

# **ASYLUM RECEPTION CENTRE IN CYPRUS: SETTING THE BASES FOR A CONTEMPORARY ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to present the living conditions and services provided at Kofinou Asylum Reception Centre in Cyprus through a Project funded by the European Refugee Fund and the Republic of Cyprus. It is based on the knowledge gained, when an academic institution initiated the operational transformation of the Centre towards an organisational structure that would adopt modern principles of organisational management, parallel to the provision of comprehensive social welfare support. The main presenting pillars include details about a) The provision of counselling and supporting services, which were provided to the residents of the centre b) Administrative support for the daily operation and c) The design and implementation of educational and recreational activities. Emphasis was drawn upon the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that were identified. It is suggested that both residents and staff's active participation provided opportunities for those involved to investigate possible individual and organisational transformation over time, as participative 'bottom-up' approaches of organisational learning are generated. The knowledge generated could be used as a paradigm to lead policy-makers and central administration to accept the development of cross-system thinking and planning. It is also expected that decision-making flexibility will be increased through constant feedback from the bottom to the upper level and vice versa.

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**Keywords:** Asylum Seekers, Asylum Reception Centre, Interprofessional, Organisational Change, Organisational Culture

## **Introduction:**

Cyprus, as a full member of EU since 2004 and by constituting a natural border for entering EU from South East, is confronted with an increased number of immigrants and refugees. Annual numbers of

applications remained low until it was clear that Cyprus would join the EU. In few years time, Cyprus was transformed from a traditional country of immigrants to a host country for massive numbers of immigrants (Sylikiotis, 2006). For example, in 2002 only 839 applications for asylum were submitted, where in 2003 the applications reached to 4.032. With the accession of Cyprus to the EU in 2004, 9.285 applications were filed only that year (Solidarity Funds Sector, 2008). In 2005, the number of new applications reached 7.291, while from that time and afterwards a progressive fall in the number of new applications occurred. Given its size of population, Cyprus has received the largest number of asylum seekers during 2000–2004 (UNHCR, 2005), compared to the rest of EU member states (Sylikiotis, 2006). To fully understand the numbers, on a per capita basis it would be the equivalent of approximately 600,000 new applications in the United Kingdom or 800,000 in Germany (Hennis-Plasschaert, 2008).

The country was not prepared to accept such large populations of immigrants; legislative and administrative structures were not established to support the numbers of asylum seekers and their respective difficulties. Cyprus in its attempt to correspond to the above mentioned pressures has fully adopted the EU guiding lines. Similarly, at national level respective legislation has been established that defines the legal immigration and combat the illegal one. All these efforts are, also, supported and encouraged by the European Refugees Fund (ERF), which grants the member-states with an annual budget to support initiatives that are related to the conditions of reception, to the integration of individuals whose residence is taken rather a permanent character and to the repatriation of persons, under the term that they have not acquired new citizenship and have not abandoned the territory of a member state.

Despite the developments in legislation, negative opinions for the presence of huge numbers of immigrants are still occurred (Micharikopoulos, 2009; Gazerian et al., 2008; Trimikliniotis, 1999 & 2005; Georgiou et al., 2006). As a result their positive contribution in the national economy (Trimikliniotis, 1999 & 2005), these groups remain in the margins of social life, quite often in conditions that are far below the minimal acceptable level that the human dignity dictates. Such conditions may also result to develop an illegal and anti-social behaviour. Those negative images in their tune are supplying attitudes of reserve or even worse, evidence of racial or national abomination on behalf of the native population (Kaza, 2009; Gazerian et al., 2008; Georgiou et al., 2006; UNHCR, 2005; ECRI, 2005). The inadequate process in terms of long delays of assessing asylum applications also resulted to the provision of economic support for long time, which is perceived by the indigenous population as a waste of financial resources (Cyprus News Agency, 2011; Panagi, 2010; Kaza, 2009). Living in these conditions,

asylum seekers have to learn and understand the Cypriot culture and attempt to integrate within the local communities by living either in the reception centre or finding their own accommodation and work in their own their integration process.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how a systematic intervention and effective management at the first stage of asylum reception can contribute towards the improvement of general and specific conditions for both the asylum seekers and the local community. It presents a social intervention that was implemented in the Asylum Reception Centre at the region of Kofinou, during 2008.

The article is separated in three main parts. The first part illustrates the legal frame applied in the Republic of Cyprus for asylum seekers and refugees in order to explain the necessity and the legitimacy of the Centre's operation. The presentation of services' provision follows, by giving emphasis to the new procedures which were developed and/or applied during that intervention. The third part is referred to the design and planning of the Centre's operational transformation by illustrating processes that promote collaboration between the residents and the personnel. It is argued that the adoption of such a mechanism provides both possibilities and challenges of continuing upgrade of quality services, stimulating at the same time participative managerial approaches regarding its daily operation. The article concludes with a critical analysis of proceedings and proposes ideas and methods that could be used for the development and/or operation of similar centres elsewhere.

### **The legal framework**

The Republic of Cyprus on an attempt to respond to the increased numbers of asylum seekers, as well as to the need to be harmonised with both international Conventions and European Union, has signed the Genève Convention of 1951, the Additional Protocol of New York of 1967 and the European Convention on Human Rights (Protocol 12, 2005) (ECRI, 2008). These legal documents illustrate the general frameworks for the protection of human rights and place the basis for the management of asylum. Cyprus has incorporated in its national legal system, all the related articles that have decided at European level (Micharikopoulos, 2009).

