

# Training Kit for Empowering Refugee-Led Community Organisations

## National Report on the status of refugee-led community organisations in Greece

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### Project Summary

The main aim of this project is to see a dramatic improvement in the quality of enjoyment of human rights by refugees and is based on the idea of supporting the active inclusion of marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities. With this, the project seeks to strengthen refugee inclusion by supporting the empowerment of those refugees who want to play an active role in their communities and at the EU level. Through the project, community needs, strengths and trends will be identified, and we will seek to produce an educational package that will tackle these challenges and provide improved skills to overcome them.

Part of our project will be a training programme which will be geared at supporting the mobilisation of refugees into organised and effective communities that will be active in various spheres such as peer-to-peer support, provision of information or other community-based services, and advocacy with national governmental stakeholders. This is done in order to bring the voice of excluded groups to the attention of policy-makers, engagement in public awareness-raising, talking directly from the heart of their represented communities.

This will be the Training Kit, our ultimate deliverable which will address the challenges faced by refugees in integrating effectively in their host countries. The Training Kit will contain content addressing refugee-led groups that wish to be active at a national and/or European level. It will also be available to the public and thoroughly disseminated throughout the Partners' networks.

The project is implemented by the following organisations: aditus foundation, Cyprus Refugee Council, Dutch Refugee Council, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Greek Forum of Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Service (Malta), Mosaico – Azioni per i Rifugiati. With Syrian Volunteers Netherlands as Associated Partners.

For further information visit the project webpage: <https://aditus.org.mt/our-work/projects/training-kit-for-empowering-refugee-led-community-organisations>.

## About the author

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## Input of Data

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The Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR) is a network of refugee and migrant Communities, individuals and professionals working to support and advocate for the rights of asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and stateless persons in Greece and empower Communities through workshops on employability and sustainability. Today, eleven (11) formal Communities are members of the GFR with several unofficial ones also cooperating with us. The GFR's legal status is that of an association and was created by concerned individuals of refugee and migrant background in 2012, though it was conceived as an idea since 2010. It was a very early step towards Self-Advocacy and had a clear perspective on promoting an essential inclusion and joint participation of both the refugee/migrant and the local population. The Board of Directors is composed of people of a refugee and migrant background.

**This report was published in December 2020.**

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## Historic Information

The period of time that we will focus on is 2015-2020. This is a crucial period of time for Greece since it begins with an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers in the country and their treatment regarding hosting, rights enjoyment and their integration/inclusion from then onwards.

### Important Dates

- 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2016: **Closure of the Northern borders** of Greece by the neighbouring countries, effectively cutting off the flow of asylum seekers and refugees to the rest of Europe by the so-called “Balkan Route”. From 2015 up until the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 2016 the Balkan Route was considered a safe passage for asylum seekers in order to reach northern Europe.
- 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016: **EU-Turkey deal**. The primary cause of the overpopulation in the eastern Aegean islands. The deal was followed by the implementation of geographical restrictions, a year later, for asylum seekers until their asylum procedure is finalized<sup>1</sup>.
- June 2019: **National elections**. The right-wing conservative party “New Democracy” wins the elections and takes over from the left-wing party “Syriza”. The migration issue was one of the first topics that the new government focused on; a fact that entailed changes on policies and procedures.

### Reception and Identification Centres, Camps and Accommodation programs

- 2015**: Seventeen (17) Reception Centres (camps) were up and running in 2015, throughout mainland Greece, most of them in the region of Attica. Most of these 17 reception centres are run by NGOs, and have been depending on funding, mainly originating from the European Refugee Fund (ERF). Additionally, there were 24 apartments (of which 19 in Attica, 4 in Thessaloniki and 1 in Lesbos) for a total of 120 persons, managed by the NGO Praksis (Praksis & Stegi Apartments Programme)<sup>2</sup>.
- 2016**: After the EU-Turkey statement, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, up until June of the same year, five (5) Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) were built on the eastern Aegean

<sup>1</sup> <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/implementation-of-the-eu-turkey-statement-eu-hotspots-and-restriction-of-asylum-seekers-freedom-of-movement/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida\\_gr\\_update.iv\\_.pdf](https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_gr_update.iv_.pdf) p. 76-77

