

Greece Mainland Needs Assessment March 2016

Brief Overview

With over 850,000 asylum seekers and migrants reported to have arrived in Greece in 2015 and over 152,000 arriving in the first months of 2016¹, the majority having crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece, the situation continues to be one of very high need. Despite worsening weather conditions brought on by the onset of winter, movements during the first three months of 2016 did not subside. These are mainly driven by the absence of political solutions to major conflicts in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the increasing number of refugee populations in neighboring countries of first asylum affected inter alia by deteriorating living conditions, leading to onward movements out of desperation.

Since March 2016, there have been important developments impacting on the flow trends across Greece. Following the full closure of the Western Balkans transit route on 8th March 2016, onward passage from Greece through FYROM has not been possible for refugee and migrant arrivals. This was followed by the EU-Turkey Agreement, which came into effect on 20th March. Now the refugee and migrant groups in Greece can be split into two caseloads: the pre-20th and post-20th March arrivals.

For the post-20th March caseload, who remain stranded across different locations on mainland Greece, here are real concerns about the impact of the border closures, particularly vulnerable groups. With reduced options for onward travel, the approximately 52,000 refugees and migrants are currently in need of emergency services. There are reports of new refugee camps opening up in new locations in Greece on a weekly basis, including outside Athens and in the North, near Idomeni. Also concerns that the camps are being built and run by the Greek military, with poor conditions and inadequate supplies/services. Women and children representing a greater share of refugee population, including in Idomeni (reports suggest up to 75%).

As this caseload are gradually moved into the new refugee camps, the focus of the response will shift from emergency response to a mobile population, to addressing the longer terms needs of a more static group. It is clear that concerted response efforts in particular will need to be directed towards addressing the particular vulnerabilities of specific groups, and also towards achieving durable solutions to their displacement. It is this caseload which frames the focus of NRC's mainland Greece assessment.

NRC Response in Greece

NRC has been present on the island of Chios since September 2015 to implement a multi-sectoral, holistic approach to Site Management Support, including Information Management and information dissemination, for the entire process of first arrivals on the beach, to

¹ UNHCR reports 856,723 persons arriving by sea in Greece in 2015 and 152,152 persons arriving between 1 January and 3rd April 2016. For additional statistics for Greece, please see: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

eventual departure from the island, and this has been integrally supported by NRC's provision of WASH and infrastructure activities. During the period of September 2015 to March 2016, NRC supported the flow-management, registration, access to information, provision of NFIs, access to basic services, and onward travel for 96 882 individuals.

Mainland Assessment

Between the 16th and 29th of March 2016, NRC conducted a needs assessment on the Greek mainland, around both the Athens and the Thessaloniki/Macedonia areas. Although the needs assessment was open-ended in its enquiries, the key sectors investigated were Camp Management/site management support, Shelter, WASH, Infrastructure, Food Security and Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance.

The field assessment included both individual and small-group interviews with a number of asylum seekers, ranging from those already in planned camps (4 sites) or longer-term informal sites (3 sites), to those in informal sites under threat of imminent closure (1 site), to those encountered in urban public meeting places (2 sites). NRC deployed a mixed-gender team, and was able to engage through its female staff in discussions with both female-only groups of asylum-seekers, and families. The topics of discussion were structured but wide-ranging, departing from the immediate state of basic services in the site, to encompass topics such as sources of information about the asylum process and awareness of that process, accessibility to information about health and other services, further travel intentions, livelihoods coping mechanisms, and priorities for children's education.

During the field assessment, NRC also had the opportunity to discuss and take site tours with site coordinators (both military and civilian governmental), members of other international humanitarian actors, representatives of local municipalities, and members of local volunteer/solidarity groups. This allowed NRC to (a) gain insights into how these other actors were observing, or had interacted in order to hear, the needs and priorities of the asylum-seeker populations in the sites, and (b) gain insights into the key site-management support gaps as impacting the effective operations of those actors themselves.

In all sites visited, NRC technical managers conducted transect walks and other assessment activities of visual observation. Whilst these activities did not include direct interaction with the target populations *per se*, they did permit another range of observations to be made, with regards to issues which may not have been apparent through other discussion activities, including the environmental impact (and associated impact upon quality of life) of the site, emerging evidence of informal-economy livelihoods activities, and the extremely circumscribed degree to which sites as a whole were accessible to those with physical disabilities.

