

Refugee care organizations* in urbanized Greece

Thessaloniki – Ioannina – Athens

Report by Anna Mammitzsch

Period of travel 01.08.2017 – 21.08.2017

Scholarship of Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung

Overview

1.	Aim and purpose of this report	01
2.	Thessaloniki	02
	Blue Refugee Center (Solidarity Now)	02
3.	Ioannina	04
	Youth Center of Epirus	04
	Habibi.Works (Soups and Socks)	05
	Second Tree	07
	Doctors without borders (Médecins Sans Frontières)	07
4.	Athens	09
	Refugee Compass (Greek Council for Refugees)	09
	Solidarity Now	10
5.	Final remarks	11
6.	Acknowledgements	12

**The term organizations refers to different projects and help organizations who are not all incorporated associations / institutions but rather a group of people following an idea to help the society*

1. Aim and purpose of the report

In August 2015, I applied for a local team of volunteers in my hometown of 25.000 citizens in the heart of Bavaria, who took care of the 25 refugees in my small village. I got accepted and was allowed to start working with the asylum-seekers after the return from my semester abroad. In January 2016, I came back and due to the huge influx of refugees that happened in Europe and to Germany during the months of my absence, I found 650 instead of 25 refugees. My help was needed. The German government not only agreed to relocate thousands of migrants from Greece, but also accepted more than one million refugees since 2015 in the country, staying in camps, waiting for their refusal or admission of their asylum applications. I spoke with many of the fled men, women and children. They told me their stories and I learned that many of them came through Greece and set first foot in Europe on Greek soil. After the implementation of the agreement to close Balkan borders, many refugees are unable to continue their journey and stayed in Greece, through which they were trying to find their way to central and northern Europe. Nowadays, are approximately 62.000 refugees living in Greece, which makes around 0.57% of the total population.¹

In 2017, I moved to Greece to perform an internship in International Relations at the University of Ioannina, a city in the poorest region of Greece, Epirus. I got involved in events in context of Social Erasmus, through which I met Greek volunteers working in refugee care. I came to ask myself, how does the Greek population, who still suffers from the aftermath of financial and economic crises, deals with the many refugees that have stayed in their country? Most importantly, **why** do they want to help and **how** do they manage to support refugees? According to data of the UNHCR, since the beginning of 2017, over 11.500 refugees arrived in Greece, with estimated 66 people moving daily from Greek islands to the main lands. In June, over 4000 people applied for asylum in Greece.²

The aim of this report is to portray the work of the national supporters, describing the challenges and the success they have experienced since they started their activities within the urbanized areas of the main land in Greece. I chose Thessaloniki, Ioannina and Athens for my research, three different-sized cities in three different parts with different methods and resources to approach refugees and successfully support them to integrate themselves into Greek society. With the purpose of learning from their efforts, the following chapters represent the results of the interviews with the volunteers and coordinators of various projects.

¹ International Rescue Committee, 2017, <https://www.rescue.org/country/greece>

² UN Refugee Agency, 2017, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58629>

During the interviews, I focused on the following questions: the structure of the organization, the outcomes of the projects and programs they have implemented for refugees, the communication between members of the support teams and refugees, the struggles and challenges the organizations face and the hopes and wishes of the organization and its members for the near future. Additionally, the question why the respondents got involved in refugee care has been a matter of interest.

** Organizations refer to different projects and help organizations who are not all incorporated associations / institutions but rather a group of people following an idea*

2. Thessaloniki



Thessaloniki is the second largest city in Greece and can be found in the area of central Macedonia, located northeast in the country.³ Asking Greek inhabitants, they describe Thessaloniki having a cosmopolitan character. Walking through the streets of Thessaloniki, you can see various monuments of its 3000-year-old migration history under Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Jewish influence. Giving a correct number of refugees living in Thessaloniki and this part of Greece is impossible. However, estimations mention up to 25.000 fled people in Northern Greece.⁴

The Blue Refugee Center (Solidarity Now)

The Blue Refugee Center (BRC) was opened by the care organization Solidarity Now. The Open Society Foundations founded Solidarity now in 2013. Since November 2016 the center operates as an open space, providing refugees and asylum seekers free services and a safe place for interaction with one another and the Greek community. Every refugee gets a club card free of charge and can access the center from 09:00 to 17:00 or schedule special appointments with employees of legal and social services, attending language classes and obtaining health care treatments.

