

## ESTIA – MAKING THE CONNECTION

As an external border country of the EU, Greece is the entry port for many asylum seekers. In recent years there has been a substantial increase in the number of asylum seekers entering the country; in the first quarter of 2005 Greece was the only country to see a major increase: up 177% to 2,816<sup>1</sup>. The real figure is much higher because only people who have been interviewed by the police and received a red card (a kind of proof of registration) are included. It does not include the much larger group of people with white papers, a type of “service note” that only allows asylum seekers to stay in the country until the interview with the police has taken place.

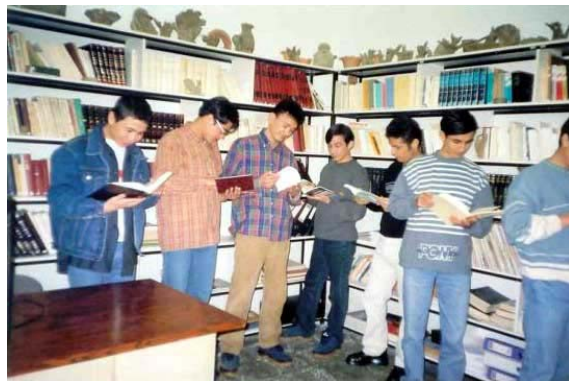
In Greece asylum seekers are not allowed to work until they have received the red card, which due to administrative procedures can take 1-2 years. Asylum seekers mainly get short-term low profile jobs as most of them do not speak Greek and arrive without their diplomas and certificates of education and work experience. Even for those who were able to bring these documents, it is extremely difficult to get them validated.

The increase in the number of asylum seekers prompted action. The ANADRASI-ISTOS Development Partnership recognised the immediate need for coordination and joint action of all actors working with and for asylum seekers in Greece. It recognised the advantages of sharing resources, experience and knowledge for better and more efficient services to the asylum seekers. The National Youth Foundation has co-ordinated the work of the DP, with prominent partners such as Doctors Without Borders, the Social Work Foundation, the Hellenic Red Cross, the Greek Council for Refugees and during the later stages the Ministry of Health and the UNHCR. The Head of UNHCR Greece, Karen Farkas, says that “the work of the DP has been a great success which has increased the transparency, accountability, efficiency and cost-effectiveness among the actors working with asylum seekers in Greece and has led to better services to this vulnerable group of people”.

### IT ONLY TAKES A “CLICK”

The DP has created an interactive electronic network, connecting actors who provide services to asylum seekers via a common online database, “ESTIA”. Through a simple “click” they can refer the asylum seekers to each other in order to give them effective specialised assistance.

Until ESTIA was created, each agency in the field was working alone, leading to a high degree of duplication of work. Previously, asylum seekers were registered at each agency they visited, which usually was done in paper form. This was a very ineffective way of working for several reasons. Not only was it extremely stressful for the asylum seekers, who were asked to repeat the same personal information several times and perhaps had to re-live difficult memories, but also the agencies working with them were duplicating work.



*Asylum seekers are eager to study and work*

ESTIA was developed to solve these problems. The introduction of the interactive electronic system means that the asylum seeker’s personal information is only recorded once,

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<sup>1</sup> [Asylum Levels and Trends the First Quarter 2005](#) , UNHCR, May 2005

electronically, at the first agency the asylum seeker goes to. The other agencies, linked to the database, can then access this information by simply entering the name of the asylum seeker or the number connected to their record. It is a very user-friendly tool, which does not allow the “user”, i.e. the person registering the data, to move on to the next section without filling in the required information. Asylum seekers agree in writing that the information may be shared. Following its introduction over 1,300 asylum seekers have been registered in the online database by different organisations.



#### **Helping asylum seekers to find employment**

When the asylum seekers are registered, they are asked for information about language skills, past education and work experience both in their home country and in Greece and about their work preferences. This information is essential because the database also serves as a tool for those agencies helping asylum seekers to find employment. Within the main network, which links different actors such as legal experts, reception centres and the Red Cross to each other there is a smaller network of agencies specialising in employment. These agencies have made an agreement clearly setting out their roles in the network, including looking at different sources to find work opportunities, for instance searching in newspapers or on the Internet and contacting employers pro-actively. After contacting employers they put the work description and the employer’s details in the database, which automatically matches the details of suitable asylum seekers to the job at hand and provides a list of candidates. The employer ultimately decides who to hire. Almost 100 asylum seekers have found jobs as a result.

