

Migration cluster study visit: Reception and housing conditions for asylum seekers residing in Greece

(Lesvos and Athens, 2nd-4th March 2020)

FEANTSA coordinates a working group on migration whose members are experts in the area of migration and homelessness. One of the major focuses of this working group is the housing conditions of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in several EU Member States, including Greece. In March we coordinated a study visit, designed for the members of the migration cluster to learn more about the material reception conditions for asylum seekers residing in Greece (particularly in Lesvos and Athens) and to better understand the main challenges that both asylum seekers and reception centres face.

List of participants

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- Bo Jochimsen, Projekt Undefor (Denmark)
- Georgiana Mozer, FEANTSA
- Laura Guijarro, Sant Joan de Déu (Spain)
- Lazaros Petromelidis, Greek Housing Network (Greece)
- Maëlle Lena, Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité (France)
- Martin Enquist-Källgren, Stockholm City Mission (Sweden)
- Mauro Striano, FEANTSA

Meeting with Médecins du Monde (MdM) and visit to Kara Tepe refugee camp in Lesvos

During the first day of the study visit Dimitri Patestos, a medical doctor and field coordinator from MdM working in the Moria refugee camp, gave the participants the latest updates on the Lesvos island and the work carried out by MdM. He gave an overview of the situation in the camp and talked about its inability to provide adequate living conditions. Patestos informed the participants about the unhygienic situation in which asylum seekers and refugees live and the desperate lack of medical care and



Moria refugee camp and the surrounding olive groves, photo taken by Dimitris Patestos

sanitation in the overcrowded camps. People queue for hours to have access to food or bathrooms (1 WC per 200 people). Most medical organisations are overwhelmed and access to healthcare for asylum seekers and refugees is challenging. Hotspots in Greece are completely overcrowded, and the numbers of people accommodated in the Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) significantly exceed the centres' capacity. The first refugee camp in Greece opened in 2004 and was closed in 2009 due to the inhumane conditions in which people were living. Around 14,000 refugees were in the camp, many of them unaccompanied children (3,600). After closing this camp, the five hotspots in Greece were created (Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Kos and Leros). The Moria refugee camp opened in 2014 and it originally intended to hold 3,000 people. More than 20,000 now live at the Moria refugee camp, with no electricity, scant water and, for many, no shelter at all.

If conditions are bad in the Moria refugee camp, they are even worse in the surrounding olive groves, an unofficial overflow where refugees and asylum seekers sleep and live in tents, amid the mud and the trees. The Moria refugee camp was originally an RIC where people could go through the first reception procedures: verification of identity and nationality, registration, medical examination and provision of information about the conditions under which they could access the asylum procedure. As explained by Patestos, the camp broke down as an RIC when in 2015 around 20% of the one million asylum seekers who arrived were unable to register because of the high flow of people coming.



Kara Tepe refugee camp, photo taken by Laura Guijarro

At the time of the visit, a particularly tense situation was developing on Lesvos. As explained by Patestos, Greek island communities have shown solidarity and compassion for the refugees, but they have been facing a disproportionate responsibility in hosting a large number of refugees during many years. During the first days of March 2020, residents from Mytilene (the capital of the island of Lesvos) have been expressing their anxiety and frustration through public protest. Moreover, a few days before, on the 27th of February, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Turkey would cease controlling its land and sea borders and start letting migrants enter the EU uninterrupted, breaking the EU-Turkey Deal. The increased inflow of refugees from Turkey further worsened the situation and Greece responded by closing its borders and suspending the right to asylum for one month. All those who arrived would be detained and taken to detention centres or to prison. All these events together with the strained

situation comprising riots, strikes and fascist attacks against refugees, humanitarian workers and NGOs, made it impossible for the participants of the study visit to visit the Moria refugee camp, as was initially planned. However, participants could visit the Kara Tepe refugee camp, which is considered one of the best refugee camps in Europe.

Kara Tepe was created in 2015 and it is located about 2.5km to the northeast of Mytilene. Co-funded by the AMIF (Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund of the European Union), the camp is managed by the Municipality of Mytilene and UNHCR in collaboration with the NGOs that operate there. This camp hosts the asylum seekers that have been transferred from the Moria refugee camp. It was designed to provide temporary housing to the most vulnerable people, including women with children, the elderly, or people with disabilities. The camp hosts

around 1,300 asylum seekers awaiting their registration processes. Most of them are coming from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Palestine. The services at the site are run, in the large part, by several NGOs, among them: International Rescue Committee, Médecins du Monde, Metadrasí, Caritas Hellas, Praksis and Because we Carry.

Residents at Kara Tepe live in prefabricated modules. Primary healthcare and psychosocial support services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare and support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, are provided in the camp. There are common toilets and showers and meals are delivered to each family daily. Within the camp, there is a school, a paediatric practice, a gynaecologist, a hairdresser and even a beauty salon. The place seems quiet and very tidy. Everything appears to be functioning well and without conflicts. Those who reside there can enter and leave the camp at will.

Visit to Eleonas refugee camp and apartments for young asylum seekers in Athens

The second part of the study visit took place in Athens, where participants could visit the Eleonas refugee camp and a Youth Shelter for asylum seekers.

