



VOICES AT THE BORDER

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Executive Summary

This report shares the stories and experiences of people on the island of Samos. People waiting for a decision on their asylum claims, local residents, and people living and working here in support of displaced people. In writing this we argue that the situation on Samos cannot be forgotten or ignored. That the conditions displaced people face here have always been bad and that even though the levels of overcrowding may have reduced, the situation remains tense, frightening and exhausting.

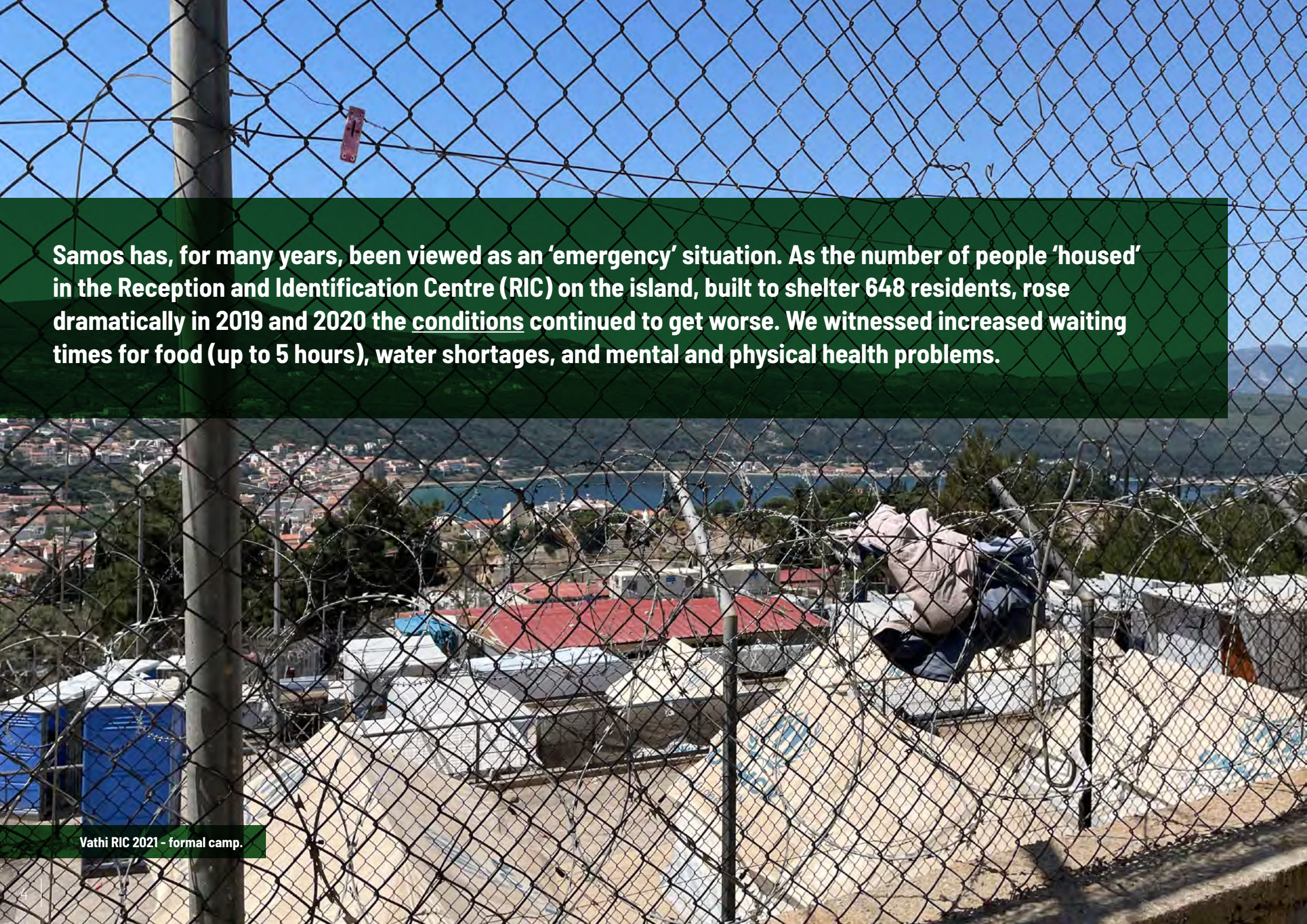
We share human stories rather than numbers and in doing so we advocate for policy change.

For access to healthy, nutritious food that recognises the cultural and individual role food plays in people's everyday lives.

For the need to improve communication channels on the island. For open, honest communication that reduces fear and uncertainty rather than increases it.

For access to skills development and education to support people in their next steps.

