

Migrants and refugees facing the Covid-19 crisis, what lessons for the post-pandemic time?

Europe Must Act is a campaign movement that seeks a more humane and fair migration policy for Europe. We are a platform for grassroots organisations which actively support refugees and asylum seekers on the Aegean islands and mainland Greece. Throughout the lock-down, members of Europe Must Act have been on the ground, directly involved with providing relief and observing the rapid deterioration of living conditions that were already appalling before the lock-down.

The lack of adequate sanitary facilities and the overpopulation of the camps (e.g. the hotspot camp on Chios was designed for 1000 but now has nearly 5000 residents), made the most basic protective measures against Covid-19, handwashing and social distancing, impossible for camp residents. These conditions make everyone living in the Aegean camps highly vulnerable to Covid-19.

In these difficult circumstances, grassroots organisations stepped in to provide much-needed services to meet the basic human rights needs of camp residents. Here are some examples from Vial camp on Chios.

- a) Action for Education set up a simple online learning tool for their high school students, ensuring continued access to education.
- b) To help camp residents protect themselves against Covid-19, grassroots organisations fundraised to distribute hygiene packs and water tanks. Requests to distribute these essential items were ignored by camp management and authorities, even after camp residents resorted to digging wells because water had become scarce.
- c) When fires hit the camps, grassroots organisations scrambled to provide clothing and tents to camp residents who had lost their belongings. They were ready to hand over these supplies to camp management but the effort was blocked by authorities. Only after two-and-a-half weeks was distribution of tents allowed. Distribution of clothes has still not been allowed.

The reluctance of authorities to collaborate with grassroots delayed or made impossible the provision of essential aid. Distributions coordinated with camp management and authorities could have taken place with respect for lock-down measures and helped to protect camp residents.

Since the 15th of June, Greece has started receiving tourists, but for the residents of the camps nothing has changed. They are still subject to restrictive measures that prevent them from leaving the camps and accessing essential services. A [report](#) published on June 15th the European Centre for Disease Control stated that there is no evidence that quarantine of whole camps limits transmission or is more effective than conventional protection measures.

Furthermore, it can lead to adverse effects on mental health, sexual and gender based violence and non-communicable disease.

So, what are our lessons learned?

The impact of the pandemic has made painfully clear that (1) the system of hotspot camps is inherently flawed and (2) grassroots organizations need to be recognized as essential partners in providing relief.

- 1) The safety of refugees and asylum seekers cannot be guaranteed in the current hotspot system. On the contrary, the system is the root cause why this demographic is still particularly vulnerable to the pandemic. The abovementioned report of the ECDC advises that instead of quarantining camp residents through restrictive measures, an “early evacuation may be more effective in reducing transmission.” Therefore, in order to protect the residents of the hotspot, the Aegean camps must be carefully decongested as soon as possible. The recent mass transfers to the Greek mainland, launched without the proper support, have stranded hundreds of asylum seekers in Athens, where they are at risk of homelessness. This is not a solution.
- 2) Grassroots organizations have a keen understanding of the realities on the ground and the communities they serve, they have ability to swiftly mobilise relief and essential services as well as filling the gaps in general service provision such as adult education and psycho-social support. Recognizing grassroots as valuable partners in humanitarian relief efforts, through collaboration and coordination with authorities and INGOs, will enhance relief and services provided to camp residents. Concretely we ask for:
 - a) Advance warning of upcoming changes to EU and Greek policy that affect our work on the ground. This will allow for more stable and secure provision of relief and services.
 - b) Access to resources, including buildings, equipment and funds, which are used by authorities and larger humanitarian organisations.
 - c) Inclusion in the decision and policy making process through consultation.
 - d) Fair, effective and transparent registration procedures for grassroots organisations.