One successful candidate was Basir<sup>2</sup>, now 31, who fled from Afghanistan in 1997 and came to Greece in 1999 after first having been in Turkey two years. He received his red card after one year, which meant that he could work legally in Greece until his status was determined. “EQUAL was very helpful”, he says. “I tried to find a job myself, but it was very difficult. Before the project I had to run, run, run between different agencies which took a lot of time and without any positive result, but the EQUAL workers helped me get an interview with the recruitment officer here at Shell, and then it only took a week before I could start working”.

Penelope Tsantila, the recruitment officer at Shell who hired Basir, and Fani A. Tsokani-Triantafy, External Affairs Manager for Shell Greece, both praised him. His direct manager explained that some customers actually came specifically because of Basir’s excellent work. Fani A. Tsokani-Triantafy presented their positive experiences from hiring Basir at a conference on corporate social responsibility held in Greece in 2004. After her presentation, one participant queried why they did not just give money to the UNHCR instead?” Fani A. Tsokani-Triantafy explained that in the company’s view, it is much better for asylum seekers to work and integrate in the new society by coming in contact with Greeks at the workplace, than receiving money from UNHCR. “For us it is also a very positive experience to have someone from another culture working for us. Diversity and inclusiveness is not just lip service for us, we really see the benefits and are proactively pursuing these goals.”

## **PARTNERSHIP WITH MODERN TOOLS**

Initially the aim was to involve around ten organisations in the ESTIA network but this target has more than doubled. The word about the project spread very quickly among agencies working with asylum seekers, and the EQUAL initiative was welcomed with immense enthusiasm. 22 partners are now connected via the online system with several joining on their own initiative. The network includes 90% of the non-governmental organisations working with asylum seekers in Greece, a number of municipals as well as labour unions and vocational training institutes. These organisations all signed a ‘code of conduct’, establishing the rules for co-operation in the network.

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<sup>2</sup> Not his real name

ESTIA makes it very easy to refer asylum seekers to other agencies when needed. The system provides a unique referral function, allowing problems to be identified and forwarded to the relevant organisation by a simple “click”. Network partners have agreed the “click” should always be followed by a phone call to avoid queries being missed. The system records response times to encourage prompt action. The person who referred the case can follow it by checking the subsequent entries and comments in the database.

In the smaller network focussing on finding employment for asylum seekers, concerns that collaboration could be difficult due to the fact that competing agencies were involved were unfounded. Indeed, organisations often phone each other to spread the word when a job becomes available that they cannot fill. Given that few employers are willing to hire asylum seekers, each agency realised that it was far more important not to lose any potential job then to consider their competitive position. This intensive collaboration between the organisations proved to be even better for the asylum seekers, who contacted one organisation but got the assistance of six instead!

Olga Leventi, Project Director of the Social Work Foundation, is extremely enthusiastic about the online database. “For us it was a very slow process to get started as we needed to convert from a paper filing system to learn how to use this electronic system. Also, the staff needed training, but once we had introduced it, we could clearly see its big advantages and benefits, both to us as organisations working with asylum seekers, and to the asylum seekers themselves.” She explained that not only do they save a lot of time using the new system, but they have also got to know the other actors working in the field. The new collaboration has been very fruitful for all parties involved.



*All the system's possibilities displayed*

## MAINSTREAMING THE ONLINE SYSTEM AND ITS SPIN-OFF EFFECTS

As the work with the database proceeded, it became evident that ESTIA provided more benefits than the partners originally imagined. In addition to improving services to asylum seekers through networking, the system provides an impressive range of statistical information. Data on entry, registration, unemployment, housing and health issues has identified weaknesses in the asylum application system that can be improved.

When the possibility to extract this statistical data became clear, ESTIA was developed to provide limited access to some sections of the database containing only statistical information about the asylum seekers and not their personal details. During the later stages of 2004, the UNHCR and the Ministry of Health were given limited access to the database. UNHCR is already using the information when checking the reception centres for availability and compare the statistics with those they receive from the Ministry of Health.

For the Head of UNHCR in Greece, Karen Farkas, the benefits of mainstreaming ESTIA were very evident. “ESTIA provides more detailed statistics than those we receive from the Ministry of Health. If all actors dealing with asylum seekers could use this system, including the police, it would be of great benefit to both asylum seekers and the public institutions involved. To be able to access up to date information about numbers of asylum seekers at any time is of immense use for planning and budgeting purposes. It improves the accountability and transparency of the organisations and public institutions involved and helps us work at full capacity while minimising the gap between the type and numbers of services provided to asylum seekers. I am prepared to invest in making this work and promoting it to other actors in Greece.”

But ESTIA has not only been successful for statistical purposes. With its specific focus on employment, and its success in getting a very difficult disadvantaged group into the labour

market, the database approach of ESTIA has recently been included as a good practice in Greece's National Action Plan for Employment.

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