For a focus on community building and integration, on bringing people together rather than dividing them.



Samos has, for many years, been viewed as an 'emergency' situation. As the number of people 'housed' in the Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) on the island, built to shelter 648 residents, rose dramatically in 2019 and 2020 the conditions continued to get worse. We witnessed increased waiting times for food (up to 5 hours), water shortages, and mental and physical health problems.

Vathi RIC 2021 - formal camp.



“ This report focuses not on numbers but on human stories and experiences ”

Vathi Camp: 'The Jungle' 2021.

Introduction to Samos...

In 2021, the picture is somewhat different, with a 72% fall in the number of displaced people housed in the RIC and surrounding 'Jungle' area that expanded as a result of severe overcrowding. Resident numbers have decreased rapidly from 7,600 in January 2020 to 2,100 at the end of May 2021 (UNHCR, 2021), with a continued reduction as spring progresses into summer.

Though the Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi suggests that the reduced number of people housed across all five island 'hotspots' is a sign that the country is *'working in the right direction'*, in particular because it is 'easing the burden of immigration on local communities', this focus on numbers does not tell the real story. The real story faced either by displaced people who remain stuck on these islands or the communities whose lives run in parallel. There is more to

these islands than a story that can ever be told through numbers.

This report focuses on the island of Samos where Project Armonia has been operating since July 2019 and Dr Bird has been researching since 2018. It brings together research with experience and testimonies from the people who find themselves 'sheltered' here, who live here as a part of an ever changing community and

who work and volunteer here. This report focuses not on numbers but on human stories and experiences with the hope that it will allow readers to more deeply understand the changing situation on the island.

[As has been discussed elsewhere](#), the situation in the RIC, whilst vastly different from the previous two years, the RIC remains overcrowded, with people living in self-made shelters that are often unsuitable to face the conditions in either the summer or the winter,

surrounded by rats, with damaged and unclean toilets, at risk of physical and mental illness. There remains limited access to food. As well as limited access to healthcare, and with the added fears associated with COVID-19 that places people who test positive to the virus in quarantine conditions that sees all [positive cases housed together](#) in a small container. Even the new Camp Director recently accepted in an interview that [‘the way refugees have been treated here in recent years was](#)

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...a 2 hour walk from Vathi, over hilly terrain, in a space with no shelter from the hot summer sun, access to support and resources will become a lot more difficult.

[criminal and inhumane](#)’. As a result of this situation, a lack of trust exists between the people residing in the camp and the authorities. This situation was only exacerbated as COVID-19 restrictions were imposed and many rumours started to circulate in and around these spaces.

As a result, and as an added layer of concern, scepticism about vaccination and health support is high. Vaccination levels on the island more generally, in fact, are low, and the risks associated with both the conditions in the RIC and the tourist season mean an outbreak of COVID-19 on the island is still possible.

As we write this, the island’s displaced population and the NGOs supporting them face a new challenge. The opening of the Zervou Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre (MPRIC) and the closure of the Vathi Reception and Identification Centre. In November 2020, the European Commission [‘signed a grant agreement with the Greek authorities for the construction of three new reception centres on the Greek islands of Samos, Kos and Leros](#)

with the funding amounting to €121 million. In March 2021, [a further €155 million](#) was added for the construction of new reception centres on Lesbos and Chios.

The Vathi RIC has long been an anomaly when it comes to [approaches to refugee housing and support](#) in that it is situated next to the city of Vathi. On the islands of Chios and Lesbos, for example, as well as in mainland Greece, the majority of camps and RICs are situated away from urban hubs. Even the camps in the vicinity of Athens are in the suburbs, on the periphery of the city. [This distancing](#) of refugee shelter from urban centres creates a situation in which refugees are othered as racialised groups, placed at the periphery away from the activities of the local population and other visiting groups. The situation in Samos until now was somewhat different, with displaced people carrying out their daily lives in the city alongside the local population, NGO workers, volunteers and tourists, contributing to the local economy and to the everyday life in the city. This is not to suggest that the situation was utopian, without tensions and difficulties, but rather that the people stuck here on the island had access to the services and support available in the town.

With the move to the new camp – a 2 hour walk from Vathi, over hilly terrain, in a space with no shelter from the hot summer sun – access to support and resources will become a lot more difficult. This is the new challenge facing displaced people and their support networks on the island, a challenge that is not covered by only looking at the numbers. When we focus on the human stories we realise even more the problems caused by the move to the new camp. Opening a second structure on the island, one that is further away from the town, is not a solution to the issues faced on the island, it is simply a case of moving those issues to a different space, one that makes it harder for NGOs to operate.

