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churches' commission for migrants in europe

CCME's Advocacy Training, 'vital' in the growing importance of EU law on asylum and migration policy

by Joy Eva Bohol

WITH THE growing importance and worrying trends in European law on asylum and migration, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe's (CCME) Advocacy Training in Athens, Greece, on 12-15 February 2024 "is vital, more than ever, to train and empower its constituency to better understand European Union (EU) legislation," said CCME General Secretary Dr. Torsten Moritz. This critical initiative was generously supported by Otto Per Mille (OPM) Waldesian Church in Italy and Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (EKiR).

About 20 international and local participants from CCME member churches and ecumenical partners from across Europe participated in a three-day training to look deeper into the current EU legislation on asylum and migration, the legislative processes involved, and how to influence future policymaking, particularly regarding safe passage.

In the past two decades, asylum and migration have become key areas of focus within European law, particularly EU law. Since the Amsterdam Treaty came into force in 1999, the adoption and implementation of an *acquis* on asylum and migration have been crucial in harmonizing laws across Europe. The framework laws and court rulings related to these laws have significantly influenced the realities on the ground.

Dr. Moritz said, "Over the last years, it had become clear to CCME that our members wanted their voices, the voices of refugees and migrants, to be more heard in European policy discussions. We could, as CCME, do our bit, but often national advocacy was missing—often because procedures and responsibilities were unclear. The participants in our training now have a much clearer idea of what they can do to advocate for a system protecting people more than borders."

Looking ahead to early 2024, negotiations on the EU pact on asylum and migration have resulted in an agreement. Subsequently, a new European Parliament will be elected in June 2024, followed by a new European Commission taking office in autumn 2024. These developments will undoubtedly shape asylum and migration policies in EU member states and beyond.

Despite the significant impact of these laws and policies, the processes of lawmaking in the EU regarding asylum are often unfamiliar to those directly affected, such as asylum seekers, refugees, civil society organizations, and lawyers. Opportunities to influence policy and its implementation are even less understood.

Annina Rautalahti, representing the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, reflected that the current lack of transparency in the process of drafting EU bills limits citizen engagement and input in EU member states. Additionally, the issue of integration in areas without common EU legislation, such as refugee camps in Greece, "underscores the importance of empowering refugees through education and employment opportunities for a more humane and cost-effective immigration approach."

Participants were tasked with developing concrete advocacy plans to be implemented in their context by autumn or winter this year.

As the landscape of asylum and migration policy continues to evolve in the EU, CCME believes that it is essential for stakeholders to be informed, engaged, and proactive in shaping the future of these critical areas.

"Participating in the Advocacy Training in Athens has empowered me to actively engage in understanding European organs and to particularly shape the role of international organizations in advocating for meaningful changes in migration policies. It's not just about learning; it's about becoming a catalyst for positive transformation. I'm fueled by the hope of creating a more inclusive and compassionate future for migrants and helping the change," said Alice Jahier, one of the participants, from the Italian Protestant Church.

The Advocacy Training was held in collaboration with CCME member SYNYPARXIS of the Church of Greece, which served as this year's host, and in partnership with the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland (EKiR) and the Otto Per Mille (OPM) Waldesian Church in Italy. This partnership with Otto Per Mille underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing critical issues of asylum and migration in Europe.