Eleonas refugee camp opened in August 2015 and it was the first official temporary accommodation centre for asylum seekers in Greece. It is a government-run camp supervised by the Greek Migration Ministry. The accommodation units are metallic containers and services, such as primary healthcare, are available on site. Laundry facilities are accessible in the camp together with the provision of hot and potable water. The camp hosts more than



Eleonas refugee camp, photo taken by Mauro Striano



Eleonas refugee camp, photo taken by Mauro Striano

2,000 asylum seekers, the big majority coming from Afghanistan and Syria. It is located in a western suburb of the city of Athens, not far away from an underground station. Each prefabricated module accommodates between 3 and 5 people, toilets and showers are shared. There are no stores nearby, but breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided in the camp. Children go to Greek schools, although they have difficulties getting there because of the camp location, which is located far from the schools and no transportation is provided. One of the main problems of the camps in Greece is that many of them are in remote and industrial areas.

Another important issue is that these camps are designed to provide temporary housing, but they become long-term accommodation sites. Once asylum seekers receive a resolution, they must leave within a short time (6 months to leave the refugee camp if the result is positive, and 1 month if it is negative). Most of the people from the camp have been there for a long time and they face many barriers when it comes to access to housing, such as the lack of sufficient resources to pay a rental guarantee, discrimination in the private rental market, or the lack of knowledge of the national language. Therefore, they become vulnerable to homelessness. Nowadays, there are 14 refugee camps scattered across Greece and another 2 are under construction.

Participants of the study visit also visited an apartment for 25 young asylum seekers (18-24 years old) located in the centre of Athens. The Youth Shelter¹ is operated by Solidarity Now and the Society for the Care of Minors. Those who are accommodated in the apartment previously lived in accommodation facilities for unaccompanied minors, in Greece. These kinds of shelters offer minors hospitality and support during this transition period of their lives, which is also marked by many insecurities. Solidarity Now undertook the management of the Youth Shelter from the beginning of 2018. Apart from the accommodation and food provision, there are other services available, such as: psychosocial support, educational activities (with a focus on Greek language courses), employability counselling or medical escorting, and legal support. As in many of the accommodations offered within the framework of Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA programme), UNHCR gives cash in the form of pre-paid cards to all asylum seekers. Amounts vary depending on the size of the household. For single people, the amount is approximately 150 euros per month. However, for people who receive food, it is 90 euros per month, which is the case of the asylum seekers of this accommodation. Participants could visit the apartment, where they had the opportunity to talk with the social assistant who works there (the other two workers are a woman in charge of cooking and cleaning and the security guard). The apartment has 9 rooms and it looks cold and impersonal. Young asylum seekers usually spend between 1 and 2 years there. If in the meantime, their request for asylum is denied, they have 1 month to leave the centre. In general, authorities lose track of the youth who were rejected asylum once they leave the apartment. A small number of these young people stay in Greece. Most of them end up in other European countries, which has often been their intention since the beginning.

Recommendations

The European Union has been facing a serious humanitarian crisis that concerns hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers who escaped from conflicts in their origin countries and risked their lives to get to a safe place in Europe. Thousands of people are deprived of their most basic rights in the Greek camps. The poor hygienic conditions and unsuitable accommodation in the camps violate EU and Greek laws that require Greece to provide adequate accommodation and reception conditions for asylum seekers.

The Greek government, with support from the European Commission and EU member states, should end the containment policy on the Greek islands and guarantee sufficient and

¹ The Youth Shelter operated by SolidarityNow in partnership with the Society for the Care of Minors and Youth in the framework of the organisation's Accommodation program, is part of the ESTIA - Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation of the UNHCR and funding by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO).

adequate accommodation and services coordinated together with an effective system of European relocation.

Therefore, FEANTSA calls on the European Union to:

- Empower the European Commission to ensure that housing continuity is provided to all individuals who go through an asylum application. People who arrive in the EU to ask for asylum must be immediately provided with adequate accommodation and must not be left without a housing solution at the end of the asylum process, irrespective of the final decision regarding asylum (approved or rejected).
- Reaffirm that everyone has the right to reception and support, regardless of their administrative status. For asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, this involves a guarantee to respect the principle of non-refoulement, and other principles enshrined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Geneva Convention) and of EU law on asylum. Respecting the law i.e. pertaining to provision of material reception conditions ensuring asylum seekers do not end up sleeping rough, or in inadequate accommodation, and are supported in the asylum-seeking process.
- Ensure a reception capacity for refugees and asylum seekers that prevents newcomers from becoming roofless and provides adequate living standards. Higher standards regarding material reception conditions need to be adopted. Moreover, obtaining the status of a refugee does not necessarily mean applicants no longer risk being on the streets; besides the structural lack of adequate housing, refugees generally have to leave within a short time the accommodation provided during the asylum procedure and because of a lack of sufficient resources to pay a rental guarantee and discrimination in the private rental market, they are vulnerable to homelessness. Those whose asylum application is refused and end up residing irregularly are in an even worse situation and low threshold services are often their only recourse, if national legislation allows it.
- Develop and implement an asylum and immigration policy that respects fundamental rights and is coordinated on a European scale, and consequently, put an end to the current system which is inefficient. The current system, based on the Dublin Regulation, further jeopardises newcomers' living conditions and does not encourage the sharing of responsibilities between European countries. A coordinated and effective system of European relocation is needed; a system that takes into account not only Member States' willingness to accept newcomers, but also individuals' hopes regarding the country they aiming for; a system that fully respects the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the States' international obligations. This new system must enable asylum seekers to access the European territory, must evenly distribute the management of the applications from asylum seekers, must give greater consideration to the person's choices in order to enable their social inclusion, and must end the sanctions imposed on secondary movement.

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