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EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – GREECE
16-18 DECEMBER 2015



European Economic and Social Committee

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In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited eleven EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practices of the various actors in the current refugee crisis with the final aim of providing input to EU policy making. The delegation to Greece was composed of Irimi Ivoni Pari (Greece, Employers Group), Nicos Epistithiou (Cyprus, Workers Group) and Cristian Pirvulescu (Romania, Various interests Group). Jean-François Bence, Director of Directorate C and Panagiota Theodoropoulou, Administrator in the President's Private Office took part in the mission. The members visited the island of Lesbos island (Greek-Turkish border) and the Eidomeni area (Greek-FYROM border).

1st day of the mission – Lesbos - 16/12

Meeting in Mytilene with local NGO "Iliaxtida"

"Iliaxtida" is an NGO which belongs to the broader "Chorio tou Oloi mazi" network and fights against the exclusion of vulnerable groups, through consultancy and by creating job opportunities. The members were told that the increased Turkish controls against smugglers in Izmir has only made people enter the island from the other side. The "Chorio tou Oloi Mazi" civil network decided to use the PIKPA youth camp site to host refugees. Since summer 2013, PIKPA has become a true self-administered centre that provides shelter, food and basic health care to vulnerable long-term refugees. Since 2015, the huge influx of refugees (thousands per day) has motivated many organisations to come to Lesbos, some of them with considerable budgets, and competing with each other for publicity and access to funds. At present, although there are several daily coordination meetings held by UNHCR, a lack of coordination prevails. They refer urgent medical cases to the hospital but because of the crisis some specialisations are lacking: Doctors without Borders (MSF) are desperately trying to cover these.

Meeting in Mytilene with the international NGO ProAsyl, and representatives from the "Chorio tou Oloi Mazi" network.

ProAsyl is a German based monitoring NGO that has had a representative in Lesbos on a permanent basis since summer 2015. Chorio tou Oloi Mazi is an organisation that promotes the expansion of individual and collective initiatives related to health, nutrition, an exchange-based economy, support for migrants, education, environment and much more. A lawyer from ProAsyl mentioned that thanks to the "Aegean Refugee Support Programme", ProAsyl can also report violations of human rights at border crossing points, offer support in cases of serious medical problems, and provide legal information to the most vulnerable. A social scientist is the focal point of ProAsyl for vulnerable people. They try to connect victims of shipwrecks with NGOs that can help them. They often collaborate with Turkish networks in order to locate victims of such accidents. There are doctors available from several NGOs but no medical centre for refugees as such.

All asylum-seekers/migrants mentioned that there is a considerable overlap in the activities of the various organisations which leads to either waste of human and material resources (e.g.. more than one organisation preparing food for the same group of people at the same time) or inadequacies and lack of

clarity on who is doing what (free tents in Kara Tepe only allocated to Syrians). Sometimes items are wrongly used, as in the case of blankets distributed by UNICEF. If people didn't have to wait in the rain for hours, blankets would not get wet and be thrown away.

PIKPA camp had been operating for three years without any funds while today they use donations to improve the infrastructure, such as more stable tents. PIKPA remains the best possible accommodation on the island and they still provide food to refugees and migrants, including those living in the Moria reception centre. Asylum-seekers/migrants shared the idea that tighter controls in Turkey will lead to more push-backs and therefore greater loss of life at sea. While volunteers work non-stop for the protection of refugees and migrants, they said officials and professionals work strictly by the clock.

They stressed the absence of prioritisation of vulnerable people during the registration procedure, the national profiling that takes place during registration, the extremely slow-paced registration and relocation, the lack of adequate registration personnel and resources, the fact that foreign officers are not allowed to help with finger-printing of migrants for reasons of national security, the fact that FRONTEX officials only work until 3 p.m.. No referrals are made regarding victims of torture or pregnant women. They further mentioned that unaccompanied minors are detained, while awaiting transfer to a reception centre for minors, tear gas and violence are used by riot police, there is bribery in order to register migrants sooner, the high prices for migrants to travel to Athens or to charge their mobile phones. They suggested the appointment of a coordinator who knows both the local particularities and the refugee issues on a permanent basis and a 24h operational centre to allocate responsibilities and respond in cases of emergency. They also stressed the need to deploy more doctors to hospitals.

