



Providing adequate social services for refugees: a challenge in FYR Macedonia

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Description

Huge flows of refugees in the period 2015-2016 transiting through and staying in the FYR Macedonia exposed the weaknesses of the institutional capacities of the national social protection system. Around 300 refugees currently face inadequate social service provision, poor treatment of unaccompanied minors, and lack of educational services.

The decision to close the “Balkan route” of refugees, adopted in March 2016, resulted in more than 1,100 Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians stranded in the country. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Head of Office in the country, from 19 June 2015 to 22 March 2016, a total of 477,856 refugees were registered in FYR Macedonia (23% of the country’s population). Women and children made up 61% of the total number of refugees arriving in the country in 2016. This has posed an immense challenge for the country, which itself is facing on-going political, economic and social crisis. Currently, around 300 refugees remain in the reception centres, but there are no clear data on the number of women and children, including unaccompanied minors.

In practice, the existing hard and soft law mechanisms proved difficult to implement. For example, the Integration Strategy for Refugees and Foreigners, adopted for the period 2008-2015, was primarily aimed at facilitating the local integration of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (RAE) from the region, who were granted international protection, without special consideration for refugees from outside the region. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, a serious challenge in practice – related to social service provision for

refugees and asylum seekers – that needs to be addressed is the absence of a systematic profiling of asylum-seekers which would allow to identify specific needs (including for persons with disabilities, single women, children and older people). This situation affects the quality of services available at the centres. Another challenge is the need to appoint a guardian for un-accompanied and separated children (UASC). In addition, there is no age assessment procedure, but statements made by UASC regarding children’s age are generally accepted as true. Also, refugees and asylum-seeker children are not attending schools since they do not speak the Macedonian language. National schooling is not offered in the reception centres; only NGOs offer some informal educational activities for children below the age of 10. Finally, the lack of financial assistance provision is also a challenge to be dealt with; only food, clothing and hygiene parcels are distributed to asylum-seekers at the centres.

Outlook & Commentary

Alignment of the legislative framework with international standards, as well as improvement of the infrastructural, administrative and judicial capacities of the asylum system in the country were

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not sufficient to tackle a large-scale transit of refugees, such as the situation the country experienced in the period 2015-2016. It should be noted that the country was only prepared to manage the transit of the refugees, but not to provide adequate social service provision. This should not come as a surprise, as the FYR Macedonia is a country where: social transfers amount to 14.3% of GDP (2016), social services delivered through Centres of Social Work lack effectiveness, and there is a significant shortage of human resources in the social sector. Hence, apart from international support related to border management and control, as well as donor funding of equipment in asylum centres, more assistance and emphasis is needed in relation to the psycho-social support of refugees as well as educational services to children and young people.

Further reading

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