

**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

AEGEAN GRASSROOTS REPORT

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE HUMANITARIAN
CRISIS IN THE AEGEAN FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF NGOS AND REFUGEES.**

AUGUST 2020

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REPORT
2020**

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EUROPE MUST ACT

Europe Must Act was established by a group of volunteers on the Greek Aegean islands of Chios and Samos in March 2020, in response to the ever-worsening situation of the hotspot camps.

We are a growing grassroots movement that brings together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane, dignified and legal reception of refugees in Europe. Through local action in cities across Europe, as well as joint-advocacy efforts of grassroots organisations, we aim to influence European migration policy. We seek the replacement of the EU-Turkey Agreement with a fair and humane EU policy on migration, beginning with the decongestion of the Aegean islands camps through equitable relocation across Member States.

„Purportedly in order to ensure the safety of the 21 000 refugees in Moria Camp from the coronavirus, the Greek government decided to lockdown the camp. Since the 23th of March, all the refugees are stuck in the camp, and are only allowed out in limited numbers, and for limited reasons. At first, the decision was taken on precautionary grounds to protect them from the virus but now the lockdown has been extended several times as part of a discriminatory practice with no basis in public health (MSF).

Shady, a Syrian child, looking through the wires surrounding Moria Camp.“

Central to our work is our focus on solidarity and the creation of mutually supportive networks of citizens and organisations across Europe. Although we are based on autonomy and decentralisation, all our members commit to our core principles of non-violence and the avoidance of shaming and blaming. This report aspires to be evidence of our aspiration to let the facts of the situation, and those it is directly impacting, speak for themselves.



RETHINKING MIGRATION POLICIES

An approach to migration in Europe emphasising deterrence and securing external borders has turned a manageable migration flow to Greece into a humanitarian crisis on the Aegean Islands. This security-focused approach has created vast suffering and even loss of life in the 'hotspot' camps where nearly 30,000¹ people live in deplorable conditions. Human rights violations are a daily reality for all residents of these camps.

The data in this report is based on qualitative input provided by 21 grassroots organisations working with asylum-seekers on the Aegean islands. The organisations were invited to give input in written form to a survey consisting of open-ended questions. Next, this data was compiled with information from additional sources, including relevant reports and articles.

This report aims to provide a broad overview of the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean and offer pragmatic and rights-based solutions based on the expertise of grassroots organisations working with asylum-seekers here. Europe Must Act, on behalf of the grassroots organisations who contributed to this report, urges European leaders and governments to immediately evacuate the Aegean camps and exchange deterrence strategies for a more humane approach which puts the human rights of refugees and asylum-seekers at its core.

¹There are currently 28,200 asylum-seekers and refugees on the Aegean Islands (UNHCR Aegean Island Weekly Snapshot report, published August 18th 2020).

„Throughout the past couple of weeks that we have been in this whirlwind of insanity with first the attacks on refugees and NGOs, then the impending threat of Covid19 upon us, the word that has stuck with me through it all when I think of the people of Moria is Resilience. Through the horrors, their human rights being non existent, living conditions atrocious, their safety at risk everyday and now realizing that when the virus will come to the camp there will be no way to stop the wave of deaths, and that surely, apart from a few, no one will care to try to stop it. Maybe it is that few that keep sustaining them, maybe it is their incredible resilience, maybe a mix of both. Most importantly what is shining through this are the incredible residents of Moria standing up and helping each other, children who are cold and dirty smiling so bright it warms up anyone who is lucky enough to be around them. Most importantly it is people who through it all will keep hope that they have survived war, they have survived militias, they have survived crossing the sea and now they will survive this virus together.“

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the voluntary and dedicated help of several actors. For this we want to express our deepest gratitude.

21 grassroots organisations active in the field, including both volunteers from the refugee community and international volunteers, took their time to contribute their expertise and insight into the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean. We are extremely grateful for their input and are especially touched by the trust invested in us to present the crisis from their perspective.

The drafting of the report was the result of the hard work of a dedicated team of Europe Must Act volunteers based across Europe. They spent countless hours collecting and analysing the data, writing and editing the text and formatting the layout of the report. We also extend a special thanks to Yousif Alsheweili and the Lesvos Legal Centre for the incredible photographs.

Finally, we extend our thanks to Refugee Rights Europe whose expertise on report writing was invaluable to our team throughout the process of preparing this report.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Several terms are used in this report to refer to the people arriving on the Aegean Islands in search of safety in Europe, including ‘asylum-seekers’, ‘refugees’ and ‘refugee populations’.

Europe Must Act recognises the distinct meanings of these terms as follows.

ASYLUM-SEEKER A person who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum-seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which the claim is submitted. An asylum seeker is therefore an individual who has submitted an asylum claim ([UNHCR Glossary](#)).

REFUGEE A person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it ([1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#)).

In order to establish whether a person fulfils or not the criteria contained in the definition for refugee status, the states parties to the 1951 Convention have developed “asylum procedures”. Once a person’s asylum claim has been approved the term ‘refugee’ will apply.

However, the [UNHCR Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status](#) states that a person is a refugee as soon as they fulfil the criteria contained in the definition of the 1951 Convention.

As such, the term refugee is used in this report to refer generally to populations who have arrived on the Aegean Islands having fled conflict in their home countries and may be used to apply to those who are also asylum-seekers.



INTRODUCTION

„In order to face the absence of masks inside the camp, refugee women have gathered together as an informal co-operative and they have started to make their own masks. Indeed, this group of 12 Afghan women, called Moria Corona Awareness Team, have created 21 000 masks in only three weeks. They are sending masks to other camps all over the world : Italy, Malta, US... and they are still making masks until today. All of this is made in a spirit of solidarity without any economic profit.

Picture of Nooria is sewing masks in the communal area.“

In recent years, the humanitarian crisis unfolding on the Greek Aegean Islands has been largely ignored by the media and treated as a nuisance or burden by politicians. Asylum-seekers landing on European shores in search of safety and a better life have been widely portrayed as faceless statistics, security threats or passive victims to be pitied. The Aegean Grassroots Report (AGR), prepared by Europe Must Act, aims to present the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean from the perspective of grassroots organisations and refugees.

Based on the expertise of 21 grassroots organisations - who provide education, legal aid, healthcare, psychosocial support, Search and Rescue (SAR), human rights monitoring, infrastructure and distribution of aid to refugees in the Aegean -, the AGR specifies concrete recommendations for the provision of relief to the camps and structural changes for a more humane migration policy in Europe.

This report calls on EU and national policy makers to take urgent action to address this protracted humanitarian crisis at Europe's borders.

Asylum-seekers who arrive on the Aegean Islands by dinghy are forced to live in the deplorable conditions of the Aegean 'hotspot' camps for months or even years as they navigate an extremely backlogged and bureaucratic asylum system. In these dangerously overcrowded camps human rights violations are a daily reality for all residents: nutritious food and drinking water are insufficient, shelter and sanitation facilities are highly inadequate, and access to education and healthcare is extremely limited. Violence among residents, outbreaks of fires, inadequate living conditions, outbreaks of disease, as well as a lack of psychosocial support to address people's mental health needs mean that camp resident's lives are at risk every day. A lack of preparation for Covid-19 reaching the camps has created fear among residents and further raised tensions. People's existing trauma, combined with appalling living conditions, means that *everyone living in the Aegean 'hotspot' camps is highly vulnerable.*

Grassroots organisations in the Aegean play a critical role in providing vital services and facilities where there is either a shortage or complete absence of these provided by the Greek government or UNHCR. Whilst their presence is crucial to alleviating

Policies of securitisation, criminalisation of solidarity and deterrence do not work and will continue to result in human rights violations and breaches of international law.

suffering and improving wellbeing in the camps, the level of deprivation means that NGOs are often unable to fully meet the needs of camp populations. Furthermore, they often face challenges to their operations in the form of limited funding, the criminalisation or prohibition of their activities and a lack of communication or cooperation from government authorities. The Covid-19 pandemic has also created further logistical and bureaucratic barriers for NGOs working in the field.

Residents of the Aegean camps are resourceful and proactively organise services, shelter and infrastructure within the hotspot camps. With the absence of many NGOs in the camps during the lockdown, the need for self-organisation increased and refugees also assisted remaining NGOs with delivering vital services inside the camps. Grassroot organisations have emphasised that going forwards, policy makers must recognise refugees as active stakeholders in the delivery of services which impact camp populations.

The first section of the report outlines the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean, highlighting the specific challenges faced by refugee populations within the camps. The second section focuses

on the various forms of violence faced by asylum-seekers on the islands and at the hands of state authorities at sea. Following this, the challenges faced by especially vulnerable groups in the camps, as well as by grassroots organisations operating on the islands are detailed. Lastly, comprehensive policy recommendations are provided regarding immediate actions to provide relief in the Aegean camps as well as long-term structural changes to European migration policy.

Policies of securitisation, criminalisation of solidarity and deterrence do not work and will continue to result in human rights violations and breaches of international law. Europe Must Act, and the organisations who contributed to this report instead propose alternatives that put refugee rights at the core of asylum policy, ensuring dignified living conditions and a fair hearing to all those arriving at Europe's shores seeking safety.



HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE AEGEAN

„In the midst of Covid19 the refugees of Moria are faced with a different dilemma than the rest of the world. Most people around the rest of Europe are worrying about having to stay indoors and occupying their time. Here for refugees it's different, water is cut off for several hours a day in the camp. When the water comes back, the dilemma starts. Should they wash dishes first or shower, should they wash their clothes or should they go wait for hours in line for food? If they go get the food and manage to receive it the dishes will be dirty, if they go get the food there won't be water long enough to wash their clothes, or to shower. If they go to wash their clothes and shower they won't be able to stand in line for food so they will sleep hungry. One of our most basic needs in life is water, whilst others get to worry about Covid19, they are left to worry whether we will be able to have water to wash our hands. Don't listen to those who say there are no solutions, there are many solutions, the lives of those in the camp unfortunately don't seem worth the effort to those in charge. Covid19 response seems so well orchestrated everywhere else, refugee camps once again are forgotten.“

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948:

Article 1: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*

Article 3: *Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.*

Article 24: *Everyone has the right to rest and leisure.*

Article 25: *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.*

Article 26: *Everyone has the right to education.*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the cornerstone of international law. There can be no compromise on these rights, yet, they are being denied to the refugees and asylum-seekers forcibly held in the camps on the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos. The crisis on the Aegean Islands, and also in the Mediterranean, is often framed as a 'refugee' or 'migration crisis' thereby distracting from the fact that this is a protracted humanitarian crisis directly created by a policy making paralysis at EU and nation-state levels. In the following section the living conditions in the Aegean camps are outlined as well as the ways in which Covid-19 has impacted inhabitants.

