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on the internal Evaluation of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)

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Introduction

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) was established by Regulation 439/2010¹ (hereafter also referred to as the EASO regulation) in order to help improve the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), strengthen practical cooperation amongst Member States on asylum and provide and/or coordinate the provision of operational support to Member States subject to particular pressure on their asylum and reception systems.

This ***evaluation on the impact of EASO on practical cooperation on asylum and on the CEAS*** is part of the activities the European Commission committed itself to in the Communication on enhanced intra-EU Solidarity in the field of asylum². This evaluation will be followed by an external evaluation to be commissioned by EASO in 2014 in accordance with Article 46 of the EASO regulation.

For this reason, and in view of the short period of EASO operation, this evaluation has a limited scope of suggesting actions to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency in the short time and to help frame the scope of the subsequent external evaluation. In order to avoid duplication and to ensure a sound use of financial resources, the European Commission has decided to carry out this evaluation internally.

The evaluation was carried out by an evaluation team in line with DG Home policy on evaluations.

This evaluation focuses on the EASO activities undertaken between its in 2010 and December 2012. In addition, where possible, some of the activities undertaken by the Agency in 2013 were included in the evaluation process.

The report is structured around the cluster of EASO activities as foreseen in the agency's founding regulation, with recommendations tied to each of areas analysed. The first chapter instead gathers some horizontal findings EASO giving a general overview of the agency's staff, budget and the perceptions of key stakeholders on the overall contribution of the agency to the implementation of the Common European Asylum System.

Methodology

The methodology for this evaluation was adopted following the DG Home policy on internal evaluations. The Steering Group adopted both an evaluation mandate and a full evaluation methodology before the start of the activities by the evaluation team (*annexed*).

¹ Regulation 439/2010 of 19.05.2010 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Asylum Support Office

² COM(2011)835 of 2.12.2011. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on enhanced intra-EU solidarity in the field of asylum. An EU agenda for better responsibility-sharing and more mutual trust

The evaluation included a desk review phase based on available EASO documentation, a questionnaire survey sent to key stakeholders working in the fields covered by EASO activities. In total, 260 filled questionnaires were received, including Member States officials, Civil Society Organisations, and officials of International Organisations (*the list of recipients of the questionnaires is annexed to the report*).

Following the “action research” methodology, 10 focus groups were organised with EASO staff. Results of the survey and the desk review were used to stimulate discussions within groups with a view of creating a collective understanding of challenges and addressing them in a participatory way.

When necessary, interviews were undertaken with specific officials involved in EASO activities in order to confirm the evaluation judgements.

General Overview

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) was established by Regulation (EU) 439/2010 of 19 May 2010. The agency operates in the realm of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), alongside Frontex, EUROPOL, EU-Lisa and the Fundamental Rights Agency³.

The first Management Board meeting of the Agency was held in November 2010 while, in line with its founding Regulation, the Agency became fully operational on 19 June 2011. At the same time, EASO achieved financial independence from the European Commission only in September 2012 and, for the purpose of the budgetary procedure, was still considered as a start-up agency in 2013⁴. Since its inception, the Agency has implemented two Work Programmes (2011, 2012) and was implementing its third Work Programme for 2013 at the time of this evaluation.

The staff and the budget of EASO have increased gradually throughout the first two years accompanying the establishment of the Agency as described in the tables below:

EASO budget		EASO staff	
2014	14,526,000.00	2014	84
2013	11,870,000.00	2013	77
2012	10,000,000.00	2012	61
2011	8,000,000.00	2011	42

EASO is an agency which is now achieving a stable situation after a period mostly devoted to its establishment and to integration of methodologies and tools that characterised practical cooperation projects carried out by other actors and co-financed by the European Refugee Fund (ERF) prior to the establishment of EASO⁵. Whilst taking this into consideration, the evaluation has examined the perception of key stakeholders in order to assess the contribution of the Agency to the implementation of the Common European Asylum System in the first two years of its operations.

The evaluation team received 20 answers on this subject from the Members of the EASO Management Board showing a generally positive attitude vis-à-vis the first two years of EASO activities. Management Board members stressed that the main problems have been linked to the need to establish the necessary procedures for the smooth running of a European body and the recruitment of the staff necessary in order to implement the procedures and develop policies and operational activities.

³ Due to the focus of the evaluation of EASO on the first two years of the agency activity only a limited analysis could be carried out concerning the quality of the cooperation between EASO and other JHA Agencies (cfr. for instance the chapter on Early Warning). The topic will need to be investigated further in particular to assess risks of duplication and possible areas of strengthened cooperation once the agency activities are fully established.

⁴ COM(2013)519 final COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Programming of human and financial resources for decentralised agencies 2014-2020

⁵ See for instance the EASO activities in the field of training

Respondent signalled that, while being a newly established agency, the EASO has provided a very significant added value in some of the key areas of activities covered by its founding Regulation. In particular, training was the EASO activity most often mentioned by Members of the Management Board. Other activities that respondents considered highly were the provision of Country of Origin Information as well as the Quality Initiatives, including on Unaccompanied Minors. Some also underlined the importance of Early Warning, stressing however that the current system should be strengthened in order to fulfil the requirements of Article 33 of the Dublin regulation⁶.

Concerning the future, a vast majority of respondents were of the opinion that EASO should focus strongly on supporting Member States in implementing the recast European legislation in the field of asylum⁷, including by mapping and sharing best practices and by developing guidelines and handbooks in line with the work that is taking place in the Contact Committees organised by the European Commission with Member States, where EASO is invited. It was also mentioned that EASO should organise practical cooperation meetings on asylum policy and COI in order to align decisions at EU level.

In terms of organisation of the work, some Members of the EASO Management Board underlined the need to better link the various EASO initiatives including by developing analysis that go beyond the expertise of a single EASO centre in order to harness the full potential of the whole agency. The importance of increasing the quality and quantity of the information communicated by EASO vis-à-vis the Member States but also towards civil society was mentioned in the replies, alongside some concerns on potential duplications with the work carried out by European Commission. Some respondents also underlined that the number of questionnaires to be filled by Member States administrations to reply to EASO's requests for information may be burdensome in particular for small national administrations.

⁶ Regulation 604/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 26.06.2013. Article 33 of the Dublin regulation concerns "A mechanism for early warning, preparedness and crisis management". Art 33(1) says: "Where, on the basis of, in particular, the information gathered by EASO pursuant to Regulation (EU) No 439/2010, the Commission establishes that the application of this [Dublin] Regulation may be jeopardised due either to a substantiated risk of particular pressure being placed on a Member State's asylum system and/or to problems in the functioning of the asylum system of a Member State, it shall, in cooperation with EASO, make recommendations to that Member State, inviting it to draw up a preventive action plan."

⁷ DIRECTIVE 2013/33/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast) Regulation 604/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 26.06.2013; OJ L 180/96 29.6.2013

REGULATION (EU) No 604/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast); OJ L 180/31 29.6.2013

DIRECTIVE 2013/32/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast); OJ L 180/60 29.6.2013

REGULATION (EU) No 603/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 on the establishment of 'Eurodac' for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes, and amending Regulation (EU) No 1077/2011 establishing a European Agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems in the area of freedom, security and justice (recast); OJ L 180/1 29.6.2013

DIRECTIVE 2011/95/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast); OJ L 337/9 20.12.2011

Similar themes emerged also in the discussion with EASO senior staff when assessing the outcomes of the first two years of operations. Interviews demonstrated that the establishment period of the Agency is a challenging one, including due to the gap between expectations of external actors and real capacities of an organisation with limited staff, resources and with procedures to be established. Communication was identified as a crucial sector where to devote efforts in order to reduce this gap, and to make sure that outputs produced by the Agency have an impact⁸.

The following recommendations build on the questionnaire's results and the interviews with EASO staff, but integrate also some cross cutting elements emerging from the discussions in various focus groups held in EASO in the context of this evaluation that could not be referred only to a specific area of EASO activities.

