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## **Psychosocial Challenges at a Refugee Camp: When Volunteer**

### **Preparation is Lacking.**

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#### **Abstract**

This small-scale study was undertaken to learn about training for volunteers participating in a particular nongovernmental organization (NGO) program to help refugees living at a camp in Greece. There is a dearth of research on this topic in spite of the fact that organizations rely heavily on the support of volunteers. The design was that of a pilot case study. It was conducted using observations and interviews of volunteers at the NGO. Findings indicated that volunteers were poorly trained, as the NGO staff had insufficient knowledge about refugees in general, and the refugee population at the camp, in particular. The lack of training resulted in high levels of frustration for the camp residents as well as poor morale and sadness on the part of the volunteers. There are relatively easy solutions for better preparing volunteers to support refugees in transitional camps, including pre-arrival and on-site mentoring on the culture, history, and languages of the predominant camp residents as well as clear instructions on procedures and careful oversight by NGO staff, all of which would result in improved wellbeing for both refugees and volunteers.

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**Introduction**

In 2015, an increase of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe was named a “refugee crisis,” and some wealthy nations sought to reduce the numbers crossing their borders (Hughes et al. 2020). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that nearly 5.2 million refugees and migrants reached Europe by the end of 2016 (UNHCR 2020a, 2020b). Due to its geographical position, Greece is often the first European country of entrance. Initially, the Dublin Regulation (European Commission 2020; EUR-Lex 2013), adopted by the European Union in 2005 and amended several times since, determined which country processes claims for asylum, usually the country where the asylum seeker first entered the European Union (EU). The UNHCR estimated that there were over 186,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Greece at the end of 2019, including over 5,000 unaccompanied children (UNHCR n.d.). Camps are overcrowded – the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Reliefweb 2020) reported over 37,000 living in Greek Island camps built for 6,000 – with harsh and unsanitary conditions.

Volunteers have often substituted for skilled staff, as there has been a considerable need for workers to provide all kinds of essential services, from rescue operations to handing out basic supplies such as blankets, food, clothing, and soap. However, as Fratzke and Dorst (2019) report, ‘Volunteers and sponsors require vetting, training, supervision, and ongoing support in order to be effective’ (p. 1).

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) recommitted to respecting the right to seek asylum and to the protection of refugees in the 1999 Istanbul Document (No.22). Its May 2016 meeting in Athens, ‘Migration, refugees and European security,’ co-organized with the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), sought to foster cooperative and humanitarian strategies to address the increasing crisis of migrants from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa (Meeting Report 2016). Remarking on the effects of the COVID pandemic on refugee flows, OSCE Director of the Office for

Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir stated, 'Refugees make up a small percentage of the world's population. But those who have been forced to leave their countries because of conflict or persecution depend on all of us for their protection and wellbeing... We need to ensure that they settle in well for the duration of their stay, however short or long that ends up being' (OSCE 2020). Numerous OSCE documents and reports indicate its longstanding commitment to human rights and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. At the same time, evidence of failed policies and anti-immigration practices have contributed to ongoing human rights challenges for refugees and asylum seekers (Reliefweb 2020).

For example, even after the September 2020 fire at the Moria Camp on the island of Lesbos, the residents were quickly moved to a new camp, 'Moria 2.0,' criticised for inadequate shelter, a lack of running water, limited health care, and no legal aid access (Aljazeera 2020).

Volunteers are needed to provide basic necessities and humanitarian care in these protracted situations. At the same time, volunteers need care in terms of training to understand the situations they will face, and ongoing support in the midst of tensions and stresses regularly encountered at the camps. In spite of the need to engage tens of thousands of volunteers to help with the mundane, but necessary tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and distributing clothing and supplies, there is a surprising lack of research on effective strategies for volunteer training. There is also little research relating to interactions between volunteers and NGO staff, or about any wellbeing issues resulting from interactions between refugees and volunteers.

This pilot case study was an attempt to gain insights on the topic.

