

Athens' Migrant Integration Centre

Lead Agency

The Municipality of Athens

Context & rationale

In 2015, Greece faced high migration flows. Services had to be reorganised to respond to this need. The centre serves the refugee and asylum-seeking community, as well as serving the existing migrant communities, such as those from the Balkans, who have a long history in Athens. The aim was to offer a range of services under one roof for migrants in Athens, to streamline services and make orientation easier for migrants.

Description

The Migrant Integration Centre was originally funded by the European Social Fund. In 2017 the centre opened front desk services and in 2018 they opened integration services. It offers the following activities:

- orientation and information services relevant to immigrants and asylum seekers in different languages (Urdu, Arabic, Farsi, English). Interpreting and translation in facilitating access to mainstream services for migrant and refugee groups. Intercultural mediation.
- guidance towards other services accordingly to the need of the beneficiaries such as accommodation, labour market orientation, job counselling, financial aid etc.
- initial support as required and direction to social services for newcomers
- synergies with other public organizations, UNHCR, NGO's, migrant and refugee associations, immigrant communities



The project also includes integration actions such as:

- language courses (Greek, English) and acquiring computer skills
- intercultural workshops addressed to young people and to parents with their children.



Resources Needed

MIC is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). The City of Athens took full advantage of the opportunity to establish the specific service in the wider context of Community Centres. Staff and the rest of operational costs are eligible, apart from the facilities that have to be municipal or under municipal budget.

The front desk of MIC is supported by 3 social workers, 1 psychologist, 2 legal counsellors, and intercultural mediators (2 Farsi, 1 Urdu, 1 Arabic). The integration unit includes 4 teachers (2 Greek language, 1 English language, 1 computer skills), 2 labour market experts (psychologist and job counselor), 1 dramatist for intercultural activities for children. Both (front desk and integration unit) are supported also by administrative staff (3) as also by a communication and public relations expert (networking with other reception and integration actors and services)

Due to the lack of know-how at the initial phase of operation of MIC, there was a wide range of cooperation and synergies with external actors. International organizations like the UNHCR and the IOM provided initial trainings for the municipal staff. The UNHCR, during the first year of operation, operated a protection desk for asylum seekers in MIC facilities providing services to beneficiaries as also on the job training for the municipal staff. The MIC is also an active partner of the ACCMR, developing synergies and referral paths with other actors on the field (NGOs etc). During the initial phase of operation and until hiring intercultural mediators, there was a close cooperation with NGO Metadrasi providing interpretation and intercultural mediation in Arabic and Farsi.



Results

The direct beneficiaries are all legal categories of third country nationals (TCN). The operation of a specialized service for TCNs on the municipal level improved the access of beneficiaries to all relevant services, especially to those of the social welfare system. The indirect “beneficiaries” are other municipal services in terms of referrals, cooperation and orientation between municipal staff on issues of third country nationals.

The operation of MIC initiated a municipal info point for most of the issues that a third country national has to deal with (depending the legal status) as also an entry point for application for other administrative and integration services. The operational structure in terms of provision of multiple services through authorized access of central administration services (social welfare system, information managing system of housing for asylum seekers, provision of temporary social security number for vaccination against COVID19 etc) improved significantly the access of TCNs to all relevant services. Additionally, the provision of integration services fills an existing gap on the municipal level and not only, concerning a holistic approach on the provision of services to TCNs.

MIC has several positive evaluations especially from the regional managing authority of the ESF, as also from the Ministry of Asylum and Migration. From both authorities it is considered as a good practice with direct impact on beneficiaries. The Ministry in cooperation with responsible national managing authorities of the ESF, process the expansion of the model of Athens' MIC to other municipalities in Greece with a significant number of TCNs residents.



Success Factors

What worked best

- Having a passionate team and effective team communication
- Being connected to Networks and to online services, in this case, the CNI Network and the ACCMR online platform
- Having a friendly and welcoming space, which is due partly to the team, but also due to pictures on the walls (e.g. of fluffy animals)
- The Community Centre next door (in the same building) also serves the Greek / non-migrant community. This means that the migrant integration center is not a standalone migrant service, but part of a wider system of support for the community. This helps with tensions that may arise from having a migrant only service.
- Having specialist staff working in house - social workers, legal counsellors, and psychologists
- Everyone knows where it is



Risks & Challenges

Key challenges:

- Capacity
- Staff burnout
- Lack of translators / interpreters in the necessary languages. The rate of pay is set by the government and there are better paid opportunities in NGOs, and so it is hard to keep staff. We can also only recruit staff who have Greek citizenship.
- Space – having a big enough space
- Many clients come to use the service just to access benefits (although they could do this from other offices), and then they don't use the holistic service offer. Other agencies also refer clients to our service, although they could support with certain tasks (e.g. benefits access support).
- COVID has initiated a period of uncertainty concerning the general operation of services, with measures and rules changing depending on the situation in terms of public health, which makes quite harder for newcomers to access the services and generally for people that have to face the language or the digital barrier (e.g. appointment platforms)

Do's

Preconditions for success

- Political support
- Financial resources
- Flexibility: being able to adapt the project as you go
- Knowing your allies, and having effective working relationships with other agencies and organisations

TOP 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. 'Just do it!' Get stuck in, have space, money and practices which are flexible, so that you can adapt to the changing situation.
2. Try and make the service robust, and regarded as a core state provision, so that the finances are not at risk when project funding ends or when the political party changes. This takes time and clever communication, in order to speak the language of the politicians and show that the project is for everyone's benefit.
3. When planning the budget, include a frontline expert as well as a finances expert. Both will bring different essential expertise to the table. You must include budget for communications, for staff wellbeing, and try to have some flexibility within the budget, so that you can adapt as you go.



[Panagiotis Psathas](#)



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