*islands*. The Commission has adopted the new RIC approach (also referred to as the "hotspot" approach) to help Greece and Italy, Member States which were at the forefront of this crisis, cope with the sudden and dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving at their external borders during 2015/2016. This approach was intended to provide operational support to Member States to ensure the identification, recording and fingerprinting of arriving asylum seekers, as well as their referral to the appropriate follow-up procedures. The locations of the *RICs* were selected taking into account the main entry points, as well as the availability of existing structures.<sup>3</sup>

- **2017:** Thirty-two (32) reception centres (camps) are now running throughout Greece. Most of them still run by NGOs under the supervision of the UNHCR. Certain camps were run either by the Armed Forces (Army, Navy) or the Municipality. Toward the end of the year the UNHCR and most of these NGOs gradually withdrew from the camps and were replaced either by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) either by INGOs (e.g. DRC) or the equivalent Municipality Authorities. In addition, the accommodation program "HESTIA" was initiated in January 2017<sup>4</sup>. Funded by the EU and the UNHCR, the program actually made use of pre-existing apartments and shelters run by local NGOs adding even more premises in order to accommodate as much vulnerable cases as possible (unaccompanied children, single parent families, elderly persons etc.). The cumulative total number of beneficiaries of the HESTIA program reached 22,980 people who were accommodated in buildings, apartments, host families, hotels and relocation sites. The number of premises and beneficiaries gradually increased the following years, without addressing the accommodation issue properly in the sense that vacancies were ab luxury either in the camps either in the HESTIA program. The limited period of stay to both types of facilities was never upheld since the beneficiaries did not have anywhere to go or could not find a job due to the lack of integration programs. This had an impact to the newcomers since they could not find vacancies in the aforementioned facilities.
- **2018\*:** A completely uncharted phenomenon is that of people living in solidarity squats, accommodated in Greek family households, rent flats shared by 20-30 people at a time, etc. These spaces were not under the coordination of any official State office or NGO. These spaces of "solidarity" were a necessity rather than an organized and funded solution. Their existence was an outcome of the shortage of vacancies in the official accommodation centres or the asylum seekers and refugees denial of being hosted in facilities far away from major cities, especially Athens. The squats, specifically, were raided by the police forces after mid-2019 by both acting governments (SYRIZA & New Democracy). Apart from the rent-flats all other aforementioned types of accommodation slowly paled into insignificance.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida\\_gr\\_2016update.pdf](https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_gr_2016update.pdf) p. 98-99

<sup>4</sup> <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/home/>

- **2019:** Initiating in June 2019 up until November 2020 the HELIOS project, coordinated by the IOM, focuses on the accommodation and integration of recognized refugees<sup>5</sup>. In close collaboration with national authorities and experienced partners, through the HELIOS project, IOM aims at promoting the integration of beneficiaries of international protection currently residing in temporary accommodation schemes into the Greek society. The objective of the project is two-fold: First of all it seeks to increase the beneficiaries' prospects towards self-reliance and supporting them in becoming active members of the Greek society, and on the other hand it seeks to establish an integration mechanism for beneficiaries of international protection, resulting to a rotation mechanism for the current Greek temporary accommodation system.
- **2020:** Up to this day there are five (5) RICs situated in the eastern Aegean islands with the capacity to accommodate 8.873 people but as of the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2020 they host 38.351 persons. In the mainland are operating in total 28 camps with a hosting capacity of 27.865 people and actual hosting numbers up to the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2020 reaching 25.007 people<sup>6</sup>. The HESTIA program is accommodating 22.151 persons with an actual capacity of 22.822 persons in a total number of places reaching 25.822<sup>7</sup>. Lastly, the HELIOS project offers a total number of rent apartments reaching 1563 along with 907 unique houses with a total number of beneficiaries reaching 1548 persons on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://greece.iom.int/en/hellenic-integration-support-beneficiaries-international-protection-helios>