### Methodology

The goal of this small, evaluative case study was to examine training and support given to volunteers on a Greek island in order for them to provide for refugee camp residents. Research questions were as follows: What kind of training was provided prior to and during time spent as a volunteer? What was the structure of any debriefings? In what ways did training relate to volunteers' abilities to support the refugee camp residents?

### Search Strategy

The small number of studies found in the Web of Science, JSTOR, Applied Social Sciences Index, Social Sciences Full Text, and Academic Search Premier are described here. The database search included the years 2015-2021, using keywords 'refugee camp' and 'volunteers'.

## **Literature Review**

Many articles include the work of volunteers but do not focus on the volunteers themselves, and their needs for training and support. For example, Ruas (2017) describes language instruction and volunteers at a Greek camp who were enthusiastic but not trained: 'few of these teachers have any training in how to teach language' (p. 18). The author stated that a problem is that many volunteer groups work in isolation, have short-term volunteers, and need structured support groups. However, the article focuses on training volunteers to teach English, not on training for volunteers with respect to engaging with refugee circumstances or volunteers learning the languages of the residents.

Many volunteers are young, with little to no experience (Sandri 2018). As Chtouris and Miller (2017) found, the work performed by both NGOs and informal collectives in Greece has not been well documented. They conducted research to understand interactions occurring between refugees and volunteers as they contributed to volunteers' identity formation. They found that most volunteers engaged due to a sense of morality, humanitarianism, and justice (see also Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan 2020). Many are at a place between education and employment; volunteering was seen as a bridge, but most do not come equipped with professional skills or experience working with people affected by trauma. In fact, some are looking to develop such skills. Chtouris and Miller (2017) stated that some major NGOs, such as Doctors without Borders, provide training for 'professional opportunities in "volunteering"' (p. 71). However, some volunteers choose to remain independent, as they viewed such training as 'restrictive and alienating' (p. 71).

Trihas and Tsilimpokos (2018) described the volunteer work they observed in Lesbos as 'volunteer tourism'. Their quantitative sample of 107 volunteers found that most volunteers were highly educated and 42.1% were between the ages of 25-34. Nearly half had never volunteered before, and nearly 60% were only volunteering for 1-2 weeks. The volunteers' described their best experiences as being linked

to altruistic events and solidarity with other people who were being generous and those who were appreciative of help. Their responses to negative experiences revolved around highly traumatic events, such as seeing dead children and shipwrecks involving dead and drowning people. No support for volunteers in such situations is described. These negative events reflect that the refugee experience is often one that includes multiple traumas: fears and subjection to unrest and violence in the home country, the many dangers associated with fleeing to another country, and the unfamiliar and frequently unsafe conditions found in a new location (Anagnostopoulos et al. 2015; Patterson et al. 2017). To be responsive to the population, volunteers need information about the refugee journey in general and cultural information about the refugee population they will serve in specific.

Recognizing the needs of volunteers for support and guidance, Hughes et al (2019) (British mental health professionals) created a service for those working in Calais, usually on their own without the benefit of an NGO for organizational support, direction, supervision, or guidance. They found that volunteers needed to work through ethical dilemmas in which their values were compromised, manage stress arising from a lack of supplies and a multitude of injustices and practice self-care. The volunteers struggled with cultural misunderstandings and needed emotional support to sustain resilience.

Cunningham and Sesay (2017) called for 'cultural humility that emphasizes the importance of community and partnerships over the work of the individual' volunteering in crisis settings (p. 478). They argue that such a mindset involves a thorough understanding of camp procedures, a willingness to take on whatever tasks are assigned, and a close partnership with long-term staff to understand policies and interventions. Gaining "cultural humility" was associated with time in place, but it is also acquired through thoughtful training.

Tribe (2002) has written about how those who have healing roles in the lives of refugees may not be mental health practitioners; they include community members and organizations. As such, people in these roles need to understand the effect of major loss in refugee lives as well as the role of culture (and its relationship to the concept of 'mental health') and the challenge of language and translation.