Recommendations:

Horizontal recommendations emerging from the replies to the questionnaire to Management Board Members:

- EASO should ensure that appropriate information management systems are in place to channel all of its initiatives towards the effort of supporting the implementation of Article 33 of Dublin Regulation;
- Member States should continue responding to the calls of EASO for the deployment of experts and assets facilitating national reimbursement rules when appropriate;
- Member States should ensure that EASO is informed of practical cooperation measures in the field of asylum undertaken by Member States and where necessary invite EASO coordinate them so as to avoid duplication and maximise economies of scale;
- EASO should also reflect on how to facilitate the participation of small national administrations that have significant difficulties in taking part in the Agency's activities due to their limited staff;

Horizontal recommendations emerging from other questionnaires and discussions in the focus groups:

- EASO should reinforce linkages between the different centres and areas of activities in order to harness the cross-cutting potential of its activities;
- The Agency should revise the role of National Contact Points in order to reduce their number and enhance their mandate in particular to inform about EASO activities in their national administration;
- EASO should monitor systematically the participation of Member States in EASO initiatives and their impact in terms of policy follow-up in order to have informed discussions at the Management Board;
- Member States should promote EASO initiatives and activities across their administrations to make sure that final users (e.g. case workers) are aware of the products of the Agency;

⁸ Interview with EASO Senior Staff Member

- Member States should strive to incorporate EASO products and projects in their national planning even when they have similar projects and activities of their own (i.e. in the case of national training systems), in order to maximise the added value of EASO initiatives and their potential for the coherent implementation of CEAS;

EASO activities in the field of Country of Origin Information (COI)

Since its inception the EASO has been working in the field of Country of Origin Information (COI) with a view to increase the convergence of COI among different Member States thereby increasing the probability that an asylum application has the same chances to be recognised or rejected regardless of the Member State where it is lodged. This task has a prominent character in the EASO regulation among other tasks that the Agency should fulfil in this field.

The main activities undertaken by EASO, which have been taken into consideration for the purpose of this report are:

- (1) The publication of two COI Reports on Afghanistan⁹ and a Methodology report;
- (2) The management of the COI Portal after handover by the European Commission
- (3) The organisation of Practical Cooperation meetings on countries of origin as handed over by the European Commission (ex-EURASIL)

EASO activities in this field have been developed mostly on the basis of existing practical cooperation measures co-financed by the European Refugee Fund (ERF), and have been supported by the establishment of advisory working parties composed of Member States' representatives and the European Commission that have supported the Agency in the handover process. This has ensured a well-organised transfer of the methodologies, tools and lessons learned, as well as their further integration on the basis of an overall strategy, the so called "Network Approach". This strategy was endorsed by the Management Board of EASO only in February 2013 and therefore is not part of the evaluation. However EASO intends to carry out an assessment of the implementation of the network approach in the future.

The questionnaires referred to in this chapter of the EASO Evaluation were targeted at the members of the EASO Country of Origin Information Strategic Network. These are senior Member State officials with lengthy experience in the field of COI that provide strategic steering to the work of EASO in this field. UNCHR also provided replies in this context. In terms of feedback on the single sets of questions, 27 replies were received on the EASO COI Reports, 16 replies were received on the COI Portal while 14 replied on the EASO Practical Cooperation meetings.

- Country of Origin Reports on Afghanistan

The availability of information on Countries of Origin of asylum seekers is one of the key elements in the procedure to decide an asylum application. It allows decision makers to undertake an in-depth assessment of the motivations presented by the person seeking protection and to verify his or her credibility. The publication of reports on Countries of Origin is foreseen in Article 4 of the EASO Regulation. The COI reports on Afghanistan were the first to be prepared by the Agency.

In terms of efficiency, the 31 weeks needed for the publication of the first COI Report on Afghanistan, raises some doubts concerning the sustainability of the system of recruiting dedicated Seconded

⁹ Another report on Western Balkans was being prepared by EASO at the time of drafting of this Commission Evaluation and was not taken into account for its purposes.

National Experts for the drafting of such reports. It has to be noted however that the research phase was considerably shorter for the publication of the second COI report, evidencing some advantages of publishing more than one report on a single country. During the focus group discussion, the issue of increased efficiency was discussed in depth in light of the new strategy envisaged in the COI Network Approach. In particular, the possibility of identifying and validating nationally produced reports, when drafted in line with EU established methodologies and the EASO COI report methodology, was considered as one possible avenue to achieving higher productivity and harnessing the harmonisation potential of EASO.

On the positive side the long planning cycle allowed Member States to provide feedback on various occasions on the text of the report which was considered as having been drafted in a transparent manner by the majority of respondents. It has to be noted also that some Member States showed a lack of knowledge of the existence of the report itself that should be addressed. Finally some respondents considered that NGO sources were not sufficiently used. The risk of the information becoming quickly out of date was underlined by some respondents, which raises questions on the updating of the reports in order to avoid them to have a very short life cycle.

In terms of impact, a satisfactory number of respondents have used an EASO COI Report (12 out of 27) and the majority of them were satisfied with its content (50-60%) and structure (55%). Some Member States insisted however that future reports should be more user friendly for decision makers. Concerning the latter, the Focus Group discussion confirmed that the problem lies also in the diversity of Member States COI needs which often require tailored solutions to their particular situation.

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that the fact that EASO Reports are produced by an EU body does not make them more reliable than national ones. Some also indicated that the reports would be improved by undertaking linked Fact Finding Missions.

In terms of impact, the majority of the respondents considered it impossible to estimate the impact of the EASO COI report on decision making in terms of recognition rates. Only one respondent considered the report as having an impact on decision-making in terms of recognition rates of the selected caseloads in their country.

Finally, three respondents confirmed that their decision on whether to publish a report was affected by knowing that an EASO report on the same country was due for publication. This indicates a potential for EASO products to reduce duplication at the EU level.

Six respondents were aware of instances where the EASO Report was used in a court. This was considered a positive result by EASO staff members during the Focus Groups. Given that the report was only available in English, some respondents indicated that increased use of EASO COI reports in courts would be limited by existing language barriers.

Recommendations:

- EASO should concentrate its efforts in the field of COI on areas where the greatest potential for harmonisation lies (e.g. security situation in countries of significant inflow) in order to reduce duplication and foster alignment of decisions;

- In line with its founding Regulation, EASO should publish reports on key countries of origin, with the list of such countries established with the support of the COI Strategic Network;
- The EASO COI Network Approach should be harnessed in order to increase productivity of EASO in the field of COI;
- EASO should explore the possibility of coordinating Fact Finding Missions in order to reduce duplication and achieve the greater harmonisation potential;
- Member States should engage in the translation of EASO reports and products to facilitate their wider dissemination among case workers and in courts;
- Member States should ensure that interested case workers are aware of the publication of EASO COI Reports or other COI Products.

- **EASO Country of Origin Information Portal**

The Country of Origin Portal is a project initiated by the European Commission and transferred to EASO aimed at linking all Country of Origin Information databases available at national level to a single entry point so that, with a single search, COI experts and decision makers can retrieve information available all over Europe. Article 4 of the EASO Regulation foresees the management of a Country of Origin Portal.

In terms of efficiency, the EASO COI Portal mostly mirrors the costs recorded under the management of the European Commission. However, the IT staff devoted by EASO to the project, at the time of drafting, was more limited with a possible impact on the functionality of the system. The respondents to the questionnaire were quite satisfied with the updating of information stored in the portal (56%) and the research functionalities (56%). However, the efficiency of the tool is hampered by a complicated log-in systems (based on the Commission IT environment) and by the presence of duplications in the search results.

The use of the portal is still limited with only 46% of Member States responding to the questionnaire using the platform for their daily work. This seems to be due mostly to language barriers (37%) and due to the fact that the instrument does not have relevance to their work (12%) or because alternatives are available (Refworld, ECOI.net¹⁰). However, when discussing the result in the context of the EASO Focus Groups, this result was considered in fact to be a positive one given the current state of development of the portal and the limited product placement undertaken so far. While agreeing on the importance for the EU COI Portal to interact with Refworld and the ECOI systems, EASO staff underlined during the focus group that the main purpose of the EU COI Portal should remain the possibility to exchange relevant COI among Member States by linking national databases.

