks only Kurdish. They arrived in Cyprus on June 16, 2018 and applied for asylum on June 18. For the next month, Caritas Cyprus worked with SIJ to help him access emergency money for accommodation. Caritas provided translation services and liaised with Social Welfare, provided food packs and additional top-up money for accommodation, helped the family obtain medical cards and arranged and accompanied them to dozens of medical appointments for services ranging from immunisations for the children to help with chronic illnesses. By the middle of July, the family had exhausted every avenue for additional emergency money and took up residence in tents in the park. As their desperation increased, they began camping in front of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance and were immediately given a few more nights in a hotel. At the end of July the family was placed in a “family room” in the Kofinou Reception Centre.

SIJ's is a success story. Most individual asylum seekers are not nearly as fortunate. Unless they are regarded as vulnerable (e.g. family units with children, unaccompanied minors, or victims of trafficking), there is no assistance available for beneficiaries from Social Welfare other than meagre financial allowances. Asylum seekers arrive and must wait days or sometimes weeks to register with the authorities, during which time they have no access to any benefits and

can be homeless. When registered, they are given benefits that are slow to materialise and woefully inadequate to cover living expenses. As a result, they are homeless and hungry for months, left to fend for themselves in a society that is rife with latent xenophobia and racism fuelled by ignorance. They are often preyed upon by unscrupulous real estate agents and landlords. Despair drives them to exploitation of one another as well.



e. Services for the homeless are always at full capacity

A temporary reception centre is available to asylum seekers but the entry criteria are wholly unclear. Males who do not qualify, or for whom space is not available, must fend for themselves. Women and families are placed in hotels or hostels until more permanent accommodation can be secured. In addition, the Government runs or supports shelters for unaccompanied minors and female victims of (sexual) trafficking.

The main obstacle is the lack of available space.

Caritas Cyprus operates a men's shelter and a shelter for women with children, for the most vulnerable. These shelters are always at full capacity.

Asylum seekers are the most affected by these barriers because their emergency funds allowance is far too small to secure adequate shelter in the current housing market.

Over the last few years the service has worsened as affordable housing stock has been depleted as a result of the dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers.

5. Use of the minimum income as a measure of inclusion and activation

Principle 14 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** states that:

"Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services. For those who can work, minimum income benefits should be combined with incentives to (re)integrate into the labour market."

According to the approach put forward by the EU initiatives (in particular the Recommendation on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market, promoted in 2008 by the European Commission¹⁰), minimum income schemes have to be viewed through the perspective of the **active inclusion approach**: they are expected to be universal and to provide integrated support in the form of adequate cash benefits, effective access to enabling goods and services, and to include an activation component for beneficiaries

Minimum income is implemented in Cyprus through the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) and Social Benefits Law of 2014. The GMI is considered financial support in line with the active inclusion approach.

In Cyprus the minimum income scheme is having a significant positive impact on the fight against poverty and inequality. According to the results of a EUROMOD simulation, the risk-of-poverty rate in 2018 would be significantly (15 %) higher if the scheme was not in place. The impact on child poverty appears smaller (a 5.5% decrease compared to the rate it would have reached if the GMI scheme had not taken effect). Full implementation of the guaranteed minimum

income reform can also reduce the poverty gap by 31%.¹¹ However, the GMI explicitly excludes asylum seekers, whose maximum benefits (if received) amount to only a fraction of the GMI amount.

A testimony can help to illustrate how people access this active inclusion/activation measure.

UH is an 18-year-old female from Somalia. She arrived in Cyprus as an unaccompanied minor in 2015 and has since received recognised refugee/subsidiary protection status. As such, she is entitled to a Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI). She applied for her GMI and left the shelter when she turned 18 in February 2019. She came to Caritas Cyprus for help in March because she was unable to complete her GMI application without a bank account. Since then, and with assistance from Caritas, she has been given periodic emergency allowances from Social Welfare but not her GMI. Because she has chronic leg pain, walks with a limp and is on a waiting list for surgery, the Labour Office refuses to register her for work. However, orthopaedic doctors are unwilling to certify that she can't work because she could theoretically work in a field that would not require manual labour. Unfortunately, she is

¹⁰ Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32008H0867>.