Picture taken from <http://www.worldatlas.com/eu/gr/76/where-is-thessaloniki.html>

³ Worldatlas, 2017, <http://www.worldatlas.com/eu/gr/76/where-is-thessaloniki.html>

⁴ Mary Harris (Greek Reporter), 2016, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/06/14/how-many-refugees-are-in-greece-heres-the-head-count-ahead-of-world-refugee-day/>

I was impressed by the equipment and modernity of the center. It is secluded in various areas, offering legal counseling, psychological support, employability consulting, educational activities, a women safe space and a nurturing room for mothers and newborns, a child friendly space, a corner for the youth, a conference room and an area with computers and internet access. Brochures with events and information about the Center and its services and activities are always accessible and are available in Greek, English, Arabic and other languages. All services that are provided by Solidarity Now at the BRC are free.

The children friendly space is suitable for children between 3 and 12 and its trained staff takes care of around 25 children a day. The midwife and women space offers the female refugees education about nutrition, health care and beauty sessions and works flexible according to the desires and needs of the women coming to the center. Additionally, young mothers are provided with information about breastfeeding.

The center offers language classes in English and Greek and works in collaboration with volunteers by teaching German and French. Languages are taught up to 3 times a week with a high number of participants (around 30), but due to relocation and administrative problems, the number of learners drops eventually to less than half of the initial amount of participants. Another problem is the illiteracy of some refugees, which need to learn how to write and read from scratch. The center offers also language classes only for women. The teachers focus on current events by taking recent newspaper articles and other educational events into account.

The conference room is available for other organizations who work with refugees in the Thessaloniki area. During the employability consulting, refugees are informed about their rights to work and are supported by creating CV's. Additionally, the consulter offers interview practice. The internet and computer room is open from 9 to 8 and is mostly used for skyping to friends and family members who remained in the home countries or fled to other nations. Within the center, a ping pong table is available as well as a music class for teenagers.

Moreover, the BRC offers free tours to Thessaloniki center or other locations every Friday, depending on the wishes of the refugees. The BRC also offers other educational and leisure events, like football and museum visits. Furthermore, the employees educate the fled individuals about educational opportunities, like scholarships for studies, funded by the American Embassy, to study 2 courses within one year for 100 refugees in Thessaloniki and Athens. Also Solidarity Now offers two full scholarships for three years. The BRC also has a helpline, where refugees obtain support through phone calls in various languages, can schedule appointments and register for classes.

A highlight was to get to know the efforts of Solidarity Now to support the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual individuals) refugees and asylum seekers. Solidarity Now managed to establish a pioneer project through which the LGBTI community is offered shared accommodation, psychological support, medical assistance and most importantly, a safe and respectful environment.

The purpose of the employees and volunteers of the BRC is to establish contact and interaction between refugees and the Greek community, which is a main step towards integration. Solidarity Now hopes for an open community who will accept the refugees as new members of such, underlining the cosmopolitan character that Thessaloniki has had historically. The respondents are positive that Thessaloniki will develop and enhance its multicultural society further.

More information about the BRC <https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/blue-refugee-center/> and the organization “Solidarity Now” <https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/orama-praxi/>

3. Ioannina



Ioannina is the largest city of the poorest region in Greece: Epirus. The city looks back at a history of different occupations by Turkish authorities; hence, the community is very proud of its Greek identity. Five camps were established within the surrounding areas of Ioannina and three of them are still existing today. The rates of unemployment are high in Epirus, therefore it was very interesting to see, how the Greek community and international care organizations support refugees with the options they have.