On the other hand, it appears that Member States consider the portal as having a potentially positive impact on the harmonisation of COI at the European level (80%) and that they are eager to connect with 6 Member States which expressed interest to link their national databases to the European one. The other 3 Member States that replied that they do not plan at the moment to link their national

¹⁰ These are two among the main databases of information on Countries of Origin: <http://www.refworld.org/>; <http://www.ecoi.net/>

systems to the EU COI Portal stressed that this is due to temporary technical problems and not due to a deliberate policy decision.

Recommendations:

- Member States should encourage their staff to register in the EASO COI Portal including through dedicated information campaigns. EASO should support this effort by making all relevant documents produced by the Agency in the field of COI available on the portal in a timely manner;
- EASO should explore ways to overcome the language barriers also by better visualising the mandatory abstracts in English when available;
- EASO should develop a standardised quotation system for its COI Portal;
- EASO should provide usage statistics to Member States' National Contact Points for the COI Portal in order to allow national administration to benchmark their usage of the common tool;
- Member States should follow up the connection of their databases to the EASO COI Portal.

- Practical Cooperation meetings on Country of Origin Information

Practical cooperation meetings are organised by EASO in order to allow Member States experts and policy makers, as well as the European Commission and other stakeholders to discuss issues of interest referring to specific countries of origin or thematic issues with a view to foster alignment of decision practices at the EU level.

As it was the case for the COI Portal, the practical cooperation meetings organised by EASO are the successors of a similar activity, previously managed by the European Commission under the framework of EURASIL. In terms of efficiency of EASO, the costs and staffing for the organisation of EASO Practical Cooperation meetings are comparable with the ones applicable to the European Commission before the handover.

In terms of effectiveness, a weak point highlighted by one third of respondents – in line with the previous experience under EURASIL - is that not all Member States nominate the appropriate participants to EASO meetings. All respondents confirmed that they took part in at least one practical cooperation meeting, which suggests that practical cooperation meetings achieved a good result in terms of participation. The majority of respondents were very satisfied with the preparation and relevance of the meetings and 50% confirmed that the participation in the meetings increased their knowledge to a significant extent and was relevant to their work. However, still 14% of respondents considered that the meetings did not improve their knowledge after all.

Considering that the EASO Practical Cooperation meetings address both Member States' officials dealing with Country of Origin Information and those who deal with the policy setting at a national level, it was reassuring to see that respondents considered that the time devoted to both target groups was adequate. In total, only three respondents regretted that more COI was not discussed during the meeting, a suggestion that should be balanced with the fact that the main target group for this specific questionnaire was a group of senior COI officials at national level. Respondents to the questionnaire suggested that other stakeholders should be invited to the meetings on a more regular

basis, recommending in particular that the composition should reflect private experts (50%), third countries (25%) and International Organisations (25%).

Evidence from a specific assessment undertaken on the basis of the three meetings of practical cooperation organised by EASO in the context of the Syrian crisis did not yield a final statistical conclusion on whether the meetings achieved their objective by reducing the variance of recognition across the EU. This aspect of the impact of policy meetings and other EASO initiatives on Member States' recognition rates should be further explored in the context of the upcoming EASO Evaluation in 2014, when the effect of the EASO activities can be better discerned.

Recommendations:

- Member States should make sure that relevant experts participate in EASO practical cooperation meetings, avoiding that the same person takes part in all of them as this could reduce the knowledge-sharing potential of the practical cooperation activities (*this does not refer to Member States with very small administrations*);
- EASO Practical Cooperation meetings should be targeted at Member States that have a direct stake in the issue under consideration. This could be facilitated by organising meetings at regional level when a number of neighbouring Member States is particularly affected by an inflow that might not concern other Member States;
- The possibility to use videoconference or web-streaming systems to increase the impact of the meetings and reach out at interested officials at national level should be explored by EASO;
- Member States should ensure that the output of EASO meetings is disseminated throughout their administration and does not stay only with the meeting participants;
- EASO should explore the possibility of establishing "policy networks" to complement existing COI networks in order to ensure that both aspects of Country of Origin Information and policy discussions can be devoted appropriate time.

EASO activities in the field of information and documentation¹¹

In the period covered by this evaluation, EASO activities in the field of information and documentation have been mostly concentrated on the drafting and the publication of the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the Union as foreseen by Article 12(1) of the EASO founding regulation. As a consequence the evaluation carried out by the Commission has focused on this document with the awareness that in the future the initiatives of the Agency in this field will be further developed as explained by EASO officials during dedicated interviews¹².

The publication of the Report on the Situation of Asylum in the Union is one of the main tasks of the EASO as foreseen in Article 12 of its founding regulation. This report allows the Agency to provide a factual analysis of the state of asylum practices across the EU, to highlight the main trends in terms of asylum applications as well as to summarise jurisprudence of courts and tribunals. The report is also linked to the EASO Annual Activity Report as it provides the framework within which the activities of the Agency are implemented.

From the desk review carried out, it emerged that the workflow for the production of the EASO Annual Report is structured in a solid way around an annual cycle of activities with various contribution possibilities for Management Board members and with a good coordination with the European Commission and the European Migration Network (EMN) in the production of the respective Annual Reports. On the other hand, Civil Society Organisations – in their replies to the questionnaires – stressed that they did not consider the process of the drafting of the report transparent enough. Also in terms of planning cycles, some Member States mentioned the risk of misleading conclusions owing to changes in the statistics available on EUROSTAT during the drafting. As far as the costs for the production of the annual report are concerned they have mostly to do with fixed elements (cost of publication and of translation in all official languages of the EU) which cannot be reduced to a significant extent.

The questionnaire on the EASO Annual Report was submitted to different target groups. In this context the Commission received 38 answers of which 27 from Member States officials who are part of the EASO network of National Contact Point, 9 from Non-Governmental Organisations and 2 from International Organisations. In terms of impact, the survey confirmed a very good awareness on the side of respondents concerning the existence of the EASO Annual Report (97%) and EASO confirmed that a satisfactory result was achieved in terms of downloads of the EASO report from the Agency's website. During the focus group it was underlined that, as the EASO Annual Report is one of the main products of the agency, it should be better promoted. This could be achieved by ensuring its publication on the websites of national Ministries.

Concerning the content of the report, respondents considered that very significant steps forward have been made from the 2011 to the 2012 version of the report, with 74% of respondents agreeing that the 2012 version was good or very good in providing valuable information against 42% for the 2011 edition. A similar pattern could be observed also in terms of the perception of neutrality and

¹¹ This should not be confused with external communication which is covered in a different section of this report.

¹² Interview with EASO Senior Staff Member

impartiality of the report which increased from a total of 53% of respondents rating the 2011 report as good or very good in terms of impartiality, while 61% did the same for the 2012 report. The issue of impartiality and neutrality seem also to overlap significantly with the problem of transparency evidenced above, highlighting the need to develop a more structured consultation model with Civil Society Organisations. The same was also confirmed as the main weak point of the EASO Annual Report in the discussion in the dedicated Focus Group.

Finally, respondents considered that the usability of the report was improved, with 64% agreeing that the 2012 report was easy to use against 35% in 2011. However in order to further improve the product, the possibility of including an improved data visualisation system was suggested, as well as the possibility of developing more country-specific factsheets.

Recommendations:

- EASO, with the support of the Management Board, should envisage solutions in order to bridge the gap of perception between Member States and Civil Society Organisations on the transparency and neutrality of the Annual Report. A first step could be for the Management Board to express formal agreement with the Statement of Principles presented at the February 2013 Management Board meeting and publicly expressing that the Annual Report should include Civil Society input where it is compliant with the standards listed in the next point;
- Interested Civil Society Organisations should provide their contributions to the EASO Annual Report and to ensure that their contribution is factual in nature, timely and not oriented at achieving advocacy results;
- Asylum authorities of Member States should publish the EASO Annual Report on all their national websites in order to harness the potential of the document to improve public awareness on the existence and activities of EASO;
- Member States should ensure that all data supplied to Eurostat are complete and timely and that any revisions are provided by at the latest end March following the year in question so that analyses made in the report are based on complete and final data from all EU Member States.