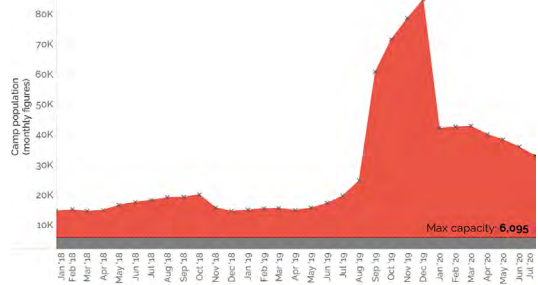
“In Moria camp, your neighbour can hear you breathe in the night. Privacy doesn't exist.”

Anonymous grassroots organisation



LIVING CONDITIONS: shelter, privacy, sanitation

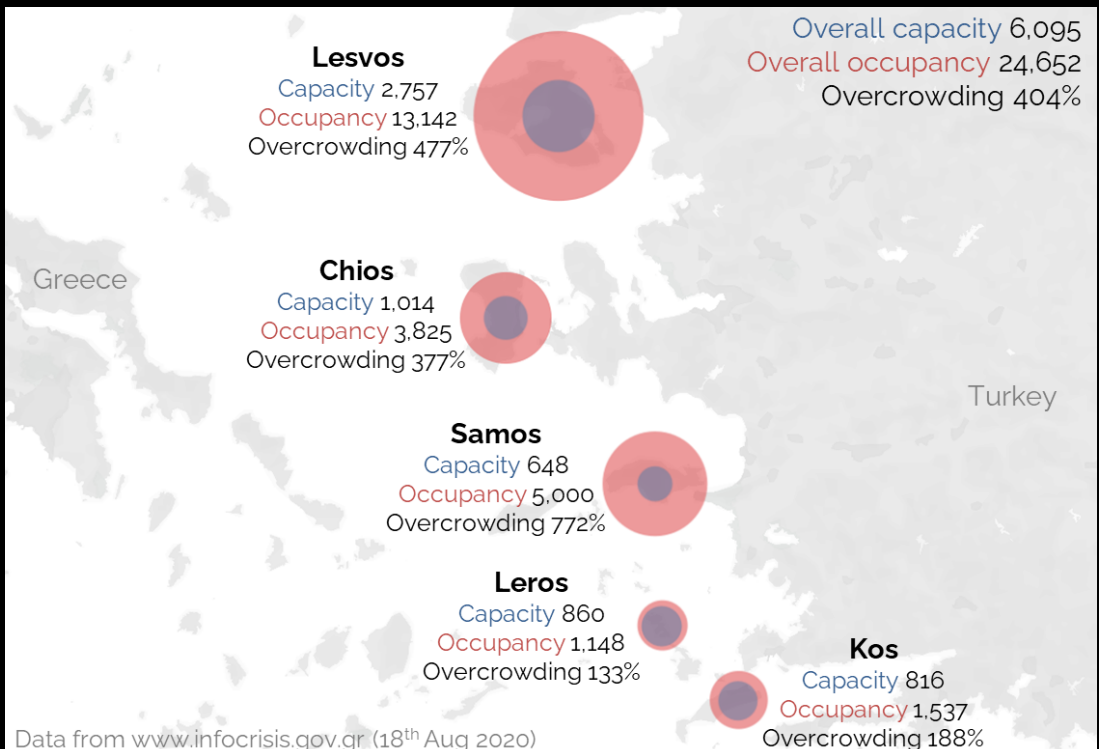
The Aegean camps are severely overcrowded. As of [August 18th 2020](#) the Aegean camps had a total population of 24,652 men, women and children, despite having a maximum capacity for only 6,095 people.



This puts total camp overcrowding at 404%, with Vathy camp on Samos being the most overcrowded at 772% overcapacity.

Fluctuations in the camp refugee population on the Aegean islands with respect to their overall maximum capacity, Jan 2018 - Jul 2020. [[Aegean Boat Report](#)]

Levels of overcrowding for the refugee populations on the islands, comparing the capacity to the number of people currently living in each camp. [[infocrisis.gov.gr](#)]



Data from www.infocrisis.gov.gr (18th Aug 2020)

For an asylum-seeker living in the camp for months, and in some cases even years, this means sharing an ISO-box (on average 30 square meters) with 7 other families or living in a small tent or make-shift shelter in the 'Jungle'² with up to 10 other people. Grassroots organisations report that black 'real estate' markets exist within the camps, with tents and self-built shelters being sold and bought among the refugee population.

Authorities seldom provide assistance in terms of shelter to new arrivals -

“Unless you are housed in a container, new arrivals are left to fend for themselves. It’s up to grassroots organisations to distribute essential shelter items such as tents, blankets, tarps and construction material”

NGO coordinator on Samos

Winters in the hotspot camps are cold and wet. During severe storms in December 2019 and January 2020, many shelters in Vial camp on Chios were destroyed or badly damaged. Water and sewage from uncollected waste piles ran into tents and other living spaces including those of families, children, elderly people and other vulnerable groups. Many of the tents and shelters used by refugees are not watertight and there are no adequate facilities to shelter or dry clothing and possessions. Consequently, winters in the camps are an extremely difficult and unpleasant time for asylum-seekers.

Summer brings no relief. As average daytime temperatures soar to 32 degrees celsius, living in tents and containers becomes almost unbearable. The heat and drought make fires an almost daily occurrence.

Living conditions in Moria camp on Lesbos [NGO on Lesbos]



Fires also stem from personal cooking or discarded cigarettes that ignite on the dry ground. These both threaten the lives and belongings of camp residents and pose a danger to buildings, towns and farmland near the camps. Local fire departments who are already overstretched have to intervene daily.

In the Jungles, human faeces and plastic water bottles filled with urine can be found outside of tents or shelters. Due to the Aegean hotspot camps being massively overcapacity, toilets and showers are overused and poorly maintained. The above statistic, based on Vial's camp population from December 2019, demonstrates the sheer lack of sanitation facilities. Furthermore, this assumes that all toilets are functional, which is never the case.

Toilet facilities in Vial camp, Chios [Anonymous camp resident]



Sanitation

On Chios, there are 30 toilets for a total of **5,782 people**. This equates to one toilet for every **192 people**.

Statistics for Vial Camp on Chios in December 2019 [NGO on the island]

International humanitarian standards prescribe a maximum of **20 people** per toilet. These must be **segregated** by sex, **sufficiently close** to living areas and **adequately cleaned** and **maintained**.

[[The Sphere Project](#)]

² The 'Jungle' refers to the informal settlements outside of the official Reception and Identification Centres (RICs). People must find or make their own accommodation here when the RICs are at capacity. Living conditions are typically very basic structures with those living in the jungle being almost totally dependent on NGO-provided services.

For those living in the Jungle of Vial, it takes 5-20 minutes walking to reach toilet facilities, and once there, people must wait in long and unregulated queues. This makes access difficult for children and those with mobility issues. Additionally, as there are no lights on the pathways to and from the toilets, nor separate facilities for men and women, refugees visiting these facilities at night face an increased risk of (sexual) assault. Consequently, people frequently relieve themselves near their own living spaces and [some adults resort to wearing nappies](#) to avoid walking to the toilets at night. Grassroots organisations report that children end up playing near, and often slip over into, piles of human waste.

Another concern with regards to sanitation, is the vast amounts of rubbish which pile up throughout each of the Aegean camps. Local municipalities do not have sufficient capacity to regularly collect rubbish from these overpopulated camps meaning that it is only collected sporadically. Plastic bottles and food packaging piles up in ditches and living areas and is often burnt to dispose of it. Burning plastic not only increases the unpleasantness of the camps due to the pungent smell emitted but also releases dangerous chemicals into the air which are [harmful for human health](#).

“I’ve shown journalists around, that have visited or worked in refugee camps all over the world, including Jordan, Congo, Uganda, Turkey and Bangladesh. They independently agreed that the camp on Samos was the worst that they had seen.”

Coordinator for an organisation working with refugees on Samos

With rubbish and sewage scattered throughout the camp, rodent infestations are the norm. Despite organised groups of asylum-seekers on the islands working alongside grassroots organisations to collect and dispose of this waste, rubbish rapidly piles up again due to the high numbers of people in the camps and the lack of adequate waste management.

The inhumane living conditions in the Aegean camps outlined above violate numerous human rights. They deny asylum-seekers their rights to *dignity, liberty and security of person*, their right to *rest* and to a *standard of living adequate for the[ir] health and well-being*.



top: **Rubbish piles in Moria camp on Lesvos** [[The Guardian](#)]

middle: **Plastic pollution in Moria camp on Lesvos** [[TRT World](#)]

bottom: **Waste piled up in Vial camp on Chios during Lockdown** [NGO on Chios]

UN HABITAT'S 5 SLUM INDICATORS

All are indicative of living conditions on the Aegean.



1 LACK OF WATER

There is a severe lack of safe drinking water in the camps. Additionally, there has been no attempts by authorities to improve access for residents.



2 LACK OF SANITATION

Sanitation facilities in all five camps are highly inadequate. People are also forced to wait in long and unregulated queues to use facilities, which often are not functioning.



3 OVERCROWDED CONDITIONS

The hotspot camps are severely overcrowded meaning residents are not provided with sufficient living space.



4 NON-DURABLE HOUSING STRUCTURES

In the camps, there is a distinct lack of durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions. Most residents sleep in temporary housing structures, such as tents and self-constructed shelters.



5 NO SECURITY OF TENURE THAT PREVENTS FORCED EVICTIONS

Camp residents are not effectively protected by the state from unlawful expulsions or treatment. Instead, they are threatened by the state.

6

A summary of [UN Habitat's five slum indicators](#), which are also applicable to the conditions in the Aegean island camps.

B

NUTRITION: food and water

Camp residents must queue to receive distributions of food and water from camp authorities and often spend up to 3 hours queuing for each meal.