2nd day of the mission – Lesvos- 17/12

Visit to the PIKPA refugee camp

In PIKPA, many tents were made of plastic from the boats that refugees and migrants had used to come to Greece. The members had the opportunity to discuss with a Syrian who was recently recognised as a refugee and who used to live in the camp, and a Syrian family waiting to be registered.

Visit to the Moria hot spot

In this hot spot, refugees and migrants are registered and can apply for asylum and relocation. The Moria hot spot is divided into two areas. One area is for applicants who are prima facie refugees according to the UNHCR guidelines (persons from Syria, Eritrea, Central African Republic, Yemen etc.) and one for those who are not (Afghans, Iranians, Moroccans etc.). The members were welcomed by the newly appointed Director of the camp, Mr Kourtis of the Ministry of the Interior, who explained that Frontex was carrying out the nationality assessments and debriefing. He showed to the members the finger-printing offices. One police officer who was in command in the centre explained to them that the other area where the other nationalities are registered is moving more slowly because there are many newcomers and Frontex is not providing services there, as it does in the first area. In Moria, many people were found sleeping in tents under the olive trees and waiting in queues to be registered. Outside the camp there were stands where refugees and migrants needed to pay in to have

their mobile phones charged, together with canteens and kiosks. There were information signs in several languages explaining where they are and where all the procedures take place.

Meeting in Moria with the Greek NGO "Praksis" and a representative from the NGO "Save the Children".

Colleagues from "Praksis" mentioned that the two organisations work together on a common emergency project for unaccompanied minors which combines the protection and better integration of children in Greece. They showed the members the facilities in Moria camp where unaccompanied children are detained for several weeks, until they are transferred to a shelter; they said that they come to accompany the children during weekends. Praksis is renting premises in the town of Mytilene that can host up to 6 children, the most vulnerable cases. Both mentioned that they have psychologists and social workers and they try to look into the family situation of every child, to identify its roots, family bonds in other Member States etc. Unfortunately, due to the length of the relocation procedure, most of the time children don't opt for this solution of being reunited with relatives who reside legally in other EU States. They further explained to the members that the criteria by which they distinguish who is a possible refugee and who is not are arbitrary and shouldn't be based exclusively on the country of origin of the person. This leads to discrimination affecting many children who are excluded from the relocation procedure.

Meeting in Moria with a representative from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and representatives of the Greek asylum service.

In Greece EASO's role focuses on the provision of information on asylum and relocation procedures, detection of false documents during the registration process, matching applicants with the most appropriate MS of relocation and preparing transfers. The representative explained that the number of persons that apply for relocation is still very low. She identified 3 root causes. 1) the number of relocation places that Member States provide remains extremely low; 2) refugees are afraid that they might end up in a country where they will not be able to survive or where they don't have enough connections (family, language, social network), since their preference is not always accommodated; 3) relocation is limited to people from a specific list of countries of origin. It has further been mentioned that it takes time for countries to respond therefore many refugees and migrants get exhausted and want to move on. Representatives of the Greek asylum service pointed out that since police officers have recently received an order to arrest people from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, although they have nowhere to detain them, they remain unregistered and unable to leave Lesbos. On the reception centre fence there was a sign that said that these three nationalities are excluded from ferry ticket booking services.

Visit to Kara Tepe camp

Kara Tepe is a refugee camp that constantly changes function. When the EESC members visited the camp, the director Mr Stavros Mirogiannis of the municipality of Mytilene explained to the members that this camp hosts only Syrian refugees and migrants and that it is no longer used as a registration camp.

Meeting in the town hall of Mytilene with the Vice-Mayor.

Elected to his post in 2014, the Vice-Mayor is responsible for volunteer organisations, youth and support for citizens. A representative of the Mayor of Mytilene was present during the meeting. They both reported that EUR 2 million euros have so far been spent by the municipality for the reception of migrants (cleaning, health, accommodation etc.). They expressed the need for life guards and registration officers. They said that although NGOs hold weekly coordination meetings, it seems that there is no central control. NGOs need to be registered and checked. They suggested that registration of migrants should first of all take place in Turkey. They proposed that the EU use ferries to transfer refugees safely from Turkey to Greece. They mentioned that smugglers very often use fake life jackets and people lose their lives. The Vice-Mayor has actively participated in rescue missions and it is terrible to see dead children.