EASO activities in the field of analysis and early warning

The activities of the European Asylum Support Office in the field of data analysis and early warning have been developed following two different legal routes. On one side, the EASO founding Regulation foresaw the possibility for the Agency to work in the field of information gathering and analysis (Article 9). On the other hand, the legislative developments intervening with the adoption of the recast Dublin Regulation¹³ and in particular of its Article 33 which designs a mechanism for early warning and crisis management in the field of asylum, have prompted the Agency to further develop its initiatives in this field.

EASO produces standardised reports on a monthly and on a quarterly basis and it also provides ad-hoc information to Member States and the European Commission upon request, in particular when they relate to possible situations of pressure on national asylum systems. At the time of evaluation, the Agency was also developing a new set of indicators that would allow it to go beyond the data normally collected by EUROSTAT in compliance with the Migration Statistics Regulation¹⁴. The focus of the evaluation was therefore placed on an analysis of the impact of the products that EASO already delivers but it was also encompassing some of the new initiatives that will have been officially started after the finalisation of this evaluation.

The questionnaire on EASO activities in the field of Early Warning was submitted to the members of the Group for the Provision of Statistics (GPS). This is a network of Member States' officials that provide the Agency with statistical information produced at national level, and discusses main the strategic orientations of the Agency in this field. UNHCR was also invited to respond to this questionnaire. A total of 23 replies were received from these stakeholders.

From the questionnaires collected for this purpose it appeared that, despite good and broad knowledge of EASO activity in this field, respondents still confuse EASO analytical products and might not have a clear idea of what exactly the Agency produces. In particular, 40% of respondents confirmed they were aware of the existence of weekly factsheets produced by EASO, despite the fact that the Agency only produces monthly and quarterly data analysis. It should, however, be underlined that this confusion could also be due to a dedicated weekly data collection exercise on Syria that the Agency carried out in the summer of 2012.

Overall, Member States confirmed the usefulness of EASO analytical products with 80% of respondents to the questionnaire indicating that they use EASO analytical products in their work and 64% who confirmed that EASO products increase their knowledge of the situation of asylum in the EU to a significant or very significant extent. Among surveyed officials, 75% also stressed that they consider that the EASO products cover their main needs. Concerning the future plans of the Agency, 65% of respondents considered the list of indicators developed by the Agency to be sufficient for the establishment of an Early Warning System at EU level. Among the remaining 35%, three Member States indicated that the list of indicators is too broad for their capacities.

¹³ Regulation 604/2013 of the European Parliament and the Council of 26.06.2013.

¹⁴ Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11.07.2007.

According to 56% of the respondents to the questionnaire, there is a risk of duplication with data collected by other institutional players, including EUROSTAT, Frontex and UNCHR. During the focus group discussion it was confirmed that EASO is working with the European Commission (DG Home and EUROSTAT) as well as Frontex to reduce this risk to a minimum and to have a common approach to definitions in the field of asylum.

During the focus group discussion it was also underlined that there is currently a significant mismatch between the capacities in EASO in terms of staff and the expectations of the stakeholders and the wider public on what can be delivered. In this context, the importance of full support by Member States emerged including by nominating in the EASO Group for the Provision of Statistics persons that, at national level, can deliver data to EASO but that are also empowered to take decisions in order to react flexibly to new statistical needs. To support this process, EASO could also consider specific training to be delivered to ensure that the participants to the statistics network are well aware of the legal framework and the definitions applicable for the EASO data collection.

In the focus group, the interaction between Early Warning and other areas of EASO initiatives, including information and documentation, quality COI, and EASO's work on the external dimension, was also considered an important asset to be further developed by the Agency. This would allow harnessing the potential of an improved knowledge management system inside the EASO both for operational purposes and providing inputs to policy makers. In particular, the field of COI was considered promising in order to link external and internal pressures on EU asylum systems.

Recommendations:

- Member States should appoint and empower their representatives on the EASO Group for the Provision of Statistics in line with the terms of reference of EASO. EASO should establish a dedicated training programme for GPS members;
- EASO should explore ways to allow customisation of analysis by key users through improved and user friendly data visualisation tools;
- EASO should ensure that information collected by other units of the Agency feed in the Early Warning and Preparedness System and vice-versa. Prior attention should be devoted to harnessing the potential of the COI Network approach for Early Warning purposes by linking statistical data and Country of Origin Information;
- Data exchange between EASO and Frontex should be further developed to facilitate the qualitative information deriving from Frontex debriefings into EASO analysis and to feed EASO COI Information in Frontex assessments;
- The EASO should continue working in cooperation with the Commission and Frontex to minimise the risk of duplication of data collection activities and to ensure a single framework for statistical asylum related data at the EU level;

EASO activities to support Member States under pressure

- Emergency and Special Support

The activities of EASO in the field of support to Member States under pressure are one of the three major duties of EASO as per Article 1 of the EASO Regulation ("to provide and/or coordinate the provision of operational support to Member States subject to particular pressure on their asylum and reception systems") and section 2 (Articles 8, 9 and 10). EASO's role is to coordinate and support common action assisting asylum and reception systems of Member States subject to particular pressure, including by coordinating: action to help Member States subject to particular pressure to facilitate an initial analysis of asylum applications under examination by the competent national authorities; action designed to ensure that appropriate reception facilities can be made available by the Member States subject to particular pressure, in particular emergency accommodation, transport and medical assistance; the deployment asylum support teams.

In addition to data analysis, which is covered by another chapter of this evaluation (*see early warning*), EASO activities in relation to emergency support have so far covered the following:

- the establishment and administration of the Asylum Intervention Pool (AIP): additional profiles were added in 2012 following assessment of the Asylum Support teams (ASTs) deployed in Greece
- the elaboration and implementation of Operating Plans with Greece and Luxembourg (signed respectively in 2011 and in 2012) and Special Support Plan for Sweden and Italy (signed respectively in 2012 and in 2013) the deployment of Asylum Support teams (ASTs) in the Member States above mentioned¹⁵
- development of methodologies to be better prepared for future emergency support

In this field of EASO activities a questionnaire was submitted to the EASO National Contact Points and UNHCR. A total of 20 replies were received.

From the questionnaires collected in the context of the evaluation it appeared that the organisation of emergency support activities by EASO is considered to be efficient in terms of resources and outcomes delivered (60%). Respondents from Member States authorities underlined in particular that the Asylum Intervention Pool is an efficient tool (80%) to manage deployments of experts and that it encompasses all relevant profiles (85%). This positive overall assessment is confirmed by the

¹⁵ In **Greece**: The aim in 2011 and onwards was to support Greece with its establishment of the new Asylum Service, First Reception Service, the new Appeals Authority, reception in general and reduction of the backlog via the deployment of Asylum Support Teams. Additional ASTs were deployed aiming at targeted at supporting the Greek authorities with the reduction of the backlog, the construction of new, sustainable structures and services, improving the quality of the asylum process, the registration and analysis in the field of asylum and reception and various other topics like increasing the reception capacity of vulnerable categories and the use of the solidarity funds. Please note that the deployment of Asylum Support Teams in Greece is considered particularly relevant for the purpose of the evaluation; In **Luxembourg**: The aim was to train the newly hired staff in the EASO training modules "interviewing techniques" and "decision making" in order to reinforce the refugee unit with more trained personal and help increase the capacity to deal with the unprecedented and urgent pressure on their asylum system; In **Sweden** The aim was to train the Swedish Migration Board on International Refugee Law and Human Rights and on Inclusion (provided early 2013). In **Italy** the aim was to improve and enhance the Italian Asylum and Reception System in the following fields: as data collection and analysis, COI, Dublin system, reception system and emergency capacity, and training of independent judiciary.

fact that 94% of the respondents would consider asking for EASO support if under a situation of pressure. In particular they identified Training, absorption of EU funds, and the asylum procedure (i.e. processing of asylum applications) as the three areas where the Agency could have the most impact¹⁶. On the other hand some respondents underlined that the AIP is often too static to respond to emerging needs and that therefore the good structure underpinning it might be improved for operational purposes. This could also help to increase the number of Member States that engage in EASO emergency activities, as so far only eight Member States out of twenty respondents have deployed experts. This issue of limited engagement by some Member States surfaced during the Focus Group discussions where it was stressed that the small size of some national administrations might be a key constraint to the deployment of asylum support teams. However from the discussion it also emerged that the role of National Contact Points is not sufficiently developed and that they should be entrusted to take decisions and respond swiftly to EASO requests for experts.

