

Content

Preface

Meetings with international partners

Individual guidance: Gagik's story

Information from specialized foreign partners

Preface

The "Return and Rehabilitation" unit is delighted to present to you the first edition of their Newsletter.

For several years Caritas has had the feeling that insufficient attention was given to returnee candidates after their multi-annual stay in Belgium.

Since 1984, IOM has helped migrants to organize their return via the program REAB and in co-operation with different social services. This program is however not always adapted to the individual and concrete needs of the returnee candidate. Moreover it seldom calls upon the possibilities of assistance which the local Caritas can provide.

In 2004, we initiated a pilot project for the returnee candidates towards Bulgaria and Ukraine. By means of questionnaires we tried to better understand their needs in order to support their reintegration in a sustainable way. This project was continued in 2005.

In 2006 the Ministry for Social Integration and Fedasil extended this operational project. We started cooperating closely with local Caritas in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Armenia, Georgia and Serbia Montenegro. Together with Fedasil we also made an evaluation visit to Bulgaria and Armenia in 2006, revealing us the added value of a local structure.



Meeting with international partners at Fedasil

The visit to Belgium of the representatives of our local structures and their meeting with the consultants of Fedasil (September 2006) were perceived as extremely positive by all the implied partners. Since the beginning of 2007 we have tried to offer identical assistance to all nationals worldwide wanting to return (except for the EU).

Presentation of the team: Bart COSYNS has been working at Caritas International since 2004. Thanks to his knowledge of Eastern Europe and his good writing skills he has contributed to setting up this rather new service.

Annelieke CARLIER joined the unit in October 2006. She is responsible for the information gathering that is of use to returnee can-



Work in progress during meetings at "Maatwerk bij Terugkeer", the Hague

didates to Armenia, Georgia and Serbia. Thomas JÉZÉQUEL joined our team in February 2007. Bart and Thomas are both responsible for the operational aspects of the unit.

Apart from our four fixed structures in Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Serbia Montenegro we can also call upon the cooperation with "Maatwerk bij Terugkeer" as well as all Caritas structures worldwide as for example in Nepal, Mongolia and Togo. In a few months the list of the countries will probably be longer, but we will keep you informed by means of this Newsletter.

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Meeting with international partners

ERSO (European Return Agency Support) aims to promote collaboration between its members: Maatwerk, Caritas Belgium, Refugee Action (Large Brittany), JRS Portugal, Caritas Austria and Raphaelswerk (Germany).

These NGO's do not have the same experience, nor the same practices, some are there to learn and others, as I quickly realized, to share their experience: Cordaid and Caritas Belgium clearly are well ahead of others in this field.

Although I am a new member of the Return Unit of Caritas, I was already asked to partake in the first ERSO training course which took place on March 5th, 2007 in The Hague at our partner CORDAID (Caritas Netherlands). Even before setting up a European network of organizations working in the field of voluntary return which is ERSO's final goal, Caritas Belgium and the unit "Maatwerk" had already reached an agreement concerning the 'use' of their respective local partners. For example: in Bosnia we use Maatwerk's partner when helping people to reintegrate in that country, and we can contact Maatwerk regarding any new country in which they already have partners.

But no worries, I was in familiar surroundings, with an organization that was present at the very beginning of the Caritas International voluntary return service.

For Caritas Belgium the headline goal of this training course was meeting with the foreign partners of Maatwerk, who deliberately had their annual meeting coincide with the ERSO training course week. It gave me the opportunity to establish good contacts with the representatives of Togo, Guinea, Benin and Angola. As of my return in Brussels, I could contact the representative of Caritas Togo to assist a Togolese single mother with her reintegration.

The training course programme was very intensive: workshops, meetings, learning about the working methods of

Maatwerk and a visit to an asylum centre: representatives of the new Dutch return agency were subjected to a great deal of questions by the foreign partners of Cordaid, who were shocked by the way the concept of "voluntary return" is perceived.

The last afternoon was devoted to a meeting with the members of ERSO to prepare the project's operational future. New prospects seem to emerge, in particular with regard to the collaboration of different countries on the same project: the file of an Armenian family submitted by Austria for example would be financed by CORDAID and managed by Caritas Belgium and its structural local partner.



Some discussions continue throughout the evening

In the years to come our strength will be the collaboration with our partners and the sharing of our experiences.

