

# ECRE

EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
ON REFUGEES AND EXILES

CONSEIL EUROPEEN SUR LES  
REFUGIES ET LES EXILES

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## **Comments by the European Council on Refugee and Exiles on the Commission Proposal for a Council Decision establishing the European Refugee Fund for the period 2005-2010**

### **Introduction**

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) is an umbrella organisation of 78 refugee-assisting agencies in 31 countries working towards fair and humane policies for the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Many ECRE member agencies have during the past four years received funding from the European Refugee Fund (ERF), both at national level and under the framework of the Community Actions, for project activities on a wide range of issues.

ECRE therefore welcomes this opportunity to present comments on the Commission Proposal for a Council Decision establishing the European Refugee Fund for the period 2005-2010.<sup>1</sup> The need for a proposal on these lines is clear: after four years of highly successful work on the reception, integration and voluntary return of refugees under the framework of the ERF, it is crucial that the experiences gained during the first period are developed further as the European Union (EU) prepares for the second stage of harmonisation of asylum policy. In addition, with the accession of ten new EU Member States in 2004, some of which have less developed asylum systems, greater financial solidarity and more strategic support for the creation of a common European asylum system, is much needed.

### **Allocation of financial resources**

ECRE welcomes the gradual and substantial increase in the ERF budget to a total of €87 million over the period 2005-2010, as this approximates to the investment level required to support all EU Member States to achieving a high standard in reception of asylum seekers, better results in integration of refugees, and success in voluntary return. We further support the Commission's proposal to increase the fixed amount to €500,000 per annum during 2005-2007 for the states that accede to the EU in 2004. Coupled with a Community contribution of 75% for ERF projects in the Member States that are covered by the Cohesion Fund, we believe this will go some way to address the problem of continued uneven capacity across the EU, in particular in the new Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> COM (2004) 161 of 12.2.2004

However, the bulk of the fund will still be allocated to countries, which have received and recognised large numbers of refugees in the past. As it can be expected that these countries already have developed reception and integration facilities and procedures, the ERF will in reality contribute little to creating an 'equal balance of effort' across Europe. In addition, by defining in advance the sum available to each Member State, it can be argued that this reduces the incentive on the Member States to submit proposals that closely follow the requirements agreed at the EU level. If instead allocation reflected need for improvements in the asylum systems and the quality of proposed actions, the EU budget would be put to better use. To this effect, ECRE stresses the point that the ERF is not supposed to cover for a lack of State funding of activities which should be States' responsibility anyway, but that ERF projects should more directly support the transposition of EU asylum directives in a way which is most favourable to asylum seekers and refugees, and assist with the process of raising standards and practices to meet European and international agreements.

### **Scope of the fund**

With regard to the scope of the fund, ECRE agrees with the Commission that explicitly including people requiring international protection within the framework of a resettlement scheme is a positive development, reflecting the emergence of new resettlement countries in the EU, as well as the Union's own work in preparing a proposal for orderly entries into the EU for people in need of international protection, including a EU resettlement programme.

In relation to integration activities, in many Member States there is a need to widen the target group available for integration measures funded by the ERF. ECRE therefore recommends that "persons whose stay in the Member State is of a lasting and/or stable nature"<sup>2</sup> should include not only those with refugee status as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention, but also people enjoying complementary forms of protection and temporary protection. The reality is that for many refugees, return is not an option in the mid-term and being excluded from integration provisions only furthers the economic and social exclusion of this group.

Concerning voluntary return, given that the European Commission is planning to introduce a new Return fund, ECRE argues that the return strand in the ERF should solely finance activities on voluntary repatriation of refugees, persons with complementary and temporary forms of protection, and not rejected asylum seekers. This would help achieve synergy with other budget lines, and ensure that voluntary return as one of the durable solutions receives the attention it deserves.

