EDITORIAL

Welcome to the April edition of the EASO newsletter. Regarding Country of Origin Information, in this edition we provide you with an update on the COI information portal. We also update you on the outcome of the COI strategic network meeting which was held in April (see page 2). As to EASO training, we are introducing the EASO training module related to ‘interviewing vulnerable persons’. This module provide participants with knowledge on symptoms and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and other vulnerable conditions which might affect the interview, in order to facilitate the identification of vulnerable persons and addressing their special procedural needs (see page 3). Quality of the asylum procedure is of particular importance to EASO. In this context, EASO recently organised its first thematic meeting in the Quality Matrix process with the participation of Member States and UNHCR. On the basis of consultations with Member States, EASO has summarised a working concept of quality: “Quality is met by a fair and efficient procedure according to law and policies” (see page 5).

Jean-Pierre Schembri
Newsletter Editor
EASO Spokesperson

IN THE NEWS: LIBE Committee backs agreement on the asylum procedure Directive

Asylum seekers would get fairer, more uniform access to international protection across the EU under a draft law agreed by Parliament and Council representatives and endorsed by the Civil Liberties Committee on 24 April 2013. This draft law is one of the five acts forming the backbone of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), to be put to a plenary vote in the European Parliament in June. Due to disparities among EU member states’ asylum procedures, an asylum seeker’s chances of being granted international protection partly depend upon where s/he lodges the application. To reduce these disparities, Parliament and Council have agreed to review the 2005 Asylum Procedures Directive to harmonise procedural guarantees for asylum seekers. The Parliament/Council deal was endorsed by 44 votes in favour, 3 against and 8 abstentions. See press release: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/cont ent/20130422IPR07521/html/Civil-Liberties-Committee-backs-plan-to-improve-asylum-procedures

The Common Country of Origin Information Portal

The Common Country of Origin Information (COI) portal was built to enable asylum officials to access a wide range of COI from a single point of entry. Therefore, the Portal allows connection of the official COI databases owned by Member States and associated Countries to a single web application, while allowing Member States which do not have web based systems to upload and share COI documents into a local dedicated area called the ‘Upload Area’.

After a successful National Common Portal Administrators (NCPAs) meeting on 7 and 8 February 2013, NCPAs were invited by EASO to attend a one-day training on the Common COI Portal on 11 April, in Malta. In Member States and Associated Countries, NCPAs will play an important role in regard to the COI Portal: firstly, they will act as a contact point between their national users and EASO (registrations, user’s questions, technical issues); secondly, they will manage their respective “Upload Area” while ensuring consistency and quality of this area or will oversee the connection of their national COI databases. Finally, they will provide training on the COI Portal to their national users, when necessary. The purpose of this second meeting was to provide NCPAs with hands-on training on the Portal’s main functionalities. On the basis of practical exercises, and with the support of the Working Party on the Common COI Portal (NL, DE, FR, IE), NCPAs were guided through the notification system, the search engine and the management of documents in the Upload Area.

Participants were also given an opportunity to comment on the draft NCPA Guide which has been designed as a practical tool to support them in their role as national administrators of the COI Portal. On the basis of their comments, this guide will be revised and communicated to all NCPAs. A User Guide will also be made available in order to assist them in the training of new users. Following the February meeting and the April training session specifically dedicated to NCPAs, the COI Portal will be increasingly used, drawing more feedback from its users. Before the end of the year, and based on the collected feedback, NCPAs will be invited to meet again in order to discuss the Portal’s usability and the management of the national Upload Areas.
On 22 and 23 April 2013, the inaugural meeting of the COI Strategic Network was held. In this Network, heads of national COI units or COI representatives from European Member States and Associated Countries (EU+) gathered to give EASO strategic advice on its COI activities.

This meeting initiated a new stage in the establishment of European cooperation on COI activities under the auspices of EASO. The setting-up phase, in which EASO was supported by a COI Task Force for the drafting of a strategic plan and on MS-led COI Working Parties for more specialised activities, has now come to an end.

In this first Strategic Network meeting, different aspects regarding the practical implementation of the ‘COI network approach’, as approved by the EASO Management Board, were discussed. In this approach, EASO and MS will establish COI Specialist Networks gathering COI specialists on a certain country of origin or on a COI topic (e.g. gender). It was decided to start with three Specific Networks on Syria, Somalia and Pakistan.

The general goals of the Specific Networks are: detecting COI needs and filling gaps; improving efficiency; avoiding duplication; raising and harmonising standards; capacity-building and training. The networks will also act as a focus for knowledge generation among experts based on solidarity between EU+ countries in sharing information and expertise.

All EU+ countries will be able to participate on a voluntary base in activities of Specific Networks, depending on their interest, level of expertise, and availability of resources. Concrete tasks of Networks may include, inter alia: mapping existing and available COI; listing and assessing sources; setting up a query system; and drafting common COI products.

Networks will also provide input when it comes to organising specific Practical Cooperation Workshops, developing new methodologies and training and testing innovative work methods. The COI Portal will play a central role in disseminating knowledge produced by networks to end users.
EASO Training

Overview of EASO training activities

EASO training activities are in full swing. In line with our training plan, we are looking forward to welcome more participants to our train-the-trainer sessions in Malta in the coming weeks.

Two training sessions on Inclusion and Evidence Assessment have just been concluded. Moreover, there are currently two on-going training modules (on Dublin Regulation and Interviewing Children) which will have their face to face sessions in Malta in the third week of May.

In May EASO will also enrol two more train-the-trainer courses (on Drafting and Decision Making and Country of Origin Information). Both training sessions will have their on-line parts starting 13 May, with the face to face session in Malta on 11-14 May 2013.