Thomas Jézéquel



International meeting

More information:

Website ERSO: www.erso-project.eu

Individual guidance: Gagik's story

Gagik, a 62 year old Armenian, resides in Belgium since 3 years. After a succession of negative decisions and appeal procedures, he had to leave the asylum centre in which he was staying.

Fellow Armenians let him stay at their place for a few weeks but finally he got ill and had to be hospitalized in Brussels. It is the hospital that contacts a social service. The social service informs Gagik about the Caritas International rehabilitation project in Armenia. His request for regularization being refused, Gagik decides to return to his country of origin.

It became clear very soon that Gagik had neither family in Armenia, nor in Belgium; on top of that his physical and psychological condition made him unfit for work; Furthermore he didn't have any housing in Armenia because at the time he had sold his house in order to be able to pay his trip to Belgium.

Caritas International put Gagik in contact with his local partner in Yerevan, Caritas Armenia. In a long telephone conversation with our local partners, he was able to explain in his mother tongue which were his needs, his expectations and his problems. Caritas Armenia then arranged for a temporary lodging and prepared his medical follow-up in Armenia.

In August 2006, Gagik eventually left for Armenia. He was disappointed but hopeful that the social service of Caritas Armenia would uphold its promises.

Armen Badalyan, a social worker with Caritas Armenia, accompanied Gagik to its temporary lodging and together they discussed how to manage the budget available for him within the project's framework. For Gagik, the most urgent needs were a medical follow-up, lodging and money for food. As the project is limited in time, our local partner also looked for more sustainable solutions that would enable Gagik to live an independent and dignified life after the project had stopped.

The situation however was not that easy. Gagik was entitled to a modest pension, but he did not possess any longer an Armenian passport. It was thus initially necessary to submit a request. The social service assistance at the same time sub-

mitted a request to the Armenian authorities to have Gagik recognized as a physically and mentally handicapped person, so that he would be entitled to a place in an open medical structure.

While awaiting the outcome of these procedures, Gagik temporarily lived in a private apartment and he was visited every day by the social service of Caritas. Unfortunately during a psychotic episode Gagik broke all the windows in the apartment and fled. Caritas Armenia traced him but he had serious health problems. He had stopped taking his medication and had to be hospitalized. Caritas paid for the replacing of the windows and after many negotiations (to obtain his identity card in an emergency procedure) and lots of searching Caritas found him a place in a home for the elderly.

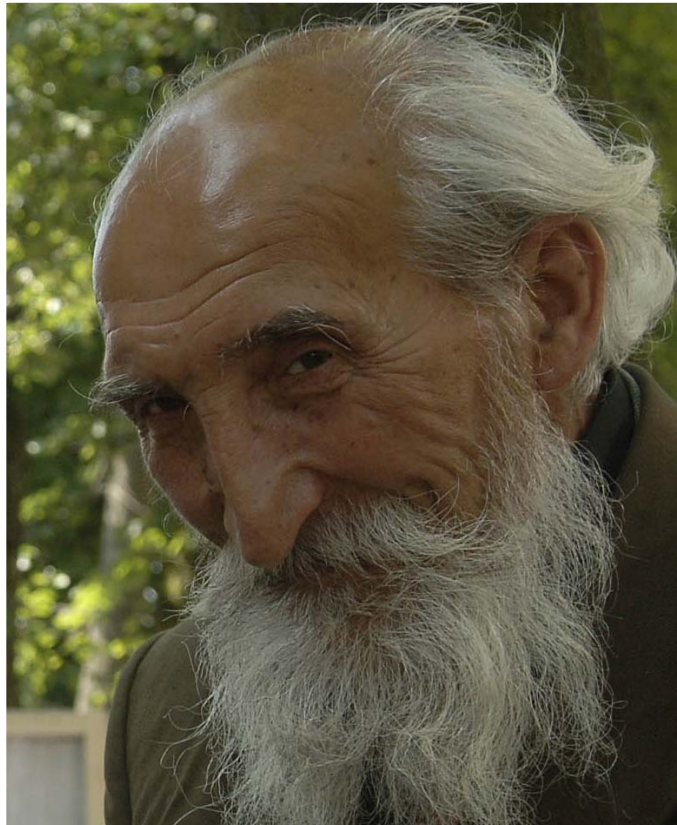


Photo: Herman Ricour

After many discussions with Armen, Gagik revealed that he had a brother in Moscow but that he had not contacted him until then because he didn't want to be of any nuisance to him.

