

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON REFUGEES IN GREECE

refugees  
trauma  
initiative



JUNE 2020

# CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
Life Inside Refugee Camps	5
Life in Towns and Cities	11
Shared Experiences in Camps and Urban Centres	13
Recommendations	18

**Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI)** specialises in psychosocial support to people affected by the trauma associated by war and ongoing displacement. We also train and support humanitarians, helping them to provide the best possible care. By connecting with refugees in their own language, and by providing them with continuing care, support, and guidance informed by therapeutic principles, RTI helps refugees and migrants to heal, process their experiences, and foster integration into society. We are based in Thessaloniki, Greece, and work with a network of local partners across the country. Learn more and support our work at: [www.refugeetrauma.org](http://www.refugeetrauma.org)

**We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this report.**

Many thanks to the individuals from the refugee community who shared their experiences with us. All names have been changed to protect their identities. Photos were taken by participants and shared here with their permission.

Thank you to the following organisations for their inputs and/or assistance with finding participants to contribute to this report: Athens Comic Library, Better Days, Elix, Help Refugees, IHA, Irida Women's Centre, Lighthouse Relief, Mobile Info Team, Northern Lights Aid, Perichoresis, We Are Here.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



"Before COVID-19 my schedule was full, and now it's not. I love being with others and enjoying myself, so now it's really hard," explained 19-year-old Amin. He was speaking to our team over the phone, from Diavata refugee camp, in the rural countryside of North Greece. "Camps are in far places, far from any human being. They are not close to Greek civilisation. It's so painful". When we spoke to him at the end of April, he had been living under confinement measures for over a month. These continued until late May.

Amin is from Iran and arrived in Greece 11 months ago. He was only able to leave the camp once a day due to strict restrictions on movement which were introduced across the country to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Yet with no buses running due to the national lockdown, Amin couldn't go to the nearest city of Thessaloniki, 10km away.<sup>[1]</sup>

"There is no building around us, it's just plain. It's nothing. It feels like we are in another planet, like we are not alive. Sometimes I feel very hopeless and disappointed because other people here are in a worse position than me. I miss the seaside. I want to see a sunset again. These are inexplicable things. Grief is an experience I can never explain."

Amin, 19, from Iran and now living in Diavata Camp, North Greece

In early March, group activities including education and social projects were stopped across Greece, with increasing restrictions as the month went on. In camps, any NGOs not delivering essential services, such as food or medical supplies, had to suddenly halt operations, with many of their international volunteers returning home.

"I had friends [from NGOs] who I used to learn from and now I really feel alone. The biggest problem is the lack of internet connection. I just try to be active every day".

"What would be most helpful to you and other displaced people right now?" we asked. "The most important thing is for people is to be heard. Some people have never been heard in their lives. For me it was when I was 18 years old, someone [from an NGO] was listening to me and really caring about me and wanted to know what's going on in my heart. They helped me take a few steps, learn languages, make a plan, and now I can work on my future. Grief and sadness are what they [refugees] carry always. The rest of the people here need a psychologist."

[1] Mohamad Kasra, Osman Mohammad, Rabih Saad, and Ioanna Terzi, with Anjali Khatri. To Integrate or to Move On? Feinstein International Center, March 2020. <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/thessaloniki>

## The Stories Behind the Statistics

Everyday experiences are being lost behind the statistics about the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true for those already marginalised, such as displaced men, women, and children. 120,000 refugees and migrants live in Greece.[2] At Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI), we spent time talking to the communities we work with and NGO workers about what life has been like for them during the past few months. We heard how stressful circumstances have worsened significantly.

For the 60,000 people living in the overcrowded refugee camps of Greece, which generally lack adequate facilities, it has been near impossible to follow social distancing or appropriate hygiene protocol. With greater police presence and strict regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many have felt isolated, frustrated, and fearful.

People we spoke to living in towns and cities seemed, in general, better able to cope with the additional strain created by COVID-19. Yet many have been affected by the lack of structure and increased uncertainty. For some, the vacuum created when their usual routines were disrupted has been filled by memories of traumatic experiences. The pandemic has added burdens to asylum seekers and refugees, who already face daily and chronic stressors, such as meeting basic needs like food and shelter. For example, from 1st June, some 9,000 people who have received legal refugee status faced government-arranged exits from the reception system without adequate safety nets in place, meaning thousands of certified refugees are at a genuine risk of homelessness.[3]

"Refugees suffer from poverty and hunger. Now they are facing another crisis in their lives, which is a crisis in world. Imagine how it will affect them and their bodies. The sense of fear is very high."

-  
Mehdi, 20, from Iran and now living in Thessaloniki

We heard, in both camps and urban areas that there has not been enough up-to-date and accessible information about the virus, government regulations, or the status of their asylum claims. Without schools, jobs, community centres, or NGO and other activities to attend, some have lost a vital connection to society and their sense of hope and progress. Online initiatives and remote support have attempted to fill the gap. But these depend on access to WiFi or phone data which are huge challenges for most people we spoke with -- adding to feelings of disconnection.

Although we spoke to diverse people with various backgrounds, a common thread emerged from our conversations. The pandemic has impacted their wellbeing in profound ways. While the challenges facing displaced people in Greece and worldwide are complex, some practical solutions can meaningfully improve lives and support integration.