The first Refugee Law (6(I)2000) was introduced in 2000 and has been amended several times since then. It refers to the legal, economical and psycho-social provisions for asylum seekers, individuals under subsidiary protection as well as for refugees. It determines the regulation processes that have to be undertaken from the State's perspective regarding their accommodation, and in more general terms, their protection for the time they will stay in Cyprus. Particular point of interest is the right free movement

within the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, provided that they have been granted provisional permission while their application is under examination. This procedure was regarded as an effort of social integration for the group within the local society via the autonomous choice of geographic area of residence from the group per se.

During the same period, more measures and procedures were introduced. In 2002, the Cypriot authorities undertook full responsibility for examining asylum applications from the United Nations for Human Rights (Micharikopoulos, 2009). In 2004 the Asylum Service was established in order to scrutinise asylum applications (Micharikopoulos, 2009; Asylum Service, 2006). It is also responsible for handling issues of asylum accommodation.

Regarding the latter issue, the Republic of Cyprus was obliged according to an instruction of the European Council (Official Journal of the European Union, 2010) to create and maintain an Asylum Reception Centre. The Centre was created at the geographical area of Kofinou district, and till today it is the only temporary accommodation centre. It constitutes a provisional space of accommodation for asylum seekers and their dependants, focused primarily on the fulfilment of their basic needs. The following section describes the Centre's main functions in more details.

### **Centre's Operation**

The operation of Centre began in 2004 (Service of Asylum, 2006), in government owned land, where pre-existed infrastructure for the provisional hospitality of another social excluded group (Roma) was available. Prefabricating containers were placed and shaped to accommodate about 120 individuals. Two multifunction rooms primarily used for common space eating and eight communal spaces of hygiene (lavatories and baths) for men and women were also setup. External catering was also employed to provide, on daily basis, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The centre is operated under the provisions of Law 38 (I) (1997) regarding Adults' Centres. That means that it is not an independent foundation (legal entity either public or private), but constitutes "*a centre that provides care, protection, employment, entertainment, food and other services in more from five individuals of age eighteen years and above, in any time at the duration of a day*".

Its purpose is to provide temporary accommodation for asylum seekers and their dependents, from the time they request to the competent authorities that they have no place to stay, until the examination of their application. Thus, it can be transferred any person whose application for asylum is pending, until the final decision by the Refugee Reviewing Authority. Priority is given to the accommodation of vulnerable groups such

as families, unmarried women, etc. It is also noteworthy to emphasise that unaccompanied minors cannot be referred to the Centre. The centre from the day of its launch provides meals and accommodation on daily basis, all through the year, as well as mediation in health care.

The daily operation of Centre was assigned to the Community Welfare Council (CWC) of Kofinou district (voluntary organisation) under the monitoring of Asylum Service. CWC was responsible for the centre's daily operation, employing personnel, training them and implementing the national directives for asylum accommodation. Six admin staff were primarily employed, as well as a craftsman and two cleaners. The same number of employees exists even today (2011). The admin staff are working on a 24h shift basis, seven days per week. The Centre type is characterised as open, as the guests are allowed to leave the centre anytime, having only the obligation to return back in 48 hours.

Negative factor regarding the daily operation of the Centre was the lack of operational criteria, apart those that are specified in the Law for the Adults' Centres. During the initial planning, both organisational challenges and residents' psycho-emotional difficulties were not taken under consideration. Personnel with no proper professional and academic qualifications were employed, unable to deal with complex general and specialised problems. The initial lack on specific knowledge about the asylum system and obligations was primarily faced with intensive training seminars, however limited in time duration from UNHCR (Ministry of Justice and Public order, 2003).

The absence of extensive regulations had caused several difficulties in understanding and interpreting the residents' obligations and rights. The limitations were not clearly defined and disputes among the involved parts occurred very often. The admin staff, quite often, had to defend a procedure and to face spontaneously the problems that emerged, balancing inevitably between the residents' different culture and understanding and job. Moreover, the absence of defined limitations in the obligations of each admin worker in relation to the flat level hierarchy that was applied was a reason of frequent internal conflicts, which tended to increase the emotional levels of conflict, disappointment, and it complicated any efforts of achieving consensus and collaboration. Furthermore, a lack of common organisational goals and approaches was sited on behalf of admin staff; different priorities, values and expectations were noted on several instances. All these conditions had developed a negative climate regarding the problems' priorities and following methods of resolution. They also contributed to a continuous resistance to accept new processes.

## **Setting up the intervention**

In the following years of the Centre's establishment, an (informal) assessment by the Asylum Service characterised the daily operation of the Centre as inappropriate to provide comprehensive supporting services according to the standards set by the European Committee. That resulted to announce a call for proposal (also subsidised by European Refugee Fund), for additional welfare support and administrative services. In particular, in 2007, it requested the of services of qualified staff to provide psycho-emotional welfare support and additional training for the personnel on multiculturalism, diversity understanding and on the development of administrative processes positive results (Asylum Service , 2009).