In terms of the actual impact of EASO deployments, 40% respondents identified the lack of feedback to the sending Member State about the mission outcome as one of the key shortcoming, which impacts also on the ownership of the deployment by the sending Member State. The issue of ownership surfaced also in the discussion on AST deployments in the Focus Group, but in the context of the lack of ownership by the receiving Member State. This problem was also confirmed by Greek officials interviewed for the purpose of the evaluation as they stressed how EASO deployments were sometimes not tailored to the needs of the Member State on the receiving side and that sometimes they required disproportionate commitment on the side of the Member State being assisted¹⁷. In this context it was also suggested that EASO could hire local experts under the coordination of an Asylum Support Team in order to increase its impact on the ground.

During in depth interviews with Greek officials involved in the deployment of EASO experts it also surfaced that the impact of the Agency in the very early stages of the establishment of a functioning asylum system is quite limited. This was considered a consequence of the fact that the EASO mandate is mostly focused on providing support to existing administrations when they come under pressure due to inflows of asylum seekers, rather than on the establishment of new structures¹⁸.

During the focus groups it also emerged that EASO staff dealing with Emergency Support is concerned with the very high expectations that are placed on the assistance EASO can be in the position to provide. The issue of expectation management for EASO activities is treated in detail in the section dealing with communication (*see below*).

Recommendations:

- EASO should establish a feedback system that will allow both the sending Member State and the assisted Member State to receive a report on the impact of the deployment. Additionally, experts deployed should receive a feedback by EASO in order to improve their performance in future developments and to certify his or her participation to EASO emergency activities;

¹⁶ In the in depth interviews realized with Greek officers it was confirmed that Training and Country of Origin Information were the two areas where EASO support was more effective

¹⁷ Interviews realized with Greek officers

¹⁸ Interviews realized with Greek officers

- EASO should strengthen its preparatory work ahead of deployments in order to ensure ownership both on the side of the AST to be deployed and the assisted Member State;
- EASO should develop a strategic blueprint for the use of emergency measures in Member States which are still developing their asylum systems as they have only recently accessed the European Union. Special support should be explored to this end¹⁹;
- Member States should swiftly respond to EASO call for proposals. In order to stimulate participation by all Member States EASO should develop a tool to monitor the participation of Member States to call for experts in order to prepare discussions in the EASO Management Board;
- Member States should fully comply with the provisions of the EASO Regulation establishing National Asylum Intervention Pools and empower National Contact Points to swiftly reply to EASO calls for experts. To this end the National Asylum Intervention Pools should be updated on a regular basis and possible avenues to make it a more flexible instrument should be explored;

- **List of Available Languages**

The activities of the EASO in the field of support to Member States under pressure also envisage the establishment of a pool of interpreters²⁰. This requirement was followed up by EASO through the adoption of a dedicated decision establishing the Agency's List of Available Languages.

The aim of the EASO List of Available Languages is to support immigration services that – due to special circumstances – are facing a lack of interpreters for certain languages. This support could be realised by videoconferencing or through on-the-spot interpretation. The only activity managed by EASO to date has been the rolling update of a list of languages available in each Member State, leaving to bilateral contacts between them further arrangements in terms of deployment and possible financial implications.

The EASO List of Available Languages builds on the experience of an Interpreters' Pool project developed by GDISC and co-financed by the ERF. In this project, however, the full interpretation cycle was managed under the project including the covering of the costs related to the interpretation services, whereas EASO limited it to the list, as the other part was considered to be of low cost-effectiveness by the EASO Management Board.

As a consequence, the two activities are not fully comparable (the costs of the list of available languages and the related staff requirements are significantly lower than in the Interpreters' Pool project) and in the discussions within the focus group the need to clarify the functioning of the new List of Available languages in comparison with the previous project emerged.

From the responses to questionnaires on the List of Available Languages from the same target group as in the previous paragraph on emergency activities in general, it is clear that the effectiveness of the project is limited. Despite some use of the tool by 6 Member States, 20% of respondents to the questionnaire were not aware of the existence of the List of Available Languages, 77% never used the

¹⁹ Special Support is a tailored support that EASO develops outside emergency situations in order to help Member States in the improvements of their asylum and reception systems

²⁰ Cf. article 9, 14 and article 15 of the funding regulation, the latter stating that "as part of the Asylum Intervention Pool, the Support Office shall set up a list of interpreters"

list and 55% consider that there is no need to expand the list. Some Member States consider the list outdated and reimbursement excessively complicated. The little knowledge on the actual existence of the list in Member States administrations was confirmed during the discussion with the focus group. It is also reflected by the lack of feedback, underlined by EASO, from National Contact Points on the use of the List of Available Languages.

The added value of the List of Available Languages in its current form also seems limited with 13 out of 20 Member States replying that they believe they have sufficient interpretation capacity at national level. However, discussion during the focus group underlined the fact that Member States with capacity at national level do not necessarily cover the full range of the languages needed, in particular in situations of emergency.

In the opinion of the respondents the efficiency and effectiveness of the list could be improved if a videoconference system were available. Two Member States also suggested that EASO could cover interpretation costs - a proposal which is not considered feasible by EASO as mentioned during the focus group. Another Member State believes that the tool should be better promoted.

Despite the limited added value of the List of Available Languages in its current form the discussion in the Focus Groups confirmed the importance to further development of the EASO practical cooperation activities in the field of interpretation as one of the key elements to ensure the quality of the asylum procedure.

Recommendations:

- EASO should better inform Member States of the opportunities offered by the List of Available Languages also clarifying the differences with the previous Interpreters Pool project;
- EASO should facilitate the use of the List of Available Languages inter alia by exploring the opportunity of establishing a videoconference system or a similar tool that can be used by Member States;
- The Management Board of EASO should foresee a strategic discussion on the possible role and scope of the Agency in the field of interpretation as a key area where practical cooperation can bring an important contribution to the quality of CEAS.

EASO activities in the field of training

Training activities pursued by EASO, which are based on Article 6 of EASO Regulation (439/2010), aim to enhance quality standards and the harmonisation of asylum practices throughout the European Union. The main tool of the training activities is the EASO Training Curriculum managed by the EASO training and quality team. This curriculum is a set of training modules covering the whole of the asylum procedure that can be used by Member States in order to train in a uniform manner the staff dealing with the assessment of the asylum applications. The system is grounded on the principle of train-the-trainers so that EASO can train dedicated Member States officials that are then tasked to train their colleagues at national level.

The EASO Training Curriculum was previously known as the European Asylum Curriculum (EAC), a project co-financed under European Refugee Fund and implemented by the UK Border Agency in Cooperation with the Swedish Migration Board. EASO took over the existing project in January 2012. The tool was already known to Member States and therefore it was easier to further develop the modules and introduce it to Member States' training systems.

The current management within EASO seems to bring more efficiency and effectiveness: it reduces the costs of development of training modules²¹ and avoids duplication of work (development of similar national training modules). The cost efficiency is based mainly on the fact that all meetings are held in dedicated facilities within the EASO premises and there is a permanent team of 8 EASO officials which organises, administers and streamlines the whole EASO training process. This allows also for better planning through a training strategy²², development and enhancement of the skills of the team and better reaction to new developments in the field of asylum by updating or developing new training modules. The system of train-the-trainers allows for sharing the trainers as well as better multiplication of knowledge. The efficiency gains are confirmed by the fact that the output of this type of training seems to have been constant throughout the years with a substantial increase since it has been taken over by EASO.²³

The questionnaire in the field of training was submitted to the Member States' officials gathered in the EASO Training National Contact Point network as well as to UNHCR. In total, 15 replies were received in this field.

