

The Refugee crisis and the Greek Public Services:

Mapping of the contribution of public services in Lesvos concerning reception, registration, accommodation and care facilities, and the asylum procedures.¹



Lesvos port, Mytilene, September, 6, 2015, photo Angelos Tzortzinis

Executive Summary

It has now already been five years since the issue of asylum and refugees in Europe has become a high ranking political issue for the European Union (EU) in the context of its founding principles and values, and in view of the binding European and international obligations of the Member States.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Greece has been among the first EU countries to receive the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers, mainly through its maritime borders. As most of the inflow of migrant population was reaching Greece via the Eastern Mediterranean route, it was inevitable that the Eastern Aegean islands, such as Lesvos, sooner or later had to face an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. More than 850,000 people crossed the Mediterranean to reach Europe in 2015 and more than 3,500 people have lost their lives during their dangerous journey. Most of these people were arriving in families, having abandoned their homes in countries ravaged by armed conflicts and people who are persecuted and suffer hostility in their home countries because of their race, political, religious or sexual orientation.

Lesvos island from the beginning of the crisis and during the whole period of our investigation, is a unique example of a local administration that had to adapt and cope with the humanitarian crisis despite the absence of central planning, lack of resources, and the

¹ *The project was administered by Koinoniko Polykentro – ADEDY and carried out by the Aegean University under the supervision of the Associate professor in Sociology Department M. Psimitis.*

legislative vacuum caused by the enactment of the EU/Turkey Agreement that left unprotected a big part of the refugee population stranded on the island.

More specifically, what we see in Lesvos is that a rather new –at least for an EU country– and experimental model of “humanitarian governance,” involving international organisations, European institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). All these entities, in cooperation with the central and regional authorities and the local community, maintained operational control and response to first reception and care necessities, on the assumption that the refugees are there only in the interim, until they could continue their journey to their final destination.

However, the EU/Turkey Deal of March 2016 has drastically changed the situation. The deal refers to the agreement between EU and Turkey to return irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece. Because of the deal, thousands of people were stranded in the places of their “first entry” (as Lesvos) and as a result, created additional needs for resources, especially for health and care services but also required a long-term management plan for local authorities and services.

The scope of the research was twofold: (1) to investigate the readiness of the local authority and of local public services of Lesvos to fulfil the tasks of reception, accommodation, asylum procedures and care facilities in response to the urgent needs of the incoming population before and after the enactment of the EU/Turkey Agreement and (2) to investigate the effects and the humanitarian crisis experience on the existing public services of the island of Lesvos.

The report is organised according to the above research questions in three chapters: the first chapter describes the services and the organizational structures and plans put in place for the three key services: first reception services, health services and asylum services. The second chapter analyses the impact of the crisis on these services and their staff through four case studies: 1. A Case Study for the Healthcare Units (Hospitals - Health Centers) 2. Case Study of Reception Services 3. Case Study of Asylum Services 4. A case study targeting the employees of the above services in respect of their views, attitudes and experiences. The third chapter discusses the main findings of the research and presents specific policy recommendations, with emphasis on training needs, improving working, ensuring adequate resources and effective cooperation among the different public services and other institutions.

The main research outcomes are:

1. The research recorded the insufficiency and lack of material resources (financial, infrastructure and staff shortages) as well as the absence of an effective organizational plan. The personnel of the public services in Lesvos proved to be, from the beginning of the crisis, extremely motivated and made the best use of their non-material resources (knowledge, resourcefulness, innovative action and moral commitment). Thus, it is not surprising that many of the institutional shortages were counterbalanced by the strong efforts of the employees of the public services in Lesvos. Here it should be noted that a big part of the personnel involved in managing the crisis, are employees on temporary contracts in the Municipality, auxiliary health staff, part-time and vouchers at the reception and identification center. A majority of them are in precarious working conditions.

2. As the refugee crisis unfolded in Lesvos, the general climate of solidarity developed all over the island. The initiative and dedication shown by workers in public services was a natural consequence in this climate of solidarity, along with the support to the refugees coming from the residents of the island and volunteers from outside.

3. The lack of cooperation within the public services in Lesvos was one of the weaknesses in the management of the refugee crisis. There was a lack of planning at central level, and problems of coordination between services, thus prompting the municipality to take on the coordinating role and undertaking new tasks and responsibilities.

4. The lack of an integrated plan of action was compensated by 'flexible practices,' in order to deal with the rigid bureaucracy, shortages of material resources, as well overcoming delays.

Policy recommendations based on the findings of the research are:

- Capitalization of the knowledge gained by the services in the face of the refugee crisis.
- The need for employee training schemes for the acquisition of knowledge and special skills in adapting to complex situations.
- The development of a crisis-response organizational plan, following a bottom-up approach from the municipal to state services, with the participation of the workers, and supported by a local coordinating body.
- Implementation of fast-track asylum procedures, along with integration policies for the stranded population of refugees and migrants, in order to alleviate community concerns and to counter the xenophobic rhetoric of right-wing and fascist groups on the island.