



Observation Paper

An overview on the situation in
Mavrovouni Refugee Camp,
Lesvos.

By the participants in the
activities of the programme
“TeamsWorks for Solidarity”
implemented by ELIX



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The main activity of TeamWorks for Solidarity project took place from 08/09/2021 to 22/09/2021 in Lesvos, where volunteers had the chance to participate in educational activities for the youth living in the Refugee Camp in Mavrovouni, a new camp built after the devastating fire of Moria Camp. This observation paper, initially drafted by the participants of this project, aims to provide an overview on the situation and educational process in the new camp. This paper is structured as follows: First, a brief description on Lesvos Island will be provided. Following a brief contextualization on the conditions attained to the new camp, and the living conditions of the dwellers. Next section is focused on how education is being provided, and the initiatives to support youth learning process will be described. Last, a final observation and recommendations will be discussed.

1. LESVOS: A GATE TO EUROPE

Lesvos Island, is located in the North-East of Aegean Sea. Once a paradisiacal tourist destination, nowadays the collective imaginary hold a different perception of the island. Due to its proximity to the Turkish coastline, the island has become the gate to Europe, the gate for a long desired life free from violence, insecurity and poverty. According to the European Commission (2017) more than 1 million refugees have reached the island. UNHRC report (2021) reveals that in 2021 a total of 2,047 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece by sea. The ongoing humanitarian crisis and conflict taking place in the Middle East have pushed thousands to cross the Turkish borders and land in Lesvos. When the Syrian war burst in 2015, many Syrians attempted to reach the Greek islands. However, in the last years the arrival of refugees from Afghanistan (30%), and many African countries such as Somalia (17%), Democratic Republic of Congo (12%) has been significant. It is remarkable that more than half of the population is women (24%) and children (31%)¹. According to UNICEF Country Annual report 2020, in 2020 refugee and migrant children arrivals in Greece, 4.520 children arrived, of whom 58% were boys, and 42% girls and the majority arrived at the islands. In this matter, Lesvos received the majority (56%) of all new arrivals.

The recent data offered by Greek Council of Refugees and Oxfam (8th September, 2021) shows that there are 4130 refugees living in Lesvos, and the vast majority of them live in Mavrovouni Camp , in dire living conditions. 20 % of the dwellers are women, and children account for 32% per cent of the population, whom nearly 7 out of 10 are younger than 12 years old (GCR and Oxfam briefing, 2021).

2. FROM MORIA TO MAVROVOUNI

Moria camp, one of the first camps built in Lesvos island, was the depicted as the graveyard of the human rights, “where human rights violations were commonplace” (Mecca, 2018).Moria Camp known by being

¹ Retrieved from UNHCR, the UN refugee agency (2021) Greece

largely overcrowded, offering dehumanized living conditions, lack of security, and where basic human needs were unfulfilled (in terms of food, water, or sanitization)² were one of the many deficiencies detected. After the fires in Moria Camp burned the facility down, approximately 12.000 refugees were displaced, including 4.200 children. The Greek government built a temporary site in order to provide a quick response to this tragedy. However, Mavrovouni has already been nicknamed as Moria 2.0, as the living conditions have hardly improved despite the funding of the European Union³.

Although during the interventions of TeamWorks for Solidarity, we witnessed the construction of new and better foundation houses, the camp has been built at the seashore, and many refugees still live in tents with no shade or access to cooling utilities. This extreme weather conditions make the living in the new camp hardly bearable. Moreover, the roads within the camps were not concrete, but stone or soil, which make the movement within the camp difficult. This represents a challenge particularly for the elderly that many could not freely move and could not move at all.

Electricity was not apparently fully provided in the tents, as one of the students we assisted during our interventions manifested that they needed to wait some hours before they could cook and prepare the lunch due to the lack of electricity.