It is a problem that is further exacerbated by the approach to which information is shared and the rumours that circulate as a result. For example, the question of when the new camp would open has been an open discussion on the island for a number of years, with this increasing in 2021 as the construction came closer to completion. The initial communications suggested that it would open in May 2021, this was then delayed as the MPRIC was not yet ready.

As the community in the RIC waited to hear more details, [camp residents](#) and the local community came together to challenge the building of Zervou MPRIC and to advocate for a different solution. This absence of information has resulted in rumours and uncertainty and to an increase in tensions in a space that is already heightened with suffering and lack of information. On top of this, on the 24th June 2021 a message was sent to the phones of camp residents, an ‘Important Statement from the Ministry of Migration and Asylum’, telling residents that ‘the objective of the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum is exclusively to provide better living conditions and an orderly framework for the provision of services to residents’, but that ‘no voluntary transfer to another structure or centre will be accepted. The presence of the beneficiaries in a centre or structure other than the one specified by the Ministry will result in the termination of financial assistance’. This message heightened anxieties and concerns as it in many ways increased confusion about what exactly happens next for people housed in the RIC who have a range of different asylum statuses. As of writing, a date is still yet to be communicated for the transfer to the new MPRIC and many questions and confusions remain.

It is in sharing these stories from one of Greece’s border islands that we look to remind people how displaced people, who find themselves stuck here often for many years, have been failed and abandoned by an asylum system supported by the European Union that is slow, ineffective and often not fit for purpose. To remind them that the repercussions of this on people’s lives are real and serious, and will have long-lasting effects on future generations.



Zervou MPRIC 2021.



Vathi camp barbed wire 2021.



Project Armonia meal: Beef stew.

The Problem of Food

One of the key problems on the island was always access to food. When you would speak to anyone you would hear the stories of five hour queues in the camp food-line to access 'meals' that were non-descript, mouldy, full of maggots or simply horrible.

As the founders of Project Armonia were volunteering for other organisations on the island, they would hear the same stories, 'we couldn't come to class as we were in the food line', 'food no good', stories of exhaustion and hunger that meant that concentrating on anything else was impossible. Without basic nutrition it is impossible to make proper use of the other NGO run services on the island such as Greek and English classes. As one of the founders, Jessica Nichols, makes clear, if people

were struggling with poor nutrition for only a few weeks that would be bad enough. However, once people find themselves stuck in these spaces for years, awaiting asylum, the effects of poor nutrition start to show in people's physical and mental health. One Project Armonia volunteer also pointed out to us that 'people don't make good decisions when they are hungry' or when they can't pay medical bills, that when people are hungry they will do what they need to do to be able to access food.

It is for these reasons that Project Armonia was founded, to offer an alternative to the catering company that provided food in the RIC. Project Armonia were able to provide healthy and nutritious food for only €1 per portion, whereas the catering company within the camp charges over €6 per portion. It was never going to be possible to feed the whole camp, but for those with the most severe needs, people who were pregnant or breastfeeding, people who were unable to stand in the food line for physical or mental health reasons, people over 60, there would be an alternative. An alternative based on working 'with, not for, refugees' and focused on providing tasty, nutritious meals inspired and cooked by the different communities living in and around the RIC. The Project brings together people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, people who have different ideas about politics or religion. Yet 'food goes beyond barriers, it is a way of communication', a way to come together to be 'useful' and to do something to

support others. The Head Chefs bring their own dishes and identities to the kitchen, cooking and serving dishes from their own countries, ones that they cannot return to. This matters, it is important. To be able to share such an important part of your culture and identity, to be able to cook and to welcome people is a right that is taken away by a camp catering system that provides non-descript food that is either inedible or unpleasant.

Food is something special, it is not simply a case of nutrition and health benefits (although that is vital too). It is more than that, it reminds us of where we come from, our upbringing, our experiences. The food provided in the camp does none of these things. Project Armonia, in contrast, provides a space to share stories and cultures through the sharing of a meal.

It is the sharing of stories, then, that we suggest is vital for fully understanding the situation on the island of Samos. It is not simply a case of understanding the

number of people who are 'housed' on the island, or the number of meals that are served, the number of doctors they have access to or the number of people sleeping in each shelter. Rather, it is important to understand the effects of this situation on the people involved, the struggles they face and the changes that they, and we, demand from the European Union to improve the situation.



...the effects of poor nutrition start to show in people's physical and mental health.



Discarded RIC food.

STORIES FROM THE BORDER

The stories we share here include voices from all over the world, from people whose stories start in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Yemen, Greece, the UK, Italy and many more, who share differing forms of existence on the island of Samos.