<sup>6</sup> <https://solomonmag.com/the-visuals/refugee-camps-in-greece/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://estia.unhcr.gr/en/estia-accommodation-capacity-weekly-update-27-july-2020/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/HELIOS%20Factsheet%20August%202020\\_W1\\_3.pdf](https://greece.iom.int/sites/default/files/HELIOS%20Factsheet%20August%202020_W1_3.pdf)

# Refugee Demographics

## Arrivals

- **2015:** Total arrivals: 861.630 / Sea Arrivals: 856.723 / Land Arrivals: 4.907
- **2016:** Total arrivals: 177.234 / Sea Arrivals: 173.450 / Land Arrivals: 3.784
- **2017:** Total arrivals: 36.310 / Sea Arrivals: 29.718 / Land Arrivals: 6.592
- **2018:** Total arrivals: 50.508 / Sea Arrivals: 32.494 / Land Arrivals: 18.014
- **2019:** Total arrivals: 74.613 / Sea Arrivals: 59.726 / Land Arrivals: 14.887
- **2020:** Total arrivals: 11.263 / Sea Arrivals: 8.619 / Land Arrivals: 2.644<sup>9</sup>

## Most common Nationalities

The five most common Nationalities that enter the country as asylum seekers are<sup>10</sup>:

1. Syria
2. Afghanistan
3. Congo
4. Iraq
5. Iran

The list is based on the percentages of people arriving from each nationality with the difference that in 2019 and 2020 the Syrians come in the second place.

## Population Size

At this point we have to state once more that Greece is a transit country. Asylum seekers and refugees will find a way to cross the northern borders either by land or sea. It is, thus, nearly impossible to obtain clear numbers regarding the different population sizes that reside in the country.

The number of applicants (asylum seekers) in 2019 is<sup>11</sup>:

- Total number of applicants: 77.287

<sup>9</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

<sup>10</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/statistics>



- Men: 51.749 (67%)
- Women: 25.536 (33%)
- Children: 25.368 (32.8%)
- Unaccompanied children: 3.330 (4.3%)

The refugee population in Greece counts 50,000+ people, of whom 38,000 are situated on the mainland and 11,000 on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Samos and Leros. Over half of them are women and children; more than 3,000 are traveling alone.<sup>12</sup>

## Education

Generally asylum-seeking children are required to attend primary and secondary school under the public education system under similar conditions as Greek nationals. A Ministerial Decision issued in August 2016, which was repealed in November 2016 by a Joint Ministerial Decision, established a programme of afternoon preparatory classes for all school-aged children aged 4 to 15. The programme is implemented in public schools neighbouring camps or places of residence being subject to the yearly issuance of a Joint Ministerial Decision (exceptionally a Decision by the Minister of Education). Such decisions have been respectively issued for each school year.<sup>13</sup>

Children aged between 6-15 years, living in dispersed urban settings (such as UNHCR accommodation, squats, apartments, hotels, and reception centres for asylum seekers and unaccompanied children), may go to schools near their place of residence, to enrol in the morning classes alongside Greek children, at schools that will be identified by the Ministry. This is done with the aim of ensuring balanced distribution of children across selected schools, as well as across preparatory classes for migrant and refugee children where Greek is taught as a second language.<sup>14</sup>

Three out of four school-age refugee children out of the 4,656 in the reception centres of the Greek islands do not attend school<sup>15</sup>. The situation in the mainland is more or less the same since most of the camps are situated outside urban areas making the transportation to school extremely difficult.

Even for the refugees that are living in urban spaces a sudden change of address means that they have to change school for their children too, so they either lose time in order to enrol the child again or drop the issue entirely.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.rescue.org/country/greece>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.unhcr.org/gr/12714-paidia\\_prosfyges\\_den\\_pigainoyn\\_sholeio.html](https://www.unhcr.org/gr/12714-paidia_prosfyges_den_pigainoyn_sholeio.html)



## Access to Labour

Up to the end of 2019, asylum seekers had access to the labour market as employees or service or work providers from the moment an asylum application had been formally lodged and they had obtained an asylum seeker's card<sup>16</sup>. That changed from July 2019 when a 6-month period of time was implemented before asylum seekers can register for a Tax Registration Number.