[2] UNHCR Fact Sheet, March 2020: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/76284>

[3] "Greece must ensure safety net and integration

opportunities for refugees - UNHCR", 2nd June 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/6/5ed603924/greece-must-ensure-safety-net-integration-opportunities-refugees-unhcr.htm>

**To decision-makers, funders, and the NGO community, we highlight the following points:**

- There is an increased and urgent need for innovative mental health and psychosocial support for refugees due to COVID-19, and a commitment by the funding community to prioritise and support them.
- As always, but especially during the pandemic, it's crucial there is political will and collaboration to ensure basic needs and human rights of displaced people, including housing and right to asylum.
- Grassroots organisations, who have established trust and relationships with displaced populations are well placed to deliver effective initiatives. To do so, they need long-term partnerships and secured investment.
- To have the greatest impact, programmes should be co-created with members of the refugee community, leveraging their existing capabilities, ideas, and resilience.

# CONTEXT: THE STRINGENT COVID-19 MEASURES IN GREECE

Given the limited capacity of Greece's national healthcare system and economic resilience, its government took swift and strict action to slow the spreading of COVID-19, beginning with much-loved public events like Carnival processions, which were cancelled in February.[4] Schools, shops and services began closing in early March, and by 23rd March, the strictest measures were in place. At this point, one was only allowed to leave their residence with ID and permission requested and received by SMS (or on a paper form). Not doing so risked a fine of 150 euros.

Movement restrictions ended on 4th May for the civilian population, but continued until 21st May for most refugee camps, and 7th June for all island camps and some mainland camps. The government's rationale for the extra lockdown in camps was to protect the populations. Others claim this is discriminatory treatment, serving right-wing agendas to detain refugees at the same time shops and cafes have reopened.[5]

Since the first case of COVID-19 in Greece on 26th February, an outbreak in a camps and other hosting structures were widely feared as being disastrous. Greek authorities introduced stringent measures in the 100 hosting structures across the country: refugee camps, supervised apartments, and hotels. Though measures varied by structure, generally people were confined in place. In most camps, tight limits were put on the number of people allowed to leave. In Moria camp on Lesbos islands, which hosts 19,000 people while intended for 3,000, only 100 people and only one family member could exit

[4] There were just over 500 ICU beds nationwide at the beginning of the crisis, and just under 1000 as of mid-April. Katy Fallon, "How Greece managed to flatten the curve," The Independent, April 8, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-greece-cases-deaths-flatten-curve-update-a9455436.html>

[5] Katy Fallon, "Greece ready to welcome tourists as refugees stay locked down in Lesbos", The Guardian, May 27 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/27/greece-ready-to-welcome-tourists-as-refugees-stay-locked-down-in-lesbos-coronavirus>

the camp at a time since 19th March [6].

In April, three hosting structures experienced COVID-19 outbreaks: Ritsona camp (over 30 confirmed cases), Malakassa camp, both north of Athens, and a hotel in Kranidi in southern Greece (148 reported cases).[7] There has been very little news out of these sites however, so accurate numbers are hard to get. Given the overcrowding and poor sanitation in camps, it's likely they are higher. Most recently, on 4th June, a pregnant woman tested positive for COVID-19 in Nea Kavala camp in North Greece, and has since been quarantined.

As of early June 2020, Greece reportedly had just under 3000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and under 180 deaths, significantly lower than nearby countries. This success likely reflects the stringency of the measures taken, and widespread abiding of them. But what has day-to-day life been like during this period, and how have the strict measures been impacting some of the most vulnerable communities? What would be most helpful and is needed? Drawing on our networks with the refugee and NGO community, the RTI team had conversations in English, Arabic and Farsi to explore these questions.

# LIFE INSIDE REFUGEE CAMPS

Today, 60,000 people live in nearly 40 refugee camps across Greece. Of these, 42,000 individuals live on the Aegean islands, and about 35,000 of these are in camps that have the capacity to host only 5,400. These are cramped and dehumanising conditions.



We spoke to people living in Moria, and Diavata camps and to NGOs that are connected to Eleonas, Lagadakia, Nea Kavala, Kavala, Ritsona, and Serres camps. Several themes emerged on what life has been like inside refugee camps during the pandemic.

## Impossible to follow social distancing or hygiene measures

Keveh had been volunteering as a translator for an NGO in Moria camp, where he lived with his wife and two children. But this came to an end after violent attacks in February and March against refugees and migrants, humanitarian organisations, journalists, and shelters on the Eastern Aegean islands.[8]

[6] Discriminatory Restrictions on Movement Further Contain Migrants in Unsanitary Conditions – And At Risk Of Covid-19 Outbreak," Legal Centre Lesbos, March 30, 2020, <https://legalcentrelesvos.org/2020/03/30/discriminatory-restrictions-on-movement-further-contain-migrants-in-unsanitary-conditions-and-at-risk-of-covid-19-outbreak/>

[7] Katy Fallon, "Greece: 148 refugees test positive for COVID-19, all asymptomatic," Al Jazeera, April 21, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/greece-148-refugees-test-positive-covid-19-asymptomatic-200421134039733.html>

[8] Refugee Support Aegean, 'Timeline of attacks against solidarity', <https://rsaegean.org/en/timeline-of-attacks-against-solidarity/>



Alongside other organisations, the NGO that Keveh worked for was forced to close its services. This included a school for some of the 6500 children living in the camp -- a camp which Keveh described as "worse than hell". Just a few weeks later, the "corona crisis began, and we started to have more problems." Around 20th March, Keveh's wife felt sick so they tried to go to the camp doctor. As elsewhere in the camp, they were faced with long queues with people packed closely together.