For the period of 2008, another call of open interest was announced for the provision of administrative and welfare support for a period of twelve months. More analytically, it requested the employment of a qualified social worker to provide psycho-emotional and welfare support to the residents as well as to organise a number of recreational activities throughout the year. In addition, the project demanded the improvement of administrative procedures by employing an administrator to coordinate and monitor the Centre's daily operations.

The University of Nicosia and in particular the Social Work Programme submitted a comprehensive plan for the Centre's operational transformation to an organisational structure that will adopt modern principles of management, parallel to the provision of comprehensive social welfare support. The motive behind that proposal was that academia must play a significant role in improving the living conditions of social excluded groups and enhance the awareness of the Cypriot society. The project was given to the University of Nicosia, and members of its academic staff (four in total) took over the responsibility to design and implement the intervention.

Five main pillars were utilised to design and implement the proposal, attempting to transfer best practices from other Asylum Accommodation Centres in Europe such as Finland, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands and Ireland. Those were:

**Constitutional operation:** it is referred to the fulfilment of the basic needs for accommodation, security and, in more general terms, living conditions of residents.

**Psycho-social Support:** it refers to the diagnosis and scientific intervention of various difficulties, including psycho-emotional difficulties, which the residents may face. It also includes the empowerment and support of individuals, families and/or groups, as well as the counselling by utilising a strengths' perspective theoretical approach.

**Legal operation:** it points to the possibility of providing legal advice on immigration issues. as it was believed that their knowledge about both the national and the European immigration legislation and processes was limited.

**Communication:** it refers to the processes of maintenance and/or development of relations between the residents and their relatives from their countries of origin as well as with the Cypriot society.

**Recreational operation:** it refers to the design and implementation of events and/or seminars that will create opportunities to gain knowledge for daily issues such as employment, cultural issues, historical events, hygiene etc. It was also argued that they would provide a point of differentiation to same routine till their application would be processed.

The level of success of each of the above mentioned operations is described below through a number of activities that were developed on 12 months, in accordance with the guidelines set by the Asylum Service.

### **Provision of Counseling services**

The development of an inter-disciplinary team to provide a holistic approach was the first planned step . The main purpose was to proceed in diagnoses and interventions in the light of different theoretical approaches. A qualified social worker was employed on a full-time basis, in addition to the employment of a part-time psychologist. Simultaneously two social work trainees were utilised for the first six months to assist the work of professionals. Furthermore, academics from the Social Work Programme of University Nicosia supervised and consulted them in particular issues (social welfare, cases' counselling, supervision and mental health).

Setting up the Centre's Social Service, primary concern was given to a number of procedural configurations such as the opening hours. There was a need to communicate on the one side with various public services, Non Governmental Organisations and/or corresponding Private Enterprises, and on the other hand to setup a direct connection with the majority of the residents in hours where they were in the centre (men, women and children). Therefore, a decision to be open six days per week (Monday until Friday from 8:30 to 8:30 in the evening and Saturday from 9:00 until 14:00) was taken.

At the same time a number of administrative processes were developed such as the design of residents' records, which included their social profiles and histories. It was designed on a format that could be disseminated to other agencies either as written reports or by using modern sophisticated electronic computerised systems. It was identified the need to acquire a comprehensive view (scientifically justified) for each individual that would reside in the Centre, in order to be possible for any member of the personnel (with the proper authorisation) to review and/or accompany a

resident to another public social welfare service; to be able to practice direct advocacy. It was the first time where, during an emergency situation or in the need of someone to visit another social service, their social and emotional background (assessment report) was available. The development of personal consent form was utilised to address issues of confidentiality and to secure the limitations of Cyprus Data Protection Act, signed by the individual or their guardian in case the residents were adolescents. At a later phase, medical records were also kept. That strategy was promoted following a number of incidents in which confusion about drugs' prescriptions and diagnoses from hospitals were identified. The absence of interpreters in the public services to act as mediator among the resident and the doctor impeded the reception of medical history as well.

The support provided, initially, surprised other organisations that serve individuals from this group. The bigger difficulty identified concerned the legal aspect of employees, as they represented a voluntary organisation, and in particular, they were employed through a European co-funded programme. The records as well as the proposal to establish common collaborative channels and share of information were accepted with scepticism. Those identified barriers were overcome by arranging professional meetings with organisations and professionals in which a detailed presentation of the project's goals and objectives was illustrated. The scientific committee of the programme also supported the theoretical justification of both the goals and forms and guaranteed for the bibliographic validity and completeness of those forms.

One of the main goals for the Social Service was to provide welfare support to the residents. Empowerment techniques were employed to deal with personal, emotional and adjustment difficulties that either were prior existed or continued. During the first month, emphasis was given to accept the role of professionals and record all residents. The initial assessment also promoted the establishment of constant relationships as the latter part felt that the professionals were there every day to listen to them and to suggest a possible solution to their daily difficulties. A balance of various multicultural factors was also taken into account in determining equality among the different ethnicities and sub-groups, in order to prevent any aggressive acts that were noted in the past. Discussing with them, it was noted that living for a long time at the Centre, quite often, was leading to conflicts. It is worth to stress at this point, that the time the intervention began, the average time of remaining there was more than a year. At a later stage, following a negotiation with the Asylum Service, the time was reduced progressively to four - six months. After that period they could choose the geographical location to live, by getting a public assistance till the time they would receive a decision regarding their asylum application.