Six months after his return, Gagik is recognized as a person having a physical and mental handicap. He is entitled to a disablement pension (which enables him to remain in the nursing home, to have an individual room and to cover his medical expenses), the social service of Caritas Armenia visits him regularly and his health is stable. Caritas has contacted his brother in Moscow, who has visited him in the mean time.

During an evaluation mission to Yerevan, we met again. In spite of his difficulties, Gagik expressed his deep appreciation for all our efforts. He spoke to us about 'all the nice

people' that he had met in Belgium.

It goes without saying that for a great number of people the return process is not so complex as Gagik's. Sometimes the role of our partners is limited to help with the creation of a micro-project. Sometimes people only need temporary housing while waiting to find work, or they need time to follow a formation. Gagik's case demonstrates at what point the reintegration project can make a difference for returnee candidates.

Information from specialized foreign partners

The CRI project tries to provide practical and specialist information for potential returnee candidates. To this end, Caritas International has looked for local partners in Armenia, Georgia and Serbia/Kosovo.

The mission in Georgia: a testimony of one of our employees.

"From 11th to 19th November 2006 I stayed in Georgia to visit a certain number of NGO's and to discuss with them the information we required in Belgium. Certain organizations were suffering a lack in motivation. Other organizations were some kind of sole proprietor. Fortunately some NGO's were organized according to the description given on their website".

"I had the occasion to meet GYLA 'Georgian Young Lawyers Association' and 'World Vision'. The latter NGO is devoted especially to social projects while GYLA specializes itself in legal matters from a humanitarian point of view. They provide free legal assistance to individuals, campaign against human trafficking and make people aware of their rights".

"Because these two organizations are particularly powerful in their field, I decided to make them partners. The contacts of these organizations are young and motivated people who send us recent and neutral information about Georgia on a daily basis".

Our local partners in Armenia, Georgia and Serbia answer to specific questions of any returnee candidate, whatever their nature is. These questions may concern the possibilities and prospects for reintegration (education, employment, housing, family/ tracing) but also the potential risk factors (safety, political situation, etc).



Our contact persons at GYLA and World Vision, Georgia

Questions and answers can therefore be of a purely practical or informative nature. Answers are presented in a few days and according to their specificity we can have them submitted to a thorough examination on a local level.

In every Newsletter we will publish an exemplary question and an answer that were treated by one of our local partners:

Can a mixed couple (Armenian-Azeri) return to its village 'Manashid' close to Shahumyan (Karabagh)?

Answer of our Armenian partner (Mission Armenia)

"This is not an easy question! But I already talked to a lawyer of the Migration Agency, the director of an NGO in Shahumyan and the chief of the New District of Shahumyan in Kharabagh! There is indeed one New District called Shahumyan, given the fact that the original district is now under Azeri control. [...] To be able to answer correctly, all the organizations need more information about this couple. For example: when did the couple leave their village Manashid? If they did before the war, they can't obtain a refugee status. There remain other questions to be answered, which I herewith send you. [...] In any case, the couple as cannot return to its original village Manashid. The partner who is Azeri can go back, but Armenians can't. If the couple returns to Armenia, I can provide them with contact addresses; social workers can immediately phone them in order to discuss their potential return. Should they have any other question, do not hesitate to contact me, so that I can gather the required information. With respect to housing, the couple has to be registered at the Migration Agency. If not they don't have a refugee ID and the Armenian government will consequently not feel responsible for their housing [...]. The chief of the NGO Shahumyan equally proposed to help the couple - even if they do not have a refugee status - and this because they were former inhabitants of Manashid. This NGO can also trace friends and members of the family of the couple. You will find included the coordinates of the organizations mentioned previously. [...]".

Annelieke Carlier

Country of Return project

Within the framework of the "Country of Return Project", every information concerning the various aspects of living in the country of origin is being gathered. Caritas International is in charge of information-gathering concerning Armenia, Georgia and Serbia. This information is provided by our local partners: **CDS** and **Grupa 484**, **World Vision**, **Gyla** (Georgia) and **Caritas Armenia** and **Mission Armenia** (Armenia). The CRI project is financed by the EU (RETURN) and is executed by a European partnership network.