

More than Six Months Stranded – What Now?

A Joint Policy Brief on the Situation for Displaced Persons in Greece
Executive Summary - October 2016



This policy brief, a joint effort of 12 international and national organizations operating in Greece, outlines the current situation for those stranded throughout the country for over six months since the closure of the northern border and the entry into force of the European Union (EU)-Turkey deal. Our hope is that this briefing and our joint recommendations will be of use to all actors engaged in addressing the situation and improving the response for those in need of protection in Greece.

Acknowledging the complex and evolving operational context in which we work, all stakeholders have a role to play in improving the response and providing the girls, boys, women and men stranded throughout Greece for over six months with the protection, services and support they need to have a dignified life. **In order to improve the response, issues to address by all stakeholders as set out in the policy brief fall within three main areas of concern: (1) the need for humane reception conditions and facilities; (2) access to international protection; and (3) access to accurate, up-to-date and reliable information.**

The Greek Government estimates over 60,000 people fleeing war, poverty and natural disasters are currently stranded within its borders. Those that arrived before the EU-Turkey deal on 19 March 2016—currently an estimated 47,000 people—are living on the mainland in formal “open temporary reception structures” (sites), while those that arrived after—more than 15,000 people as of 14 October 2016—are confined to facilities or sites on the Greek islands bordering Turkey with restricted movement.

Sites throughout Greece vary greatly in their suitability and preparedness to provide short-term, safe accommodation and critically needed social services. On the islands, the overall accommodation capacity is at 7,450, while in reality over 15,000 are living in dangerously overcrowded and sub-standard conditions, while arrivals continue. It is widely acknowledged that many sites do not meet humanitarian standards. Those sites that fall far below standards should be closed immediately, and winterization efforts for all sites should be urgently rolled out to ensure that no one spends the quickly approaching winter months in tents, exposed to the elements.

In addition to addressing substandard accommodations, there is a clear need for health care, specialized services for survivors of gender-based violence, mental health and psychosocial support (PSS), as well as educational opportunities for children and youth, and access to the labor market for adults. Provision of services for more complex conditions is a severe gap. Regarding education, it is positive that efforts are being made to enroll children in reception classes in the Greek public schools; however, it is critical that the Government expedite and expand this process to ensure all children have access, including those 15 to 18 years old. Finally, according to Law 4375/2016, applicants for international protection have access to paid employment; however, this unfortunately, excludes those of the 27,952 pre-registered on the mainland who have yet to complete the registration process and all of those who remain on the islands. Thus, people continue to rely on food, non-food item and financial assistance distributions to meet their basic needs for a significant period of time. This not only extends the need for emergency services, increasing the risk of exploitation, but it also impedes the integration prospects of asylum seekers.

¹ The following numbers have been updated since the drafting of the report. The need to update the numbers indicates the volatile situation on both the islands and the mainland.

² UNHCR, Europe Refugee Emergency, Daily map indicating occupancy and capacity (government figures), as of 13 September 2016.

³ Coordinating Body for the Refugee Crisis Management, Summary statement of refugee flows, 14 October 2015, accessed at: <http://tinyurl.com/zhn9gnh>

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Safety and protection in the sites are issues of increasing concern. Contributing factors to the deteriorating security situation include: lack of information about legal and asylum rights and timelines for various steps of the process; substandard living conditions and food; lack of PSS and mental health services; sanitation facilities without adequate lighting at night or locks on doors; insufficient cross-cultural learning and communication (e.g. lack of interpreters and cultural mediators); and lack of appropriate and timely police involvement when an incident occurs. Unaccompanied children are at particular risk, and many of the 3,779 identified in 2016 have been left without full access to safe accommodation, services, education and family reunification procedures.

Practical and administrative obstacles and delays in accessing the asylum procedure jeopardize the legal status and well-being of thousands of people, while the relocation and family reunification schemes work far too slowly and threaten family unity and integration perspectives. Legal information, counselling and assistance is core to a proper protection-centered humanitarian response; however, in Greece there is a severe lack of coordinated legal service provision. Thousands of people therefore have to navigate a complicated legal asylum system in languages they are not familiar with, starting from police notes upon arrival to an actual interview many months later. With a lack of specialized legal staff, it means that people receive the wrong information, listen to rumors, and at times make harmful decisions for themselves and their families as they are unaware of potential consequences.

The policy brief contains several recommendations to the European Commission, EU Member States, the Greek Government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Asylum Service Office, and other humanitarian actors. In particular, we highlight the need for:

- A **long-term strategic plan and a final list of sites for the islands and mainland** to be developed by the Government of Greece and shared with all responding agencies, in addition to guidance on expediting the approval processes to ensure initiatives, such as our urgent winterization efforts, are rolled out in time. This information is critical for all actors in order to coordinate efforts to improve the living conditions for all.
- The **establishment of a high-level, national decision making body, led by the Government** with active engagement from UNHCR, representatives from Greek and international organizations, and relevant donors, as well as regional and site level mechanisms for planning and coordination.
- Development and clear communication by the Government of **security protocols and the roles and responsibilities of the Hellenic military and police** for each site, in order to ensure the protection of all residents. It is of paramount importance that all humanitarian principles are adhered to by the EU and its Member States.
- An end to the detention of children, including unaccompanied and separated (UASC), and an **increase in the capacity of open, safe, community-based accommodation facilities for UASC**.
- Provision of assistance must follow a **needs-based approach centered on protection**, and ensure non-discrimination. Access to relevant asylum procedures must be provided to all, with first priority given to those most vulnerable.
- Safe and appropriate **urban accommodation and** access to a comprehensive package of **services** should be available.
- Both EU institutions and Member States must fulfill commitments to immediately deploy the asylum and legal staff needed to **support the Greek Asylum Service** with accelerating the asylum, family reunification and relocation processes, and comply with relocation allocations under Council Decisions by immediately making needed places available for those eligible.
- All humanitarian and other actors operating in Greece should dedicate time and resources to ensuring **appropriate coordination and information sharing**, in accordance with do no harm principles and international best practices, always protecting confidentiality.
- All stakeholders should increase **targeted communication with all communities** concerned, to address concerns and ensure they are informed in their own languages, and engaged when possible and appropriate.