"In Moria, it's the worst-case scenario. We saw many people coughing in the clinic lines with no space between each other. If these people have [COVID-19] it's really bad, we could get these diseases. I asked them to keep some distance. Some said 'no, you won't get infected'. I know if it comes to here many people will be affected. We got here on a boat with 62 people. We arrived alive, and now a disease may take our lives."

—  
Keveh, 36, from Afghanistan and father of two.

Fearing for his family's health, Keveh made the difficult decision to "spend more money to keep me and my kids safe" and was able to move his family out of the camp and into an Airbnb apartment in the town centre.

Talking to us from the apartment with his young children playing in the background, he reflected on the impossibility of following social distancing and taking hygiene measures in the camp. "We have to queue one hour for the shower. Many days we don't have water in the camp. We must walk far to get water to wash dishes. In the food line, there are 500-600 people packed together. We have to go three times a day, and usually there is not enough food for everyone who has been queuing, around 300 to 400 people miss out on food."

While Moria Camp has some of the worst conditions of camps in Greece, Keveh's experiences echoes those we heard from other camps. Though most are aware of the recommended measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, it is generally impossible to follow these due to the vast overcrowding and often squalid conditions.

Some camps do not have enough water, taps or showers. This is true particularly for the island camps, and we were also told of a camp near Athens where the water supply was unreliable. This was corroborated by an MSF staff member; "in some parts of Moria camp, there is just one water tap for every 1,300 people and no soap available. Families of five or six have to sleep in spaces of no more than 3 square meters." [9]

We Are Here, an NGO that has been distributing essential items in Nea Kavala camp during the pandemic, shared with us that, "although there were 1,200 new arrivals [from the islands] in the camp recently, only five toilets were added. All public services will be shared even more than before. The new arrivals are housed in such close quarters that there's no ability to socially distance between them."

[9] Médecins Sans Frontières, May 18, 2020. <https://www.msf.org.uk/article/covid-19-bbc-panorama-investigates-squalid-greek-refugee-camps-risking-virus-outbreak>

## Lack of COVID-19 tests and dignified quarantine solutions while accurate numbers of confirmed cases are unknown

As of early June, three camps have had confirmed cases of COVID-19 and went into strict lockdowns: Ritsona with over 30 confirmed cases, Malakassa with one confirmed case, and Nea Kavala with one confirmed case as of June. However, there has been little to no news from these and other camps, with numbers not updated over time, so accurate figures are hard to obtain. Given the proximity of residents, its likely cases are higher than what has been reported so far. Adding to the challenge of accurate numbers is that there has been very little testing.

"Testing is intermittent with different barriers that keep emerging: doctors not coming to administer tests, isolation tent being stolen or tampered with. At the moment [late April] there is a figure of 30-plus identified positive cases, not the figure of the actual disease.

The COVID response has been piecemeal. The kindergarten area was converted into a confinement space, but it only has capacity for 15 people. The remaining 15 have been asked to quarantine in their caravans – which they share with another 5+ people each. Therefore, it's likely that at least another 75 people have been affected."

–  
Lighthouse Relief, NGO in Ritsona Camp

A BBC Panorama TV report on 17th May<sup>[10]</sup> shed light on the overcrowding and poor living conditions in Malakassa camp, where there had been an outbreak, and the high potential for the virus to rapidly spread. One girl with COVID-19, who was hospitalised, had been living in a tent alongside other families in tents, all of whom shared a common space. The report showed a lack of dignified quarantine solutions, with people who had tested positive effectively trapped in new isolation units (small caravans/containers) with their family, without appropriate access to washing or cooking facilities, and stigmatised by other camp residents. Medical support for those with coronavirus symptoms or other conditions was severely lacking and under resourced, with many waiting for hours to see a doctor.

Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) also reported on the dire conditions at Malakassa.<sup>[11]</sup> Sayed (aged 36, Afghanistan), told RSA: "We are locked up in quarantine but living side by side with dozens of others in one big tent. We share the dirty toilets and showers. People's mental health gets worse day by day. On top of the problems we already had, we are now also anxious not to get sick and about not knowing if our families are safe. We don't have anything to defend ourselves so we can only wait for the worse to come. We cannot sleep. Many people had mental health problems already and they are getting worse now. We move towards a very basic struggle trying to survive the virus, the conditions, the dangers. ... Don't leave us alone!"

On 6th May, two asylum seekers who had just arrived in Lesbos island tested positive for COVID-19 and were placed in isolation. On 15th May, local authorities identified another two cases among recent arrivals to Lesbos. All new arrivals to Greece (including foreigners flying into Greek airports) were

[10] Reza Adib, "Coronavirus: Lockdown in a migrant camp." BBC

Panorama, May 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-52704340/coronavirus-lockdown-in-a-migrant-camp>

[11] RSA, "In this place, we have to help ourselves!" –

Malakasa Camp: <https://rsaegean.org/en/quot-in-this-place-we-have-to-help-ourselves-quot-malakasa-camp/>



required to quarantine for 14 days. This included these four individuals and everyone who had arrived with them. However, the quarantine conditions were deplorable; they were housed in tents on the same beaches where they arrived, without sanitation facilities and only limited food and water distributions. [12]



“There was no water in camp, only one spot has water and kids, men, and women have to walk up to 1000 metres to get water from the other side of camp and use it either in toilets or for washing the dishes.”