Social service's second level of intervention was to identify the specific needs of residents in individual or in family and/or in group level. Within the frame of direct services, social service worked systematically to identify correlated internal and external environmental factors that resulted to living together in small size accommodation with limited personal space. Groups were setup for children and teenagers aiming towards their effective integration in the school environment, in parallel to the development of personal skills. For example, a collaborative initiative with a local school was established following an incident between indigenous students and some of the Centre's adolescence residents. An recreational event, in the Centre's premises, was organised to inform the students for the living conditions of asylum seekers in the Centre, their daily problems, anxieties and difficulties. Through discussions, active dialogue, games and group activities the problems of xenophobia and racism were presented. A critical discussion with the active participation of the students followed and ways of successful negotiation methods were proposed. The encounter of different groups and cultures resulted in reducing disparities, while it simultaneously promoted the development of common expectations, such as peaceful coexistence (in the school environment on primary level) and social integration of migrants with the local community (in the second degree).

Another area of interest was the direct and/or indirect advocacy for the favour of residents. Social Service was there to advocate for their rights to several organisations both at local and national level. Strict financial conditions did not allow formal legal aid and/or legal advisory to the residents. However, this weakness was quite effectively managed by setting up a close collaboration with another programme that was financed by UNHCR and employed lawyers; direct telephone communication was established, in case that there was a need for legal advice. This particular synergy was proved useful in certain cases where misunderstandings of the Refugees' Law spotted or further explanations on submitting appeals were needed.

An important factor for the successful implementation of provided services was the scientific supervision of professionals. It is not a common practice for organisations to offer supervisory sessions to employees to be able to reflect on the conditions and difficulties they face. All members of the project (including trainee social workers) received scientific supervision from academics (social worker and psychologist) with experience in supporting professionals to handle complex stressed situations.

### **Provision of administrative services: Coordinating the Centre**

Parallel to the development of the centre's Social Service, an administrative officer was employed. The admin undertook the responsibility to manage effectively the Centre's daily operation, included the co-ordination and communication with public and other organisations. To support those functions, a number of administrative forms were developed. The process also required a number of procedural changes to meet the new standards set, out of whom the majority were prior discussed and agreed. The admin role, initially, was proved difficult enough as there was a need to overcome the resistances of existing personnel, as by the years they had developed their own way of thinking and interpretation of various regulations (Lipsky, 1980). It was appeared a lack of understanding of the common purpose on behalf of the employees, who they seem to have different priorities, values, expectations and interests. These conditions had created a negative atmosphere regarding the hierarchy of problems that occurred and on the way to effectively handle them. That climate also contributed to a constant reluctance to accept and adopt the new presented organisational processes. A condition, which Lipsky (1993) defines front-line staff, as "street-level bureaucrats" because they often alter policy decisions or regulations (explicit knowledge and formally codified mechanisms as part of management procedures) in practice to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, was identified.

A strategy to develop or consider methods to mobilise the staff in carrying out their tasks was raised (Payne, 2002). The process began by seeking the positive correspondence of personnel. The planning was focused on a series of small, however intensive procedural changes. It was considered as the proper way to overcome objective difficulties and securing the collaboration with direct affected parties. Pre-existed formal and informal procedures and processes were identified and recorded.

The need for adopting a complex process of balancing between the proposed changes and the different priorities was identified. Under this angle, a number of forms were developed, while procedures for all the staff were introduced. The initial planning included the development of procedural forms (i.e. entrance form for visitors or for journalists, regular update of logging book etc.). The majority of them become accepted following a discussion with them. It was also established a policy of forty night staff meeting to discuss responsibilities and obligations, review internal procedures, conflicts and plan ahead.

Methodological and planning tools were then utilised to contribute to the desired changes. Tools like S.W.O.T. Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) and Logical Framework were adopted to study and explore the current internal and external factors that influence the

organisation's operation and analyse the consequences of future changes including a suitable system of control, follow-up and evaluation. It was also taken into account the fact that from the beginning of the Centre's operation there was not any systematic process of management. A unified methodological framework of management then shaped, by coding and adopting institutional procedures, national strategic objectives, legislation for Refugees and labour legislations.

The next phase (after the first six months) included the development of formal internal regulation (Internal Regulations) for running the Centre. Till that moment, the basic operational functions were summarised on a guidance with the title «Reception Centre Rules», published by Asylum Service. It included, in general terms, details about the residents' rights and obligations by illustrating instructions on about proper communication with personnel, food, accommodation, transportation and entertainment subsidy, as well disciplinary measures in case of policy and rules breach. The new Centre flow chart under the form of a Prototype Regulation model defined a series of daily procedures: a) the administrative competences of the organisation (regulations for both personnel and residents that all had to follow), b) personnel obligations and duties and c) definition of hierarchical process and methods to overcome daily difficulties. In addition, a separate section was referred to the application process, as well as voluntary organisations that could help them and advocate for their rights.

At the same time, a number of activities were organised to enhance residents' participation and collective decision making for daily issues, such as choice of food, communal space cleaning, hygiene, sub-groups' differences etc. That process began from the Social Service, where they could discuss and exchange ideas and recommend new procedures. Examples of this practice were the change of delivering the daily food catering, the possibility of frequent change of food menu, the organisation of intercultural cooking day, the setup of a developmental women group to discuss personal and family issues etc.