¹¹ European Commission Joint Research Centre, calculations based on the EUROMOD model.

not yet qualified. She attended two years of technical high school in Larnaca, where she lived in the Shelter for Unaccompanied Minors, but has been unable to transfer the credits to the Technical School in Nicosia, where she now lives. In June 2019, she received notice that her bank account had been opened, but she has still not been able to access her GMI because her employability is not clear: she is declared unemployable by the labour office and employable by the doctors.

This example highlights just how difficult it can be even for the most "privileged" migrant categories – recognised refugees/subsidiary protection holders – in Cyprus. Though they are eligible for adequate benefits, the Government's piecemeal approach to migrant services, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of active inclusion/activation measures, makes successful integration almost impossible for most.

exclusion, the report identified a positive trend in terms of reduction of poverty and social

exclusion but illustrated that challenges still remain to be tackled. In summary:

The proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is high but declining.

The guaranteed minimum income scheme appears to be having a significant positive impact on poverty and inequality.

The tax, benefit and social protection system has some weak points. Pension levels pose the main challenge as regards gender equality.

The number of asylum seekers is growing, while measures to integrate them in society are insufficient.

Health status in Cyprus is overall good, (but) health spending and investment in Cyprus continue to be among the lowest in the EU. The implementation of the universal national health insurance system is progressing, but challenges remain.

Cyprus has a shortage of adequately skilled health professionals.

Cyprus lacks specific legislation to regulate formal home and community care.

6. Progress made in achieving EU and national social targets

The **Europe 2020 Strategy** states that the EU's main objective for the current decade is to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as a way of overcoming the structural weaknesses in Europe's economy and tackling the main European inequalities. The Strategy sets out the **EU TARGETS** to give an overall aim of where the EU hopes to be by 2020, based on key socio-economic parameters. The EU targets are then translated into national targets so that each EU Member State can check its own progress towards each goal. The ones particularly relevant for this study are those referring to employment, poverty and social exclusion.

In relation to **EMPLOYMENT, the target set at EU level is that, by 2020, 75% of people aged 20–64 are expected to be employed.** For Cyprus this indicator has been set at between 75–77%: in 2009 it was about 75.3%, in 2018 it was at 73.9%. This is data-based evidence proving that the target is still a way from being met.

Concerning **POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**, the EU target hopes to reduce the number of people in or at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 20 million. In 2017 in Cyprus the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion was about 215,000 (25.2% of the population¹²). The identified target, to be met by 2020, is to reduce this number by 27,000, when compared to 2007. However, in fact, since 2017, there has been an increase in the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, by about 34,000.

In an effort to achieve these European targets, the Cypriot Government has promoted programmes and reforms in line with the EUROPE 2020 Strategy over the past few years.

- Within this framework, the evolution of the socio-economic context in Member States is described each year within the Commission Staff Working Document European Semester Country Report.¹³ In 2019, in the area of poverty and social

According to Caritas Cyprus, the Eurostat indicators on the EU2020 STRATEGY and Sustainable Development Goals may not reflect the reality for asylum seekers. For them, services and benefits continue to lag behind. The situation is, however, better for recognised refugees.

Cyprus must act to address the hardships experienced by asylum seekers before collective tragedy strikes. It must speed up its court system so that cases can be adjudicated more quickly to discourage ineligible asylum seekers from making the journey to Cyprus, and free up more funds to provide adequate benefits for asylum seekers to

live in dignity.

- In May, each year, the European Commission assesses the progress made and issues **COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS**¹⁴ in order to propose new actions. The recommendations provide policy guidance tailored to each EU country on how to boost jobs and growth, while maintaining sound public finances. The recommendations focus on what can realistically be achieved over the next 12–18 months. In 2018 the Recommendations issued for Cyprus and referring to social inclusion were the following:

¹² Eurostat, 2019, AROPE.

¹³ European Semester Country Report, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2019-european-semester-country-reports_en.

¹⁴ Here you can download the most recent available recommendations: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2018-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en.

3. Complete reforms aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the public employment services and reinforcing outreach and activation support for young people. Deliver on the reform of the education and training system, including teacher evaluation, and increase employers' engagement and learners' participation in vocational education and training, and affordable childhood education and care. Take measures to ensure that the National Health System becomes operational in 2020, as planned, while preserving its long-term sustainability.