The water and sanitation facilities were located in each section of the camp, in which we saw many male refugees utilizing them. However, an immediate question that popped to our minds was, and what about the women? How women's specific necessities regarding hygiene are being addressed? In this matter, a study conducted by Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH cited by GCR and OXFAM, 2021) demonstrated that many women fear using the toilet facilities, showers and water points particularly after the dark. This shows the pressing urgency to include gender perspective within the planning, structuring and organization of the camp in order not only to guarantee women's integrity but also to guarantee their basic needs.

Accessibility and connectivity with the outside world draw our attention. While taking the transportation back to our accommodation, a line of people heading to the city of Mytilene could be seen from the distance. Many of the Mavrovouni camp dwellers went to the city in order to do their groceries, but the travel costs of the local public bus were too high for a very modest monthly stipend. The journey to the nearest supermarket might have taken more than 2 hours, a highly significant time consuming activity. Many of the people heading towards Mytilene were women, children or families. Accessing and exiting the camp was guarded by the police forces, which carefully controlled who were entering the camp. However, recent reports and studies conducted by Greece Council of Refugees claimed that under the umbrella of COVID-19 pandemic measures, refugees are subjected to disproportionate measures on their movement. In words of Dr. Nabiha Islam, a Canadian doctor who has worked with refugees in Lesbos (2021)⁴, the

² Greece Country Report 2021

³ Retrieved from : Lesbos After Moria fire: "People are still living in tents by the sea". DW (n.d)

⁴ Retrieved from: Dr. Nabiha Islam (2021): As a doctor in a European Refugee camp, I found eep neglect and xenophobia. The New Humanitarian

dehumanization of the refugees and violations of their rights started long ago, yet, the pandemic has provided a pretext to justify the racist, islamophobic, xenophobic policies.

The mentioned research claims that during weekdays the refugees are only permitted to exit the camp for three hours and on Sundays they are prohibited to leave the camp (Greece Council of Refugees and Oxfam, 2021).

Overall, the pandemic of COVID-19 effected the migrant and refugee population on Lesbos Island probably more than the rest of the population. The situation worsened much more with the people having many more restrictions than the other population. Much more information about the measures is described in the "Agnodiki" plan, developed by the Ministry of Migration Policy. Although, this plan is synchronized with the measures for the total population of Greece for pandemic-19, the plan made many aspects of refugee and migrant lives difficult such as education. Children could not attend school even when schools were open as many Sites were considered to be in "lockdown" at times when there was no lockdown in the rest country (e.g period September-October 2020).

3. EDUCATION and REFUGEES

Education is a human right, and as such children's access to education should be guaranteed (Maldonado, 2017). The New York Declaration of Refugees and Migrants highlight that education is a critical element of the international refugee response (UNHCR, n.d.). Moreover, education is a basic human right enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee convention (UNHCR, n.d). Education is a powerful mean that protects refugee youth from forced recruitment, and strengthens community resilience. Furthermore, education empowers by providing refugees knowledge and skills to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives, hence it represent a paramount mean to rebuild their lives (UNHCR, n.d).

Efforts to ensure the education at the Mavrovouni RIC were significant. Different local and international organizations were in charge of the education, such as Eurorelief, Metadrasi to name a few.

Concerning Eurorelief, for example, this organization has organized provisional schools in form of a tent, in which small groups of children attended different types of lessons. Children seemed to enjoy this very much, and provided them a sense of stability, progress and joy. We witnessed a flute concert, in which children played all together. This activity might have reinforced children's self-stem and provided them a sense of accomplishment and pride. This is very critical, particularly when dealing with refuge children who may suffer from trauma and psychological distress.