The established procedures revealed positive results on the effort to restructure the Centre and transform it into a modern social unit. However, additional procedures, primarily at the administrative level, need to be adopted, subject to acceptance by the employees. In such case, it is expected the development of an organisational climate that will prevent difficult situations.

### **Designing and forming recreational activities**

Planning and implementing recreational activities was another important sector of that project. The first phase included systematic identification of the residents' social needs as well as their willingness to

participate. They were asked to define and describe a number of activities that they would like to be organised for them. Following that procedure, activities that focused on the development of residents' participation and response, enhancement of group spirit and mass attendance in relation to the interaction with the local population were organised.

A primary difficulty the team had to think and solve out was the location and space utilisation, as well as the financial cost. On the one hand there were not robust financial costs allocated for such events and on the other hand, there was willingness and moral demand for as much as possible bigger attendance from residents. A first thought was to develop a common multi-function room that would serve the different age-related groups (children and adults). A plan to re-allocate the usage of common space was emerged. There was already a space which was inactive. The two communal spaces primarily located for providing space for eating, they were rarely used, as the residents preferred to eat inside their rooms, in privacy, instead of being in common view.

With the permission of Asylum Service, one room was transformed into internet café. The idea behind this decision was based on the need for residents to communicate with the external environment, and in particular with friends and relatives from their countries of origin. Part of the infrastructure was bought through the project's budget, while the rest was donated by the University of Nicosia and the Bank of Cyprus. Asylum Service also agreed to cover the cost of an ADSL line; and the internet café became a reality. Moreover, for a time period, basic training on computing courses was arranged by utilizing some residents to teach the rest of them how to use the internet and type processor. A number of electronic games (consoles) was also placed in the same room (there were donated from a hotel) as well as a lounge, television with satellite connection (the latter expenses were covered by the Ministry of Interior). All those changes resulted to the rapid transformation of the room; it became a multi-functional room able to be used to be used by different groups during the day. For example, the morning was used mainly by women, the afternoon by children and the evening mainly by men.

Meanwhile, the second common room was transformed (informally at the beginning) to a multi-function teaching room. Children's drawings, charts and linguistic objects for learning Greek and English were attached on the walls to bright it up and develop a more joyful atmosphere. Important factor was the mutual acceptance of personnel and residents the utilisation of room for educative purposes and provision of training seminars. In collaboration with the Adults Centres of Training of the Ministry of Education and Culture Greek and English language courses for foreigners were delivered. Parallel to this, the social work team formed several groups

with developmental aims, by giving particular emphasis to women and children. They also supported students with their school schedule. The main intention was the effective social integration within the school framework. For example, a children's group was developed under the supervision of a trainee social worker. The meeting time was the same in which their parents were receiving Greek and English courses; their children were kept busy and under supervision, so they could attend the courses. Additional courses were also offered during the summer period from the scientific personnel as well as from volunteers.

The Social Service's psychologist undertook the responsibility to design and form adults' groups. The aim was to develop the creativity of residents, personality strengths and personal skills. Moreover, there was a willingness to raise their self-appreciation, to undertake obligations and duties, to increase feelings for social integration within the Cypriot society, by promoting and accepting cultural differences and particularities. Different groups were created regarding activities, sex and age concern; they manufactured jewels, mirrors' decoration, wishes cards, paintings and Christmas cards.

Looking at alternatives ways to adopt to the current living conditions, a number of recreational events were taken place focusing on the participation of all residents or specific sub-groups. For example, the female residents visited local colleges, which they offered, free of charge, aesthetic treatments; another group attended cultural activities on a nearby community centre during the Carnival period; residents from Iran celebrated their New Year's day with other people from the same country in another place; tree planting was organised in the Centre in collaboration with voluntary associations, volunteers and people from the Kofinou district.

The various events held throughout the year gave a positive picture. However, a more systematic consistently approach, which will contribute more effectively to the desired integration was still required. The residents felt that they are part of a multicultural community, while participants from the local community had the opportunity to learn and understand core elements from different civilisations. A final positive element was the initiation of dialogue and interactive process to design and formulate a recreational event.

### **Setting up voluntary services parallel to the immobilization of residents' participation**

As it was mentioned above, one of the main objectives was the active participation of residents within the local community. Systematic efforts in seeking sponsored sources from various organisations were conducting. The overall strategy included the activation of volunteers who, by undertaking

social actions, will supplement the needs of the Centre. Such practice would also have multiple positive effects on the effective integration of residents with the local society. It was argued that an improvement in the well-being of the residents could be noted from the appreciation which the volunteers would illustrate by giving an effort to help them with practical issues. Similarly it was expected the sense of belonging and being cared for to be raised.

Under this perspective, it was also promoted the residents' participation. They were asked to express their opinions about things they would like to change and events they would like to participate etc. Consulting groups were created and representatives were included in the implementation of such ideas.

At the end of the project a number of events were delivered with the help and participation of volunteers. For example, campaigns were organised to collect clothes and toys, books to setup a loan library (at the end more than 1500 books were collected in different languages from donations of citizens and volunteers), fundraising was organised to renovate a pre-existed children's playground, cultural events took place in the Centre with the participation of groups from the local community.