Meeting with UNHCR representatives in Mytilene

Last summer, the office of UNHCR in Greece became an international office, thus benefiting from a bigger budget and having the capacity to deploy several international officers in the high risk areas of Greece, Lesvos included. The UNHCR coordination officer in Lesvos said that they are currently supplementing the coordination carried out by the State and which must be improved. They work on humanitarian assistance and capacity building in the hot spots. There is more infrastructure in the north, where UNHCR has launched a bus system with capacity for 1 000 people to transfer them from the shore to the registration camps. They provide life-saving support and have rescue vessels that guide refugees and migrants to disembark at safe locations. He further mentioned that heated accommodation places are being set up for the winter. It had been observed that boats were currently moving to the south because of patrols. They advocate relocation of the reception services to a place where people can stay for 1-2 days, no matter where they come from, so that when Moria and Kara Tepe are full, they can still be accommodated (a place with capacity for 10 000-15 000. people). According to testimonies of refugees and migrants, controls in Turkey have been increased. However, people still come. Regarding relocation, the processing time and the few pledges hinder the procedure. They intend to increase their presence in Lesvos by opening an office.

Meeting with representative from Frontex, at the port of Mytilene

The EESC members met the Frontex representative in their office at the main port of Mytilene. The representative claimed that they are not much involved in border control and that in fact this is a huge humanitarian operation and that they have 4 boats for search and rescue, from Sweden, Portugal and Norway. When asked by the members if Frontex is engaged in push-backs, the representative said that according to international law, it is impossible to send these people back. The group was informed that there are 70 international Frontex officers and 17 Greeks working in Moria. They have good cooperation with the Greek police. They started fingerprinting migrants at the end of October. They had difficulty proceeding since Eurodac devices are in Greek. They made a brief presentation of the new RABIT Operation, which is not expected to have its own resources, just more staff involved. They think that migrant flows will not stop anyway, although some smugglers do get arrested. They are not convinced that Greece is incapable of safeguarding the EU's external borders.

Meeting with a representative of the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

The IRC has sent an emergency team which includes coordinators, logisticians, doctors and water and sanitation experts, specialists focusing on human rights protection, the special needs of children in crisis, the prevention of sexual violence and aid for rape survivors. The group was told that IRC are setting up a permanent office in Lesbos, the first time in a developed country. They run 26 offices in the US for resettlement and everything paid for by fundraising (water sanitation, transportation, protection). They are currently opening their own new transit centre for refugees in the north. It is considered that there are coordination issues in Lesbos. Things change frequently and very fast, the logistics are a mess, people don't know what to do or where to go, and there are problems on a humanitarian level. According to the representative, unanswered questions include what is going to happen to the people who are not granted asylum. Everybody focuses on hot spots but Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians are not registered because in they were, they would have to be detained, and where could they be detained?

3rd day of the mission – Eidomeni- 18/12

Arrival in Eidomeni, meeting with volunteers of Kilkis-Refugees and migrants Eidomeni

This local group of volunteers supported refugees and migrants in the area by covering their basic needs, by distributing food, water, basic hygiene products and medical-pharmaceutical support. It had recently been dismantled because some of its members didn't agree with the political decision to allow only three nationalities to cross the borders to FYROM. One of the volunteers in the meeting came from the Netherlands and had managed to collect 7 containers in the Netherlands with donations, simply by publicising it on the internet. They said they had to find quick solutions to resolve the problem of having so many migrants starving, being exposed to bad weather conditions and who needed medical care. The representatives further stressed that in Eidomeni, currently only Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan persons can cross the border, as it has been decided by other EU Member States (such as Austria) that only these nationalities will be accepted. At present, buses with migrants were constantly arriving in Eidomeni on a daily basis from Athens and Kavala. They had to park far away from the camp, in places where there was no infrastructure to support people in transit. This informal procedure that had been followed meant that the infrastructure installed at the borders was almost useless.