Gaps were observed in sectors where NRC already has experience working and developing programming in Chios, and in other countries affected by the Middle East conflicts, as follows:

Camp Management

The sheer number of camps being opened by the Greek authorities points to a considerable gap in camp management. With the large number of volunteer organisations present in camps, and the complexities of interaction with local municipalities and host communities, camp management will need a constant presence in each of the camps, and will not be able to rely upon a mobile, or occasional approach. Host communities have not had asylum-seeker populations nearby before, and other humanitarian actors are either relatively new to Greece, or new to the mainland, therefore gaps will continue to be identifiable for the outreach, training and capacity-building elements of camp management.

The national Sectoral Working Group coordination model implemented by UNHCR is still being established, and there has never been a Camp Management Working Group meeting convened; the WG lacks a ToR, and almost all of the other tools for effective sectoral coordination. There is an increasing tendency for partners at the local level, to either diverge from each other's practices, or else needlessly reinvent practices, lacking forums for interaction.

Infrastructure

Whilst a number of the member organisations of those working groups have signalled that they will have the resources to undertake larger scale installations (for example mass installation of pre-fabricated 'container' shelters, or toilet units), to date none has indicated that they are planning similar approaches to NRC, focussed upon smaller-scale, individualised infrastructure upgrade and repair projects to support all sectors present in a site. In NRC's discussions with site coordinators from either the Greek military or the Greek Ministry of the Interior, there has been a similarly clear indication of a gap. The lack of clarity from the Greek authorities about the eventual number and location of all the planned camps makes it difficult to state prior to commencing the project the exact list of intervention sites: many of the sites may be ones which have not been constructed by the Greek military yet, but which may be constructed, and in need of rapid upgrade interventions.

The nature of the gap is precisely that without the types of interventions proposed, many of the facilities in the sites would not be able to function as intended: without adequate housing and water provision, kitchens would cease to be hygienic; without privacy barriers, toilets would not be culturally appropriate for many women and girls, and would remain inaccessible to them; without the necessary physical support, a variety of the facilities in the camp would remain inaccessible to those with physical disabilities; without adequate shading, and appropriately heighted washing facilities, child-friendly spaces would be limited in use.

Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance

For many years the asylum system in Greece has not been very efficient. In 2013 a new law was passed and a new Asylum Service was established resulting in some improvements in the system. In addition, Greece has been receiving support from the European Asylum Support Office, an agency of the European Union established with the aim of enhancing practical cooperation and assisting Member States on asylum issues.

While the improvements in the last few months in particular should be recognised and the efforts of the Asylum Service supported, the quick clearance of the backlog of cases and some new measures introduced to expedite the process (such as the use of skype interviews) have raised concerns among local organisations that thorough assessments of asylum claims are not always undertaken particularly for nationalities that are not considered to be from 'obvious' refugee-producing countries. Expedited claims may potentially lead to *refoulement* if a person is returned to a country where he or she faces persecution.

Given the very high number of refugees/migrants/asylum seekers in Greece, the number of asylum claims made in country will be very high. The needs for assistance to access the system are likely to significantly increase, particularly for those who may want to get into the EU relocation scheme as claiming asylum in Greece is a pre-requisite for relocation.

NRC could consider the coordination with the various actors working on providing information and support to access the asylum system and see how it could best complement ongoing efforts.

Working with local partners

All stakeholders interviewed during the assessment have reported large gaps in the provision of both information and legal assistance to asylum seekers and migrants in Greece. While UNHCR is scaling up its assistance to provide information on how to access asylum and the relocation scheme, this will not be accompanied by direct legal assistance.

Further, there are currently a limited number of local NGOs providing legal assistance to asylum seekers in Greece with only the Greek Refugee Council having the provision of legal assistance to refugees and asylum seekers as its specific mission, although other actors also offer some level of legal assistance as part of a more diverse response. Legal assistance programmes however are currently mainly implemented in Athens and Thessaloniki with a limited presence of actors in the islands.

While the quality of the assistance provided seemed to vary per organisation and location, the level of technical capacity among the lawyers met by the NRC in Athens was high. Organisations specialising on the provision of legal assistance such as the Greek Refugee Council or Arsis demonstrated a higher level of legal strategic thinking than organisations providing a range of integrated services including a legal component.

Given the existence of ongoing legal assistance programmes by local actors in the country, the high level of technical capacity as well as the wish from Greek civil society to be at the forefront of the response, it could be envisaged that NRC supports existing Greek organisations providing legal assistance as part of a future ICLA programme.

NRC could consider assisting local legal aid organisations in various sectors including with fundraising; coordination and networking; the design of coherent national and local programmatic and advocacy strategies; joint advocacy initiatives; the provision of technical support; the use of flexible approaches such as mobile teams and one-stop services; and



linking the local organisations to NRC's other core competences as well as to other international humanitarian actors in the country and the region.