The atmosphere in food queues is often tense, and consequently, frustrations stemming from both hunger and long waiting in adverse weather conditions can lead to violence. This makes people nervous about waiting for food and some residents even choose to avoid the food distributions altogether.

The food received by asylum-seekers from camp authorities is unanimously described by grassroots organisations as innutritious, undercooked and insufficient. Both NGOs and asylum-seekers also claim that the distributed food is often spoiled and causes diarrhea.

An [Athens-based nutritionist interviewed by the Washington Post](#) newspaper said that the meals in Moria camp on Lesbos “**most days appeared to fall short of adult and teenage caloric needs**” arguing that people’s food needs increase when they are sleeping outdoors or are chronically sick.



A typical meal distributed to the residents of Vial camp, Chios [Europe Must Act]

“If you eat this food, you won’t recover as easily, it affects your immune system [and] your growth.”

she said.

Camp residents have no choice but to buy food in shops that are located far from camps or inside the camps at greatly inflated prices. Grassroots organisations try to fill this service gap by providing additional nutritious food through distributions or meals in their centres.



Food

In the hotspot camps, people spend up to **3 hours** queuing for each meal. Reports from [Samos](#) even mention waiting times of up to **5 hours**.

Statistics from the Aegean Camps, December 2019 [NGO on the island]



Drinking water requirements in emergency situations [[WHO technical technical notes on drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene in emergencies](#)]

The [WHO regards 2.5 - 3 litres of drinking water per person per day](#) as a minimum requirement for survival in emergency situations. In the Aegean camps - regarded as being in a protracted state of emergency - asylum-seekers receive only around 1.5 litres daily. Grassroots organisations on Chios and Lesvos report that even this quota of 1.5 litres is not always met.

Running water is usually only available in each camp for a few hours each day and as a result, during the lockdown, asylum-seekers on

Chios and Lesvos resorted to digging wells in the contaminated soil of the camps. NGOs reported incidents of children falling into these - as well as other disused wells left uncovered near the camps - and having to be rescued. NGOs have had to use their own funds to create covers for these. This further demonstrates the extent of the life-threatening conditions of the Aegean Island camps.

Residents of Vial camp, on Chios, digging wells due to lack of water, April 2020 [NGO on the island, published on [EMA FB](#)]



C

HEALTH:**access to medical and mental health care****Impact of COVID-19**

Covid-19 made access to food and water in the camps even more precarious. Distributions by camp authorities were reduced from three times a day to twice a day on Chios. This increased waiting times in queues where social distancing was impossible. Restrictive lockdown measures, confining asylum-seekers to the camps, made trips to supermarkets and shops for fresh food either difficult or impossible. Moreover, asylum-seekers' access to food, through distribution by grassroots organisations or in their centres, decreased or stopped altogether during this time. The paradoxical result is that access to food within the camps has decreased at a time when camp residents have become increasingly dependent on it.

There is an extreme shortage of adequate medical facilities and staff in the Aegean camps. On site medical staff - Greek government employees or volunteers of grassroots organisations - are overworked, under-resourced and lacking both medicines and vital equipment. Consequently, only the most acute cases are treated and, generally, chronic illnesses and conditions requiring specialist care (dental, gynecology, optometry) go untreated.

In order to access healthcare, camp residents must wait in long queues, similar to those for food and water. People start queuing [before sunrise](#) and organisations on Samos report that people have resorted to sleeping in front of the doctors' office to ensure that they receive an appointment. Local hospitals on the Aegean Islands are overwhelmed by cases from the camps as they must also meet the needs of the local population. A visit to a hospital outside the camp also requires authorisation from the camp's health office.

As a consequence of inadequate sanitary facilities and limited healthcare bed bugs, scabies and lice are endemic. Minor wounds also go untreated and so often get infected. Whilst NGOs attempt to fill service gaps by providing medical services, laundry facilities and distributing essential supplies to vulnerable groups, the result of the severe overcrowding in the camps is

that they struggle to meet the immense needs of the refugee populations.

In 2017, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, one of the main providers of healthcare in the island camps, deemed the situation in the Aegean camps a '[mental health emergency](#)'. Since this time, camp conditions have further deteriorated as these camps became even more overcrowded.

Asylum-seekers have been forced to flee their home countries as a result of war, violence, persecution or climate disaster. Many have been forced to leave behind or have lost loved ones, some are survivors of torture, trafficking and gender-based violence and all have made the perilous and distressing crossing to the islands on small rubber dinghies. As a result, those arriving on the islands are extremely vulnerable. Medical organisations report extremely poor mental health among inhabitants in the camps with high numbers of people suffering from PTSD, depression and anxiety, experiencing panic attacks, nightmares and psychosis. Self-harm and suicide attempts in the camps are commonplace. There have been instances of 7 year old children [expressing a willingness to die](#), whilst those as young as 2 years old have been observed engaging in self-destructive behaviour. An NGO on Lesbos reports having to address multiple severe cases of self-harm each week in their clinic. *Watch a testimony of*

Youssef about suicides in the camps [here](#).

People who have experienced trauma require time and a safe space to recover. The Aegean island camps do not allow for this. The level of deprivation and the stress of living in inhumane conditions in the camps compounds existing mental health issues among residents as well as creating new trauma. Men, women and children experience further stress, fear and violence. As the process of applying for asylum and receiving a decision on asylum claims takes months or even years, asylum-seekers live in a constant state of uncertainty during this period.

For camp residents suffering from mental health issues, there is little to no support available. The few psychologists and psychiatrists present in the camps are '[overwhelmed](#)' by the scale of people's mental health needs, with only the most extreme cases receiving any kind of support.

As evidenced, people's right to medical care is consistently violated - the acute shortage of appropriate healthcare and mental health support in the overcrowded Aegean camps creates needless suffering everyday. Lives have been lost and will continue to be at risk without a dramatic scaling up of medical services on the islands and an improvement of living conditions.

Impact of Covid-19

The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, which is still in effect for camp residents on the Aegean islands, have made the situation more **critical**. Although the **demand** for both **medical** and **mental health care** have become **more acute**, **provision** in the camps have **further diminished** as medical organisations became even more **overstretched** in the lockdown period. New volunteer staff have been **unable** to reach the islands and patients with severe health conditions are **no longer being sent** to Athens for treatment.

In response to the immense and unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, **refugee communities in the camps** have been **proactively spearheading Covid-19 measures**. They have sewn masks, raised awareness about the virus among residents, maintained handwashing facilities and organised first aid training. To make up for the sudden loss of access to services formerly provided by grassroots organisations, refugees started organising schools, sports sessions and recycling projects within the locked down camps.

On Lesbos, **one grassroots organisation running a clinic observed a marked increase in patients showing signs of domestic abuse and sexual violence**. Organisations also reported that the strain of living in overcrowded camps under lockdown restrictions has **caused mental health needs to spike**.

Reflecting on the poor state of healthcare provision in the camps one coordinator on Chios concluded **“In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, the only thing they will be able to do is isolate the cases and pray for the best.”**

On August 13th, **two cases of Covid-19 in Vial camp on Chios were confirmed**, one EASO employee and one camp resident, both of whom were transferred to Chios' main hospital. Authorities put the **entire camp on lockdown** meaning that all **non-essential service provision** by NGOs and authorities has been **suspended**. Only residents with acute medical needs are allowed out of the camp. By August 18th, there were **three new confirmed cases**, which are being treated in a quarantine space within the camp.

D

LEGAL SUPPORT: access and availability

New asylum law, introduced January 2020

The new asylum law enacted at the start of 2020 means that **asylum applications** on the 5 islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos are to be **adjudicated within 28 days, including appeals**. On the **mainland**, the **regular procedure is 6 months, with 3 months for appeals**. It is therefore **extremely difficult** for asylum-seekers to find lawyers, understand the process, and prepare the required documents by their interview date. The **government can reject cases** if applicants fail to divulge a change of address or miss a deadline. Reasons for appeals must be stated in legal terms, and in Greek.

The Greek Government provides inadequate support and information to asylum-seekers who must navigate an increasingly complex and bureaucratic asylum process. Supplying sparse information in leaflets with problematic translations in asylum-seekers' native languages, the authorities fail to provide asylum applicants with sufficient information about their rights and obligations in the asylum process. Therefore, legal aid NGOs on the islands play a critical role in ensuring that asylum-seekers receive a fair hearing of their asylum claim.

This general lack of legal support from the government and the unpredictability of the procedure, makes the asylum process highly stressful for asylum-seekers. Legal assistance

from grassroots organisations takes many forms, including interview preparation and supporting appeals against rejections. They may also assist with issues including family reunion and the correction of errors made at registration.

Furthermore, the backlog of thousands of first instance and appeal asylum cases means that some asylum-seekers face waits of several years, while newcomers in the camps come and go. This feeling of being ignored or forgotten is also highly detrimental to an individual's mental health. Even those who have finished the initial asylum process face long waits before they can finally receive their passport and leave the island for good. One volunteer on Chios reported a case in August 2020 where

“a student has received his ID but has now been given a date in February 2021 to give his fingerprints for his passport.”

When asylum offices reopened after the lockdown it was reported that mass rejections of asylum claims took place on Lesbos, Leros and Chios. As Turkey is not a safe country for many refugees³, this contradicts Article 19 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights outlined below.

Article 19 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights:

'Collective expulsions are prohibited...No one may be removed, expelled or extradited to a State where there is a serious risk that he or she would be subjected to the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

“When the asylum office on Lesbos reopened, they started by handing out 1,400 rejections and a 10 day deadline to object. When Moria residents tried to go to Mytilini to seek legal help many were fined for violating the Coronavirus regulations.”

Member of an
NGO on Lesbos

In response to these mass rejections, asylum-seekers organised peaceful and orderly demonstrations. On Chios, Leros and Lesbos multiple suicide attempts have taken place in connection with these rejections.

³ One example of this is [Turkey deporting people who have fled conflict in Syria back to this country.](#)

Impact of Covid-19

Legal centres run by grassroot organisations and the government's asylum offices were **forced to close** during the lockdown, with **only a few organisations managing to provide limited support online**. When centres reopened in late May, there was an **enormous backlog** to work through, which further **increased pressure** on already-stretched legal organisations. At the time of writing, even after the official lifting of the lockdown (except in Chios where this is back in place), the **restrictive measures** that confine refugees to the camps **continue to seriously curtail their access to legal centres** located outside of the camps.