## **The Case Study**

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During July 2018, I volunteered at a refugee camp on an island about an hour from Athens. This case study, based on fellow volunteers' and my own observations and interviews with volunteers, is intended as an evaluation of psychosocial practices of the NGO for which we volunteered and as suggestions for improving practice. Our observations and recommendations may be useful to numerous NGOs serving refugees and asylum seekers. They can also help potential volunteers prepare for psychosocial challenges they may encounter at camps.

This case was not intended as a full research study, given that I had less than two weeks to volunteer at the refugee camp. I did not originally intend to conduct a research study with that time period. However, as I came to know the other volunteers and uncover some major issues affecting them and the camp residents, I felt it important to disseminate my findings, as they resonated with others I spoke with, who had either volunteered or been employed at other camps. I requested and received written permission from all other camp volunteers to include their observations. No names of camp residents, NGO staff, or the camp itself are used to maintain anonymity.

The other volunteers and I recognize and honour the commitment of paid NGO staff to work in situations of great turmoil, poor environmental conditions, inadequate supplies, and potential danger. Working for months and years in such positions can be physically and psychologically draining (Welton-Mitchell 2013). We appreciate those who take on these humanitarian jobs, often with low wages.

At the same time, we observed numerous issues that were a result of poor management and insufficient training of staff and volunteers. The staff at the NGO, for which I will use the pseudonym Solutions Crossing Borders (SCB), were primarily young people with an expressed passion 'to help others'. They appeared to have very little knowledge about refugees, and only one spoke Arabic, which was the primary language of the residents in the camp.

### *Why Solutions Crossing Borders?*

I chose SCB after searching the Internet for potential organizations at which I could volunteer for a short time, as I had a little free time before the beginning of my next academic term of teaching. Many NGOs require 2-3 month minimum stays. This is understandable, as it can help to prevent 'volunteer tourism' (Godin 2020). Of the eight volunteers at the camp where I volunteered, five had either volunteered previously at

another one of SCB's locations at least once, or they knew of someone who had and who gave the organization favourable reviews.

What I learned from these volunteers and from staff was that this refugee camp/site was SCB's first attempt at offering services to refugees. Each of its other international sites involved helping local people in other, non-refugee contexts. These other sites offered language and cultural trainings throughout the stay of the volunteers as well as supervised site visits during which volunteers worked alongside SCB staff and with local people. Three of the volunteers had been to other SCB sites in Africa and South America and found their opportunities richly rewarding. All three found their time at the camp in Greece vastly different from their past experiences in problematic ways.

### **Preparations and Orientation**

It was easy to volunteer for the SCB refugee program, as it was a matter of paying for the opportunity with no screening process, the lack of which, in itself could give rise to safeguarding issues. There was a description of the duties assigned to volunteers, and once registered, there was a recommendation to use an online source to learn a few phrases in Arabic.

Volunteers arrived on a Saturday at Athens International Airport where we were met by an NGO staff member and driven by van to a local hotel in the town closest to the refugee camp. Aside from myself and three other women, the remaining volunteers were all university students. On Sunday morning, we received a training that lasted approximately 90 minutes out of a scheduled three hours. The training explained the NGO's specific duties at the camp. SCB supervised a clothing store, a laundry, and a women's centre. It also provided tea, milk, and sanitary supplies to the camp residents on two weekdays. Volunteers bagged the supplies for each family prior to these weekly distributions.

We learned that we would be rotated through the duties on a daily basis. We were also told that, in case of an emergency (such as unrest in the camp), we would depart immediately. Volunteers were not given any background on what it meant to be a refugee or asylum seeker, the nature of the journeys of the residents, cultural or historical backgrounds of the primary refugee groups at the camp, or basic language information. The young woman who gave the training knew very little about refugees herself, nor of the events leading up to the

Syrian War (most of the camp residents were from Syria). Because I have worked internationally with refugees and resettlement for 19 years, I offered to provide support and training. My offer was politely declined.