This activity, although essentially began to be implemented after the first quarter it performed better than expected. The Centre enrolled a number of volunteers, friends and people interested in supporting the residents when there was a call for assistance.

### **The Centre's transformation towards a Learning Organisation**

All the above mentioned activities, beyond any positive contribution to the residents' daily life, could be characterised as integral parts of a more general adopted strategy for the operational transformation of Centre into a modern social structure. It was believed that the Centre's organisational philosophy had to be adapted to handle effectively and efficiently several situations, due to its unique character. The strategic objective set was to utilise human and material resources to meet their service users' needs. It was understood that at the time of intervention those resources were no longer adequately serving those needs. herefore, questions about their effectiveness and even existence had to be raised. Given the need to establish intra-organisational commitment at all levels, equally with the managerial imperative (Asylum Service) to 'get things done', a shift into re-exploring and installing techniques to become an adaptive organisation was indicated. Thus, it was adopting the argument that learning takes places both within and between organisations in asylum field.

The philosophy behind this strategy was formed by the directive that the residents have to take active role into social actions. This strategy

exceeded the initially placed objectives which pointed to the provision of effective and quality services. It mainly focused on the prevention of undesirable social situations through a comprehensive understanding of explicit and tacit acquired knowledge gained from the daily practice. The intention was to setup a process for capturing the organisational knowledge and its dissemination across the Centre's personnel and residents. It emphasised the need for a mechanism that would allow the diffusion of knowledge. It was argued that an investment in knowledge basis would contribute in the modernisation of organisation. In addition, there was a belief that it may also positively influence the wider exterior environment (public and third sector).

The literature review also supports such ideas and policies. For example, Hopkins and Austin (2004) consider successful organisations to be those that can create new knowledge, implement it throughout the different sectors and integrate it into new practices. In a similar vein, Gould (2000; 2004) describes organisation's learning as a broader dynamic, which helps the organisation to transform itself by establishing a learning culture which goes beyond a designated need for change.

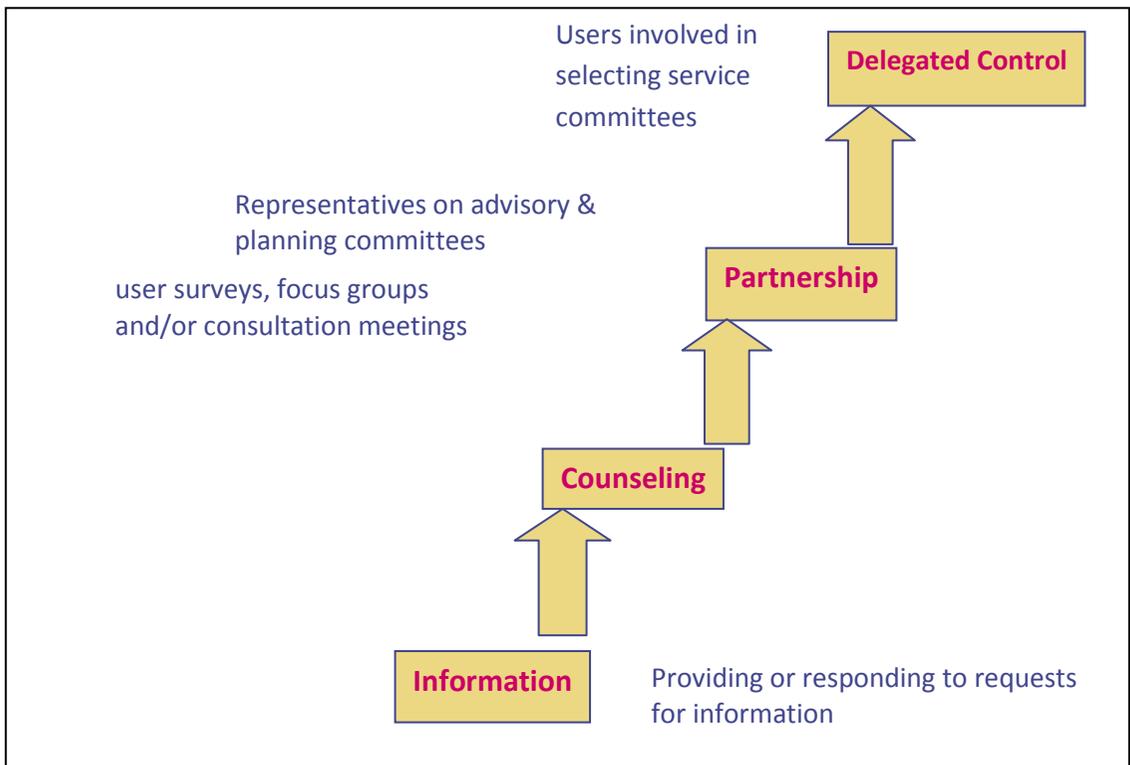
Then again, re-organisation is not an easy task and takes time and effort to succeed. Peryer (2002) believes that 'all social care agencies will continuously be juggling priorities' (p.298), either because of restricted resources, tensions caused by professionals' perspectives or requests for freedom of action against the performance standards within a political framework. Martin and Henderson (2001) suggested that by drawing attention to their organisation's position can help to educate the wider environment and therefore to build working relationships with other organisations. They went on to suggest a three stage model of environment (internal, near and far) as they argue that no social organisation can exist independently. They indicated that resources (internal environment) depend on political decisions (near and far environment). As all organisations experience difficulties in obtaining resources, they have to work together, plan and use the skills of their staff effectively for the delivery of care in relation to the articulated needs of stakeholders, to gain interdependency. Peryer (2002) advocated that social care agencies have to be restructured under these multiple realities. Coulshed and Mullender (2001) emphasised that the growing interdependency will potentially promote joint planning projects as a result of the new constructed complexities, while it will enrich the possibilities of change across the organisational boundaries.