The Syrian people, we are fractured. We would not have left Syria had it not been for the war. We went out of prisons and from under bombing planes to a country we thought was the country of justice, but we did not see that here in Chios. We escaped from the war from Syria to Turkey. We saw injustice and humiliation in Turkey, so we escaped from Turkey and crossed the sea on a rubber boat holding our children between our hands. We did not know whether we would drown in the sea or make it across. After we arrived, we were met with rejection and imprisonment and humiliation.



„I asked them:
Why don't you go to the tent to take
shelter from the rain as you are not
going to be sick

They said:
Don't worry we will not get sick, we
came by sea when the sky was raining,
let's have some fun now under that
rain...“

E

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Since the lockdown was imposed in March 2020, children and young adults from the refugee community have not had any access to formal education. Prior to the pandemic only very few children on the Aegean Islands were enrolled in public schools. Now the only type of education available is non-formal education provided by NGOs and the refugee community (see below).

“within the camp there are a few schools built of wood and tarp, completely set up and organised by people from the camp.”


One NGO on Lesbos reports that

Similar education initiatives spearheaded by refugees exist in the camps on Chios and Samos. Often the teachers of these refugee-run schools are, or were themselves, students enrolled in non-formal education centres run by grassroots organisations, thereby passing on knowledge learnt there to other members of their community.

Besides offering opportunities to learn a new language or gain skills which will help them integrate into European society, refugee- and NGO-led

education centres also provide safe spaces for refugee communities to come together. These centres are important as they ensure that people are able to gain a sense of normality, have a hot meal, charge their phone and access wifi.

Without the programmes run by grassroots organisations and the initiatives of refugee communities, the vast majority of asylum-seekers would not receive any education while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. However, whilst these groups provide critical services they are rarely able to provide a full curriculum with a range of subjects or access to schooling 5 days a week. Therefore, even the children and young adults fortunate enough to



Education

3% of 4-17 year olds on the Aegean islands were enrolled in **public schools**.

Non-formal education covers approximately only **28%** of those of school age in the camps.

Impact of Covid-19

Even before the lockdown started, widespread violence and unrest on the Aegean islands in early March had already severely interrupted the work of educational grassroots organisations. One NGO on Lesbos summed up the consequences of these closures for refugees as **“not being able to escape from the surroundings of the camp, not being able to find a distraction from stress and other psychological complaints. For children and young people, [there are] hardly any opportunities to develop.”**

receive non-formal education on the islands continue to miss out on vital knowledge and skills gained from full-time schooling.

Post-lockdown, the extension of restrictive measures continues to limit access to education centres. Resuming operations whilst adhering to Covid-19 regulations has significantly reduced the capacity of many facilities.

In response to the lockdown and ongoing restrictive measures, some grassroots organisations moved classwork online. However, a significant barrier for organisations is camp residents' limited access to the internet in the camps. Of all the Aegean hotspot camps, only Lepida RIC on Leros has WiFi and even this is highly unreliable.

“Our organisation had 450 registered students before the lockdown ... Now we have space for only 90, a decrease of 80 percent. As we had to reduce our class capacity, we also had to reduce our educational offering; we are only providing language classes at the moment.”

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated above, living conditions in the Aegean camps violate numerous fundamental human rights of the refugees and asylum-seekers forced to live there: the right to liberty, to security, to education, to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being and the right to leisure and rest. Furthermore, these conditions have made all camp residents highly vulnerable to Covid-19 whilst the consequences of the ongoing restrictive lockdown measures have also compounded and created further trauma for people.

Confronted with a heightened need for essential services and a diminished capacity to deliver these services, refugees have self-organised medical, educational, leisure and sanitation initiatives. The efforts of the refugee community during the lockdown and beyond, counter the stereotypical portrayals of refugees as helpless victims or dangerous threats. Recognising the invaluable contributions of refugees to the provision of services during the lockdown, the grassroots organisations surveyed reported the importance of supporting refugee initiatives and coordinating actions with refugee communities going forwards.

To safeguard human lives, the

decongestion of the Aegean island camps is essential and on the surface this does appear to be happening. The total population of all Aegean island camps has decreased from 40,000+ in March 2020, to 28,200 by-mid August 2020. However, this decongestion is not the result of structural and humane policy but rather of ad hoc measures with little regard for human life and dignity.

Official relocation to other EU member states is, and has always been, a rare occurrence. Instead, most people are either transferred to the Greek mainland camps or, for certain groups, to hotels and apartments here. Both are less overcrowded than the Aegean camps but tend to be located far away from services. These mainland camps have been termed as '[not appropriate accommodation solutions](#)' and therefore remain an unsuitable long-term approach to the arrival of refugee populations in mainland Greece. Notably, there are very limited opportunities for these people to integrate into Greek communities or find work. The scenario is even worse for the people who are instead deported back to Turkey under the EU-Turkey deal, or [returned](#) to their country of origin through the "[Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration](#)" scheme.

Homelessness has also become a major issue. The precarious situations of the recognised refugees who have left the islands was made clear in June 2020 when people, including families with young children and the elderly, slept rough in [Victoria square](#) in Athens for several days after reportedly being ‘evicted’ from the Aegean camps.

The Greek government has also sped up the decongestion of the camps through the aforementioned mass rejections of asylum claims. All such approaches do not constitute a safe nor sustainable solution to the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean. The final section of this report sets out policy recommendations that will ensure a humane and sustainable resolution of this crisis.

4 This is elaborated on in the section 5.

“The Greek government’s plan to decongest the Aegean islands has been successful, at least on Leros, but the price refugees are paying is high: no new arrivals since March as refugees are prevented to come in [pushbacks at sea]⁴, but on the other hand, people who have received asylum are pushed out of the island camps, which leads to homelessness, either on the islands or on the mainland. In the case of Leros, I can see that many people prefer to be homeless on Leros than the mainland, so we currently have hundreds who are squatting outside the camp in tents or dilapidated buildings.”

کنار هم
ایستاده ایم
در برابر
کرونا ویروس



JOOJI
CORONAVORUS
DIGNIIN CAAFIMAAD
KU SAABSAN
CORONAVIRUS (COVID 19)



VULNERABLE GROUPS AND SUPPORT

„Considering their vulnerability, the most vulnerable (the oldest, pregnant women, sick people...) living in the camp used to be able to cut the food line. They were given a paper by UNHCR to avoid the wait. However, this paper was cancelled at the beginning of the lockdown.

As one food line takes three hours, everyone, including the most vulnerable, has to wait 9 hours per day if they want to have 3 meals a day, no matter their condition.

At the beginning of the lockdown, cleaners stopped coming to the camp. People's wastes are left all around the camp without anyone to clean it. Garbage starts to pile up and "mountains of trash" are growing.

Picture of Ali and Omar cooking food on their makeshift shelter under the Covid prevention signs."

The inhumane living conditions of the Aegean camps pose a risk to the lives of all their inhabitants. Nevertheless, grassroots organisations highlight that several groups of asylum-seekers are particularly vulnerable in this setting. There is, unfortunately, a dearth of accurate data collected by authorities about the numbers of people belonging to these groups. This makes it difficult for both the government and NGOs to provide adequate and sufficient specialised services and support to these people who are at a heightened risk of exploitation, violence, life-threatening illness and having their basic needs met.

Separate safe accommodation in the form of smaller camps or apartments outside of the Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) are provided by the UNHCR and other major NGOs to house exceptionally vulnerable cases. However, as these spaces are very limited, many highly vulnerable people remain in the hotspot camps. Grassroots organisations help to improve these people's situations by providing safe spaces, services and support to vulnerable groups. They also signal and refer cases to the UNHCR, authorities and other NGOs that can provide specialised support. Yet, these actors are also overstretched, operating at maximum capacity and remain unable to meet the immense needs of vulnerable refugee populations on the islands.

Women and girls

In mid-August the UNHCR reported that there are 6,204 adult women and 3,666 girls in the Aegean camps. The dire living conditions in the camps, especially the lack of adequate and safe sanitation facilities and secure living spaces, put women and girls at risk of violence including sexual assault. Sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in the camps also limits their ability to access crucial services such as schooling. Furthermore, the lack of pre- and postnatal care puts the health of pregnant women and their newborns at risk. Insufficient appropriate shelters means that heavily pregnant women sleep on the ground in makeshift shelters or camping tents and those who have just given birth are sent back from hospital with their newborns to these same living conditions.

Grassroots organisations support women and girls by providing daycare for young children, safe women-only spaces, sanitary products and nappies for babies and access to education in schools and community centres. Medical organisations have limited capacity to treat survivors of sexual violence.

The situation in Moria for LGBT people is unbearable...Some have been beaten and even hospitalised in homophobic and transphobic attacks...All have had to repress their identity, living among communities which replicate the persecution they fled in the first place. LGBTQI+ refugees in Moria have been driven from their assigned containers and tents by insults and threats of homophobic and transphobic violence. Some spent the night sleeping in front of the camp offices, waiting for them to reopen so they can beg for relocation.

[Lesvos LGBTQI+ Refugee Solidarity](#)

LGBTIQ+ people

There are an unknown number of LGBTQI+ people living in the Aegean Island camps. Many of these are specifically seeking sanctuary in Europe on the basis that they have experienced persecution in their home countries because of their sexuality, gender identity or gender expression. Almost all countries in the Middle East and a majority in Africa criminalise being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and, in many of these, the death penalty is still used by the state as a punishment. As a huge stigma remains about being LGBTQI+, those who are open about their sexuality also risk violence from their own families and communities.

Since LGBTQI+ asylum seekers live in the camps with people from these regions they remain an extremely vulnerable group on the Aegean Islands. In a recent assessment by Lesvos LGBTQI+ Refugee Solidarity, LGBTQI+ asylum seekers referred to physical safety as being one of their most pressing concerns. Numerous

participants reported that revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity or having it discovered by others had led to violent attacks or receiving death threats -

“asylum seekers reported being beaten, sexually assaulted, threatened with knives and propositioned for sex”.