- Complete the reform of the education and training system, including teacher evaluations, and actions to increase the capacity of vocational education and training;
- Enhance success rates in primary schools and provide affordable high-quality early childhood education and care;
- Taking measures to ensure that the National Health System becomes fully functional in 2020, as planned.

According to Caritas Cyprus, the situation and problems described in the COUNTRY REPORT and the reforms foreseen in the NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMME do not address the realities of poverty and social exclusion among the asylum-seeking community.

The reforms suggested are inadequate and not necessarily implementable (ranked 1) with respect to asylum seekers.

A relevant and positive **policy reform related to social inclusion** that has been implemented in Cyprus recently relates to the **waiting time to access the labour market for asylum seekers**. Towards the end of 2018, the waiting time for access to the labour market for asylum seekers was reduced from six months to one month. In May 2019, the sectors where asylum seekers are allowed to work was increased somewhat, though they remain restricted to low-wage, manual labour in sectors and on shifts in which Cypriot workers are uninterested. The department responsible is the Labour Office and the reform is addressing the policy regarding access to the labour market.

On the contrary, the **suspension of the Fast-Track Examination for Asylum Seekers**¹⁷ has negatively impacted asylum seekers. Asylum seekers have very limited rights to services while their

applications are in process, which usually takes between two to four years. This policy change has increased the waiting period for the adjudication of asylum claims for everyone. Now everyone, even if from a "fast-track" country (where their cases

could/should be adjudicated more quickly), is put into the same queue, resulting in delays caused by the overloading and exhaustion of an already bureaucratic, slow system. The department responsible is the Asylum Service.

7. The use of EU Funds 2014-2020

In the multiannual financial framework of 2014-2020, within the Europe 2020 strategy, the fight against poverty and social exclusion has been considered to be on an equal footing with the other EU targets and objectives. In the regulations adopted for this new period, more measures have been put in place to ensure that the challenges around social inclusion are addressed: 20% of the European Social Fund (ESF) should be dedicated

to policies and measures aimed at promoting social inclusion, and a specific fund has been implemented to support Member States in the fight against poverty and social exclusion: the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).

Caritas Cyprus is not involved in the implementation of the ESF or FEAD programmes.

8. Caritas Cyprus - promising practices

Based on its experience providing direct services to vulnerable groups, especially migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, Caritas Cyprus has developed some positive and somewhat innovative practices that have proven successful in addressing some of the multitude of issues. A few are:

- Firstly, with a donation of funds from the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, Caritas devised a revolving **Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Fund**, which is used as a 'revolving' fund to provide bridging funding to prevent evictions (and homelessness) due to a delay or break in benefits. It is has been used to assist those who already have accommodation and are at risk, or to secure stable accommodation for those who can maintain it; inasmuch as possible, the funds have been provided as short-term loans to be repaid when/if/as beneficiaries' benefits or wages are restored. While modest, this initiative highlights the risk even those who are somewhat established in Cyprus face

and the positive role the community sees Caritas playing in terms of creative solutions. The problem that the programme is trying to address relates to migrants and asylum seekers that are in constant danger of homelessness due to a complex government-funded financial benefits scheme that often results in lost and delayed payments. Since its formalization mere months ago, approximately 20 beneficiaries have been able to avoid eviction or transitioned to independent accommodation. This seed funding came with no complex project conditions and thus provided Caritas with the flexibility to 'loan' funds to those migrants and asylum seekers who are vulnerable to homelessness. The goal is for the fund to replenish itself over time, thus allowing us to help ever greater numbers of beneficiaries.

- The second programme is a **CV Writing initiative**. Caritas Cyprus is working with asylum seekers and refugees to develop English-language CVs that will help them access and

The 2019 country specific recommendations¹⁵ have remained almost the same as those issued in 2018.