JUST WAITING: THE PASSAGE OF TIME

The journeys of displaced people are neither uniform nor easy. This is not a surprise to many but as the rhetoric surrounding refugees in the press develops, the lengthy processes and the endless waiting often gets forgotten. As we were reminded by one of our community, people 'are wasting their time...

When we lose our time we cannot bring it back, so we should use our time in a very good way'. This point of wasted time is raised regularly, whether it is guests coming to the restaurant, people talking to you in the street, or in interviews. People know exactly the

length of time they have been on the island, 'two years and two months', and exactly what they have lost. These journeys start with a process of waiting and they remain that way for long periods of time. To cross borders to claim asylum is not a simple

having to queue to exit the camp to go to the city, of different queuing systems outside shops for displaced people and local residents, and of people who did not live in the camp being told to return there after 19.00 because of their skin colour.



Anti-pushback graffiti in Vathi 2021.

process, especially as the European borders continue to close. Of the people we spoke to, all of them mentioned failed attempts, long waits, fear, isolation and appalling conditions. If you finally do cross the borders and enter Europe, a process that is made even harder by [pushbacks](#), the process of waiting, the [loss of time](#), is only just beginning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this system of waiting got worse. We were told stories about

This process of always waiting takes away the feeling of being 'useful' or being able to fulfil your hopes and dreams. Instead, people talk about their lives being on hold. In fact, people choose not to celebrate birthdays here, instead hoping to forget the years that they have lost waiting on an island, hoping to be free again. Waiting takes away people's feelings of completeness, their opportunities not only to be useful, but also to feel like they have achieved something with their lives. As one person remarked 'I have to be someone complete, someone that can lead'. That feeling of helplessness and lack of control caused by constantly waiting and having your autonomy taken away was universal across our discussions and is one of the fundamental harms caused by the system as it currently functions. With people stuck on islands awaiting a decision for many years, unsure of what will happen next, unable to integrate into the local community, and unable to plan for the future.

EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Second to the process of waiting is the question of what possibilities there are for development once a decision has been reached on a person's asylum case, both during the time spent on the island and afterwards. What is key to this are the available opportunities to access education and maintain the motivation to study when you remain 'stuck' waiting for what happens next.

We were told of one example where on arrival in Greece, a person was eager to learn Greek, to integrate, but after seeing the situation and how they were treated, this desire to learn went away. Not because they weren't keen to have the language skills but because 'Samos no good'. The situation of the camp that led to tensions between local populations and camp residents meant that they were sceptical that even if they did learn Greek, they would be able to properly settle and integrate here or be treated with respect. Without those language skills, however, the opportunity for further education in Greece, whether completing school, carrying out a vocational course or progressing to University becomes limited. As we were reminded by a local lawyer, 'memories are tickets for more unsafety in the future', particularly when it comes to children who have been repeatedly 'treated like animals', a phrase you hear all the time about the system. What will those memories lead to when people look back on their childhoods and the way they were treated?

Whilst access to schooling in Greece supposed to be open to all children claiming asylum under an [agreement that was reached in 2019](#), the reality on

the ground, and particularly on the islands, is that children and teenagers find themselves outside of formal schooling and often supported by NGOs. Yet, as one person reminded us when talking about the young people currently on the island, 'they want to be the next generation of useful people, the teacher, the engineer...the boss... So they need to be educated, they need to learn something'. Without that opportunity to develop and learn people cannot use their opportunities for a new life. This matters because 'people need education, humanity is first, our planet is first, our kids are first' and education is central to people taking the next step beyond receiving asylum.

On a vocational level, Project Armonia, similar to other NGOs on the island, such as [Selfm.aid](#), provide an opportunity for vocational skills development, 'an

opportunity for people to get active again and to take an active role in the situation' to 'empower people to think they deserve things and can do amazing things'. This is the power of skill development and educational opportunities in their broadest sense. Yet, other options are also vital and access to formal education, as well as scholarships to facilitate this, is vital for ensuring that the generation of young people forced to flee from their homes can then have the opportunity to experience the next steps of their life.



Bread making lessons.

COMMUNITY



Project Armonia kitchen team.

Communities in the RIC are separated along the lines of country of origin, or language group. Similarly, families are housed in different spaces to single men and women. However, inside Project Armonia the environment is different.

As one community member told us, people fight in the camp because of diversity, 'but when they work in Armonia it's like a family, and I like that'. Another talked to us about the fact that it is good to be around people, to talk to people, to laugh, to be noticed. Like any community, not everyone has the same approach to life, or the same politics. Rather, in a space built on dignity, respect and community these differences can be used to improve a situation, not to make it worse. This focus on community building, 'on integration rather than separation', is one that can be used as a framework for improving the situation in the RIC and MPRIC, as well as for integration in general.