There is an acute lack of support for LGBTQI+ refugees and the specific challenges that they face on the islands. Moreover, members of the LGBTQI+ refugee community are reluctant to report incidents to the police, as they are often met with homophobic and transphobic comments as well as threats and violence from the police officers. On Samos and Lesvos, LGBTQI+ support groups facilitated by refugees and international volunteers exist to create communities, mutual support networks and provide safe spaces for LGBTQI+ refugees on the islands.

People with disabilities and the elderly

For people with physical disabilities and the elderly in the camps, their impeded mobility means that there are daily challenges to accessing facilities such as toilets and showers, food distributions and other services. People with invisible disabilities are also at a high risk of abuse and the violation of their rights. These groups are particularly impacted by the lack of healthcare provision and support for specialist needs, conditions and injuries.

Grassroots organisations have built pathways and ramps in some of the camps and there is some support for disabled people from the European Asylum Support Office inside the RICs. However, people with disabilities in the Jungle depend heavily on their families, assistance from the refugee community and NGOs.

Elderly people are prioritised for transfers out of the camps to accommodation on islands or mainland to protect them from Covid-19. However, for those that remain within the camps it appears that there is little to no specific support.



Chronically ill

With healthcare provision within the camps limited and focused on acute medical emergencies, chronically ill camp residents struggle to access specialised medical care, treatments or medicine. As there is no effective monitoring system of the health conditions of camp residents, severely and chronically ill people are especially disadvantaged and their conditions often remain unaddressed.



Mental health patients

Camp residents of all ages, many of whom have experienced conflict, violence or persecution prior to arriving on the islands, suffer from complex trauma. Throughout their time in the Aegean camps, however, they are exposed to further violence and discrimination.

As aforementioned, psychosocial care is provided by grassroots organisations who are operating under enormous strains and struggling to meet the high demand for their services. Consequently, mental health issues go undetected and untreated, leading to self-destructive behaviour, alcoholism and drug abuse, self-harm and suicide.

Unaccompanied minors

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported that, in early July 2020, 4,700 unaccompanied minors (UAMs) resided in Greece. Of this number, approximately 1,170 of these were on the Aegean Islands. Unlike adult asylum-seekers, children do not receive cash assistance which reduces their access to fresh food from outside the camp and their ability to top-up their phone credit. Grassroots organisations report incidents of minors being sexually exploited.

There are several forms of support available to UAMs. Within the camps there are Safe Zones for UAMs, defined by the Greek Council for Refugees as “designated supervised spaces within temporary open accommodation sites...[which] should be used as a short-term measure to care for unaccompanied minors...for a maximum of 3 months.” At the end of 2019, however, the average length of time UAMs were living here was between 6-8 months. Furthermore, as these have limited capacity, minors must live in the Jungle areas of the camps when these spaces are full. Moreover, these zones are not always

safe with organisations reporting that fights take place inside and camp residents walk in and out freely.

Although all UAMs are meant to be assigned a legal guardian who helps them with their asylum procedure, there aren't enough guardians for the number of UAMs on the islands. Therefore, it often falls to grassroots organisations and the refugee community to support them and meet their welfare needs. Education and youth centres for minors provide UAMs with a safe space where they can escape realities of the camp.


Finally, young peoples' ages are often missassessed on arrival meaning that minors are registered as adults. Consequently, this prevents them from access to all the support described above.

Single men

As of 18 August 2020, 47% of asylum seekers on the islands are adult men. Whilst some are travelling with family, a large portion have travelled to Europe alone. This group is often misrepresented in European media as dangerous and violent and, as a result, the general public and the authorities treat them accordingly. The asylum claims of single men are not prioritised and have a high chance of being rejected. This leads to lengthy waiting times (up to 3 years) and after receiving two rejections these people are moved to overcrowded jails or detention centres to await deportation. Although grassroots organisations provide some support to single men in community and education centres, there is a lack of service provision tailored to the challenges that this vulnerable group face.

Cultural minorities

The population of the Aegean camps is highly diverse. [UNCHR statistics](#) for 2019 report that the most common nationalities of arrivals are Afghan, Syrian, Congolese, Somali and Palestinian. However, the camps also house Iranians, Algerians, Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Egyptians, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Ugandans, etc. Amongst these nationalities there are also ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, and religious minorities including Syriac and Coptic Christians. Ethnic and religious minorities are vulnerable being singled out in the camps and treated with violence. Support networks that naturally develop along ethnic and religious lines are limited or non-existent for these minorities.



„After I met Abou, I thought “when you entered to one of the camp in Lesbos, you will soon realise that your life is not going to improve but that you will have to face again a lot of hardships. It is not only about the living conditions, but mostly how the system is managed. Who should we blame? Some say that it is Greece’s responsibility because refugees are on their ground. For others, it should be Turkey because refugees came from there. Whereas from others, it is the European Union who should be responsible of because they left Greece suffering at a time when thousand of refugees flowed towards its shores”

Abou is from Iraq and left without his children. He arrived in Moria Camp in december 2019. Whereas he has to wait a year for an interview, his health is deteriorating even if he is taking some pills. While he was looking at a picture of his children, he realised that he might never see them again.“

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Lesvos Legal Center



VIOLENCE AND TENSIONS

„can't wash hands if there is no water
can't stay home if you got none
can't call a doctor if there is no doctor for
you
can't avoid crowds if you live with 21 000
people in a space fit for 3000
can't have freedom of speech if the police
represses your peaceful marches
can't have human rights if laws come out
everyday that take them from you
can't expect change if no one seems to
see you

Currently around the world there is a well known pandemic, but maybe as this story shows there is one more that we do not talk about, this pandemic has been around for much longer, its name: indifference.“

16 out of 21 respondent grassroots organisations reported regular violence - on a weekly or even daily basis - against refugees, asylum-seekers and NGO staff. This violence takes many forms and is perpetrated by a range of actors.

Structural violence: Discrimination and segregation

Refugees and asylum-seekers residing on the Greek islands routinely face discrimination in shops, restaurants, hospitals and other services. They often receive substandard service or are denied it altogether. Whilst this treatment is undeniably evidence of racist and anti-refugee attitudes among authorities and a segment of the local population it should be noted that local people are also increasingly frustrated by the long-term presence of so many incomers living in appalling conditions on their home-islands and putting pressure on already limited services.

Racist and anti-refugee attitudes have manifested in incidents of segregation in public services. Separate queues, one for refugees and one for everyone else, at LIDL supermarkets on Chios and Samos are one such example.

Furthermore, on major ferry operators to and from the islands, Blue Star Ferries, it has been reported that refugees have been refused use of escalators and entry to areas of the ship that should be accessible to everyone.

Verbal and physical violence by the local population

Islanders have also been known to shout remarks at refugees (e.g. “go home”) or demand that they leave public spaces, such as beaches and sports facilities. These acts of discrimination violate European Law, namely Article 21 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Further sources of concern are the more severe forms of verbal and physical violence towards refugees and aid-workers which occur periodically. The most recent wave of critical incidents took place in late February and early March, 2020. In the run-up to this wave of violence, NGOs had been vilified by Greek politicians, and accused of stoking unrest in the camps and aiding people smugglers. On February 5th, deputy minister of migration George Koumoutsakos claimed that

„there is a galaxy of dodgy NGOs operating alongside a network of doctors, lawyers and other people making a mint out of the human misery of these people. They are leeches and these practices must end. All of this contributes to illegal migration.“

Twenty days later, protests by local islanders against the construction of permanent detention centres on their islands erupted and quickly turned violent.

The protests and violence escalated further following the Turkish government's decision to open its borders with Greece, encouraging refugees to travel to Europe. EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen's description of Greece as the "aspída" or „shield“ of the European Union motivated some right-wing groups to physically prevent asylum-seekers from arriving on the islands.

During this period, grassroots organisations on the island of Lesbos reported violent attacks on refugee populations and cases of sexual assault. In March 2020, several suspected arson attacks also took place including an arson attack on the One Happy Family community centre in Moria camp (Lesbos) and a warehouse in Chios town. On Samos and Lesbos, several cars belonging to grassroots organisations were also damaged. Fearing for the safety of their staff and facilities, many grassroots organisations were forced to suspend operations and withdraw staff from the islands. This affected service provision thereby making the already appalling living conditions in the camps worse. These conditions would only deteriorate further during the lockdown and restrictive measures on the camps that followed shortly after.

State violence and pushbacks

Grassroot organisations also highlight the increased occurrence of state-sanctioned violence towards refugees and asylum-seekers. Since asylum-seekers are obliged by Greek asylum law to cooperate with



Life jackets found on the shores of the Aegean islands
[NGO on Chios]

authorities throughout the course of their asylum process, they often choose not to exercise their right to protest and free speech, making them easy targets for intimidation by police. In July 2020, police on Lesbos responded to peaceful demonstrations against mass-rejections with force, injuring a girl and hitting a pregnant woman in the stomach.

Another form of state violence are the 'pushbacks' of dinghies attempting to reach Greece back into Turkish waters. These are a *direct violation of the right to asylum* as outlined in Article 33 of the Geneva Refugee Convention whose compliance all European Member States are committed to by Article 18 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

In July 2020, the Lesvos Legal Centre published a comprehensive report detailing the pushbacks:

“Greek authorities forced migrants into life rafts after intercepting them at sea, or after arresting them following the migrants’ landing in Greece. The Greek authorities subsequently abandoned the occupants of these life rafts at sea, in open water in the Aegean between the Greek islands and Turkey, where they were later rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard.”

These practices constitute a systematic and deliberate violation of international maritime law and human rights that require immediate investigation.

According to *Mare Liberum*, an organisation monitoring human rights

“the Aegean Sea has become a closed militarized zone where brutal tactics are systematically used without any regard for international law, human rights or the lives of refugees. Most often, the Hellenic Coast Guard is the perpetrator, while Frontex and NATO watch and the Turkish Coast Guard postures as the savior of the migrants in distress.”

Whilst official reports show that there have only been a limited number of arrivals over the past few months life-jackets and pieces of boats found discarded onshore on the beaches of Lesbos and Chios suggest otherwise. They constitute further evidence that people have arrived and then been forcibly removed from the islands.

The New York Times estimates the number of people who have been illegally expelled since March 2020 at 1072. Over a wider time frame, Mare liberum believes that

“over 5,000 people have been denied the right to seek asylum in the Aegean Sea and subjected to violence by the European, Greek and Turkish authorities.”

