

## Letters to the Editor

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# When we talk about refugees, we are really talking about people

ON THURSDAY, September 11, the UNHCR in collaboration with the European Parliament Office and the Representation of the European Commission in Cyprus, organised a public discussion on "Integration of Refugees in Cyprus: Managing Diversity." The aim was to discuss the degree of integration of refugees in the Cypriot society and to highlight issues that need to be discussed and addressed.

The need for this discussion stemmed from the fact that many refugees, some of whom have been in Cyprus for 10, 15, or 20 years, do not enjoy as a whole their basic rights and are exposed to social and economic exclusion, not having a way to support themselves and their families. It is clear that for these people, any existing integration mechanisms have not worked as they should have.

The reality that these people face is not reflected in the perception of the public opinion, as it often happens for foreigners and other minority groups. This can be attributed to several reasons, one of which being either the lack of information, resulting in the absence of relevant articles and news, or because of the selective news sharing on behalf of the wider media.

This event was reported by a significant portion of the press, which is very pleasant. There is not usually considerable interest in the coverage of such events.

Although the event was indeed covered, most of the attendants would agree that many of the substantial and interesting messages that came out of the discussion were not reported.

Reading the various articles written

to inform Cypriot society, one could notice that most of them focused almost exclusively on the first session during which one of the official guests talked briefly about the new European funding for the 2014-2020 period.

However, an important part which set it apart from other similar events was the contribution of the refugees themselves in the debate, who talked eloquently about their everyday personal experiences, managing to describe clearly what it means to live as a refugee in Cyprus.

Unfortunately, the majority of the relevant articles ignored this social dimension and the room for reflection that this offered. Rather, they focused mainly on the financial aspect, assuming that this was the only issue worth mentioning with regards to the population that is often exclusively perceived as a financial burden.

## NO CHOICE

Did they think that this was the essence of the public discussion? Or possibly that this was the most interesting part of the event for their readers? In any case, the reality is far from this point of view. Refugees are willing and able to offer to society as much as any other citizen, and all they ask for is the opportunity to do so.

We should not forget that when we talk about refugees, first of all, we are talking about people who have been persecuted in their home countries, whether that is due to their personal, political, religious beliefs or because of their personal choices.

They are people who did not choose to come here, but were forced to leave



their homes and countries, simply because this was their only choice for a better future. In relation to such issues, it is necessary to stress the social aspects rather than economic ones if we want to be truly aware of the reality.

During the event, there was an extensive discussion highlighting that the integration of refugees is a two way process that requires work from both sides, that of refugees and the state. The level of the achieved integration of refugees into the social, economic, cultural and political levels of the local community depends on this relationship and is intertwined with the rights they actually enjoy.

The implicit obligations of refugees, like of any other citizens, towards the local community, would be easier to meet in a receptive and welcoming community, with support and empowerment mechanisms for them.

The integration of refugees is a multidimensional process and should cover various aspects of social life (e.g.

language training, education, housing, work, etc.). There must be adequate policies and reception conditions in place, as well as mechanisms for the socialization of refugees that will prevent their exclusion and marginalisation.

Issues such as equal rights, citizenship, access to work, and dialogue between government departments and refugees, are cornerstones for their integration into Cypriot society. These are issues that we should focus on, if we want to find a solution for them of course.

In the same context, for those of us who understand that the goal of harmonious coexistence with all our fellow citizens, regardless of origin, is self-evident, we must seek and require effective, impartial and comprehensive information about these issues.

Annagrace Messa,  
Public Information Officer,  
Future Worlds Center

## Larnaca has plenty to offer

I am writing in response to a letter recently published in your newspaper entitled 'Ensuring an interesting, productive retirement'. I would like to point out that the Larnaca area also has a similar non-profit making organisation, namely U3A Larnaca, which currently has over 150 members.

U3A Larnaca currently have 30 groups which cater for a wide variety of activities and interests, which include: ancient civilizations, scrabble, music, pilates, mosaics, About Cyprus, geology, to name but a few. We also invite speakers to come and give talks on subjects of local interest. Two main social events are held each year - one in the summer and the other at Christmas and most months, there is an epicurean meal where members try out the different cuisine of the local restaurants. The Travel group is about to embark on a trip to Jordan, following a very successful and enjoyable visit to Malta last November. Some of the groups meet weekly, some fortnightly and some just once a month and full details of all the forthcoming events are sent out at the end of the month to all members so that they can plan ahead. If you would like to make new friends and try something different, please visit our website: [u3alarnaca.com](http://u3alarnaca.com) which carries a copy of the latest newsletter and gives details of contacts

Jane Preston, Chairman,  
U3A Larnaca