However, the deficit on resources was visible: not enough educational resources, not suitable facilities for children. The lessons were conducted in tents, which are exposed to the extreme weather conditions. Apart from this, the surroundings of the school with no nature, and stoned-ground did not seem very suitable to create a friendly learning environment. Lack of tables, toys, chairs, educational materials and so on, made

the task of educational facilitators/ teachers very challenging. Apart from this, NGOs organized volunteers to do home visits, aiming to support the educational process of the refugee children. These sessions had the shape of non-formal education, in which volunteers employed a wide range of dynamics activities such as games, storytelling and songs. Materials were provided by the organization, in which consisted of activities sheets, a story, that in combination with the contribution of volunteers, created a dynamics, and fun lessons. This home visits had a great positive impact on the children: first, these were provided in their homes, which represent a safe place for them. Second, many parents were present during when this were held, which highly motivated children to actively participate in these sessions. Moreover, we could see how cooperative these children were, when these were helping other children or even their parents to follow the lessons by translating the content to their own languages. Volunteers also took into account the cultural background of the refugees, by asking them how certain words were in Farsi. These actions promoted the sense of pride and belonging, as students felt their cultural and linguistic background as being included. Many refugee children expressed their content, and requested more lessons with the participants “Teacher come tomorrow” was a repeated demand from the refugee children. This outreach provided participants of the project a great chance to understand the socioeconomic realities of refugee children.

Apart from this, lessons were conducted in a school bus managed by Metadrasi, which represents some advantages and challenges equally. Safeguard from the weather and extreme heat in the summer, yet lessons in a small and closed facility had clear limitation on the mobility and space. Teacher working in this adapted-bus school were refugees as well, a benefit from the communication point of view.

Nevertheless, participants of TeamWorks for Solidarity project witnessed how gender disparities’ also affected the education of the girl refugees. A 15 year old girl was not attending school, as she was required to stay at home and fulfill all the domestic duties in order to support her family. This is a clear example of how gender stereotypes affect women and men differently, and the urgency to understand the specific needs of refugee girls within the educational provision. Based on the traditional roles, in which women’s domain belongs to the home/ private sphere, many girls are prevented from receiving education. There is an emergency to include gender perspective within the educational plan to better address the specific vulnerabilities of refugee girls, and to ensure their right to access to education.

4. FINAL COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Alleviating the distress and procuring a humanize response based on human rights for refugees should be the guiding pillar the interventions for this vulnerable population. Mavrovouni camp provided a great experience for volunteers to become aware of the challenges, and living conditions of refugees. Limited accessibility, limited provision to meet human’s basic needs make up the living environment in Mavrovouni camp. Yet, seeing signs of resilience, in which the dwellers of the camp tried to normalize their life and feed their hopes for a better life, was beyond impressive. Seeing children playing all together, people finding ways through art, music and the daily life showed strength, courage and a great power will to find ways to adapt to the difficult situation.

However, significant shortages in the education provision were very prominent. This proves the point that despite the importance of education, humanitarian actions tend to cover the basic needs as food, health and shelter (Gonzalez Maldonado, 2017), education remains being relegated to a non-priority place. Efforts should be made to include education as a pressing need, not only to ensure children's education, but also because it provides a safe space, self-expressing, socializing, provides a sense of normalcy, mitigates the impact of conflict on psychosocial well-being, restores the identity and helps healing the trauma (Gonzalez Maldonado, 2017). Considering all these benefits, non-formal education is a highly valuable as well as beneficial tool to assist the psychosocial rehabilitation of refugee children while fostering life skills. Through the experience of TeamWorks for Solidarity, we could see how non-formal education provided children an amusing way to ease the heavy baggage that many carry on their shoulders while progressing on their own personal and educational development. It is critical that the focus of humanitarian aid incorporates education within their provision, as the future of the youngest generations is at stake. Attempts should be directed to achieve the fulfillment and compliance of human rights conventions and particularly, the rights of children.

As a final recommendation, integrating gender perspective throughout the reception, and plans of the camp are rather pressing. This would not only ensure the integrity of women, but also the human rights of refugee women and girls. Addressing the particular vulnerabilities of girls and women would lead to a better protection of their rights, guarantee equal rights and possibilities to have a life of dignity. Reception centers and accommodation facilities need to take into account safety and accessibility of women, as well as protection of women against gender-based violence. Last, initiatives to reach all girls in the camp and guarantee their accessibility to education is a prime priority. In this way, girls and women exposure to violence and vulnerable situations would be prevented.