Asylum seekers who have been forced onto and then abandoned on life rafts in the Aegean sea [[Human Rights Watch news](#)]



The pushback methods perpetrated by the Greek Coast Guard documented by Mare Liberum include beating asylum seekers with sticks, the use of firearms, forcing people to leave dinghies and get onto life rafts, dangerous wave-making-maneuvres and the destruction or dismantling of engines. They note both the forceful and illegal return of people to Turkish waters and even the abduction of people who have reached land already.

The numbers of people arriving on the islands and of people stopped (as reported by the Turkish Government and collated by ABR) show how, since 2018, more than 40% of people attempting to cross each month have been intercepted and returned to Turkey. The comparison of the percentage data across the period from January 2018 to July 2020 suggests a surge in the intensity of border control actions, with the figures for the past few months (Apr-Jul 2020) averaging around 80% (see the graph on page 53).

Camp tensions

Camp residents are also at risk of violence perpetrated by other refugees. Outbreaks of violence between refugees occur as a result of

“In discussions with migrants on the Greek island of Lesbos, almost everyone nowadays reports at least one pushback involving themselves, family members or friends. We have heard of over 150 cases since January 2020, as documented by various NGOs and the Turkish Coast Guard.”

MareLiberum

ongoing trauma, poor mental health, drug abuse and frustrations about the abhorrent living conditions in the camps. These often take the form of fights between different ethnicities or nationalities residing in the camps. Furthermore, stabbings and theft are common. The Aegean Island hotspot camps are therefore extremely dangerous places to live. The restrictive measures implemented in response to Covid-19, which are still in place at the time of writing, have served to significantly increase existing tensions. This being said, the camps are not in a constant state of disharmony. Despite the challenging living conditions, camp residents work together, form communities and take care of each other.

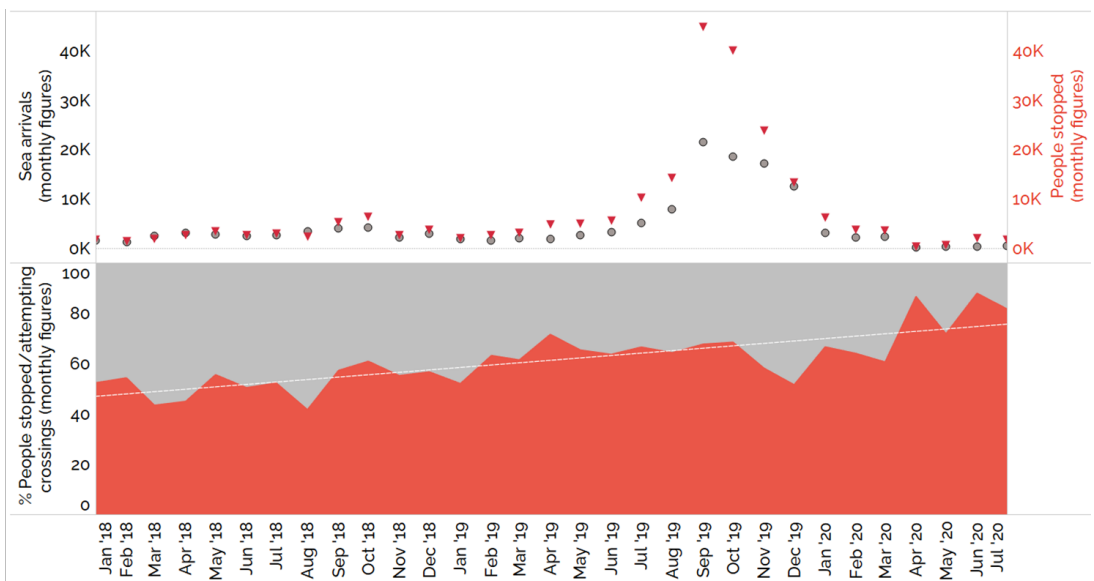
Accountability

Whilst the various verbal and violent incidents aforementioned are commonplace, grassroots organisations widely report that authorities do not follow up on cases and that victims feel apprehensive about reporting crimes. This is largely due to a lack of trust in the authorities - often as a result of prior negative experiences - or a fear of repercussions. Organisations report that law enforcement services on the islands are not only reluctant to act but that they also lack both the

capacity and expertise to professionally deal with incidents in the camp and between locals and refugees.

Furthermore, there are no effective pathways to assistance for victims, official protocols to penalise perpetrators nor measures to protect victims from their attackers after an incident. During the period of instability on the islands during February and March 2020 it was reported that there was a severe lack of support from law enforcement for incidents directed towards refugees and aid-workers.

Monthly numbers of people arriving to the Aegean islands from Turkey and of people stopped as they attempt the crossing. The bottom graph shows which percentage of people attempting to cross are stopped, with a trend line across the whole period (Jan 2018 – Jul 2020). [[Aegean Boat Report](#)]





CHALLENGES FACED BY GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS

„Mohammed, 22 years old from Afghanistan, is helping to organize the lines in front of the only supermarket that is nearby the camp.

He said, “We are 20 volunteers here to prepare the market line everyday, where people can buy food from the market. It is the only market available in the camp and was the only way to buy food since the lockdown. We are giving tickets and numbers and we make sure that we put distance, 1.5 meters, between the people in the line. People are fasting all day long because they will only be given one tomato and one bread for a meal. They would like to have a proper meal without starving after finishing it. I hope the people will be free again to go directly to town to buy food but we don't know when the camp will be open”.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created specific challenges and concerns that threaten the operations of grassroots organisations. Firstly, aid-workers fear that they might contract Covid and spread the virus to camp residents through their work. An outbreak in the camps would be disastrous and spread rapidly as living conditions provide residents with no effective means for social distancing or hand washing and healthcare provision is inadequate.

The lockdown and subsequent restrictive measures⁵ have also forced NGOs on the islands to adapt the way they work in order to avoid being fined by authorities or infection being spread in their spaces. Education and community centres have been closed or are functioning with severely reduced capacity. Search and Rescue organisations (SAR) have also had to halt their rescue operations at sea. Moreover, new volunteers, who are essential to the activities of grassroots organisations' projects, face significant hurdles to reaching the islands. Consequently, staff on the ground face fatigue and burnout as

the increased need for their services coincides with a diminished capacity to provide them.

There is also a growing fear among grassroots organisations that the restrictive measures, initially introduced as temporary measures, will be made permanent. They are concerned that the open camps that existed before the pandemic and allowed residents to access essential services (legal, medical, education, food, etc.) outside of camps, will become "controlled access-exit camps", e.g. closed camps, resembling detention centres. A recent ruling by the [European Court of Justice against Hungary](#) for keeping asylum-seekers in prison-like living conditions, demonstrates that this development constitutes unlawful detention under EU law. However, the [approval of 130 million Euros for closed controlled structures on Leros, Samos and Kos](#) demonstrates that the Greek government and European Commission are moving towards such an approach of housing asylum seekers in detention centres.

⁵ These restrictive measures limit the freedom of movement of asylum-seekers and refugees on the islands and limit NGOs activities inside the camps.

Criminalisation of solidarity

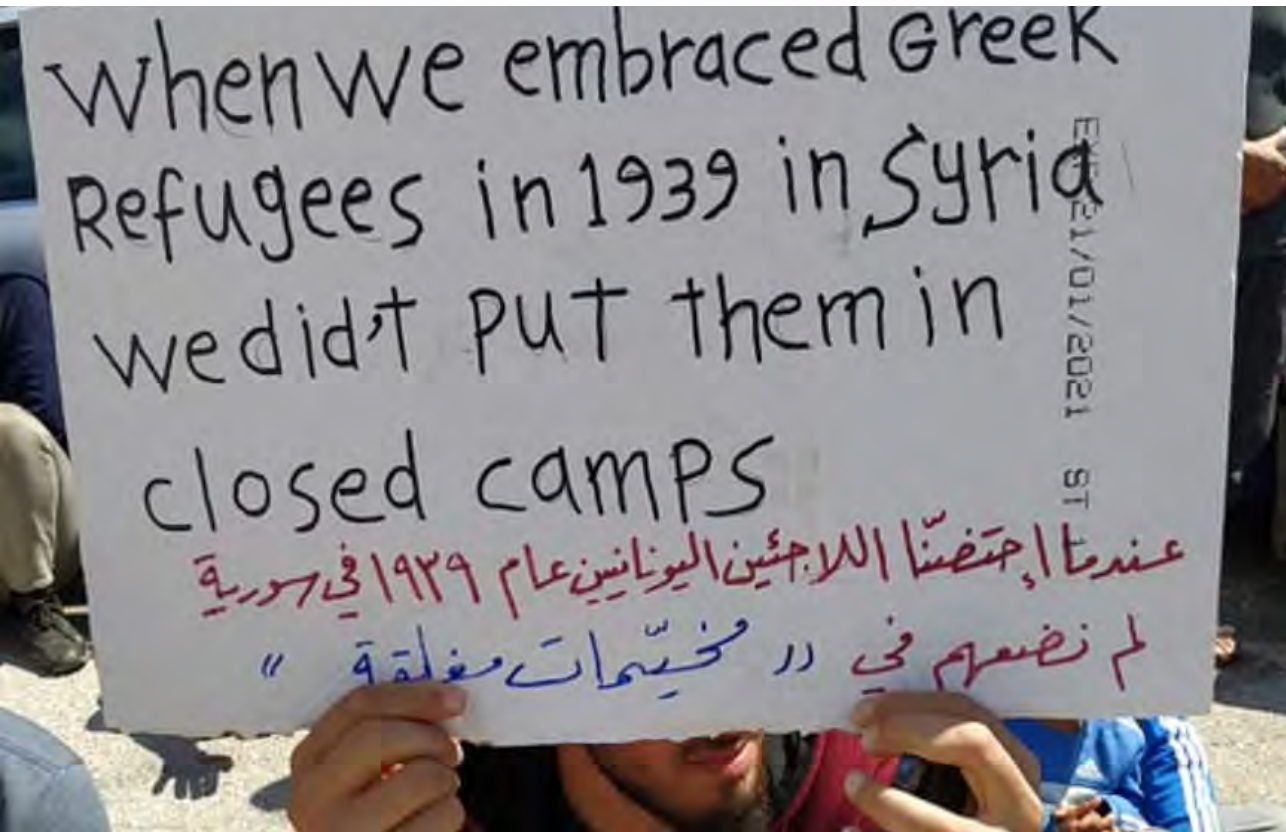
The emphasis on the securitisation of Europe’s external borders by the Greek government and European Union has increased since the period of state-sanctioned violence towards asylum seekers at Greece’s land and sea borders in March 2020.