Photo taken on 23rd March in Moria Camp.

### **Lockdown restrictions and their enforcement led to feelings of intimidation, anxiety, and being trapped**

Though Aisha lives in an apartment near the town of Polykastro, her father, friends, and others she volunteers with at a local NGO, live inside Nea Kavala camp. Like others, she found that the restrictions on movement and increased police presence have felt intimidating to those in the camp, and many have stayed inside rather than risk getting fined when trying to navigate the regulations. An NGO working in Lagkadikia in Northern Greece shared that the police presence during distributions of essential items was sometimes helpful, but agreed that it is always intimidating.

“It’s affecting elderly more and also children. It’s affecting people who are staying in the camp. It affected my elderly father a lot – he used to go out to exercise and go for walk outside. He has problem in his heart. Now he just stays inside, and he has no physical movement”

-  
Aisha, 19, from Syria, living near Polykastro

There was a much greater number of police around camps during lockdown measures, checking anyone entering or leaving. Police gave out fines of 150 euros for not abiding by regulations, such as breaking curfew or not sending an SMS to an automated government line to notify them of your name, address, and reason for movement (a measure for anyone in Greece).[13] To put this into perspective

[12] Harriet Grants, “Coronavirus cases among refugees on Lesbos spark fresh calls for evacuation.” The Guardian, May 14, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/14/coronavirus-cases-among-refugees-on-lesbos-spark-fresh-calls-for-evacuation>

[13] “Forms or text message required to leave house after virus lockdown.” Ekathimerini, March 23, 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/250944/article/ekathimerini/news/forms-or-text-message-required-to-leave-house-after-virus-lockdown>

the sum of 150 euros is added to an asylum seeker's cash card per month.

We heard of many incidents of asylum seekers and refugees receiving fines, including homeless migrants (Mobile Info Team documented 123 fines given to 81 homeless migrants staying in and around Thessaloniki.[14])

A man in Diavata camp, wanted to go to the supermarket to buy a sim card so he could send the required text messages. Police fined him once on his way to the supermarket and once on the way back, despite his attempts to explain himself. In Northern Greece, for a period, police were incorrectly enforcing a 18:00 curfew which was intended only for camps on the islands. Often, there is a language barrier between police and refugees, who often do not speak either Greek or English.

While most hope to appeal and annul fines, some NGOs and refugees feared that the fines would be taken out of people's cash cards. Considering the fine is a month's allowance, this led to panic and anxiety for those who rely on this income to survive. However, this will only be possible with the cooperation of the UNHCR who handles the cash card scheme.



Alongside police presence, some reported increased discrimination and hostility from local people, particularly toward those from countries with high COVID-19 counts such as Iran. "There's been a fear in the village—since before Corona—of refugees bringing disease," shared an NGO which works with communities living inside Lagkadikia camp.

"The vast majority fined were on their way to get food, looking for shelter or possibilities to shower. One third of the people have been fined more than once. One had been fined 5 times. 7 people have been fined twice on the same day. There were four reported incidents of police misconduct, involving insults, threats of physical violence or actual physical violence"

-  
"Homeless can't stay home: Information about police fines for homeless migrants in Thessaloniki" by Mobile Info Team

### **Without internet connection, resources and social support are out of reach**

Around the world, most people during COVID-19 confinement have turned to the internet to connect to others, stay entertained and informed, continue education and livelihoods, and in general to help pass the days. But inside refugee camps, all people we spoke with complained that the Wi-Fi connection, if present, was terrible. In its place, many relied on mobile phone data, but this is difficult and expensive to obtain. "There is a data issue in Moria camp, and if you don't know police officers personally you cannot get permission to go and buy it" shared Keveh.

[14] "Homeless can't stay home: Information about police fines for homeless migrants in Thessaloniki". Mobile Info Team. <https://www.mobileinfoteam.org/police-fines-homeless>

Aisha, speaking of her friends in Nea Kavala camp, said that “usually in Ramadan we watch movies, but now there’s no internet so it’s affecting them [in camps] a lot. They have nothing to do. Without internet it’s very difficult for mental wellbeing.” Before lockdown, many in Nea Kavala camp relied on the nearby OCC community centre in Polykastro for internet connection, which like all community centres closed during the lockdown period.

This lack of connectivity adds to the boredom experienced, especially for children and young people. Even harder is the struggle to connect with friends and family, deepening and provoking feelings of disconnection, isolation, and grief. Though lack of connectivity was felt acutely during lockdown, it’s an ongoing challenge.

“The disparity between those who can afford to top up their data and those who can’t is very apparent now. It’s difficult to assess how the community are responding, and it’s hard to communicate with the community now we cannot go in the camp.”

-  
IHA, Lagkadikia Camp

The lack of an internet connection affects NGOs’ ability to stay in touch with camp communities. Lighthouse Relief said that, “there are too many questions that we just can’t answer. We all do the work that we do for the protection, safeguarding, and wellbeing of the communities with whom we work. What we are doing now is not bad, but it’s also not sufficient.”

### **Collaborative initiatives with camp residents**

Northern Lights is a grassroots organisation, supporting people living in Kavala Perigiali camp. As with all other NGOs, COVID-19 halted their group activities and distribution of non-essential goods, and most of their international volunteers returned to their home countries. The few remaining coordinators and volunteers worked closely with camp management to deliver hygiene items and diapers. They also turned to the community to brainstorm and co-create initiatives with them.

