



European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)

providing legal assistance to asylum seekers

Philip Worthington, Managing Director, European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)

Philip Worthington, Managing Director of European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) outlines the activities carried out by the organisation in providing legal assistance to asylum seekers in order to uphold the rule of law and protect human rights. This project is supported by the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

The Context

In March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal created a legal crisis, stranding tens of thousands of people on the Greek Aegean islands as their claims for asylum are processed. They live in camps and reception centres in dire conditions and with limited access to basic services. These facilities are almost always critically over capacity. Last year alone, over 74,600 people, the vast majority of whom fled Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, arrived in Greece after making the dangerous sea crossing in search of safety.

The asylum process is a legal one, yet on the Greek islands there is no state-provided legal aid available for asylum seekers before their decisive asylum interview, meaning that most attend without having spoken to a lawyer. The only way an asylum seeker can receive legal assistance at this stage is through one of the very few NGOs on the islands. On Lesvos, there are just 20-30 lawyers to assist over 10,000 people going through the legal process. On Samos, there is less than one lawyer for every one thousand asylum seekers.

The right to asylum is enshrined in Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This provision gives effect to the basic protection principles contained in the Geneva Convention of 1951 to which all EU Member States are contracting parties. As lawyers, we all know

that the course of a case is invariably set at its commencement (at a time when serious mistakes can be made which may not be repairable). It is therefore crucial that people in need of protection and fleeing war and persecution are provided with competent legal advice from experienced practitioners.

European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)

European Lawyers in Lesvos is a charity registered in Germany and Greece. It was founded by the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) and the German Bar Association (DAV) in 2016 and is now also supported by the French Bar Association (CNB). Our programmes are built on belief in the overriding critical importance of upholding the rule of law and defending human rights by providing access to free, independent legal assistance.

Our main activity is the provision of one-on-one legal consultations to prepare asylum seekers for their first instance interview. ELIL offers legal information, practical support and tailored advice to asylum seekers at this crucial stage of the process. ELIL also helps reunite families, providing legal consultations to assist with family reunification applications under the Dublin Regulation.

ELIL also provides support to unaccompanied minors, particularly those incorrectly registered as adults. The need in this regard is great - earlier this year, there were almost 1,100 unaccompanied minors in Moria alone. ELIL is one of the largest providers of legal assistance to unaccompanied minors on Lesvos, having assisted over 650 such individuals since 2016. This work focuses on family reunification and challenging incorrect age assessments, with our team also assisting minors with asylum interview preparation where relevant.

In summer 2020, after four years of successful work on Lesvos, ELIL extended its operations to the Greek island of Samos, where 5,000 people live in Vathy camp, which has an

official capacity of just 700. Our new project will contribute to considerably increasing the legal capacity on the island.

ELIL's work has been made possible by the remarkable spirit of European collaboration which sees full-time Greek lawyers working alongside volunteer European asylum lawyers and legal assistants. Over the past four years, over 250 people from 18 European countries have volunteered with us, sharing their experience, skills and knowledge.

Along with in-person assistance, in recent months our volunteer lawyers from across Europe have also begun to provide consultations remotely from home, ensuring that we are able to support as many people as possible despite lockdown restrictions and challenges to legal access.

An Enduring Need

Over the past four years, ELIL has provided legal assistance to over 11,000 people. Our work demonstrates how important access to legal assistance can be for refugees. Of those we have assisted, 74.5% have been granted asylum (compared to an average of 46.5% in Greece), meaning they are given protection and do not have to return to face war, violence or persecution in their home country. We have also helped over 1,200 people, including 300 unaccompanied minors, be reunited with family members elsewhere in Europe.

The past year has brought many challenges that have eroded legal access still further, from the devastating fire that destroyed Moria camp on Lesvos, including our offices, to the Covid-19 outbreaks on both Samos and Lesvos and the increasingly strict asylum framework in Greece. In this context, guaranteeing meaningful access to legal support is more important than ever.

We are extremely grateful for the Law Society of Northern Ireland's support over the past four years. For further information and to support ELIL, please visit www.elil.eu