According to nearly three quarters of the consulted stakeholders (71%), the process of creation and updating the training modules is managed in efficient and transparent manner and 80 % of the respondents were overall satisfied with the EASO training system.

The EASO training system shows already its positive impact on the harmonisation of training activities in this field. From responses to the questionnaire gathered it seems that the EASO training

²¹ The EASO budget for training for 2013 was 1.200.000 Euro (commitment appropriations) and 900.000 Euro of (payment appropriations) whereas the cost of running EAC project financed under European Refugee Fund for the period of March 2010 – December 2011 was about 1.200.000 Euro

²² <http://easo.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/EASO-Training-strategy.pdf>

²³ http://easo.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/20052013EAC-Trainer-courses-2013_FINALJuly2013_for-the-WEB.pdf

is very effective as 88 % of respondents consider that it covers their administrative needs with regard to training and 76% replied that it helped to train at the national level. 12 out of 15 respondents who provided the responses stated that they were using the EASO training modules regularly. A significant majority of respondents (80%) considered that EASO training expanded their knowledge and some of them (20%) indicated changing their national policies thanks to EASO training.

After desk review analysis and discussions in the focus group, the evaluation team came to the conclusion that one of the key added values of the EASO training modules development, and of the training sessions, lies in the exchanges of views and best practices they allow between Member State officials.

The survey respondents and participants of the focus groups also identified some challenges. Firstly, further improvement of the system appears to be problematic as only some Member States participate in the development and update of training modules. Secondly, the co-existence of national training systems makes some administrations resistant to use EASO-delivered training courses, hampering in part the harmonisation potential of EASO Training. It was also underlined, both by EASO staff and Member States representatives that language barriers might hamper the potential of EASO Trainings to be used more widely since the training modules are offered mostly in English. Some Member States also indicated problems related to budgetary constraints.

Nevertheless, the focus group participants confirmed that they see a good opportunity in the implementation of the new asylum legislation to increase the use of EASO training courses by new Member States, which would foster a more coherent application of the asylum norms across the EU. Furthermore they recalled that EASO Trainings has a significant potential in terms of practical cooperation with Third Countries.

On a more negative note, it appears that at the moment there is a risk for EASO training courses to fall victim of their own success as the pressure is increasing on the system in order to deliver a high number of training sessions per year and to deploy resources for other EASO initiatives (e.g. to provide training in emergency situations). It is therefore considered essential that Member States act as multipliers by making full use of the train-the-trainers system and by deploying experts from the training pool in emergency contexts.

Recommendations:

- EASO should establish a certification system to allow participants to EASO training courses to have recognition of their qualifications in order to encourage more Member States and their staff to take part to EASO activities in this field;
- The EASO Management Board should agree on a core basic system of training modules that should be followed by all new case-workers who are hired in national authorities. This basic group of trainings should reflect the provisions of the recast EU Asylum Legislation;

- Managers should be encouraged to participate in the EASO Training system in order to appreciate the potential for improvements in their own administration. EASO should organise a "managers" day for this purpose also to test the new module for managers²⁴;
- EASO should develop regional training courses from 2014 in order to facilitate participation and decrease the risk of language barriers to hamper the potential of EASO training courses;
- Member States should use the opportunities offered by the new Asylum and Migration Fund to translate EASO training modules;
- EASO should explore avenues to link training modules to updates and developments within the EASO Early warning and Preparedness System in order to anticipate possible emerging needs;
- Partnership with third countries on EASO training activities could be strengthened with the objective of making the training tool used also in non EU countries therefore fostering the promotion of EU values and procedures in the field of asylum.

²⁴ This could be linked to the EASO info day suggested in the section on Communication of the Evaluation Report

EASO activities in the field of quality

To enhance the quality of the asylum procedure and harmonise asylum practices throughout the European Union, EASO is also active in the field of quality. The Quality exercise is a new EASO process that started at the end of 2012, aimed at directly enhancing exchange of best practices among Member States through gathering, analysing and discussing the relevant information in specific fields of the asylum procedure (e.g. the determination of the age of minors).

The time and work invested by EASO's quality and training team to prepare the particular topics is substantial (it takes about 6 months to prepare and analyse the questionnaires, hold expert meetings and produce a final report). The development of reports with involvement of the Commission and Member States' experts is nevertheless progressing smoothly with 4 subjects being covered in 2013 and in addition a pilot quality initiative on Unaccompanied Minors (UAM).

The questionnaire concerning quality was based on the pilot quality initiative on Unaccompanied Minors focusing on the age assessment procedure, as it was the only activity that was in an advanced state of implementation at the time of evaluation. The replies in the questionnaires refer therefore mainly to this initiative. The questionnaire was addressed at Member States officials gathered in the National Contact Points' network as well as UNHCR. In total 20 replies were received in this context.

The questionnaire evidenced a very good degree of awareness in Member States concerning the existing activities of EASO in the field of Unaccompanied Minors, with 85% of respondents confirming that they were aware of this initiative. Almost 90% of the respondents indicated overall satisfaction with the organisation and the holding of several experts meetings and over 80% considered that all relevant stakeholders were invited to the meeting contributing to the quality of the initiative. 76% of respondents considered the UAM initiative useful and indicated that the initiative was relevant for their work and it has increased their knowledge.

Limited evidence surfaced from the replies to the questionnaire on the direct impact of the UAM initiative on policy approaches of national administrations; however 3 out of 3 Member States that responded that currently have no policy on UAM are considering adopting one. This confirms the finding in other sections of the evaluation that EASO's policy impact is higher in countries that do not have an established policy/system in place, while countries that already have a policy in place tend to be more resistant to changing it thereby hampering the harmonisation potential of the Agency²⁵.

Also in terms of policy impact, during the discussion in the Focus Group it emerged how it is often difficult to identify best practices in the areas covered by the quality exercise as in Member States there is a number of positive examples none of which could be selected as the best possible option. As a consequence, EASO tends to present the results of the exercise in the form of a SWOT table in order to provide Member States with a "system of reference", where they can orient themselves and see how their own national practice fits within the overall EU context. However this contradicts a general expectation that EASO would be in the position of providing "ready-made" solutions, immediately applicable at national level, which is often not the case.

²⁵ See for instance on the use of the EASO Training programme

During the focus group discussions, EASO staff underlined the risk that some Member States, in particular those with small administrative capacity, might disengage from the quality activities due to the high number of questionnaires that have to be filled in in this context. It furthermore remains to be seen whether the method of sending questionnaires to Member States remains efficient, taking into account the possible national administrative burdens if the number of different questionnaires were to increase. Some respondents (from small administrations) indicated problems with proper engagement. Therefore there might be a need to find alternative solutions in order to cater for the specific situation of small administrations.

Another challenge identified by the focus group is to find a proper degree of involvement of Civil Society organisations. Finally it was evidenced that, on the specific initiative on Unaccompanied Minors, there is a fear that after the expiration of the Commission Action Plan²⁶ on this issue the political attention will fade hampering the impact of EASO initiatives.

Recommendations:

- EASO should prioritise fields within its the quality exercise and provide an immediate result in the form of a handbook, best practice manual or any other output to stimulate continuous participation of Member States;
- EASO should, following consultation with Member States, consider making all the tools developed available online in a dedicated section of the website in order to facilitate retrieval of information on the Member State' side;
- EASO should continue involving Civil Society organisations in the quality activities as they can bring an invaluable practice oriented insight in this field;
- Member States should be ready to review their national policies following the issuing of EASO guidelines and tools. In order to monitor the effectiveness of the quality exercise, EASO should develop a dedicated tool akin to the "Training Cockpit"²⁷;
- EASO, in cooperation with Member States and the European Commission, should set up networks of experts as a result of its quality activities that can continue to be in contact and further develop harmonised policies at the EU level. The example of the existing COI Networks could be followed.