### **Multi-annual projects**

ECRE welcomes the proposal that ERF actions shall be implemented on the basis of two multi-annual programme phases, each lasting three years, and that there is the possibility to receive ERF support for actions up to three years, subject to periodic progress reports. ECRE believes this will reduce some of the problems associated with too short project cycles, in particular difficulties with conducting proper follow-up of projects and mainstreaming successful projects into regular activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Article 4(b) of the Proposal for a Council Decision establishing the European Refugee Fund for the period 2005-2010

For multi-annual projects, ECRE agrees with the suggestion that funding remains granted on an annual basis, as long as there is an explicit possibility to receive continued funding for subsequent years following the submission of approved financial and narrative reports, showing progress, results and sound financial management. By continuing to grant funding on an annual basis, we would also avoid increasing the burden on organisations to secure co-funding for the whole project period initially, something which is very difficult to achieve, in particular for voluntary organisations with limited core funding.

Finally, ECRE emphasises the need for the ERF to also fund shorter, innovative projects for up to 12 months. This would ensure that new projects may be submitted, and that the multi-annual projects do not bar new organisations/projects from applying for ERF funds. In some Member States during the previous ERF programme, there was a tendency to fund the same projects year after year, making 'newcomer's' access to ERF funds more difficult.

### **Management of the ERF**

ECRE notes with approval that the multi-annual programmes shall be elaborated by the Member States in consultation with relevant partners, including non-governmental organisations, before finally being approved by the Commission. In our view, this will enhance the involvement of project promoters and other stakeholders in the setting of national ERF priorities, and add much needed European steering to ERF actions, ultimately contributing to a better coordination of a Common European Asylum System.

To support this proposal, ECRE calls for the creation of small Advisory Committees at the national level, whom the national ERF authority can consult with on the focus and priorities of the Fund, as well as draw on for policy development support. These Advisory Committees could include, apart from government officials, representation from UNHCR, local authorities, voluntary organisations, academic institutions and the social partners. In particular in countries where there has traditionally been less of a dialogue between the authorities and the voluntary sector, these Advisory Committees would be important. An added advantage of Advisory Committees made up of potential project promoters is that this would strengthen the Member States' ability to set priorities for the Fund based firmly on refugee needs and expertise on the ground, and therefore also likely to result in project applications better able to meet those needs.

### **Increased European added value**

ECRE supports the proposal to increase the level of Community Action to 10% and argues that this would make the budget available for much needed pan-European projects more realistic and allow for real comparative studies on asylum issues, projects aimed at developing operational guidelines for implementing EU asylum directives, and conferences to exchange experiences and examples of good practice. In this respect, the proposal that the Community contribution for national ERF projects may be increased to 60% for particularly innovative actions or actions carried out by transnational partnerships is very important, as it would strengthen exchange of experiences and add European value to national ERF projects. Furthermore, ECRE strongly recommends that projects directly involving refugees and/or their communities in the design and implementation of activities, are defined as 'innovative actions' and thus eligible for the higher level of Community contribution. This would increase the number of stakeholders accessing the fund and make the target group more directly involved in the ERF.

ECRE notes with concern that there continues to be a problem with lack of information on national ERF projects and Community Actions, mainly caused by the absence of a database on the Internet of all projects funded by the ERF. This has contributed to difficulties adding a European dimension to national projects and in networking between related community actions, and ECRE therefore recommends that a website with a database of all ERF projects is created by using part of the funds for technical and administrative assistance. With contact details and short project descriptions, this database would greatly facilitate exchange of information across the EU, as clearly stated by the mid-term evaluation.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, ECRE notes with concern that the Proposal does not address the relationship with EU candidate countries, as funding remains strictly limited to ERF countries only. ECRE recommends that the ERF is linked up more closely with, for example, the PHARE programme to enable organisations in candidate countries to apply for refugee related projects matching activities under the ERF. This would go some way towards preparing these countries for eventual membership of the EU, including contributing to the development of the asylum systems and enhancing their capacities and experience in implementing EU-funded projects. In addition, project promoters from an ERF country should be able to receive funding for working together with agencies in countries bordering the EU, and for inviting them to project activities such as exchanges of good practice and conferences. Through these kinds of twinning and 'people-to-people' activities, the EU would contribute to the promotion of human rights and the development of good governance and civil society in the wider European neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup>

ECRE  
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<sup>3</sup> DG Justice and Home Affairs (2003) *Extended Impact Assessment – the European Refugee Fund*, section 6.2

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament 11 March 2003, *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, COM (2003) 104 final