EASO Training National Contact Point meeting

On 13 and 14 May, EASO will also hold its Training National Contact Point meeting. The main aim of this meeting is to provide Member States with a comprehensive update on recent developments in EASO Training and discuss other training-related issues (new EAC modules; development of EAC training handbooks; the Training Cockpit and good practices in using EAC and translating EAC modules).

Getting to know EAC Modules – Interviewing Vulnerable Persons

Persons seeking international protection may have experienced a threatening or a traumatic episode in their country of origin. They may have also encountered distressing experiences when fleeing their country.

Such traumatic episodes may influence both, the amount of information, as well as the manner in which the applicant provides information during the interview.

One objective of this module is to provide participants with knowledge on symptoms and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and other vulnerable conditions which might affect the interview, in order to facilitate the identification of vulnerable persons and addressing their special procedural needs.

Cultural aspects are also taken into consideration. This module will help case workers acquire skills to conduct an interview with traumatized or other vulnerable persons in a professional, respectful and empathetic manner.

This module is currently being updated and the next train-the-trainer session will be organised by EASO in September 2013.
EASO Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS) – inaugural Group for the Provision of Statistics meeting

How EPS works: - EASO collects data from various sources. With this data it looks into EU asylum influx and the capacity of the asylum systems in Member States and comes out with trends analysis and risk analysis.

On 9-10 April, EASO organised the first meeting of the Group for the Provision of Statistics (GPS). The GPS comprises experts nominated by Member States to be the responsible persons in regard to asylum data-collection and statistics. The network will operate in a similar way to the Risk Analysis Network (FRAN) built by Frontex.

The kick-off meeting of the GPS is a key step in developing EASO’s Early warning and Preparedness System (EPS), which aims to build EASO’s data collection and analysis capacity in regard to statistical indicators (both qualitative and quantitative) in the field of asylum.

GPS members discussed a detailed table of indicators proposed by EASO after intense consultations with EU partners who play key roles in the collection and analysis of asylum data (DG HOME, EUROSTAT and Frontex) and gave feedback on their feasibility, periodicity and timeliness.

EASO will now prepare a proposal for a reduced table of operational indicators, which can be used as the first step in the process of developing the EPS (see picture above) and provide timely, up to date data allowing EASO to send analyses to MS to provide early warning of trends and potential challenges to the functioning of the CEAS.

EASO is confident that the inauguration of the GPS network and the beginnings of an operational data-collection system will allow it to provide to relevant stakeholders timely and accurate analyses based on a thorough understanding of the differences and similarities in national asylum systems.

Enhanced information-gathering and analysis ability on EASO’s part will also allow it to raise important issues directly with concerned MS and offer tailored support; enhance harmonization and capacity-building in the field of asylum data-collection and analysis; and allow better assessment of progress towards effective implementation of the Common European Asylum System.
EASO Thematic Meeting on Quality and the Personal Interview

On 26 – 27 March 2013, EASO organised its first thematic meeting in the Quality Matrix process with the participation of Member States and UNHCR. The meeting focused on the key topic of the Personal Interview, chosen for the pilot phase of the Quality Matrix.

During the meeting participants came together to discuss quality in general terms; to exchange information, good practice expertise and practical tools on interviewing; as well as to evaluate the pilot phase of the Quality Matrix.

Defining Quality and Quality Projects

On the basis of consultations with Member States, EASO has summarised a working concept of quality: “Quality is met by a fair and efficient procedure according to law and policies”, understood to encompass five aspects: legal standards, practice, tools and mechanisms for ensuring quality, a system for monitoring of quality, and coherence. This concept brings together the numerous particular measures taken in Member States and the general mindset of fairness, efficiency and transparency.

During the meeting, EASO also presented its Quality Projects and Initiatives List – a support tool, developed to provide easy access to a comprehensive database on projects and initiatives implemented in Member States with the general aim of improving quality.

The list currently covers more than 80 projects and initiatives in fourteen topics relevant to the CEAS. It gathers in one place short information on each initiative and links it to available materials, including studies and reports, webpages, practical tools, etc. It will be made available on our website: www.easo.europa.eu and updated regularly with information provided through the Quality Matrix, mechanisms for consulting civil society, as well as ad hoc on the basis of information provided by different stakeholders. Examples of quality projects implemented in Belgium and Sweden were also presented and discussed during the first part of the meeting.

Key Findings on the Personal Interview

On the basis of the comprehensive research completed for the pilot phase, EASO presented a summary of key findings, illustrating the different practices in Member States.

Discussions, organised in workshops and plenary sessions, focused on identifying good practice and useful tools and mechanisms on the basis of this mapping. Participants exchanged expertise and ideas for improvement of interviewing practices. Four particular examples of practice were presented by Member States.

Evaluation of the Pilot Phase of the Quality Matrix

Based on the positive evaluation of the pilot phase of the Quality Matrix, EASO and Member States reiterated their commitment to the process, in line with the main guiding principles of added value, focus on good practices, prioritisation and flexibility, and sustainability.
EASO Vacancies

EASO has recently published the following vacancies:

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<tr>
<th>Reference Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Closing date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EASO/2013/TA/001</td>
<td>Program and Capacity Officer (AD 7)</td>
<td>6 May 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>EASO/2013/SNE/001</td>
<td>Country of Origin Information Portal Officer (SNE)</td>
<td>31 May 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>EASO/2012/SNE/002</td>
<td>Counter-Trafficking Officer (SNE)</td>
<td>31 May 2013</td>
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