- Within the **NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMME**¹⁶ each country describes the reforms it will try to introduce in order to reach the targets set at EU level. The **reforms** foreseen in 2019, to tackle mainly social inclusion, social protection and health challenges, are the following:
 - Increase the capacity and effectiveness of the Public Employment Services;
 - Reinforce outreach and activation support for young NEETs;
 - Introduce other measures to upgrade skills and address the skills mismatch in the labour market;
 - Combat undeclared work/improve labour market regulation/improve collective bargaining;

¹⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1560258358847&uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0513>.

¹⁶ Here you can download the most recent available programme: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/national-reform-programmes-and-stability-convergence-programmes/2019-european-semester_en.

¹⁷ http://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_cy_2018update.pdf.

compete in the labour market. The problem that the programme is trying to address is to destroy language and cultural barriers that work against asylum seekers when they try to find jobs. Being able to present an English-language CV, that provides the necessary information and highlights skills, helps applicants in their communications with potential employers; it also allows them to apply for jobs that require an online application process. Having a CV helps to combat stereotypes by allowing asylum seekers and refugees to articulate their educational and professional credentials and experience. The result is improved access to potential jobs. The CV writing support will work to build the social capital that could improve integration.

- Caritas's longstanding **cultural mediation services** continue to support the most vulnerable beneficiaries by assisting them to access government services and health care. Every day, Caritas accompanies beneficiaries

to appointments at Government offices and hospitals, bridging the language barriers and attempting to sensitize both sides, in order to improve the interaction between key parts of the host community and the migrants, asylum seekers and refugees that depend on them for survival. It is evident that beneficiaries are often treated with more respect and attention when they are with an advocate than alone.

- Fourth, Caritas has instituted weekly **information and orientation sessions**, led by experienced case managers who offer valuable insights into navigating Cypriot processes, procedures and society at large – for example, claiming social welfare benefits, accessing health care, engaging with the Labour authorities and potential employers. The goal is to empower beneficiaries to understand their rights and responsibilities, to be able to advocate for themselves, and to be better able to get along in Cyprus.



Conclusions

Five services and their potential for the most vulnerable groups were assessed for this report. For asylum seekers specifically, all five services were assigned the lowest scores in terms of their adequacy, accessibility and affordability. However, all services were assessed as moderately available.

- Public Employment Services exist, but asylum seekers are excluded from all but a few labour categories, most of which are low-paying, and job referrals can be unreliable or inadequate;
- Housing Policies are patchy and must be implemented within a very tight real-estate market. Asylum seekers are forced into overcrowded and unsafe accommodation; and homelessness is on the rise;
- Early Childhood Education and Care: a lack of adequate family-support policies leads to, among other things, a low enrolment rate in nurseries and child-care facilities. Due to their exclusionary high costs, these facilities are not accessible to migrant families;
- Weak local systems providing services for migrants and asylum seekers are proving inadequate to address the growing needs;
- Shelters for the homeless do not exist.

Recommendations

Caritas Cyprus makes the following recommendations for potential national and European level changes and reforms:

At national and European level

- Recommendation 1:** **Cyprus must redouble its efforts to speed up the asylum process so that it is in line with the Refugee Law**
- Living conditions for asylum seekers are deteriorating quickly, as the number of new arrivals has outstripped the Government's ability to cope. Cyprus must redouble efforts to speed up the asylum process so that it is in line with the Refugee Law, which states that decisions should be made within six months. Currently, it takes years, leaving asylum seekers in limbo. Cyprus has become quite adept at showcasing successes during official EU visits and masking the breadth and depth of the actual misery faced by asylum seekers and refugees.

At national level

- Recommendation 2:** **Cyprus should consider alternative ways to improve the quality and flexibility of services provided to support migrants, asylum seekers and refugees**
- Currently Cyprus is receiving the highest number of asylum seekers per capita in Europe; this is quite a responsibility — one that is straining overstretched public services. That said, the authorities should work to improve accessibility, availability and adequacy of services provided to asylum seekers by adopting a holistic approach to cases, incorporating international best practices and technologically enabled solutions (swipe cards rather than individualised, printed, paper food-coupon vouchers, for example) and by considering alternative delivery mechanisms, including possibly contracting work to organisations with experience of working with migrants and refugees.

At European level

- Recommendation 3:** **Caritas recommends that Cyprus accepts Articles 13, 16, 23, 30 and 31 of the Revised European Social Charter**



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