Youth Center of Epirus

In Ioannina, I was able to speak with a volunteer and project coordinator of the Youth Center of Epirus (YCE), which offers all kinds of events and activities for young people in the region. For refugees, the volunteers, mostly students, are taking care of the children in the camps. Overall, the Youth Center does not receive funding for their activities with refugees up to 18 years of age. Nevertheless, they offer recreational activities like football games and artistic activities, which they

were especially trained for. In summer, the YCE opened a new center, where volunteers will offer more activities for children and citizens of Epirus and Ioannina, in a safe environment. The communication with the children who do not speak English is mostly playful and the volunteers stated, the children are easily catching up with the language. The aim of the YCE activities is to provide children with basic informal learning during the sports and crafting events, to improve their use of free time and support the emotional conditions. The Center participated in a Project “YOUth for RefuGeneration” to improve the image of refugees in the EU. They also want to provide a comfortable and peaceful environment, as the conditions in the camps is rather bad. The Youth Center only operates locally, as the work is based on long term committed volunteers, trained by youth workers experienced in the field.

The volunteers mentioned struggles like the locations of the camps that are sometimes far out of Ioannina and take a long and troublesome time to reach. Sometimes, there are fights and conflicts between the residents of the camps due to their different social and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the variety of care organization within the camps is sometimes overwhelming, as the schedules interfere with each other. The respondents wish that also the Greek community of the area will open their minds more to the refugees. Furthermore, relocation is still a big problem and makes it hard to deepen the relationships to the children and their families.

The volunteer and project coordinator decided to get involved with refugee work because they believe it is a very human gesture to help people, far away from their homes, to integrate and being tolerated by the Greek society. Their hopes for the future consider the enhancement of the contact between locals and fled people, the active involvement of the new-build community Center.

More information about the Youth Center of Epirus and the Project “YOUth for RefuGeneration”: <https://www.youthcenterofepirus.org/english/> and <https://youthforrefugeneration.jimdo.com/>

Habibi.Works (Socks and Soup)

Habibi.Works is a project founded in August 2016 by the international care organization Soup and Socks, who operated in the Katsikas camp close to Ioannina. Due to the relocations, the organization works with around 500 refugees and had up to 5000 visitors since they have started to operate in the camp. I spoke with Mimi, one of the founding members of the project.

Habibi.Works supports refugees in their daily lives and offers them to make products they either sell or use themselves. Their work is based on five major aspects. First, the organizations offers support for self-help and wants the refugees to take

responsibility of their actions. They support them in giving up their passive status as refugee and become an active participant of the community. Second, Soup and Socks supports a re-definition of the refugee's personalities, who should be respected for their qualities and skills rather than being seen only as victims. Third, Habibi.Works offers a platform for networking and establishing contact to the Greek community. Fourth, due to restrictions in a general access to education, Habibi.Works tries to establish peer-education. Fifth, Soup and Socks wants to educate people all over the world about the refugee crisis and its consequences by showing the situation in the camps but also the refugees' talents through social media.

The communication with the refugees is supported by translators, but occurs mostly in English. Also, Habibi.Works faces some struggles when interacting with refugees, authorities and other organizations. Mimi underlined the importance of intercultural communication skills, as the culture clash can lead to conflicts. Additionally, the Greek community's hesitation and lack of dedication to help is a problem. The organization tries to support a long lasting contact but the Greeks are not used to the innovative concept the organization represents. Furthermore, as foreigners mostly lead Habibi.Works, the Greek community seems hesitant, also due to the non-European background of the refugees. Another struggle is the work with the big institutions and organizations, who communicate non-transparently, which leads to misunderstandings. Moreover, Habibi.Works, as well as its mother organization, Soups and Socks, are dependent on individual donations and don't receive as easily funding as the bigger organizations. Last, the work with refugees is often difficult, as the relocations, long waiting periods for administrative progress, family unifications and despair are affecting the refugees negatively.