There were four SCB staff at the site: a female director from Greece, a male who drove the van to take us between the hotel and the camp (and who provided other services throughout the day, as he was the only staff member who spoke Arabic), and two young females – one from Canada, and the other from the USA. Of the four, the male and American and Canadian women interacted the most with volunteers. Our jobs were to do laundry, supervise the shop, and provide some facilitation and activities at the women's centre (women volunteers only), along with bagging the distributed non-perishable items of tea, soap, and sanitary supplies. We left for the camp at 8am, returning to the hotel at 3:30. Off hours were on our own, with no opportunities for additional training.

### **The Challenge of Inadequate Facilities**

It is not surprising to be met with the challenge of inadequate supplies and facilities to fully support refugee residents at this camp. Given the number of people fleeing to European countries since 2015, many camps are struggling to manage numbers far greater than those they were designed to serve. This was the case with the camp described in this study. Such shortages compound the frustration and wellbeing of refugee residents. As such, volunteers should be instructed and prepared to handle the challenges in order to reduce their personal stress and provide them with ways to support the refugees. For instance, staff should be trained to provide some support for volunteers who witnessed frightening events at the camp. During my short stay, we saw a toddler left unattended and screaming for an undetermined time in the middle of a camp road. We dealt with the frustration and anger of camp residents due to inadequate basic services. We also experienced a forced evacuation of volunteers due to an armed resident who was broadcasting in Arabic from the rooftop of a building. None of these occurrences were debriefed with the group of volunteers by staff leaders.

#### *Inadequate Laundry Facilities*



At this camp of 950 residents (designed for 500), there were 14 small washing machines to take care of all the residents' laundry. SCB created a system whereby residents signed up for appointments. Volunteers, not residents, did the laundry and returned the wet clothing to residents, who would then hang it up to dry. In spite of the appointment system, many residents would come and beg to have their clothing cleaned on an unscheduled day. Typically, they had many family members and required more washing days, given that they had little clothing. Volunteers were instructed to refuse, in spite of having no language skills to communicate the instruction.

Due to the small ratio of washing machines to residents, too many clothes were typically stuffed into the machines, with the result that clothing would often come out smelling unclean. Residents would beg for the clothes to be rewashed. Against regulations, some volunteers would take in the additional clothes to rewash, but too often these granted pleas came from the residents who were the most aggressive in their requests and who knew some English, so could communicate with the volunteers. Even though volunteers made these choices, they often voiced their unease in comments such as, "What could I do?" "I didn't know what else to do," and "I wish I could be more fair." Additionally, residents often did not retrieve their clothes when they were ready. We often had 20-30 bins of laundry we would need to sort through to find a resident's items. Sitting wet in piles contributed to their unclean smell.

The machines were in a container that was very hot in the summer. I imagine it is very cold in winter, and I cannot imagine how residents manage to dry the clothing in cold winter months. Staff members did not spend time at the laundry container. At times, volunteers chose not to eat the lunches that were provided because they were afraid of health issues resulting from meats and vegetables that were not refrigerated for two-three hours, sitting in the hot container. Their hunger often resulted in them showing increased aggravation during the afternoons.

Because the machines were insufficient to clean residents' clothing, camp residents' frustrations ran high outside the container. There was rarely a staff member at this site to help the volunteers.

### *The Camp Store*

Clothing and shoes were in a store attached to the main building for SCB, which also served as a warehouse and offices. These items were

all generous donations from volunteers and international donors and organizations. All items were in bins that were labelled roughly according to age (for children) and gender. Camp residents were given a number of points each month that they could exchange for clothing in the store. Each family or individual had the opportunity to visit once per month. If they did not use all their points in a given month, they were allowed to keep the points, adding to the total for the next month.