Generally recognized refugees have access to the labour market provided that they have obtained AFM and AMKA. The latter is issued easily after recognition, in the case of the Tax registration Number; however, one has to have proof of address, which complicates things as a UNHCR survey states:

*"Most participants reported difficulties in accessing the labour market. They attributed this to a lack of information, high unemployment rates, lack of required documentation (e.g. residency permits, passport), language barriers, the remoteness of some sites from cities, and lack of job advice and placement support... Participants found the programmes on self-reliance and employment limited and unstructured... The remote location of some sites and RICs from cities were noted as notable obstacles to self-reliance, integration and co-existence... The lack of Greek language classes, which most perceive to be required for integration, was a commonly referenced issue.*

*While most participants [had] social security numbers (AMKA), they [had] difficulty obtaining other documents such as AFM and unemployment cards from OAED."*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-labour-market>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-labour-market#\\_ftn9](https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-labour-market#_ftn9)

## Political Context

Greece has always been a transit or even a destination country for migrants and refugees. Sometimes people tend to forget that and most probably think that the country faced migration flows from 2015 onwards. On the contrary, Greece has been receiving refugees at least as early as 1922 when the Balkan wars were over and there was a massive displacement of people from Turkey to Greece. In addition, Greece received refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq as early as 1999-2000, albeit the numbers were comparatively smaller. Nevertheless, migration was never a top priority for the Greek State, even to this day, and this is one of the reasons why Greece was unprepared of handling the serious refugee flows that started in 2015.

In order to depict the aforementioned, one has to keep in mind that the Asylum Service in Greece was created in 2013 and it had a rather poor composition to address the rising needs. It is under this perspective that we should conduct any kind of conversation that relates to the arrival and hosting of refugees and the success levels either for RCOs or other relevant stakeholders.

As mentioned in the beginning of this research, one of the most important dates to note is the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2019 when the National elections were held in Greece. The elections brought into power the right-wing conservative party of New Democracy, taking the lead in essence from the left-wing party of Syriza, which was governing the country since 2015. This had a direct impact to the country's approach on the reception, hosting and integration of asylum seekers and refugees and on migration issues as a whole.

## Syriza's approach

- The party was quite open to asylum seekers and refugees in the sense of positive narrative and the “just” treatment of newcomers
- Created the first “Ministry of Migration Policy” of the country<sup>18</sup>.
- Retained the status of “open reception centres” for all camps throughout its governance.
- Implemented the geographical restriction of asylum seekers in the islands derived by the EU-Turkey deal.
- Allowed asylum seekers and refugees to acquire a Tax Registration Number (AFM) and a Social Security Number (AMKA) from day one (after the identification process), balancing in this way the State's lack of resources by giving the newcomers a chance on finding a job.
- Produced a “National Strategic Plan on Integration” during the last months of its governance by bringing NGOs, community leaders and State officials together in order to materialize it<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Greece-Immigration.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> <https://g2red.org/aset-s-observations-on-the-national-integration-strategy/>

- Interpretation issues especially in public and health services. A perpetual problem in Greece is the use of official state interpreters since the country still lacks a framework in order to hire interpreters.
- Endless bureaucracy and the unwillingness or incompetence of civil services to process refugees' cases.
- Lack of official integration programs.
- The State's unwillingness to cooperate with NGOs and INGOs (organizations that possessed the knowhow and could be of great support to the State given the chance)<sup>20</sup>.
- Slow processing of asylum applications.

Syriaza's approach went hand-to-hand with the general public opinion on the matter; the average Greek especially on the islands and the prominent cities showed empathy, was sympathetic towards the newcomers and tried to help in different manners. However, as the years went by and the problems began to stack up, especially due to the overpopulation in the reception centres and the inability to include asylum seekers and refugees in society deteriorating their mental health because of the "limbo" they found themselves in, the public's opinion started to shift gradually into aggressiveness.

The latter was officially expressed on the Election Day, when the New Democracy's negative narrative and the promise of a dynamic handling of the migration issues seemed to have convinced the general public to support the party.