Mimi's personal involvement is based on her experience as a social worker, where she has seen the violence of non-European forces against migrants and was shocked to experience the same within Europe during the huge waves of refugees since 2015. With Soup and Socks she has been in Athens to distribute goods to refugees in 2016. The volunteers saw that help is needed; therefore, they decided to found Habibi.Works in July 2016 to work permanently with refugees. Her personal motivation is based on her eagerness to change the conditions for refugees who come to Europe and have the right to a fulfilling life and social integration.

For the future, Mimi hopes for a continuously dynamic work of Habibi.Works to develop a constant donator circle that gives the organization and its project more security in planning events and their stay in Greece. She wishes for a further involvement of the Greek community and hopes to deepen the Know-How to eventually transfer the leadership of the project to Greeks.

More information about Habibi.Works <https://www.facebook.com/HabibiWorks/> and Soup and Socks <https://soupandsocks.eu/> or <https://www.facebook.com/soupandsocks/>.

Second Tree

Second Tree is a non profit, non-governmental organization that offers scout activities for 12 to 17 year old refugees of the camps in the Ioannina area, English classes and dental care (transportation and organizing appointments).

The aim of the scout project is to train refugees to be the leaders of their own scout groups. The activities contain education about how to behave in society (basing their lives on 20 core values), nature field trips, thematic and leisure events and social events like giving free hugs to the people in Ioannina. The scouts of Second Tree act out of the belief that every human has the responsibility to care for everyone around them. The communication happens with two scout leaders that are selected for their English speaking skills and commitment.

Second Tree does not promote gender division and therefore supports gender mixed groups. After some hesitation, the NGO was able to work with female and male children together. A main problem is the instable situation of the refugee (relocation, family reunification), which make it hard to establish a stable core of refugee scouts. The challenges in the camps are caused by a variety of issues, depending on the period of arrival in the area, the non-existence of possible employment and a missing perspective for the future.

For the future, there are hopes to support the further integration of refugee children and young adults within the Greek scout community and develop the international contact. Throughout the work of Second Tree, they established an integrational project called the 'Twinning Project' where they paired up Greek students and families with refugee families to mentor each other and increase the social integration. However, it is often challenging to provide constantly enough funding for the duration of the project.

More information about Second Tree: <http://www.secondtree.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/SecondTreeNGO/>

Doctors without borders (Médecins Sans Frontières)

I spoke with Julien, who works as a project coordinator for Doctors without borders (MSF), situated in the Ioannina region. Since the middle of the last year, the MSF are managing and providing health and primary care in the camps around the capital of Epirus. From October 2016 on, they are providing mental health care for moderate and severe cases as well. In mobile units, the medical treatments are offered to refugees located in five camps in the region. Within Epirus, they are treating around 70 refugees.

Since the start of the medical treatment provided by MSF, around 1800 patients treated. In the camps are three kinds of branches in practice. First, the organizations and volunteers of community centers who provide activities. Second, the service centers who offer medical, psychological and social services and last, the integration of refugees into the community. MSF's team consists of 2 psychologists, 5 translators of different genders, psychiatrists, social workers and counsellors who provide support in legal protection and status, advise them in any questions regarding legal permits. They make sure the refugees receive their money promised by the state and a stable mental health environment.

The communication within the team and with refugees is mainly Greek and English, but also in Arabic languages which often build the bridge and establish the contact with refugees. To offer these services, translators with a proficient knowledge of medical terms are needed. The Greek government offers staff for translating within the hospitals, however it is difficult to schedule appointments with them or in case of emergency, translators are often not available. The main struggles are the lack of coaching of workers dealing with traumatized refugees, a need of permanent funding and inadequate management and health care resources. Julien told me about the late night arrivals of the refugees on Fridays. Many of the new arrived refugees are protection cases, which need intensive medical attention. Often there is no or missing information about the individuals' medical history.