The store door for the residents was a locked, iron-barred entrance, causing many of us to feel a bit like jail keepers. We needed to wander in the aisles, as many residents would attempt to pilfer items, especially shoes. At times, bins would be empty because of a lack of donations. There were some rules that did not make sense. For instance, each child was allowed one set of underwear per month, even when we had abundant children's underwear and no items in other bins (such as boys' size 6-8 shirts). Some of the volunteers could not bring themselves to comply with these regulations, with the result that some of the residents were able to receive more than others. These irregularities would cause increased frustration on the part of the residents, understandably. There were instances in which a resident was caught stealing from the store. Children, especially, would fight to maintain what they had taken. These occasions could be upsetting for volunteers who tried to maintain policies and retrieve the stolen items. A resident threatened to beat up our male volunteer because he prevented a young resident from stealing an item.

### *The Women's Centre – Minus Women*

The third SCB site was the Women's centre, which had been handed over to SCB from another NGO that departed from the camp. The goal was to provide women with a safe space where they could relax, learn together, sew, and have time with one another. The female volunteers and I found the allocation of this site egregious. Specifically, there was a volunteer who was helping at the camp for six months. As such, one of the staff made her the director of the centre rather than rotating her along with other short-term volunteers. This was problematic for several reasons. One, the staff person did not learn enough about the volunteer to know if this was an appropriate placement. It was clear to me and other female volunteers that she was not well suited to this position. The woman lacked understanding of diverse cultures, with the result that she tended to turn women away rather than welcome them. For instance, she sent girls (approximately aged 10-16) away, telling them

that they were not women. She did not understand that in many cultures, these girls were considered women. She complained when other NGOs used the space to teach women English, even though she had not scheduled the centre for other activities. Another NGO that taught theatre skills to residents often requested the sewing space to make costumes. The volunteer was annoyed with this and did not make them welcome. As a result, few women residents frequented the space.

Because she was 'in charge' of the centre, this volunteer refuted other volunteers' ideas to bring in more women. I specifically spoke to staff about this problem, stating that rotations for all volunteers were preferable so that no one volunteer would 'own' a duty and feel in authority over other volunteers. The staff member seemed to acknowledge this, and I noticed that our schedule had this volunteer in laundry the next day. However, on the van in the morning, I heard the volunteer complain to the staff member, and the staff member gave way, again placing her in the women's centre.

### *Additional Challenges*

One of the volunteers during my stay was from the UK, but her parents were Syrian. She wanted to help the many Syrian refugees in Greece, so chose this volunteer opportunity. Because she could understand what the residents were saying, several times she became upset and tearful, learning of problematic situations in the camp. As one example, there was a kind and modest new family at the camp with a three-year old son. The mother was pregnant. The volunteer learned that they were sleeping on the floor of an old caravan and that the pregnant mother was experiencing great discomfort. I went to the Arabic-speaking staff member and told him that he needed to inform the International Organization for Migration (IOM) immediately (IOM was the primary responsible institution at the camp, and it gave out mattresses). He said that he would get to it. I responded, 'No. Do it right now.' He moved in the direction of the IOM space, and I can only hope that he did as I requested. He never let me know the result.

The biggest concern I had occurred on my last afternoon at the camp. Near the end of the day, a demonstration occurred with much shouting and a man on top of a trailer near our NGO site. As we learned later, he was wielding a knife. Since most of us did not know Arabic, including the staff, we did not know what was happening. Our van could not accommodate all the volunteers and staff in one trip to leave the camp. I was shocked to find that the NGO director was on the first trip out of

the camp. She stated that she had a meeting that afternoon. By getting on that van, she took a spot that should have gone to one of the young volunteers for their safety.