Migrants were approaching the borders and receiving humanitarian aid from various NGOs, while walking towards the borders. The members saw refugees and migrants forming queues and waiting to show their papers to the FYROM guards, hoping to pass through. Amongst them there were many children. The guards very often stopped some persons on the pretext that their registration documents were not authentic. People who were rejected had no opportunity to provide explanations. They were immediately directed by the police to go back to the buses and were taken back to Athens.

Meeting with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

The delegation was told that IOM recently launched a new project for emergency returns that would help migrants who voluntarily wished to go back to their home countries to do so with dignity. She highlighted the fact that for migrants who do not manage to cross the border the State hasn't come up with an integrated and holistic approach. The number of persons opting for the return project is very low as it seems that despite the obstacles, they are willing to try and find another way to cross the borders to Western Europe.

Meeting with representatives of the NGO “Praksis”

Praksis provided expert social workers for its work in Eidomeni. They mentioned that since the police does not allow refugees and migrants to stay in the camp and forces them to pass through quickly, refugees don't have enough time to get support. The humanitarian aid supplies that they had been distributing had come from the Red Cross, Caritas Hellas and other NGOs.

Meeting with UNHCR

UNHCR representatives in Eidomeni explained that refugees who manage to pass the border have to walk for approximately 500 metres until they reach a camp in FYROM. From there they can take a bus or a train, provided that they have money, and go to Serbia where after walking for 1 km. they find another refugee camp. It is not known what options are open to refugees and migrants from there on. It had been reported to them that refugees and migrants who don't manage to cross in Eidomeni try to cross in other places, such as the Greek-Bulgarian or the Greek-Albanian border or in a geographic area close to Eidomeni but closer to the mountains where there is no fence. They believe that the nationality checks at the borders do not conform to UNHCR's guidelines and that this is a political decision that takes no account of the individual risk of persecution.

Meeting with a representative from "Doctors without Borders" (MSF)

In Eidomeni, Doctors without Borders established a refugee camp for migrants that initially had room for 200 people, but thousands have stayed in it to date. It was stressed that this camp was set up partly on municipal property and partly on private property. The authorities claim that this is a military zone and refuse to recognise it as a refugee camp and for this reason electricity could not be provided. They also installed chemical toilets and large tents to protect people from the cold and rain. However, refugees and migrants were currently forced to pass through the camp very quickly and this rendered the tents useless. When trying to rent some land, they were harshly criticised by the authorities.

Meeting with a representative from a national NGO, the "Greek Council for Refugees and Migrants"

A lawyer from the NGO who is expert in asylum law and migration identifies the most vulnerable cases that are not allowed to pass the borders and explains to the authorities why these cases should be reconsidered. For those persons whose legal documents are deemed to be false, there is no public service nearby where they can seek to regularise them. They have to travel to Athens or Thessaloniki and, most often, to the entry points close to Turkey where they were first registered. This is time and energy consuming and a big waste of money, she mentioned. Once it has been decided that refugees are not to be allowed to stay in the camp in Eidomeni, it is doubtful whether they can actually communicate their legal issues to GCR's representatives.

Meeting with the Mayor's office of Paionia, in the Town Hall of Polykastro

The EESC members were welcomed by the Mayor. It was made clear that the camp in Eidomeni is illegal. The biggest problem for the Mayor is migrants who will remain in Greece and who can't be

integrated, due to the crisis and the unemployment. The Mayor had suggested that UNHCR should coordinate three areas: food, health and distribution, but they refused, saying that their role should remain subsidiary to that of the State. The Ministry has allocated EUR 100 000 euros to the municipality for spending. This was seen as insufficient even to ensure cleaning services in Eidomeni. The Mayor had suggested stopping the buses far away from the camp. The Mayor wishes to launch a solidarity kitchen for the whole municipality, not only the migrants but first and foremost the citizens of his area. The Mayor would like pre-selection of which people will cross the borders to take place not here in Eidomeni but in Athens. The Mayor could have closed the camp down but didn't do it for humanitarian reasons. It was clear that the Mayor was very concerned with the situation and that the Mayor's primary responsibility was to the citizens of the municipality.