“When we closed down and sent volunteers home, we met with resident volunteers to discuss their ideas. Facemasks were scarce at the time, and so the community decided to make their own. We supplied the sewing machine from our workshop to the camp, and a borrowing system is in place. It’s not enough: there are only five sewing machines for 1,000 people. But, the mix of providing supplies and education made this initiative successful.”

-  
Northern Lights, NGO in Kavala Camp

This kind of collaboration was echoed across camps, bringing a crucial sense of agency and purpose to those involved. For some actors, this is how they were used to operating – understanding that camp residents are best placed to understand their own needs and possess a range of skills, abilities and other resources.

Yet as NGO workers left Greece and those remaining were restricted from entering camps, leveraging the capacity of camp residents became a necessity, as well as the most effective and dignified approach. In Nea Kavala, resident volunteers posted COVID-19 guidelines around the camp, and in Ritsona camp, residents assisted with distributions and outreach.

# LIFE IN TOWNS AND CITIES

Thousands of refugees live in towns and cities in Greece, through urban housing programs, sheltered accommodation managed by NGOs, or privately rented homes. We spoke to individuals living in all three arrangements during the lockdown.

## Those living in urban settings have been better able to cope

"I have become more active during coronavirus as I get up with friends at 8am and try to work out for more than an hour. I'm also trying to learn French," shared 20-year-old Mehdi. He has been living in Greece for four years and is now renting accommodation in Thessaloniki with his siblings. He's been continuing his education, which was disrupted when he left Iran in 2016, as well as working and volunteering at NGOs. Most recently he has been volunteering as a Farsi interpreter at Diavata refugee camp.

Like Mehdi, those living in urban centres have generally been in Greece for a few years, usually after moving out of refugee camps. Being more settled and integrated in local communities, compared to camp life, seems to have helped generate a greater sense of agency, connection to others, and ability to cope during lockdown.

Nehal, 21, told us, "I try to take it easy and say to myself: it's okay, it's not forever, it's just for a while." From Iraq, Nehal is living in an apartment in Thessaloniki, and has been in Greece for three years. During that time, she has participated in RTI's youth programme, and stayed connected to that community and support during lockdown.



Fadi, another regular participant in our youth projects shared how he was using the time confined in the apartment he shares with his family: "I have read two books, and on the third. I have been learning Greek and English. We are all together and caring for each other. They tell us to stay at home for health, not just for us, but for others too so as not to spread it." Fadi, 25, and originally from Iraq, lives in Thessaloniki.

"For me it's okay, I work in the home and make activities for my children. I spend my time contacting and communicating with friends, so I am always busy doing things. It's affecting people a lot, but for me I know how to use my time."

-  
Layla, 40, from Syria. She lives in Thessaloniki, and has been in Greece since February 2016, for over four years

### **Lack of structure and increased uncertainty has affected wellbeing**

For displaced people living in urban settings, their experiences vary greatly, with different levels of stability, security, and integration. Added to that are the diversity of existing stressors in people's lives.

Despite drawing upon their resilience and coping mechanisms as much as possible, many found the boredom and lack of routine difficult, sometimes leading to a sense of being lost, when their usual activities and schedules gave a sense of hope and progress. As in camps, some were confused or intimidated by the restrictions and risk of a fine and stayed inside their apartments more than required.

"I have had a lack of sleep, low energy, and stress. The stress is from being in the house all the time. I go into a sad place. The most important thing is to keep a schedule, but I still have these difficulties. I have been feeling angry, sad, and lonely"

-  
Tarik, 25, from Western Sahara, living in Thessaloniki. He has been in Greece for two years.

Displaced people carry with them the effects of chronic stress, adversity, and trauma. For some, slowing down and not having the usual rhythm of life led to low mood and traumatic memories emerging – especially those who have arrived more recently and have fresher memories of what they left behind, traumatic journeys, and are struggling to adjust to their new lives.

An understanding of trauma helps to explain how disruption to routines, predictability, and structure can lead to a sense of helplessness, or exacerbate the effects of trauma.

Bernard van der Kolk, a trauma expert, explains: "Being in a situation where you cannot do what you always do, where you're basically rendered helpless, that's the definition of trauma... The issue of structure and time becomes very important. When you're disassociated or frozen, the whole sense of time disappears, the sense of agency disappears, and that is what we are afraid what will happen to so many people who are in this current state, who are falling back to a state of timeless, helplessness, or horror... Unpredictability is at the root of trauma."<sup>[15]</sup>

In Thessaloniki, an unaccompanied minor living in sheltered accommodation, explained that during

[15]NICABM, "When the COVID-19 Pandemic Leaves Us Feeling Helpless" March 28 2020, [https://youtu.be/fVot\\_KOT8Zk](https://youtu.be/fVot_KOT8Zk).



lockdown people were "very down." He said that the quality of services and support had deteriorated, and the usual check-ups had reduced.

"I have trauma in my life. When I was living in camp, I moved around and didn't think too much about what came before. Since I came into this apartment, I keep recalling memories, they're the only thing coming to this mind. I keep watching videos to not think about memories, to have a distraction."

-  
Keveh, 36, from Afghanistan and living in Lesvos. He has been in Greece for seven months.

Layla, a mother of two, said "children are affected more. They like to go to school, so it's harder for them". Amira, 25 and from Syria echoed this: "My friend experiences a lot of pressure. She has two children and is getting mad and angry very fast because she's stuck at home. She wants to meet someone outside but can't. Initiatives need to focus more on parents".