²⁶ COM(2010)213 of 6.5.2010. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010 – 2014)

²⁷ COM(2011)835 final

EASO activities in the field of Resettlement and External Dimension of the CEAS

In the first two years of operations, the fields of resettlement and external dimension of the Common European Asylum System have been developed by the Agency only to a very limited extent. Both the Work Programme 2012 and the Work Programme 2013 of EASO mostly focused on the Agency establishment and its core activities in line with the budgetary allocation that was received through the annual Union subsidy.

For this reason in these two areas, as well as in the following one on relocation, the evaluation only adopted a future-oriented perspective with a view to gather opinions of Management Board members concerning the upcoming initiatives to be launched by EASO in these areas of operations. As a consequence, and in compliance with the methodological framework outlined at the beginning of the Evaluation report, no conclusions or recommendations could be reached for these areas of the EASO activities.

As in the case of the overall question on EASO impact on CEAS the questionnaires in the two fields covered in this section of the evaluation were submitted to the Members of the Management Board.

- Resettlement

Resettlement is an activity aimed at transferring refugees recognised by UNHCR in Third Countries to Member States in order to provide them with a durable solution to their protracted displacement. Under its mandate, EASO should support EU efforts in this field in particular by coordinating exchanges of information and other actions.

Concerning resettlement – where the evaluation team received 19 answers - the respondents encouraged EASO to step up its role in this field by ensuring a common forum for best practice and information sharing among Member States and with UNCHR. It was underlined that this effort should not duplicate on-going work in the European Resettlement Network, rather concentrating on underdeveloped areas of cooperation such as integration of resettled refugees. EASO could also provide added value by developing a training course on resettlement that could also facilitate participation of new countries to the EU resettlement effort.

Some respondents also expressed the wish for EASO to become more active in terms of operations by facilitating joint EU resettlement missions and, in some cases, by taking active part in order to facilitate profiling, travel and integration of resettled refugees.

Many respondents underlined the importance of avoiding duplications with the work of UNHCR which should remain the leading actor at the international level. Therefore close cooperation between EASO and UNHCR was considered paramount. The role of EASO of providing information on Countries of Origin was mentioned as a possible contribution to better targeting EU resettlement efforts.

- Third Country support

In line with Articles 7 and 49 of the EASO Regulation, EASO can contribute to the external dimension of the Common European Asylum System by, for instance, providing technical assistance to third countries in agreement with the European Commission.

Among the 15 replies received to the questionnaire on EASO's operations in Third Countries, some respondents insisted that for the time being this should remain an auxiliary activity of the Agency, as they considered that EASO's core tasks on the internal dimension are more important.

When engaging with Third Countries respondents stressed that EASO should concentrate on capacity building by relying on existing experiences and policies (GAMM, Regional Protection Programmes, Prague Process etc...) and facilitating transnational initiatives. Priority in this field should be given to countries in the immediate neighbourhood, in particular those under accession or which have signed mobility partnerships with the EU.

The EASO Training programme, the List of Available Languages and the Country of Origin Information provision were mentioned as possible areas of cooperation. The possibility to organise joint Fact Finding Missions for COI or resettlement purposes was also suggested.

EASO activities in the field of Relocation

Intra-EU relocation is a voluntary solidarity tool under which beneficiaries of international protection are transferred from one Member State to another. This activity has been supported by the European Commission through a pilot project to transfer persons from Malta under the name of EUREMA. As for the case of Resettlement and the External Dimension of CEAS, the activities of EASO in the field of Relocation have been too limited to allow for a full-fledged evaluation to be conducted.

In its first two years EASO has drafted a fact finding report on the Pilot project on intra-EU relocation from Malta and bilateral initiatives and has provided input to the European Commission and Member States to improve the effectiveness of the relocation projects. EASO has also organised two practical cooperation meetings on relocation in 2013. Given the limited scale of the initiatives, the evaluation team, in agreement with the Steering Group and in line with the methodological framework has decided to assume a forward oriented approach in the questionnaire submitted to Management Board members. As a consequence, and in compliance with the methodological framework outlined at the beginning of the Evaluation report, no conclusions or recommendations could be reached for this area of EASO activities.

From the 16 answers received from the Members of the EASO Management Board to whom this questionnaire was addressed, a strong link emerged with the resettlement question, with most respondents underlining the need for EASO to work towards coordination of best practices and information exchange. In particular EASO was considered as a potential key player in order to prepare guidelines and training materials in the field of relocation, also with a view towards better integration of relocated persons.

Respondents also underlined that this should be complemented by practical cooperation meetings and reports on the implementation of relocation programmes by Member States. It was also suggested that EASO should act as the main coordinating office in this field trying to match relocation needs with offers and supporting Member States in the relocation process including the integration of the beneficiary.

In this context it was mentioned that EASO could play an important role in ensuring that the same international protection status is granted both in the Member State from which the beneficiary of international protection is relocated and in the Member State where he is transferred.

EASO external communication

All along the evaluation process, the issue of communication was stressed as one of the most challenging aspects of EASO activities. The presence of a diverse target group, which includes European citizens, asylum officials of Member States, European Institutions, Civil Society Organisations, Academia, Courts and Tribunals, and, potentially, asylum seekers and third country nationals, makes the development of EASO initiatives in this field particularly complex. At the same time from many of the questionnaires submitted under the different headings of the EASO mandate, it emerged how the limited knowledge and awareness of EASO products is one of the main obstacles to achieving a long lasting and solid policy impact.

The evaluation team has addressed this diverse field by targeting different audiences with the questionnaires including Civil Society Organisations, Member State officials and journalists. However the very limited response rate by the latter category determined the prominence of the first two groups in the evaluation results. In total, 36 replies were received on this questionnaire, 21 from Member States officials belonging to the EASO Network of National Contact Point, 9 from Civil Society Organisations, 2 from International Organisations and one from a journalist.

Respondents belonging to Civil Society Organisations complained about the limited amount of information available on the EASO website. They specifically indicated that the absence of an activity calendar was an evident shortcoming that limited the possibility for external audiences to participate in the Agency's activities. More generally, 28.6% of respondents, including all categories, considered that the information concerning the budget was transparent only to a limited extent, while the percentage increased to 42.8% when considering EASO activities and policies. The issue was further discussed with EASO staff where the need emerged to improve communication both on upcoming events and on past events in order to provide a clearer picture of the discussions and enhance perceptions of transparency.

In terms of the tools employed by EASO, 50% of respondents did not consider the website as living up to expectations and only 23% considered the consultative section as sufficiently developed. On the positive side, it appeared that the website and the newsletter were received by all respondents to the questionnaire, however their impact was hampered by linguistic barriers in particular for their use by grassroots organisations.

Concerning the impact of the EASO communication activities a vast majority of the respondents was in the position to identify the key messages that EASO envisaged in its Communication Strategy²⁸.

A very specific pattern of perception concerns the fact that 40% of respondents – in particular Civil Society Organisations – did not consider EASO to be an "independent centre of expertise", despite the fact that these words are included in the EASO Regulation. During the discussions in the focus group, it was underlined that this is likely to derive from a misleading interpretation of the concept of independence included in the EASO regulation. Many Civil Society Organisations that responded to the questionnaire consider in fact that the Agency should be "independent from Member States",

²⁸ <http://easo.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/communication%20strategy%20final.pdf>

something that is contradicted by the same Regulation assigning ultimate control to the Management Board where all Member States are represented. However, given the expectation gap that this implies in the long term, it is important that EASO strives to better communicate to external audiences in this regards.

The limited impact of EASO communication and the capacity of the Agency to ensure that its products reach final users emerged as a key problem throughout the evaluation process. The Focus Group dedicated to Communication further analysed the issue and agreed on the need to increase ownership of National Contact Points in terms of ensuring appropriate dissemination of EASO information and products, as well as to liaise with national communication departments in order to use their websites to publish relevant news about EASO activities (*see for instance on the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum*). To this end the possibility to organise an annual "EASO info day" involving national administrations in all 28 Member States was considered a good opportunity to catalyse communication activities and improve the reach of EASO products in national administrations.