## New Democracy's approach

- The closure of the "Ministry of Migration Policy" as an irrelevant ministry, only to re-establish it 6 months later under a slightly different title (Ministry of Migration and Asylum) losing precious time on dealing with the rising issues<sup>21</sup>.
- Disregarded all the work done by the previous party on the "National Strategic Plan on Integration".
- Declared the switch from "open" type to "closed" type of camps (detention centres). The statement backfired since both NGOs and European authorities heavily criticized the move. Change of rhetoric to "controlled" type of camps (curfew)<sup>22</sup>.
- Successfully passed through the parliament the Act of Legislative Content "On International Protection and other Provisions" (International protection Bill)<sup>23</sup>.
- Deprived the asylum seekers of the National Security Number (AMKA) only to replace it with a temporary number called PAAYPA leaving thousands of asylum seekers bereft of access in

<sup>20</sup> <https://euobserver.com/migration/148530>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/22209/greek-government-slammed-on-migration-issue>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/greece-to-start-setting-up-closed-type-migrant-camps/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.asylumineurope.org/news/29-10-2019/greece-new-restrictions-rights-and-procedural-guarantees-international-protection>

health services (up until now thousands of asylum seekers wait for their PAAYPA number which is supposed to be given to them electronically)<sup>24</sup>.

- Allowing asylum seekers to apply for a National Tax Number (AFM) after 6 months of residing in Greece for asylum seekers delaying effectively the chance they had in finding a job in a timely manner.
- Aggressive stance toward undocumented migrants (incarceration and ultimately pushbacks) by using the police forces, essentially giving permission to the law enforcement to deal with undocumented migrants but also with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in a very aggressive manner. The latter is accompanied by a law that states that if asylum seekers do not cooperate with the State's law enforcement entities it will affect their asylum procedure in a negative manner.
- Creation of a list of "safe countries" that influence the asylum procedure of asylum seekers of certain nationalities
- Suspension of asylum applications for the whole month of March 2020<sup>25</sup>.
- More focus on voluntary returns<sup>26</sup>.
- Alleged illegal pushbacks that the Government denies. Yet everyday more and more asylum seekers confess that it has happened to them as soon as they reach the other side of the border<sup>27</sup>.
- The Governments rush to deal effectively with the growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers gives serious concerns about the quality of the services provided to the population (either asylum procedures or civil services).

Although Syriza and New Democracy have a totally different approach they do share several common grounds and areas that both were unable to address. Perhaps the most prominent similarity is their reluctance of cooperating with NGOs and INGOs. Both parties accused the organizations of meddling in a negative way with migration issues and were keen to gradually remove the organizations from hotspots and camps.

New Democracy took this a step further by requesting from the organizations to apply their status in a national register, in an effort to restrict their activities and presence in the field. Other similarities that both parties share is the inability to address the asylum applications processing in a timely manner, the overpopulation in the islands, the general accommodation of recognized refugees and a solid integration program that would give access to employability and education (since the HELIOS project does not have the capacity to benefit all recognized refugees).

## Public Opinion

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/249145/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-to-grant-provisional-social-security-number-to-asylum-seekers>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/world/europe/greece-migrants-secret-site.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/26392/greece-reactivates-voluntary-return-program-for-migrants>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions>

As stated above the public opinion gradually shifted from solidarity to outright racism. The inability of solving the overpopulation problem in the islands, the consequent demonstrations of asylum seekers about the inhumane conditions they live in, the media's constant negative narrative on migration are some of the leading factors of this behaviour. The migration issue was probably one of the basic reasons that New Democracy won the elections, however, the party could not solve the problems as swiftly as it promised ending up to declare new camps that would function on detention centres build on the same islands and sharing the asylum seeker's population. This did not work well with the locals, who in turn held protests and blocked all constructions to the new sites. The situation turned into a virtual war between the State and the islanders, with the former deploying special police units (anti-riot teams) by the hundreds on the islands only to hastily call them back about a week later after the strong resistance they encountered by the islanders. The situation was effectively terminated by the outbreak of Covid-19, since no solution was found and until today the overpopulation issue on the islands has not been solved.