# SHARED EXPERIENCES IN CAMPS AND URBAN CENTERS



## NGO activities stopping has impacted people's wellbeing

As an active and outgoing teenager, Amin relied on NGO activities in Diavata camp and nearby Thessaloniki for a sense of community, respite, and that his life was progressing. 'Due to government regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19, 'non-essential' services and group activities provided by NGOs closed from early March. This included child-friendly and women-friendly spaces, and educational, psychosocial, vocational and youth projects. Suddenly, Amin was alone, without activities or support.

"Before COVID-19 my schedule was full, and now it's not. I love being with others and enjoying myself, so now it's really hard. I had friends [from NGOs] who I used to learn from and now I really feel alone"

-  
Amin, 19, living in Diavata Camp



At a community centre in Polykastro, police showed up shortly after the new regulations were announced, threatening arrest if their centre and activities such as language classes were not stopped immediately.

We Are Here said that when they withdrew their services and projects from the Nea Kavala camp, it created a sense of abandonment among the refugee community, and at times has been interpreted that the NGO workers feared getting the virus from them. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, right-wing attacks on NGOs in Lesbos in early 2020, meant that camps on the island were already reeling from this loss and violence. Popular community centres in Lesbos, places of hope and sustenance, were burned down. Intentions to rebuild them have been impacted by the effect of COVID-19 on funding.

Grassroots organisations are by nature adaptive, agile and able to navigate uncertainty, particularly compared to larger NGOs. When in-person support was stopped, many shifted to remote support through social media and other digital channels. At Refugee Trauma Initiative, we have tried to maintain connections and support the displaced children, caregivers, and youth who usually attend our programmes by creating and sharing psychosocial support resources and videos in different languages [16]. Many NGOs took teaching to online lessons. However, as Mehdi said, "Online workshops are dependent on connection and data situation is impossible in Diavata camp".

"Organisations that used to provide psychosocial support are no longer in camps, so the community is feeling abandonment without having any support. "

-  
Lighthouse Relief, an NGO in Ritsona Camp

### **Lack of information and different levels of concern about COVID-19**

Adding to the confusion of the experience, many living in urban and camp settings felt there has not been enough accessible and consistent information on COVID-19, related regulations, nor people's rights and asylum claims.

"There are issues in Nea Kavala with the disease not being well understood, and with rumours filling in the empty space. It took a while for the community to understand the government's SMS system. The information gets sensationalised with feelings of fear, risk, and panic"

-  
We Are Here, NGO in Nea Kavala camp

Mobile Info Team, an NGO providing advice to asylum seekers and refugees, reported that at first lots of people were asking about COVID-19. Over time, requests turned to how to avoid getting police fines, alongside legal and asylum questions.

Refugees spoke of a sense of confusion, abandonment, and the spreading of rumours (also reported

[16] RTI's online psychosocial resources: <https://www.refugeetrauma.org/resources>

elsewhere).[17] Social media and digital channels have great potential to both spread misinformation but also combat it. "We have a decent WhatsApp network with camp residents and parents of children attending our child-friendly space, and we use that to disseminate through the camp to help combat misinformation," said We Are Here, who work with communities living in Nea Kavala Camp.

Like elsewhere in the world, concern about the virus and adherence to regulations varied. For displaced populations in Greece, it's possible the lack of accessible and quality information led to the differences in the perceived seriousness and risk of COVID-19.

"Some people are feeling hopeless, thinking about death of all humans, extinction, just afraid. 50% take it seriously, but 50% of people take it very easy and they think it is not necessary to stay at home, and not very dangerous"

- Nehal, 21, from Iraq, living in Thessaloniki

### Basic needs are greater concerns than COVID-19

Beyond information, the everyday challenges faced by many displaced people including poverty and asylum claims, can mean that COVID-19 is lower on their list of concerns.

"Food is the most important. If people are hungry and in poverty they don't care about the corona virus."

- Tarik, 25, from Western Sahara, living in Thessaloniki

From 1st June, 9,000 people who have received refugee status faced government-arranged exits from the reception system without adequate safety nets in place. This includes 4,000 refugees staying in UNHCR-managed ESTIA accommodation funded by the European Commission.

The intention is to create space for asylum seekers needing accommodation and ease the desperate overcrowding on the islands. The effect is that thousands of men, women and children are right now at a real risk of homelessness and plunging into poverty. This policy has been widely criticised, including by UNHCR.[18]

"The community is expecting a large-scale eviction of people who are no longer allowed to access asylum seeker housing. That eviction has been put on hold for now, but it's unknown for how long. So, some people who may not be afraid of COVID are afraid of being evicted."

- Northern Lights, NGO in Kavala Camp

[17] Julia Dumont, "Greece's Malakasa migrant camp: What life is like during the coronavirus lockdown." InfoMigrants, April 10, 2020. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24010/greece-s-malakasa-migrant-camp-what-life-is-like-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown>

[18] "Greece must ensure safety net and integration opportunities for refugees - UNHCR", 2nd June 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/6/5ed603924/greece-must-ensure-safety-net-integration-opportunities-refugees-unhcr.html>

## Uncertainty and anxiety about asylum claims

After Asylum Service Centres closed in Greece in mid-March, Aisha could not go to her interview to get her ID. Layla has been unable to renew her residence permit. Mahmoud was unable to register an appeal against his failed asylum claim until the services opened again. Many more have had interviews for their asylum claims postponed, prolonging the state of limbo over their legal status and ability to move forwards in their lives.