Recommendations:

- EASO should strive to improve the tools at its disposal to communicate with external audiences and with Civil Society Organisations including by developing further the EASO website;
- EASO should make available online a calendar of its planned activities. After the meeting takes place, EASO could provide short summaries of the items that were discussed when they are not covered by confidentiality rules;
- EASO should develop new terms of reference for the National Contact Points that clearly include a responsibility to disseminate information about EASO products and initiatives as well as to liaise with communication officials at national level;
- EASO and Member States should organise an annual EASO info day to catalyse attention on the Agency's activities.

EASO budget and procedures

As described above, EASO was operational in 2011 and financially independent during 2012. The assessment of EASO activities through the budgetary aspect has therefore to be cautiously done and the results carefully interpreted to avoid any quick generalisation. In addition focusing on how and how much EASO budget was spent in comparison to how it was defined, this section will describe briefly the procedure in place in terms of monitoring and activity/budget planning in view of the assessment of its effectiveness.

In terms of consumption of the budget allocated to EASO, a few trends appear:

In terms of **commitment appropriations (CA)**, EASO shows a rate which is above 75% from 2011 onwards, with partial data from 2013 showing that the overall consumption of commitment appropriations is very good.

In terms of differences between titles for CA consumption, Title III of EASO budget (covering operational expenditures) is the one with the lowest consumption rate in 2012 with 66% consumption and second lowest in 2011 with 82%. 2013 shows a more positive trend (around 42% of appropriations were committed in June 2013). In 2012 it is to be noted that no commitments were made for some activities under Title III (horizontal support for CEAS implementation and Early warning and data analysis). The limited implementation of activities related to "Early warning and data analysis" appears to be the main explanation to the limited CA consumption rate for the priority "Support for the CEAS implementation".

The link between the limited CA consumption rate in 2012 and the non-implementation of some of the activities under the 2012 work programme (WP) is not completely clear as the activities which were not implemented or not fully implemented are not specifically related to the priorities for which the CA consumption rate is the lowest.

Concerning **payment appropriations (PA)**, consumption rates are in general lower than for CA (around 65% for 2012 for PA compared to 78% for CA)

In terms of differences between titles for PA consumption:

- Title III (covering operational expenditures) had a very high consumption rate in 2012 (99,5%) and the partial data show a positive trend for 2013 (42,25% in June 2013). Within Title III, there was no real difference between the priorities, all of them reaching or being close to 100% consumption.

- Title II (covering infrastructures and operating expenditure) shows very low consumption rate (just above 25% in 2011 and 2012, with partial data for the period January-June 2013 (17%) confirming the trend). In 2012, one of the reasons for the low consumption was the non-use of the line "fitting out premises" (€765,966). This might be mostly related to the delivery of the works by the Maltese authority and the consequent payments that are expected in 2013. One can note that amounts for some lines which were not used or poorly used have been decreased (bank fees for example from €10,000 in 2012 to €1,000 in 2013).

Based on the data for 2012, following key features can be noted:

- EASO had a relatively low consumption rate of its CA under Title III (close to 66%);
- Some of the activities planned in the 2012 WP seem not to have been implemented;

Therefore, for expenditures related to Title III, more activities could have been with the non-used CA (about €1.4m of CA carried over from 2012 to 2013).

It also needs to be underlined that the Agency request was of €12m instead of €10m and that a revised budget was adopted which decreased the CA for Title II while increasing the CA for Title I and III.

Implementation of the activities foreseen in the 2012 WP

Activities planned in the annual WP were generally implemented. Indeed, in its 2012 WP, EASO has defined many output indicators. Reporting was made on most of them in the annual activity report for 2012, which can be considered as one of the proofs of EASO's effectiveness.

However one can note a difference in reporting between the different sections. For some activities, information is very factual and complete, for others, the activity report gives much information on for example the content of a produced report without mentioning the other activities planned in the annual WP (for example on relocation). The reporting for example on the Quality activities could be more complete or more consistent with the objectives as defined in the work programme.

For the future exercise, a more systematic approach in terms of defining output indicators and in terms of reporting with clear information given for each output indicator could be foreseen.

It could be argued that there is a need for more general indicator on effectiveness, to measure the impact of the EASO action beyond the implementation of the foreseen activities. Steps in this direction have been taken in the 2014 Work Programme and should be developed further.

Staff recruitment:

EASO initially foresaw, in line with the staff plan, 68 persons working for EASO. In its AWP 2012, EASO foresaw to reach the number of 61 persons working for EASO by the end of 2012.

EASO was effective in recruiting the foreseen staff as there were 58 persons by the end of 2012. The difference of three persons relates to contract agent and Seconded National Experts (SNE) positions.

In terms of **monitoring and planning cycle**, EASO has clear procedures which are similar to the ones place within the Commission and which are closely interlinked with the timeframe of the other institutions involved.

EASO has different ways to monitor the progress of the implementation of the activities.

1. Activities are planned in the Work Programme, and the Annual Activity Report provides the relevant reporting on these activities.
2. EASO progress report
3. EASO activity calendar (past and future activities and events)

3. In 2013, EASO put in place a mid-term review of the budget implementation. This is a positive example that should be continued in the coming years.

The planning cycle of the Agency (WP and budget) is in line with the objective of achieving efficient results as planning is made in advance (cf. main steps below). EASO cycles are consistent with the EU ones.

The drafting of the estimate revenue and expenditures follow the steps described below

December N-2	Provisional draft estimate discussed at the EASO MB and provided to the Commission
10/02/N-1	Deadline to provide draft estimate to the Commission (the deadline was respected)
By 31/03/N-1	Deadline to provide final draft estimate to the Commission (the deadline was respected)

Concerning the annual work programme (and its possible changes):

The draft annual WP is made by the EASO Executive Director and adopted by the EASO Management Board before being submitted to the Commission around June N-1. Then the Work Programme is commented by the European Commission (normally in August N-1) and adopted by 30/09/N-1 by EASO Management Board in line with the Agency founding regulation.

When necessary, the EASO Management Board can ask for an amendment to the budget. Thanks to the mid-term review set up in 2013 as well as the EASO progress report, the possible changes are taken into account in a structured way. The AWP takes into account the multiannual staff policy plan 2014-2016.

The main points emerging from the analysis on the EASO budget and procedures are the following:

- EASO has a planning cycle aligned with the Commission ensuring the provision of relevant information in due time.
- The forecasting of EASO revenue seems to show an overestimation of the activities which can be implemented, which is reflected in the marge of manoeuvre in terms of commitment and payment appropriations
- Reporting activities are in place and complete, even if the annual activity report could be improved in some parts in terms of consistency of level of information.

Recommendations:

- EASO should increase its commitment appropriations consumption;
- EASO should try to better define the commitment needs for Title III (covering operational expenditures);
- EASO should try to better define the payment needs for Title II (covering infrastructures and operating expenditure;

- EASO should work towards increasing consistency in the level of details provided in the annual activity report and its annex (progress report) and a more systematic approach in terms of defining output indicators and in terms of reporting with clear information given for each output indicator;
- EASO should explore possibilities to develop more general indicators on effectiveness to measure, beyond the implementation of the foreseen activities, the impact of the EASO action.

Annex I – List of Recipients of the Questionnaires

Questionnaire	Recipients
EASO horizontal issues (including impact of EASO on implementation of CEAS, Relocation, Resettlement and External Dimension)	Members of the EASO Management Board, UNHCR, IOM, LIBE Committee of the European Parliament
EASO COI Portal	EASO COI Strategic Network (Member States), UNHCR
EASO COI Reports	EASO COI Strategic Network (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Practical Cooperation meetings	EASO COI Strategic Network (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Annual Report	EASO National Contact Points (Member States), EASO Consultative Forum Members, LIBE Committee of the European Parliament, UNHCR
EASO Early Warning	EASO Group for the provision of Statistics (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Emergency Support	EASO National Contact points (Member States), UNHCR
EASO List of Available Languages	EASO National Contact points (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Training	EASO Training National Contact Points (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Quality initiatives	EASO National Contact Points (Member States), UNHCR
EASO Communication	EASO National Contact Points (Member States), EASO Consultative Forum Members, UNHCR, LIBE Committee of the European Parliament, Journalists