

# When Disaster is met with silence

[Better Days](#) Jan 21

This January marks our third year and fourth winter in Greece. Through this time, we have seen much that has baffled us and saddened us, faced situations that forced us to question ourselves, push ourselves harder, tackle unsolvable dilemmas and conjure solutions where there were none to be found. Together with fellow NGOs, local authorities, and anyone who had the will to help, we have tended to the needs of thousands of people who remain stranded on the island of Lesbos.

Last week another fire broke out in Moria camp, on the Olive Grove, reducing a Rubb hall to ashes. Scores of asylum seekers lost everything they had: the roof over their heads and what valuable or treasure possessions might have survived their journey to Lesbos. Thankfully and to our best knowledge, there were no injuries in this incident. The words do not exist to express our relief. The local police and fire departments, Moria camp authorities, and numerous local NGOs responded immediately to manage the incident; ensure people were safe, accounted for, and quickly moved into new family tents; and to distribute clothes, blankets, and other winter gear.





As a central participant in the migration crisis response of the last three years, Better Days is profoundly familiar with the challenges of executing a response with limited resources and never-ending demands. We have every respect for all those who bend over backwards, day in day out, to stretch every euro. We know them, we work with them. We share and we sympathize with their frustration. In the last few months, huge efforts went into reducing the number of asylum seekers and refugees living in Moria and overflowing onto the adjacent olive groves. While the total population

in Moria decreased from over 8000 to under 5000, however, camp management and NGOs continue to struggle with overcapacity inside the hotspot and many people remain sheltered in tents, exposed to dangerous winter weather.

Despite well-intended efforts to improve conditions on the islands, each winter the limits of these efforts become evident. It has been 3 years, with €1.6B appropriated to improve living conditions on the islands and in the hotspots hosting the refugee population in Greece. And yet last week, in barely three days, two fires broke out in Moria. These fires followed on the heels of the tragic death of a young man in Moria the previous week, on a night where temperatures dipped below zero. At the same time, the response in Samos reels between insufficient resources and a harsh winter. For yet another year, desperation and hopelessness have taken over.



Much as all our instincts push us to appeal — to scream — for the European Union to live up to its principles, we have little energy to spare for European governments who continue to abdicate their responsibilities, and little spirit to add another voice to the chorus that has spent the last three

years screaming into the wind, with little to show for it.

So long as asylum seekers continue suffering in cold and in squalor in camps, we will support efforts to protect them. So long as refugees struggle to integrate to a foreign and strange land, we will continue providing education and social support. We are not alone in this effort. If Lesbos has proved anything, it is that good prevails when concerned individuals, humanitarian organizations, the authorities, and refugees themselves come together around a shared ethos. That extraordinary people, fueled by commitment and solidarity, can bring humanity to the darkest places.



But we must also be honest, with ourselves and with you, about acknowledging the limits of what we, as a small NGO of modest means, working alongside other small NGOs of modest means, working with authorities of small localities with modest means, can do with bare hands to hold back floodwaters. If there is any one week to say enough, to scream in spite the disappointment we know the wind will blow back to us, it was

this last week. Europe, the world's largest trading block, the world's foremost guardian of human rights, is in dereliction — of its legal obligations and of its \ moral foundations.

Moria will resume its rhythm in the coming days. Families who lost everything in last week's fire will scramble, as they have so many times already, to acquire a second pair of socks, to replace their sole winter hat. Crowds will form around the European Asylum Support Office to try to replace documents reduced to ash. We will continue providing educational and social support to women and children from the Olive Grove and Moria. Our friends and partners will distribute clothes and blankets, administer medical care and legal support, offer safe space, open up modest classrooms and playgrounds, open up much bigger hearts. What of our elected officials in Paris and Berlin and Brussels? How much further beyond credulity can we stretch any notion of accountability?



Three years on, the migration crisis has long stopped making headlines. It

takes a particularly grave deed to attract news interest — and even then, the events of the last few weeks barely registered in the international press. EU migration policy remains just as misaligned with reality in January 2019 as it was in the summer of 2015, when arrivals to Lesbos began ticking up. And in the last two weeks, the people living in Moria have paid a terrible price for this.

It feels painfully lonely to continue pushing a humanitarian response amid diminishing attention. Lonelier yet to push this response in the knowledge that only when things go horribly wrong will the rest of the world pay attention. And loneliest when things go horribly wrong and all we hear is silence. That this crisis, or any humanitarian crisis, receives attention only when things go wrong, rather than when people build an ethos of compassion and solidarity and work together make things better, is problematic in and of itself.



But if disaster is met by silence, then what will acknowledge the inspiring

work of hundreds of responders? The generous welcome of the people of Lesvos? The incredible resilience of people living in Moria?

We stand ready to continue making things better in Moria. Yet Lesvos does not suffer from a deficit of local effort, solidarity, or compassion. Europe simply owes more to Lesvos, owes more to the people who make Moria and the Olive Grove their home. To provide solutions that solve problems, that work, that reassure — and that cannot catch fire and be reduced to a heap of ash.