What Happens Next

As mentioned above, the process of waiting is central to the asylum process, it is a constant situation of waiting for what happens next. That then raises the question of what does indeed happen next? For people who receive asylum, this is a case of finding work, often challenging with people having to apply for multiple jobs with limited access to internet and relying on mobile phones for application forms that are not set up to be easily accessible on phones.

For people who find themselves properly stuck in the system, who have multiple rejections on their asylum claims, recent weeks have seen them being able to leave the island. It has for the last few weeks been possible, even with 'geographical restrictions', to leave the island and move in the direction of the mainland. In fact, we were even told of an alleged situation in which a uniformed official told someone that they should leave the island even though they were very clear with them that they didn't have the relevant paperwork. They were told that they would be better off in either France or Germany.

These rumours and false information confuse people and lead to a situation where they feel that they should and can leave the island. Transparency is vital in this situation and the confusion is harmful. As one local lawyer reminded us, 'if people get sent back [to Greece] from France after two years we have destroyed their life'. If people are allowed to leave without the opportunities to do so longer-term, to travel further into Europe to try to set up the next steps of their new life, to then have that torn away from them and to be returned to Greece then they are made to wait even longer and with less strength to settle and start again. We were reminded that whilst we can be happy for people who make it out of Greece, the system is unfair. 'Greece was paid to do a job', to house people and process their claims and they are now in the process of covering up the fact that it hasn't been done for many years.

If people get sent back [to Greece] from France after two years we have destroyed their life.

Policy Recommendations

Whether you are speaking to displaced people, the local community or NGO workers the message is often the same, 'I am very tired', tired of the situation, tired of the waiting, tired of the lack of information and transparency, and tired knowing that the proposed solution, the newly built MPRIC in Zervou, two hours away from the support of the town will not solve the problem.

It is on the basis of these conversations, extracts of which have been shared above and drawn together in to themes, that we make the following policy recommendations. These are not based on numbers but on real human stories of the people who live on the island of Samos.





Policy Recommendations

- 1 Access to healthy, nutritious food** that reminds people of their home and countries, their experiences. The fact that 'people are humans and deserve to be considered' in the food that is provided to them and not simply have their choices ignored. It cannot be the role of NGOs to fill this gap but the approaches used by Project Armonia should be used as a framework for food provision in EU funded shelters.
- 2 There is a real need to improve communication of actions.** Whether that is communication between UNHCR and camp residents, camp management and NGOs, or the RIC and the local community. Open and transparent communication is vital for reducing fear and tensions and for supporting people in the asylum process. Communication allows for the creation of links and understanding and has the potential to generate solutions. This communication cannot simply be one way, listening is just as important as sharing information.
- 3 The importance of listening to people and treating them with dignity and respect.** We were told a story of one person who's friend lost their life after they went to seek medical help and were not able to be transferred to the hospital. Stories like this, of people being ignored and not having their concerns listened to are heard time and time again. Respect for individuals lives and their stories is vital. Properly listening to them is a necessary step when it comes to planning asylum support at the local, national and EU level.
- 4 Sending money to EU border states is not a solution to the current situation.** Rather, genuine solidarity is needed to offer people making asylum claims a future. One with access to education, health care and community support.
- 5 A broader focus is needed on bringing people together rather than dividing them.** This includes within shelter structures but also with the locations of shelter. The new MPRIC which separates displaced people from support is not a housing solution that we can support. Furthermore, the RIC, which is divided along community lines, further exacerbates tensions. Small projects such as Project Armonia demonstrate the value and strength of community building. NGOs are an example of good practice and should be learned from. Small projects such as Project Armonia demonstrate the value and strength of
- 6 There is a need for access to education and skill development** with necessary scholarships to support this. People with refugee status need to be fully supported in working towards the next steps of their life, in being able to feel 'useful' again, to meet their potential. A feeling that is lost when 'stuck' for many years on an island waiting for an asylum decision. The opportunity for development at least needs to be guaranteed once that process is over.

community building. The RIC, which is divided along community lines further exacerbates tensions. NGOs can be an example of good practice and should be learnt from.

demonstrate the value and strength of

Voices at the Border

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We would like to thank everyone who gave us their time for the writing of this report. The people who sat down with us and shared their stories, and the people who shared their photographs. We would also like to thank the University of Liverpool and the British International Studies Association for funding this project and Kaleidoscope for bringing our report to life with their design. We believe change is possible and we hope these stories will encourage it to happen.