"Anxiety mainly comes from the asylum office being closed, and not knowing how to go about renewing papers or obtaining ID and travel documents." - Lifting Hands International, NGO in Serres camp"

"There is a lot of anxiety is coming from people not knowing how COVID is going to affect their asylum proceedings." - Northern Lights, NGO in Kavala camp

There has been little information about or from the asylum service since March, and that which is released is often only in Greek and English. Layla said she has not been able to contact the asylum service, or had any information from them, but that "in general, they never contact us. Not in corona times and not usually." During lockdown, the Greek government has been trying to move more of their general services online, an initiative which is very welcomed if it is also applied to asylum services to help people stay informed about their claims.

### **Dramatic increase in negative decisions on asylum claims, while legal safeguards are being removed**

Though closed to in-person interactions, the Asylum Service continued making decisions about people's asylum claims for cases that had already passed the interview stage. It dramatically increased its processing of asylum claims from 4,000 in March to 16,000 in April. As feared, it appears this was done by issuing many more negative decisions than usual, which began to be communicated by post in the month of May.

Since the beginning of 2020, civil society and legal aid organizations in Greece have criticised Greek authorities for legislating and implementing asylum and immigration laws with little accountability and consultation.[19] These laws are removing safeguards, cancelling free legal aid, and making it easier to deport people.[20]

On 18th May, the Greek Asylum Service resumed operations. Each regional office opened on different schedules, and the backlog of asylum cases, already severe before the service closed, is making for a chaotic re-start of activities.[21]

In Lesbos alone, the Regional Asylum Office issued about 1,400 rejection notices during lockdown, which recipients only have 10 days to appeal—a practical impossibility as the office only accepts 100 appeals per day, requiring 14 days for all submissions. The Asylum Service is not providing legal assistance for filing appeals, and asylum seekers have been fined for violating lockdown measures when leaving the camp to access legal assistance from NGOs.[22]

[19] "Greece: Asylum Overhaul Threatens Rights." Human Rights Watch, October 29, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/29/greece-asylum-overhaul-threatens-rights>

[20] "The instructions for the resumption of the operation of the Asylum Service lead to violations of the rights of asylum seekers." HIAS Greece, May 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/hias-greece/the-instructions-for-the-resumption-of-the-operation-of-the-asylum-service-lead-/894096891002267/>

[21] "Greece: Chaotic Resumption of Procedures, Hundreds of Children Detained, Crack-Down on NGOs, New Evidence of Push-backs to Turkey." European Council on Refugees and Exiles, May 22, 2020, <https://www.ecre.org/greece-chaotic-resumption-of-procedures-hundreds-of-children-detained-crack-down-on-ngos-new-evidence-of-push-backs-to-turkey/>

[22] "Hostility towards migrants and those working to support them continues as state policy in Lesbos." Legal Centre Lesbos, May 27, 2020, <http://legalcentresvos.org/2020/05/27/hostility-towards-migrants-and-those-working-to-support-them-continues-as-state-policy-in-lesvos/>

## The huge impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of displaced populations

Ali lives in Moria camp shared that his wife was experiencing psychosis, and he felt she was a danger to their six-month-old infant. He had to join food queues for 2-3 hours at a time, while worried about his wife harming their baby, and then receiving meagre food supplies when able to collect any. He asked camp authorities for his wife to see a psychiatrist, but they told him that she was just dehydrated and needs to drink water, not see a psychiatrist.

Speaking with Ali on Whatsapp, he sounded resigned and fearful. He had given up on getting help as none was available. "I thought that coming here we would be safe. Our lives would safe. But this is like war. I am afraid all the time from the violence. My wife is sick. She tries to hurt the baby." Ali's story highlights the inadequate social services available in camps. RTI offered Ali continued remote support to help him cope with his situation via our online psycho-social support group, set-up in response to the findings of this research.

Living in dire and desperate conditions, carrying pre-existing trauma and stresses, the pandemic has added to the pressures on people's mental health and wellbeing. For displaced children, who are already experiencing the effects of toxic stress and trauma, the impact is particularly concerning. Keveh, living on Lesbos, shared that "I am worried about my kids, worried about wasting my kids' life. They need school and education."

"Some people were already not stable, and COVID has made it worse. They are coming from traumatic experiences and then dealing with a global crisis. The need for psychological and mental health services will go up a lot."

-  
Mobile Info Team, Thessaloniki

We were struck by how some people, both in camps and in urban settings, were quick to share feelings of hopelessness and grief – signalling a desperation to disclose their experiences and emotions.

While there was already a dearth of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services, the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for innovative programmes that reach people and help them to protect and promote their mental health and wellbeing.



Those who had previously experienced psychosocial support and understood its power, knew how much it was needed both for themselves and others.

"All people feel depression, they need mental wellbeing programs. I know one Facebook group with therapies. Whenever you feel pressure you can contact them, and they give you instructions for mental relaxation. Sometimes you just need to talk to someone."

-  
Amira, 25, from Syria, and living in Thessaloniki

"The most important thing is for people is to be heard. Some people have never been heard in their lives. For me it was when I was 18 years old, someone [from an NGO] was listening to me and really caring about me and wanted to know what's going on in my heart. They helped me take a few steps, learn languages, make a plan, and now I can work on my future. Grief and sadness are what they [refugees] carry always. The rest of the people here need a psychologist."