All the previous mentioned activities were based on these theoretical approaches and the acceptance of the need for change. It is argued that both contributed to the desired organizational change and

also promoted an overall strategy that highlights the importance of residents' active participation in the management of the Centre.

The results of these changes aimed to achieve a more general (theoretical) purpose; to promote the residents' participation to the daily management of the Centre (Figure 1). At the same time, this model empowers them to become able to "act positively" in the geographical and social contexts they will live when they would moved away from the Centre.

This model corresponds to the logic of setting up and adopting co-operative council schemes. Such ideas have been tested and implemented in other Asylum Accommodation Centres of Norway (Valenta and Berg, 2009). Similar participative policies in which service users actively influence the decision making process have become widely accepted in the Social Welfare field across EU (Beresford and Croft, 2001). The philosophy of such policies adopt the argument that service users have the right to express their opinions for the type and kind of services they would like to receive; they have also the right to participate to the planning of new programmes, to be member of the management, as they have developed their own knowledge, theories and models, based on their first-hand experience (Beresford and Croft, 2001).



**Figure 1: Residents' Involvement for a Participating Decision Making Strategy**

The process begins with the information provision to the residents for processes that need follow for a number of daily practices, or for other that they wish to develop. A constructive dialogue is developed, therefore, with exchange of thoughts and ideas, delimited from the existing legislative frame, in the light of which they become acceptable that is their right but also their corresponding obligations. The next level is extended in the conduct qualitative and quantitative researches for the measurement of degree of efficiency of expected changes, the effectiveness of certain first changes that has been materialised, in the operation of teams of focus for a more systematic exchange of opinions and in the regular aggregations of community for the discussion of subjects that occupies them. The maturation of the two first phases is expected to lead to a third stage that is pointed to be the creation of advisory and supporting committees, where the development of “effective collaboration” framework is the main target. An effective and trusted collaboration can improve quality, increase knowledge, increase access to new technology, improve research and development efforts and reduce or share the costs of major developmental projects (Spaneas & Cochliou, 2008). Depending the success level of this stage, the required goal will be defined: the residents to undertake, by participating to various committees, the running management of the Centre, or become co-responsible for the daily issues. This argument could become a reality by bringing together the interested parties in relation to the development of informal level of communication committees that will act preventative to prohibit the appearance of undesirable situations. After all, if the general policy is looking in finding ways to actively integrate the residents with the local society, this model promotes the recreation of community functions (“village” in this case) that will sense the current conditions, decide about the interventions they are required, and evaluate the decisions made. The residents will perceive the values of democracy, equality, individual’s dignity and the principles of Social Citizenship. Finally, the above mentioned stages supplement a more general strategy that serves the goal of immigrants’ social integration into the local society, as they learn to function within the legislative, social and economic frameworks of the society they live.

Central attention for the implementation of the participative model constitutes the clarification, in the upper level administration, the precise contribution of interested parties as well as the expected results. The Norway example illustrates that councils elected from residents have undertaken the management and maintenance of infrastructure that is available to them (e.g. communal spaces, televisions, Internet, cookers, sports facilities and equipment, etc.) (Valenta and Berg, 2009).

Another important element is the necessity of developing common goals and objectives from the employees' side. The existence of different professional or ideological preferences and priorities has to be identified and then to be transformed towards a combination of skills and knowledge, so an effective change to be produced. While the daily practice is characterized by the particularities of residents, the variety of difficulties and the predicaments they face, professionals are obliged to respond effectively to the continuous changing environment. Both professionals and organisations have to review their professional identities and organisational boundaries. It is important to look primarily inside the organisation, prior to any change designed (Snyder & Cummings, 1998). Of course, it is expected a number of administrative and organisational difficulties to be occurred, as it is required to adopt a mentality where all work as part of a team and in which they discuss their views, they raise their disagreements, however they agree to follow the views of the majority. Braye and Preston-Shoot (2000) believe that professionals have to re-learn how to do things and how to make decisions in a collaborative culture. It is what Payne (2000) describes as 'outward looking development' on building professional relationships. They have to develop a sense of shared responsibility towards the roles of other colleagues in a joint team or committee. By evaluating the acquired experiences, they can utilise and further develop the "common" produced knowledge. Finding and developing appropriate mechanisms to identify successes or failures of policies and programmes is another aspect that has to be analytically discussed and explored. It can be argued that the knowledge development depends on the recipients to differentiate their levels of worldview acceptance in relation to the presence of different cognitive sources as they enter into more complex discussions (Spaneas and Cochliou, 2008).