The situations described resulted in a lack of morale and security among the volunteers. As I was, by far, the eldest volunteer among the young volunteers as well as the one with research experience about refugees, they frequently discussed their feelings of sadness, frustration, and inadequacy with me. I was the frequent messenger of their concerns to the NGO staff. However, the inexperience and poor training among the staff resulted in a lack of response. I also learned that the NGO was looking to invite secondary school students to volunteer. Given the conditions that we witnessed, I could not imagine this situation being physically or psychologically safe for youth under the age of 18. As it was, the young adults volunteering at the time of this research were experiencing stress and sadness due to a lack of support and supervision. Developmentally, adolescents are dealing with personal rapid changes in physiology and psychosocial development. Though they are on a quest for independence, most still rely on their parents or guardians for a sense of security. To be placed in a camp with frequent events involving stress, anger, and hostility, with insufficient supervision and security, would be ill advised, even dangerous.

### Discussion

A number of psychosocial challenges on the part of both volunteers and refugee residents at the camp were reported. As I have learned from colleagues who have spent time at refugee camps, what the volunteers and I witnessed was not unique. Wages for 'on-the-ground' staff at camps are often minimal, with the result that they attract young and inexperienced staff. Given such circumstances, professional and ongoing training, support and supervision for staff is essential. Training needs to include backgrounds on refugees and asylum seekers as well as specific information on social and cultural aspects of the specific population at the camp. NGOs could hire external people to organize this work. Only if staff receive sufficient training can they provide adequate training to volunteers to both increase the benefits to refugees and to reduce the likelihood of negative psychological impacts. Additionally, sufficient staff training can reduce vicarious trauma to volunteers by helping them to reach their goals of assisting refugees and by providing opportunities to debrief (Hughes et al 2019).

Answering the research questions, training prior to and during time spent as a volunteer was minimal and insufficient. Aside from a suggestion to learn a handful of Arabic phrases prior to the volunteer experience and a short presentation prior to beginning volunteer duties, there was no training or support for volunteers. Time outside the camp was spent at leisure, swimming or shopping, with no scheduled meetings to debrief or discuss questions of challenging circumstances that occurred at the camp. There was no required end debrief or survey that could be used to help volunteers process their experience or consider ways to improve the volunteer process. The lack of support was problematic for both volunteers and residents. Volunteers felt, at times, upset, without support, and unprotected. Residents were frequently frustrated due to challenging situations at the camp in which they felt disempowered or treated unfairly. Language challenges made it difficult for most to have their concerns addressed.

There are ways to address each of the problems encountered in this experience. With at least one bilingual staff member, camp NGO staff could quickly learn the issues discussed by camp residents. Such experiences can provide the requirements for basic language training, which can begin before volunteers arrive at the camp. Volunteers could be required to learn some basic language skills as part of the recruitment process. There are readily accessible ways to create this training online. On site, language skills can be reinforced when volunteers are not serving at the camp, such as early evenings. Off time should also include meetings to discuss issues that occurred at camp during the day. A well-trained staff member could facilitate discussion about best practices for managing issues as well as providing support and supervision.

Additionally, people like myself who are experienced researchers may offer assistance to NGOs. I offered my assistance months prior to arriving at the camp and my expertise could have been utilised by the NGO for no cost. NGO staff should consider the potential value of such opportunities for enhancing their work

Situations of potential danger should favour the volunteers. NGO staff should never take precedence over removing volunteers from potentially dangerous events. There should always be a well-trained security staff member.

Volunteers need to understand situations in refugee camps. Volunteers are essential and gratefully welcomed by NGOs. If they understand the

conditions they might face – challenging environments, language issues, some issues of disorganization, and potential conflicts - they will be better prepared to cope with these challenges. Realistic preparation is crucially important for volunteers to determine if they are up to the tasks at hand before they sign up.

Volunteers are needed to continue the important work of NGOs working with refugees and asylum seekers. To this end, they must be treated with respect, and they need tools to help them do their best as volunteers (Hughes et al. 2020). Refugee and asylum-seeking NGO goals are, of course, to do their best to assist the populations they serve. As such, it is critical that they assess the populations they serve and ways in which volunteers can extend their services. Results of such evaluations indicate that both NGO staff and volunteers would benefit from more training about refugees, asylum seekers, background information, cultures and languages of camp residents, camp service management, and volunteer training and management.

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