As humanitarian relief reduces suffering and therefore the effectiveness of a deterrence-based

migration policy, the grassroots organisations that provide it are viewed as threats to government policy. Grassroots organisations therefore face increasing challenges to their work, in the form of ‘the criminalisation of solidarity’.

Grassroots organisations refer to a “power imbalance” existing between them and law enforcement bodies. This is problematic since collaboration and coordination with

A man holding out a sign during peaceful protests on Leros, June 2020 [[Europe Must Act Facebook](#)]



such authorities are paramount to NGOs operating their services. Furthermore, the nature of this relationship presents organisations with an ethical dilemma: remain quiet about human rights abuses committed by authorities in order to continue providing relief or openly question government policies and thus risk losing the ability to assist refugees and asylum-seekers?

Securitisation policies and the criminalisation of solidarity have led to arrests and the prosecution of aid-workers. For example, [Seán Binder and Sarah Mardini](#), two volunteers involved in SAR were arrested by the Greek police on Lesbos in February 2018. “They have been charged with several felonies, including espionage, assisting human-smuggling networks, membership of a criminal organisation, and money laundering. If found guilty, both could face 25 years in prison.” Authorities have also taken advantage of this power imbalance to intimidate aid-workers or try to shut down their organisations. For example, on July 31st 2020, MSF announced the [closure of its Covid-19 centre on Lesbos](#) stating that this

was a direct result of receiving fines and threats of criminal charges by authorities.

Legislation in other European countries also affects organisations’ ability to deliver humanitarian relief on the Aegean islands. In March 2020, the German Ministry for Transport “amended the [‘Regulation on Sea Leisure Yachts and the Regulation on Ship Safety’](#) such that yachts and other small boats which operate in the realms of environmental protection, sea-rescue including observatory missions or other humanitarian purposes,...‘now have to comply with such unreasonable safety requirements, which are not feasible practically.’” This change of law is putting the operations of German-registered SAR and human rights monitoring organisations, such as *Mare Liberum*, at risk.

Since the start of the pandemic the work of SAR and emergency response NGOs, who are heavily dependent on communication and cooperation with authorities including the Hellenic Coast Guard, Port Police and Frontex to do their work, has become increasingly difficult. Covid-19 measures

have been used to curtail their ability to operate, for instance, SAR ships have been subjected to the same Covid-19 limitations as recreational vessels making it difficult, if not impossible, to leave port.

Uncooperative authorities and unsupportive locals

Legal NGOs depend on collaboration with the Greek asylum service, the Greek Dublin Unit and the UNHCR to acquire information on asylum cases and identify legal issues that asylum-seekers experience. Furthermore, numerous NGOs reported that they require acceptance by the local island community and a reasonable relationship with the police in order for their operations to be sustainable and effective. These efforts to collaborate are threatened by two factors. Firstly, authorities are reluctant to exchange information with grassroots organisations. An NGO on Leros reports - “what is most challenging is the lack of communication with the government; we never have any long-term perspectives and always have to react to the challenges instead of being able to plan. E.g. there is the plan to

establish closed facilities alongside the open facilities and we still do not know whether people will be able to come out and attend our classes on offer.” Therefore, the reluctance of authorities to share information reduces the ability of grassroots organisations to proactively provide relief, forcing them instead to hastily react to sudden changes in policy. In each case, this directly impacts those who rely on NGOs’ services.

The second factor putting collaboration at risk is the dwindling support among local islanders for refugees. The EU’s inability to look beyond deterrence and implement fair distribution of asylum seekers across member states is increasing the pressure on island communities. These communities are increasingly polarised between those who want refugees and NGOs to leave and those who continue to be supportive of refugees arriving on their shores.

Funding

A significant structural challenge indicated by the NGOs participating in our survey is their constant struggle to secure funding. All respondents

stipulated that they are funded by private donations and crowdfunding. 12 out of the 21 grassroots also receive funds from private foundations.

Volunteers working for these grassroots organisations need to cover the costs of their travel and stay to the Aegean islands themselves, although some organisations provide free or affordable accommodation and meals. Coordinators and some long-term volunteers (3 months and more) are provided with a stipend. None of the respondent grassroots receive funds from governments, EU-institutions or the United Nations. Regrettably, there is a belief among some of the islanders that NGOs are generously funded by governments and international NGOs thereby leading them to question the humanitarian motivations of aid-workers. These rumors have no foundation in reality.

Conclusion

The presence of NGOs involved in SAR and the provision of relief to refugee populations in the Aegean has been *made necessary* by a deterrence-based inhumane European migration policy and a lack of appropriate infrastructure and support for asylum seekers from the EU, the Greek government and UNHCR. If these organisations remain hindered in the provision of their services or are forced to stop these altogether, the already acute suffering of people living here will increase further and more will needlessly die.

Handwritten graffiti in black ink, possibly a signature or stylized text.

EU

WHERE ARE YOU?!





POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Shifting to a rights-based asylum policy

„This World Refugee Day we saw people power!

Together WE led where politicians failed.
Together WE showed solidarity.
Together WE showed compassion in all kinds of colour.

52 NGOs in Europe/Greece spread #EuropeMustAct.

11 European countries/19 European cities cried #WeHaveSpace.

3 Co-Hosts supported us in a call to ☒ #OpenTheCamps.

4 event actions shared #WorldRefugee-Day realities.

In solidarity we argued FOR fairer health measures. Why?

„No one is safe until everyone is safe.”
(Global Citizen). We all acted for that which is fair, that which is moral, that which is Humane.

This is not where our demands end though. No.”

In light of the abhorrent living conditions of camp residents, the pushbacks and the increasing challenges faced by NGOs, the final section of this report outlines concrete policy recommendations to provide immediate relief to the Aegean camp populations and make structural changes to European migration policy.

Refugees are resilient, driven and resourceful people who are dreaming of a better life in peace. Currently, European migration policy, which assumes refugees are a threat to Europe is based not on this reality but on fear. A new migration policy must put human rights at its core thereby ensuring dignified living conditions and a fair hearing to all who arrive on Europe's shores seeking safety.

Here is what such a rights-based asylum policy could look like:

1

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO PROVIDE RELIEF TO THE AEGEAN CAMPS

- I **Initiating an orderly and humane decongestion of the Aegean camps** with the assistance and support of other European states in relocating asylum-seekers across Europe.
- II **Recognising grassroots organisations and refugees as essential partners and stakeholders** who are regularly consulted and informed by relevant authorities on all aspects of camp management.
- III **Increasing financial and technical assistance** by the European Union and European governments.

2

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGES

- I **Establish safe and legal pathways to Europe** by shifting away from border control programs and deterrence.
- II **Foster solidarity among European states** to enable the physical relocation of asylum-seekers from countries of first arrival to other European states.
- III **Increase the role for European cities and municipalities** in national and European migration policy making. Efforts of cities in the field of reception and integration must be supported by the EU and the Member States' governments through funding and expertise.

„Today 14/07/2020 in Mytilini there was a demonstration by 15 Syrian families. The reason for this demonstration was because these families have gotten 2 rejection on their asylum process and they were asking to be sent to Turkey or Athens were the situation might be more hopeful for them. It is important to understand that The issue with having two rejections is that the consequence is that the UNHCR will cut ones salary and one will no longer be able to receive old from the families food line in Moria.

As a result of this demonstration, a family of 5 (including 3 children and a pregnant mother) got beaten by the Greek police.“

© Yousif Alshewelli
Lesvos Legal Center



1

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS TO PROVIDE RELIEF TO THE AEGEAN CAMPS

| Initiating an orderly and humane decongestion of the Aegean camps

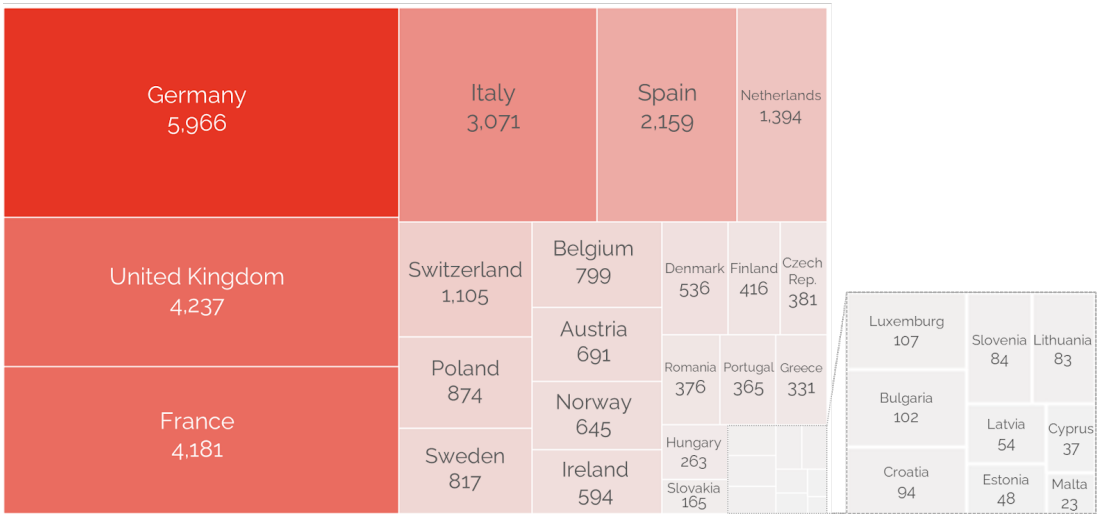
The Aegean camps must be completely evacuated and their residents relocated to reception facilities that ensure dignified living conditions.

This must be managed in a way that is orderly and humane.

It requires the assistance and support of other European states in relocating asylum-seekers across Europe.

The decongestion of the Aegean camps is not a huge logistical challenge. The graph below shows how 30,000 asylum-seekers and refugees (the latest figures being 28,200 as of August 18th 2020) could be distributed among European countries (EU27+3) proportionally to the GDP of each country. A more sophisticated model could be envisaged where other factors are taken into account, such as the number of asylum seekers and refugees currently present in each country. This simplified model, however, aptly demonstrates how manageable it is for people to be equitably distributed across Europe.