-  
Amin, 19, from Iran, living in Diavata Camp

# RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 has deeply affected the lives and wellbeing of displaced people living in Greece. While we can only speak to the situation in Greece, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants around the world face similar challenges during this pandemic.[23,24] Already facing a shortage of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), the current situation has highlighted this need more than ever.

"Although the COVID-19 crisis is, in the first instance, a physical health crisis, it has the seeds of a major mental health crisis as well if action is not taken." [25]

-  
The United Nations

## To the European Union and Greek Government

### 1. Secure the basic needs and human rights of displaced people

As always, but especially during a global pandemic, it is crucial there is political will and collaboration to secure the basic needs and human rights of displaced people. Basic needs like food, sanitation, adequate shelter, right to asylum, and no discrimination, are crucial determinants of people's health and wellbeing. These daily stressors can have greater impact on people's mental health than prior traumatic experiences. Without these foundational rights and basic needs in place, it is difficult for people to receive and respond to MHPSS initiatives.

### 2. Provide clear messaging and accessible information

Clear information is required, in all relevant languages, explaining what is expected in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, people's rights, and the status of their asylum process. Information can be disseminated through local and trusted actors, and through channels that people already use including digital channels.

[23] "COVID-19's Prevalence Among Rohingya Refugees and Host Communities in Cox's Bazar", Bangladesh, Innovation for Poverty Action, <https://www.poverty-action.org/study/covid-19%E2%80%99s-prevalence-among-rohingya-refugees-and-host-communities-cox%E2%80%99s-bazar-bangladesh>

[24] Rebecca Ratcliffe: "We're in a prison": Singapore's migrant workers suffer as Covid-19 surges back", The Guardian, 23 April 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/23/singapore-million-migrant-workers-suffer-as-covid-19-surges-back>

[25] Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health, United Nations, 13 May 2020 [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_policy\\_brief-covid\\_and\\_mental\\_health\\_final.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief-covid_and_mental_health_final.pdf)

### **3. Cooperate and collaborate with refugees and NGOs**

Supporting the 120,000 refugees and migrants in Greece, all with diverse needs and backgrounds, is a complex and vast task. Effective solutions which also consider integration and provision of people's needs will only be possible with collaboration with Greek and international NGOs, as well as refugee communities.

We ask the Greek government to leverage the willingness, commitment, and resources of refugees and NGOs when facing this challenge. We ask that Greece is an enabling and supportive environment for NGO actors including the legal and administrative framework. And we ask for recognition of the desire by displaced populations to move on their lives, to contribute and develop their skills, and to be involved in solutions.

## **To the Funding Community**

### **1. Invest in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support initiatives**

There is an increased and urgent need for investment in innovative mental health and psychosocial support for refugees due their experience related to COVID-19 and beyond. Interventions could include those that are community-based, train non-professionals in therapeutic principles and approaches, and build local networks of MHPSS actors thereby ensuring scale.

### **2. Invest in connectivity**

Connectivity is crucial to wellbeing in 2020, which many people living in refugee camps and/or unable to afford data do not have. There needs to be a concerted effort to ensure internet connections, such as improving access in camps and providing people with mobile phone data. This will help displaced people access up-to-date information and online resources, engage in educational and job opportunities, and stay connected to family, friends, and to NGOs – reducing feelings of isolation and abandonment.

### **3. Provide sustainable investment in grassroots NGOs**

In times of crisis, people look to those they trust and have established relationships with for support. Grassroots NGOs in Greece have for years been building up relationships and trust with displaced populations and are connected and responsive to their needs. It is these on-the-ground actors who are well placed to deliver effective, sustainable and agile initiatives. Now more than ever, as they face financial uncertainty ahead, grassroots and smaller NGOs need long-term partnerships and secured investment to be able to plan and deliver meaningful programmes. Without this, vital programming for refugees in Greece will suffer, further compounding their distress and impacting wellbeing.

## **To NGOs Working in Greece**

### **1. Co-create solutions with the refugee community**

To have the greatest impact, programmes should be co-created with members of the refugee community, leveraging their existing capabilities, ideas, and resilience. With the practical necessity to draw on community capacity, while foreign volunteers are absent, now is an opportunity to work in partnership with the community.



## **2. Support refugees to tell their stories and amplify advocacy messages**

Mehdi told us: "I'd like to make a movie to make awareness of our situation. I feel like no one is listening." Displaced people have stories to tell. NGOs can play a role in creating platforms for refugees to raise their voices, so they are part of the conversation on their needs and potential solutions.

## **3. Integrate MHPSS into all programming**

Consider how to mainstream mental health and psychosocial support within all programming, for example to provide refugees with a more dignified and empowering experience, whatever service they are receiving or engaging with.

## **4. Connect to and build networks**

We are stronger together. As mentioned by many NGO workers, navigating COVID-19 pandemic has been helped by being part of a wider network of NGOs (e.g. Help Refugees North Greece Coordination Group, Indigo Volunteers shared resources and training initiatives). May we continue to contribute to, build up, and draw strength and ideas from these networks as we move into a new and unprecedented era of programming.



refugee  
trauma  
initiative

©REFUGEE TRAUMA INITIATIVE, JUNE 2020

Learn more about and support our work at  
[www.refugeetrauma.org](http://www.refugeetrauma.org).