## Refugee Rights Enjoyment

- **Reception:** Problematic after the EU-Turkey deal, gathering of a large number of people in the islands until their asylum interview which may take years to happen. The outbreak of Covid-19 was a stepping-stone to “freeze” the reception and the asylum procedure for anybody that entered the country irregularly in March 2020, it also put a drastically decreased the incoming flows of asylum seekers. Alleged pushbacks upon arrival and even after a few months of arrival; the Government denies such practises, nevertheless, more and more evidence of such activities reach the surface.
- **Asylum Procedure:** Problematic in both quality and time management. Lack of interpretation for the more “unique” languages. Existence of fast-tracks that benefit very few nationalities, painstakingly slow procedure for the rest.
- **Content of International protection:** Generally falls in line with the guidelines on International Protection. Restrictions to the recognition of victims of PTSD as well as victims of torture. Restrictions on the appeal procedure when a rejection is issued.
- **Integration:** Practically non-existent, in the sense of official integration programs. Heavily dependent on CSOs informal education lessons, employability workshops etc.
- **Access to citizenship:** Poor to say the least. It takes a couple of decades, more or less, for a refugee or migrant to claim citizenship in Greece (except if you are a celebrity, or good in sports apparently). Even second-generation individuals, born and raised in Greece access citizenship usually after they reach 18 years old.
- **Voting Rights:** Non-existent. Only Greek citizens can vote. Even long-term residents paying taxes or running their own business for years and contributing to society do not have the right to vote at least in the local elections (like for example in Ireland or Holland)
- **Education:** Limited access for asylum seekers, even in the mainland, since several camps are far away from urban centres. In the major cities the schools face vacancy problems to accommodate refugee children due to the fact the majority of the refugee and migrant population lives close and around the centre of the city. Enrolment in Greek schools follows district limits, so it depends on where you live to find out which school your children can go. Apart from the aforementioned issues access to education is considered “open” and functioning.
- **Employability:** Refugees and migrants usually rely on “black labour”, meaning they are forced to work unofficially without declaring income to the tax office, saving their bosses from this procedure also. This is a reality for Greeks too. A very important obstacle is the language barrier, especially for refugees that consider Greece a transit country. The latter combined with the lack of official language courses discourages people from making the effort. Lastly, the issuing of the National Tax Number is problematic, since to obtain one you have to hand in proof of residence (address) to the equivalent tax office of your district. There is great confusion on whether to consider a refugee camp as an official address for several tax offices, leading to bureaucratic paradoxes that some clerks may consider to turn a blind eye while others choose not to, complicating the situation even more.



## Interview Analysis

The facts, findings and outcomes of both the desk research and the interviews converge in the high value of the existence of RCOs and, above all, the need for the State to cooperate with these organizations. As stated clearly in the research and by the hints of the experts, officials and asylum seekers found in the interviews, Greece has still a long way to go in order to overcome the gaps of its migration policies and to achieve a desired level of inclusion and integration of refugees within its society. One would argue that the latter should have already been achieved, at least to a certain level, given that Greece has a long history of migration flows either incoming or outgoing. However, it seems that it is precisely the notion of being a “transit” country that partially does not render migration as a priority for the State; that and the absence of the political will to render it as a priority with the well-known outcomes that accompany it (overcrowded camps, living in horrendous conditions, homelessness, unemployment, destructive fire in Moria etc).

Since 2013 with the foundation of the Greek Asylum Service and, most importantly, after 2015 when the asylum seeker flows started to rise, Greece had more than five years to come up with a concrete and strategic approach regarding the integration of refugees. What we witness today, unfortunately, is the stalemate that these policies have come to. As the last 5 years unfolded and despite the few good practices that started to develop in the early years, there has been a setback after setback situation regarding the country’s treatment of refugees followed by the deterioration of the public opinion concerning migration. Refugees, upon recognition of their status, face homelessness, unemployment, lack of education and inability of communicating their needs due to the language barrier. The unwillingness of the State first of all to acknowledge this situation, however, and then act in a meaningful manner on it is perhaps the biggest obstacle the country faces. Dealing with migration issues in Greece is one sided and this fact combined with the absence of the political will to harmonize the migration policies constitute the source where all other malpractices materialize from.