Conclusions

1. **Lack of efficient coordination in locations that need it most:** In both the places visited, the national authorities have either been absent or underrepresented, being unable to provide efficient coordination to the organisations that offer different types of humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants. Coordination, insufficient as it is, is entrusted to international organisations such as the UNHCR or shared amongst various NGOs and representatives of local authorities, and creates uncertainty with a consequent negative impact on the reception of migrants in Greece. The EESC members found that there is no emergency service operating on a 24/7. Moreover, in Eidomeni refugees are prevented from using the facilities of the ad hoc camp, the status of which remains vague. For their part, neither municipalities nor State representatives are trained in how to respond to emergencies.
2. **The relocation scheme is still not very popular:** Although it has been agreed that 66 400 refugees will be relocated from Greece within 2 years, only 30 persons have benefited from this measure up to date. This is due to the fact that Member States do not make enough pledges, they tend to accept only a very limited number of nationalities (those “in clear need of international protection”, meaning those eligible applicants with nationalities who have a very high average EU recognition rate for international protection - Syrians, Eritreans, Iraqis) and at the same time refugees are afraid that they may end up in a country where they cannot be integrated.
3. **Lack of humanitarian services to respond to the refugee crisis:** In Lesbos, there is not enough well-trained personnel to register refugees and migrants. In Eidomeni, there is neither registration nor verification of the authenticity of the refugees' documents by Greece. In addition, there is a lack of medical personnel, food and shelter, and only NGOs are trying to provide these services.
4. **Discrimination towards refugees on the grounds of nationality:** In Greece, triple standards are applied depending on nationality, making the treatment of refugees arbitrary. In Eidomeni, only Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans are allowed to cross the border. This practice is presented as a political decision that does not comply with the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees prohibiting such discrimination. Furthermore, in Lesbos preferential treatment has been granted to persons from other countries such as Eritrea or South Sudan: they are registered faster and more efficiently. To make things worse, relocation States accept refugees only from a few specific countries of origin that have a high ratio of recognition in the EU. As

has been underlined by UNHCR, the assessment of who is entitled to international protection should be made on a case-by-case basis otherwise we risk excluding from protection persons whose lives are at risk in their home countries. The EESC's opinions argue that there should be a presumption that people are first of all considered as refugees.

5. **The Frontex presence is limited:** Frontex has an important role to play not only in saving lives but also in assisting the registration of migrants and refugees and assessing nationality. Unfortunately, the agency does not have its own resources and therefore it is highly dependent on the good will of the Member States. In both the places visited, it was noted that Frontex does not have enough personnel to assist the Greek authorities in registering migrants.
6. **No clear and strategic plan regarding those not entitled to international protection:** The members understood that numerous persons that have either tried to leave Greece but were unable to do so because of their nationality, or whose asylum applications have been rejected. These persons find themselves in a precarious situation, desperately trying to find ways to leave, opening the door to their further exploitation and to growing criminality.
7. **Children's rights at stake:** Unaccompanied minors are detained for several weeks until the moment that a place is found for them in a shelter for minors, and legal protection is limited.
8. **No registration and follow-up of persons who cross the borders to the west:** Since there is no registration authority operating at the borders with FYROM, we do not know if the refugees that crossed the borders have managed to arrive in an EU Member State safely or how they have been treated on their way.
9. **Refugees face abuse and exploitation:** the vulnerable state in which refugees arrive in Greece leaves plenty of scope for them to be further exploited. Very often they have to pay more than an average Greek person for certain services, such as food, ferry tickets, mobile phone charging or hotel rooms. Sometimes they are approached by persons claiming to be representatives of NGOs, but whose motives remain unclear. However, since there is no overall locally operating authority to provide refugees with information on their rights and procedures, and who to address to in order to meet their needs, they end up being open to any kind of abuse, misleading information and exploitation.
10. **The refugee flows will continue:** The members of this mission have noted that all the organisations who are involved in the refugee crisis, as well as the state authorities and the municipalities have insisted that the refugee flows are not expected to diminish, but rather to increase next year.