While there was intention to experiment with all the stages, by the end of the project only the first two were achieved within the framework of particular intervention. Beyond any procedural difficulties that were identified, a delay in the decision on the passage to the next stage was noted. A first obstacle was the absence of experienced staff to undertake the responsibility to promote such change; the area is relatively new for Cyprus, and therefore, there is not availability of experienced personnel. The strategy followed to overcome that obstacle was the employment of young individual in age, however, with the proper scientific qualifications, who would have the willingness to learn and to work "hard and methodically". This substantially meant larger duration in each stage. Another prohibitive factor was the small number of residents for a period of four months. As it was mentioned above, after negotiating with the responsible Authority, the latter agreed the residents to stay in the Centre for a period of six months. That

meant that the majority of them had to leave the centre and new residents to come. An additional negative element became the weakness of the Project's Team to influence CWC in order to convince their admin staff to support the changing process of decision-making in all the application phases. Most possible, to the resistance of such decision, it contributed the fast change of procedures, which were imposed to them during the first eight months.

The presented however difficulties provide a valuable experience on organisational and administration issues for social organisations. It is recommended as essential the various difficulties and the conditions levels (internal and external) to become perceptible, to be recorded in order detailed planning along with contingency plans to take place to handle any unexpected conditions.

### **Conclusion**

The article presented a planned intervention that took place in the only Asylum Reception Centre in Cyprus. The aim of that intervention was, beyond the upgrade and provision of quality support services, “to modernise” the administrative operation of the Centre according to a level accepted by EU legislation. A goal set for the residents was to “perceive” the Centre as a temporary location where they could live with their dependent members under safety, while the basic (and not only) psycho-emotional needs will be taken care of. At the same time, the implementation of those objectives would be used to document a number of processes for the purpose “of good practice model”, as the Asylum Service was preparing to open up additional accommodation centres. The experience gained from the particular intervention revealed conclusions that could be decisively contribute for the future extension of the Accommodation Centre, or for the creation of conditions and/or the transformations of other similar accommodation centres. More specifically the following elements are noted:

The strategy of transforming an Asylum Accommodation Centre needs to adopt a constant pace of change, to transfer to the employees the thinking and be in a position to understand the usefulness of changes and to become capable to correspond to them. The fast changes, and in particular a change without essential planning and assessment should be avoided, as resistance it is expected to occur the time it is implemented. It is well understood that these desired changes are accompanied by fear of change and uncertainty located inside the management system (Baldwin, 2004). However, continuing emphasis on organisational development will probably encourage and support professionals to translate their learning into practice, with the focus of providing improved services and outcomes for service users. The suggested changes, it is advisable to additionally include social inclusion initiatives as well as to seek collaboration among the interested

parties (administration, employees and residents). In such case, the levels of changes success are expected to be higher.

In addition, such type of approach is expected to minimise any failure factors, as it takes under consideration and develops knowledge, experiences and practices from those directly involved and influenced from the proposed changes. At the same time, it contributes to the reduction of confusions that result from the different interpretations on what is necessity and contributes in the increase of organisation transparency and the two-ways flow of communication. It is also argued that the change, quite often, begins from a small team of individuals who encompass a philosophy of acceptance and lifelong education which they propagate to the entire organisation. However, Baldwin (2004) believes that learning by some individuals is not sufficient to increase the organisation learning capacity, as they cannot persuade the whole organization to move towards that direction. Garvin (2000) also argues that not only operational staff but managers as well must be skilled to interpret and explain the new knowledge accurately, otherwise even the best ideas will stay unexploited and underdeveloped. There is as need then to develop and adopt strategies that will mobilise the entire organisation to be transformed into a “Learning Organisation” (Spaneas and Cochliou, 2008).

Professionals have also to develop an open philosophy of accepting the alternative and new, and most importantly to illustrate a positively attitude to the new learning. Such mentality change is achieved with the capture and afterwards the utilisation of knowledge. It is essential, therefore, to begin with the participation on the knowledge development which eventually will increase the quality of practice. Primary steps can be the establishment of good practice models as it strengthens the transferability of knowledge and allows the interaction among the interested parties.

Integral part of organisation modernisation is the enhancement of critical thinking and exchange of ideas without “hidden” preferences, agendas and individualistic motives. Where in traditional organisations, leaders and managers spend most of their time in planning, budgeting and reporting back in support of promoting innovation, in learning organisations staff are expected to undertake initiatives or resolve dilemmas themselves. Such development will enable the greater participation of professionals and consecutively it will lead to the adoption of a bottom-up communication methods and techniques, which will change staff perception about their role in the organisation (Brody, 2000). Similarly, the policy makers and the senior managers of social organisations have to include in their planning ways of encouraging the active social integration of residents who live in Asylum Reception Centres.

Overall, our interpretation is that the spirit of those discussions can be used as a core element to develop and enrich a dialogue about developing

quality of services that will fulfil effectively the groups' demands. Particular stress was given to the need of organisational transformation of services' operation as it is considered an important element for instituting proactive change. It is both a challenge and an invitation for all to accept.

The operation of the Centre continues, however following a different culture.. The Social Service section provides social welfare support, on a five day basis and in particular during the mornings, with new professionals and different organisational concept for groups and recreational activities. A number of the previous accepted the procedures were abandoned, as the scientific supervision of staff and the promotion of participatory decision making process for the benefit of residents.

The University of Nicosia was not involved in providing any kind of services to the Centre after the period of that project.

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