Distribution of 30,000 people across EU27+3 countries in proportion to GDP



Suggested distribution of 30,000 people from the Aegean camps to European (EU27+3) countries based on their relative GDP for 2019 [[International Monetary Fond](#)]

|| Recognising grassroots organisations and refugees as essential partners and stakeholders

This report has exemplified the critical roles of grassroots organisations and the refugee community in the provision of essential services and relief. The refugee communities' efforts to self-organise during the lockdown force us to leave behind the image of the helpless refugee and instead recognise refugees as active stakeholders. Grassroots organisations have also proven themselves highly responsive and attuned to the needs of the communities that they serve.

The criminalisation of solidarity must end and bottom-up initiatives supported by effective collaboration and funds.

Both grassroots organisations and refugees must be consulted and informed regularly by relevant authorities on all aspects of camp management.

We ask the authorities to do the following:

A. Give advance warning of upcoming changes to EU, Greek and municipal policies that affect NGOs' work on the ground. This will allow for smoother transitions in cases of changes required to the provision of relief and services.

B. Grant access to resources such as buildings, equipment and funds used by the government and larger humanitarian organisations to increase grassroot and refugee organisations' capacities for service provision.

C. Include and consult grassroots organisations and refugee community representatives in decision and policy making processes.

D. Ensure fair, effective and transparent registration procedures for NGOs as well as transparent and accessible information on legal decisions affecting residency permits of asylum-seekers.

E. Set up or bolster independent and effective monitoring mechanisms that hold FRONTEX, national border agencies and security services to account.

III Increase financial and technical assistance

Although people must be relocated from the Aegean to other European states as soon as possible, a considerable increase of financial and technical assistance to improve the lives of the people living in the camps is urgently required in the meantime. As aforementioned, basic services such as sanitation, healthcare, food, shelter, safety, legal support, education and leisure are all severely lacking.

Greece should not be left to manage the situation in the Aegean by itself.

The European Union and European governments have a moral responsibility to provide relief through the provision of expertise and funds.

Some of this should be earmarked for grassroots organisations (see recommendation II). We recommend that this assistance is used to bolster the following essential services:

A. **Medical care:** Increase the number of medical staff including those trained to provide psycho-social support, medical equipment and, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, adequate quarantine facilities.

B. **Sanitation:** Drastically increase the number of toilets and showers, making sure that these facilities are segregated by sex. Ensure running water 24/7 and the daily provision of a minimum 2.5L of drinking water per person.

C. **Shelter:** Implement the construction of dignified shelters. In the short-term, efforts must be made to ensure that existing shelters in the camps can withstand all weather conditions. Guarantee stockpile of emergency shelters in case of loss of shelter in fires or severe weather.

D. **Legal support:** Boost the number of legal staff available to improve the provision of legal information and support to asylum-seekers, ensuring fair hearing of cases.

E. **Education:** Increase the capacity of non-formal education centres by increasing educational infrastructure

and improve routes to accessing formal education by working with the Greek government.

F. **Internet access:** Internet access must be ensured in the camps and initiatives by grassroots to provide it must be supported.

G. **Leisure:** Ensure the availability of safe spaces as well as facilities for leisure and social activities which are essential for the mental health of camp residents.

2

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGES

| **Establish safe and legal pathways to Europe**

Europe must shift away from increased border control initiatives and fund legal pathways for seeking asylum instead.

People who are forced to migrate as a result of political/economic instability, conflict or persecution will continue to do so. An approach focused on strong borders and deterrence will only make migrants' trajectories more dangerous by increasing their reliance on people-smugglers - it will not stop migration. This has been evidenced by migration experts [Ruben Andersson and David Keen](#). Deterrence and securitisation are counterproductive strategies inspired by fear which have turned a manageable migration flow into a humanitarian disaster.

The [Global Compact on Safe and Regular Migration](#) adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2018 describes various kinds of possibilities for legal pathways and resettlement including humanitarian admission programmes, family reunification, opportunities for skilled migration, labour mobility and education. European governments must establish such pathways and recognise the essential role of municipalities, the private sector and civil society in successfully implementing them.

II Foster solidarity among European states

Solidarity in the form of the physical relocation of asylum-seekers from countries of first arrival to other European states is required.

Although Greece represents 1.91% of the EU27's population and 1.1% of the EU27's GDP it accounted for 12.2% of all 142,400 first-time asylum applicants registered in 2019 in the European Union. This is not European solidarity. The reception of refugees must not be relegated solely to the countries at Europe's external borders as is currently the case. European collaboration in the processes of reception and integration of asylum-seekers is vital.

The Dublin III regulations assign the responsibility for asylum claims to the EU member state where the first application for international protection is lodged. Yet, a lasting resolution to the humanitarian crisis in the Aegean must go beyond an approach in which European states merely send financial and technical assistance to these 'countries of first entry' at Europe's periphery.

Although the United Kingdom is leaving the European Union, just like Norway, Switzerland and Iceland it must be included in an enhanced solidarity mechanism for sharing the responsibility of asylum applications processing.

2

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGES

III Increase the role of European cities and municipalities

Cities must be given a greater voice in National and European migration policy making and their efforts in the field of reception and integration must be supported by EU and the Member States' governments through funding and expertise.

Just like grassroots organisations and refugee initiatives, European cities and municipalities have been largely ignored by European governments in policy discussions on migration. Migration has been considered as a competency of states' central governments. Yet, while protracted policy debates and negotiations take place at the national level, cities and local authorities are the ones who take action - almost every aspect of the reception and integration of newcomers takes place at the local level. Local communities welcome refugees and provide them with accommodation, language classes and employment opportunities. The hard work done by cities in the implementation of these policies justifies their inclusion in the earlier stages of the policy-making process.

We call on policy makers to follow the recommendations of migration experts Petra Bendel, Hannes Schammann, Christiane Heimann and Janina Stürner:

A. Strengthening access to EU funds for municipalities: The results of city-led pilot projects for refugee reception and integration, funded through the Urban Innovative Actions initiative, have demonstrated the high potential of the local level for successful policy innovation in this area (Utrecht, Vienna). Such positive experiences should be strengthened by facilitating municipalities' direct access to EU funding.

B. Giving municipalities a greater say in EU migration policy: Cities can improve the capacity of national governments to make decisions by providing them with up-to-date information, suggesting alternatives, sharing innovative practices, etc.

C. Implementing a municipal relocation mechanism: Giving cities the ability to relocate asylum-seekers to their jurisdiction when they have the capacity allows for the distribution of asylum-seekers to communities that are ready and willing to receive newcomers. This will relieve the pressure Greek communities are experiencing whilst ensuring refugees dignified living conditions. The collaboration between municipal authorities and local stakeholders on the one hand, and supranational institutions (UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF) and national governments on the other, can facilitate the expansion of localised bottom-up resettlement initiatives to complement existing legal pathways to Europe.

CONCLUSION

It is our moral obligation to offer dignified pathways for those seeking asylum and facilitate successful integration into European societies.

If implemented, these recommendations will both improve the lives of people living in the camps in the short-term and create a sustainable migration system which respects human rights and international law in the long-term. Refugees arriving in Europe should not be perceived as threats but recognised for their potential instead.

See here for recommendations by other organisations that Europe Must Act also supports: [IRC](#), [ECRE](#), [Sea to City](#) and [DRC](#).





APPENDIX

methodology

This report is based on qualitative input provided by 21 grassroots organisations based on the Aegean islands. They were invited by email to deliver input in written form to a survey consisting of open-ended questions. The organisations are active in a myriad of service fields: education, legal aid, healthcare, psychosocial support, SAR, human rights monitoring, infrastructure, distribution and emergency response.

The input from grassroots organisations was substantiated by Europe

Must Act volunteers with data from on the ground observations and other sources including relevant reports and articles. After completion of a first draft, the report was shared with the 21 respondent grassroots organisations as well as migration experts for their feedback and approval. This methodology was aimed at producing a broad exploratory study of the humanitarian situation in the Aegean from the ground up, catching general trends and formulating solutions inspired by the experiences of organisations working here.

Survey Questions

1. Camp living conditions: To what extent do camp residents have access to basic infrastructure and support. And how has this changed since Covid-19 restrictions? Please specify which specific camps or locations you are referring to on each point.

- a. Shelter/accommodation
- b. Sanitation
- c. Privacy
- d. Health care and mental health care
- e. Food and water
- f. Legal information and support
- g. Education
- h. Phone/wifi
- i. Leisure and social activities (especially for youths)

2. Are there groups or individuals that are particularly vulnerable (gender, age, nationality, physical or mental health)? Why?

Which forms of support do they currently receive?

Which forms of support do they lack?

3. Do you regularly encounter violence towards refugees/volunteers/NGOs? How frequently?

Which types of violence and by whom? (verbal, intimidation, sexual assaults, raids on shelter, theft,...) For each type, please clarify the type of perpetrator(s).

What happens when these incidents take place (are there forms of accountability or social control)?

What could be done to better protect refugees/volunteers/NGOs?

4. Is your organisation directly involved in SAR or emergency response?

How has Covid-19 impacted your SAR / emergency response efforts?

What could be done to better support your SAR / emergency response efforts?

5. What types of funding does your organisation rely on?

How do your volunteers support themselves financially while working in Greece?

6. Do you collaborate or coordinate with Greek NGOs and/or local authorities to provide your services? If yes, please describe this collaboration with concrete examples.

7. What are the most acute challenges you are currently facing in your work?

What are the more pertinent challenges you are facing? (i.e. long term structural problems, rather than ad hoc symptom-solving).

Which 'good practices' do you see by refugees themselves, local citizens, local NGOs, INGOs, government actors?

How could these be supported better by the Greek government, INGOs or the EU?

Which small actions can make a big difference for the groups you work with? (e.g. small donations, specific types of support,...).

8. Where do you see potential for Europe Must Act to assist you in your work?

Is your organisation undertaking any advocacy efforts?

What is the aim of your advocacy efforts and who are the main targets (e.g. local government; Greek national government; EU, etc.... ?) Please add a link to a webpage(s) where we can learn more about your advocacy efforts.

9. Are there any other concerns / issues not raised in this survey that you consider essential? Please clarify why.

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NO

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