This is precisely the reason why RCOs play such a significant role in every country that hosts refugees and especially in Greece. RCOs are invaluable mediators between the refugee populations, the State and the NGOs. These organizations can unveil the cultural barrier and overcome the language one, bringing all actors and communities involved closer. The fact that they are led by refugees, by people in other words who have been themselves refugees and have experienced the hardships and struggles of being one, combined with the knowledge of the laws and values of their host country give RCOs an outstanding level of expertise regarding the integration & inclusion strategies. However, information plays a crucial role in many different aspects of this topic.

In the interviews one can deduce that the prominent reasons for not having many RCOs in Greece is the bureaucracy of founding one, the perplexed tax procedures of the country and the difficulty of obtaining financial support in order to keep the organizations running. The common denominator in all



this is the lack of official information and procedures. Creating an organization in Greece is a complex procedure for locals too; with the only difference that the locals can easily obtain the crucial official information. Refugee leaders on the other hand may possess a good knowledge of the country's infrastructure but are lacking in more specialized procedures (legal status, accountancy, logistics etc.), which in turn means they are dependent on locals for these issues that burdens them financially to the point of discouragement. This actually explains the fact that certain refugee-led communities started as a student social club, or another similar status, but ended up as full-fledged RCOs.

Nevertheless, it's not only the information that the RCOs have to obtain but also the info that they need to disseminate to their equivalent communities and beneficiaries. RCOs work as a catalyst in disseminating official state information towards the refugee population; refugees can get the info from fellow countrymen, in their own language with the appropriate approach on cultural matters. In addition, RCOs work as a catalyst in disseminating information derived from the field to NGOs and State officials (policy makers, relevant public services etc.). In other words, RCOs stand in the middle of a crossroads connecting all the actors involved, a position that grants them a strategic advantage on migration policies that can be utilized for a concrete State integration strategy regarding refugees.

*Disclaimer: Due to privacy and security reasons regarding the interviewees, we have decided not to publish the interviews. Instead, we composed an analysis of these interviews that reflect what has been documented.*

## Civil Society organizations

The impact of Civil Society Organizations in every aspect of an asylum seeker or refugee's life is catalytic. CSOs have always filled in the gaps that the State cannot cover in terms of psychosocial support, helpdesks, trivial health services, one-stop shops, informal education, legal support, and protection of vulnerable cases among many other aspects. Public opinion is divided, however, regarding CSOs since they are considered meddling in areas they should not, influencing in a negative manner asylum seekers and refugees when it comes to their rights and how to claim them. This conception started mainly from the use of untrained volunteers that although they have a great sense of solidarity often overstepped legal boundaries and, in some cases, handed false info to the refugee population creating even more confusion to an already delicate situation. At some point (during 2017 if not earlier) public opinion turned against NGOs and INGOs with the government supporting this point of view and gradually taking a step back from most CSOs.

Other perpetual problems that CSOs have to face is the lack of sustainability of their projects, the inability to follow-up cases once the project reached its end and the inability to address a large number of beneficiaries. Especially for the CSOs that deal with mental health issues, protection of vulnerable cases and accommodation the lack of sustainable projects have an extremely negative impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees.

This shortfall, along with the needs coming with the deliverables accompanying each project (refugee interviews, assessments, questionnaires etc) is well known to asylum seekers and refugees and in many cases, they prefer not to cooperate with CSOs based on this knowledge. This is the main reason that CSOs often seek cooperation with RCOs, due to the lack of project participants from the refugee population.

Again, despite these issues CSOs are invaluable to the State since they have far greater knowledge and the knowhow on the refugee issues than the State Authorities. They possess their own interpreters and they have a deeper knowledge of the migration phenomenon as a whole.

You can find out the CSOs that are registered with the local authorities and operating in Greece in the following link <https://www.accmr.gr/en/members>.