MSF is structured in 5 sections, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland and is not sponsored by European funds. 3 different sections of MSF operate in Greece: France, Belgium and Switzerland. Due to the many resources of medical care in Greece, the organizations will soon leave the country. As a result, a board of local potential funding will be needed. Therefore, MSF collaborates with translators, psychologists and locals who are connected to the Greek medical systems to establish permanent branches of help and encouraging locals to enhance the contact between the Greek community and refugees.

In the future, MSF and other bigger and international organizations will leave Epirus and other parts of Greece due to the reduced influx of refugees. It is time for smaller Greek NGO's to take over and the main concern is the lack of proper management of the project the other organizations have had established so far. Overall, the municipality is well involved within the refugee care and built a new community center to give the refugees a platform to interact with the Greek community and seek treatments and help. Of course, there are language barriers, but the future perspective is an increasing solidarity towards refugees. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the care organizations will be the next year, where many projects will lose the guidance of international care.

More information about Doctors without borders: <http://www.msf.org/en/where-we-work/greece> .

4. Athens



Athens is the capital of Greece and holds with around 6 million citizens almost 65% of the entire population within its urban and outer circles. Sources speak of around 10.000 refugees that the city currently has to care for and support.⁶ As Athens is the capital, living costs and rents are higher than in other parts of Greece and with an unemployment rate of around 20%, many Greek citizens struggle.

Despite these facts, a variety of care organizations settled in Athens to offer help in the camps and for the refugees living within the urban borders, who seek assistance in everyday life.

Refugee Compass (Greek Council for Refugees)

Established in 1989 as the first NGO in Greece with a clear focus on refugees, the Greek Council for Refugees has since developed and implemented many successful projects, offered support through its legal services and education about asylum law and the recognition and integration of refugees. The Council employs social workers and lawyers, supporting the integration of refugees since the 90s and especially since the recent refugee wave of 2015. The Council has assisted over 16,000 beneficiaries in the last year.

Refugee Compass was a project of the Council in 2016, aimed at enhancing the integration of Refugees within the Greek society. The two major aims were to assist the integration of young beneficiaries and the prevention of racism and violence within refugee groups and towards the Greek community, as segregation of refugee groups is a big threat to successful integration. An advisor board made up of a small group (migrants, Greek people and refugees) was built to design a schedule of 10 activities for individuals from 12 to 27, with the help of social workers. The advisor board, supported by the social workers, organized educational and entertaining activities. The Council fostered these activities to acknowledge the struggle of refugees, who find themselves in an unknown culture. Furthermore, Refugee Compass created a career path for participants to develop an interest in event planning and management.

Picture taken from <http://www.worldatlas.com/eu/gr/01/where-is-athens.html>

⁶ <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/06/14/how-many-refugees-are-in-greece-heres-the-head-count-ahead-of-world-refugee-day/>.

The 10 sub-projects included movie nights for children and families, with open invitations for people of the neighbourhood to participate and establish further contact between the Greek community and the refugees. Furthermore, the Compass organized day excursions to parks and museums. A major project was the establishment of a structured choir. The social workers composed the music and lyrics for the songs, which the refugee children of the choir practiced many times.

The board and participants communicate mainly in English with translators, although the responsible persons try to encourage the Greek language for communication. Some of the challenges of the projects were to find board members, as especially recognized refugees are less motivated to work with new refugees and they identify strongly with the regional community. Furthermore, parents and refugee families had to deal with housing, relocation, personal and educational issues; therefore, it was unusual for them to join movie nights and take actual time for entertainment. The Greek Council for refugees wants to draw a broader picture of refugee care and, with projects like Refugee Compass, tries to establish more than only a response to emergency needs. The goal is social integration, which takes time.

Further information in the Greek Council for Refugees and a report on the Refugee Compass: <http://gcr.gr/index.php/en/> and <http://www.gcr.gr/index.php/en/action/gcr-projects/2016/item/576-refugee-compass>

Solidarity Now

Solidarity Now is an organization that was founded in 2013 responding to the Greek crisis and having as a main target group the Greek population. Due to the refugee crisis, the organization's priorities shifted targeting mainly the refugee population. Athens Solidarity Centre is one of the projects of Solidarity Now. There is an open door policy and all the services are provided for free without any discrimination to the walk in beneficiaries from various origin countries like Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan etc.

Solidarity Now has the welfare service with social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and works in partnership with other Greek NGOs – service providers. Furthermore, the centre has a team of interpreters that directly communicate with the refugees. They play a key role in the functionality of the centre; they are necessary in terms of communication, as most of the beneficiaries don't speak Greek or English, but also in terms of bridging the cultural gap between the Greek staff and the international beneficiaries. The centre tries to gather information that is needed for the legal procedures and assists with psychological aid, if necessary. Occupational and speech therapy, perinatal care, employability, psycho social activities for parents and children, helpline, medical services are the other services provided free of charge in Athens Solidarity centre by specialized personnel.

The employees are paid, but collaborations with volunteers are existing in exceptional cases like foreign languages lessons, escorts to external services etc. The employees work in shifts and also offer support in vulnerable cases and with dealing of unaccompanied minors etc. On average, more than one hundred beneficiaries per day are supported in the center.

The challenges of the centre are the special situation of a melting pot: the cultural gap needs to be closed and language barriers to be overcome. As translators are the main contact persons of the refugees, confusion in communication occurs as the cultural aspects are sometimes affecting viewpoints and the dealing with cases. Another struggle is that not everyone can be helped, as relocation, bureaucratic obstacles of the government and the complexity of cases interfere with the progress that is made. Furthermore, Greeks act sometimes hostile against refugees, which makes social inclusion difficult. However, the employees of the centre are very motivated and passionate to support refugees in every aspect.

Solidarity Now hopes for continuing to offer services of a high quality and work more sustainable in the centre. The care organization needs to adapt daily to new situations and conflict. Regardless of refugees being relocated, Solidarity Now does its best to integrate them as far as possible and assist them with legal issues.

More information about Solidarity Now in Athens:

<https://www.solidaritynow.org/en/kentro-allileggiis-athinas/>

5. Final remarks

Travelling within Greece and talking to various volunteers and project coordinators from different backgrounds, organizations and cultures was a once in a lifetime experience for me. I have learned a lot by getting an insight in a variety of approaches and integrational projects of refugee care.

From the beginning, I thought that different cities would have different methods to access refugees and would face different challenges and struggles as well. However, a common issue, which I have noticed talking to the respondents, was the relocation of asylum-seekers, which still takes place and makes it hard to integrate them fast and successfully. Courses, projects and events had to be adapted often to new incoming refugees or could not be finished due to the relocation of participants. Another challenge was the successful support of integrational activities, as some local communities showed less interest than others to participate in the activities to establish contact with refugees. Furthermore, it was hard to convince some of the refugee families to participate, as they had to deal with crucial administrative problems rather than focusing on spare time projects. Another problem was the communication

between the organizations working with refugees, as sometimes the amount of helpers was overwhelming and the participation of the care organization was not well scheduled. Therefore, some projects could not blossom as much as they were supposed to do.

Overall, I saw that the passion, motivation and dedication was extraordinary in all care organizations I have visited and seethed within all volunteers and coordinators. To my question why the participants of my interviews help refugees, nearly everyone gave me the same answer: “because it is the right thing to do.” For some, it was not even a question. I was fascinated by the amount of people from different social backgrounds, languages, cultures, beliefs and ages coming together, to give strangers a better chance in life. All respondents said their care is a guide to self-help. It is great that the organizations and communities I have visited are existing to support the refugees in integrating themselves into an unknown society.

6. Acknowledgements

I have to thank the Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung, in collaboration with the Schwarzkopf Stiftung, to offer young people like me the opportunity to travel and do this important and meaningful experience on how youth handles the refugee crisis in Greece.

Moreover, I have to thank all the interviewees that took time to answer my questions and talk to me about the valuable and important work they are doing. It was truly an honour.