VOLUNTEERS’ RESPONSES TO THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE SITUATION

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

In 2017, the global population of forcibly displaced people rose to 68.5 million; this includes 40 million internally displaced people, 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2017). Over the past 20 years, these numbers have continued to rise considerably showing an 83% increase from 1996 to 2016 (UNHCR 2015; UNHCR, 2017). Concurrent with these global trends, European countries have seen an increase in the numbers of refugees and persons applying for international protection, most recently during 2015-2016. During this period, massive population movements took place into the Balkans and Northern European countries, and overall total arrivals to Europe grew by 500% (Shelter Projects, 2016). This rapid increase created a backlog of asylum applications and saw the refugee population of some countries such as Germany go up by 45% [UNHCR, 2017]. Moreover, it sparked a wave of reactions across Europe, as many individuals and community groups stepped up to provide assistance to those arriving. This literature review aims to explore these volunteer responses in Europe with a particular focus on Greece.

2. **EU POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND IMMIGRATION RESPONSE**

In an attempt to stem the arrival of people, northern European countries reacted by re-implementing internal border controls, building fences and increasing police enforcement at borders (Willermain, 2016). The uptick in arrivals also triggered a number of political and policy decisions to manage migration at the regional level, starting with the European Council’s implementation of urgent measures through its 10-Point Action Plan (European Commission, 2015). The European Agenda on Migration later followed outlining short-term and long-term measures for addressing migration through four pillars of action. In 2016, the closure of the Balkan route and the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement effectively left many refugees stranded in Greece and the Balkan region, catapulting these transit countries to long-term hosting countries (Shelter Projects, 2016; Danish Refugee Council, 2016). The signing of the EU-Turkey agreement also saw the deportation of persons arriving in Greece after March 20th, 2016, as well as those whose applications for asylum were declared inadmissible (Corraro 2018). As the dynamics of the situation changed, the number of persons arriving declined, though many have continued to risk the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. Additionally, as restrictions on borders increased people continued to utilise more varied and treacherous pathways to Europe, often relying on smugglers because of the lack of accessible legal ways (UNHCHR, 2017). According to the UNHCR report on Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2017, the majority of new arrivals have since taken place in Italy, where, during 2017, 126,500 new applications for asylum were made [UNHCR 2017].

3. **HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

On the humanitarian response side, governments and humanitarian agencies were slow to react to immediate needs of the arriving population. DeLargy (2016) identified some of the challenges NGOs encountered which contributed to their slow initial response, such as the lack of experience in the European context, no operational agreements with European governments, no presence in refugee-affected areas, no funding lines for European activities and no ways to mobilise resources for a response in Europe. Other contributing factors such as the transient nature of the refugee populations, the changing characteristics of the demographics and the unpredictability of the routes made it difficult to determine the humanitarian needs and plan a

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2 1. Reducing the incentives for irregular migration; 2. Saving lives and securing external borders; 3. Completing a strong common asylum policy; 4. Developing a new policy on legal migration.
response (DeLargy 2016). Individuals and community groups stepped in to fill these gaps by leading various efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, protection and integration.

4. **Volunteer and Civil Society Response**

In 2015, in response to the growth in arrival numbers, civil engagement in support of refugees increased across Europe (Karakayali and Kleist 2016). Particularly, volunteers played an important role in Europe’s response by quickly providing for the humanitarian needs of the arriving population (DeLargy 2016). Volunteering has taken the form of social solidarity and civil engagement through informal networks and formal voluntary organisations and NGOs. Volunteers provided assistance in various ways, for example, collecting and sorting clothes or food for distribution, providing first aid, building shelters, rescuing people from the sea, cooking, setting up laundries, starting libraries and language courses, digging drainage ditches and putting in water pipes (DeLargy, 2016).

The importance of these actions are recognised by EU initiatives such as the EU Solidarity Corps and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Civil Society Prize. The EU Solidarity Corps initiative recognises the potential of these actions to engage youth in solidarity efforts as it helps to “build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to the challenges facing society across the continent” (Erasmus+, 2018). The EESC Civil Society Prize awards organisations and individuals dedicated to “helping asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants to have access to their rights, protection and socio-economic inclusion in line with European values of humanity and solidarity” and recognises the role civil society plays in “contributing to a more humane migration crisis management” (EESC, 2016).

NGOs have also recognised the impact volunteers have made and the important part volunteers play in humanitarian responses. For example, Francart and Borton (2016) highlight an initiative carried out by MSF Belgium to understand the ways in which volunteer groups across Europe are working and the locations where they are working to provide assistance. The ‘Civil Society Networking Project’ was set up to ‘improve the relationship with civil society and to see how large NGOs could support these groups with logistical and technical help’ (Francart and Borton, 2016).

**Geographic Spread and Activities and Motivations**

It is difficult to paint a complete picture of the geographic spread and activities carried out by volunteers, as many activities are informal and may not be captured through formal studies. Some researchers have tried to map the activities of civil society initiatives and volunteer organisations as discussed below. Borton (2016) brings light to the preliminary scale and characteristics of the volunteer response across Europe. This research identified 216 volunteer groups, 180 of which were emergent groups started in 2015 to early 2016. From the data gathered by the Civil Society Networking Project on types of activities, two primary types were uncovered; 1) activities focused on operational initiatives working directly with refugees, 2) activities concentrating on information-sharing initiatives between volunteers, and between refugees and the host population. The Standby Task Force (SBTF) compiled a database in December 2015 of who was doing what and where in the European Refugee response. SBTF identified 175 volunteer organisations providing assistance; 146 of these organisations were based in European countries, 41 of which were in Greece and 12 in Germany. The majority of the organisations were involved in aid distribution (72) and information sharing (63).
With regard to motivations, Borton (2016) highlights the key role the media played to trigger motivations to volunteers. Coverage of tragic events, e.g. the images of three-year-old Alan Kurdi who drowned while trying to reach Greece or the reports of 1,200 migrants drowning in one week while trying to cross the Mediterranean, were noted as inspiring volunteers to act. Borton also states that negative sentiments expressed by politicians about the refugee influx has also spurred volunteers’ actions.

5. Case Study: Greece
Greece has been at the forefront of the recent migration wave in Europe. In 2015, when over 1 million refugees arrived, over 800,000 people had come to Greece alone (IOM, 2015). This fast-paced increase of asylum seekers/refugees into Greece took place against the backdrop of the country’s most severe economic recession in its present history (Kalogeraki, 2018). Initially the islands were characterised as a country of transit for those arriving to reach mainland Europe, but with the closure of the Balkan route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, Greece became a long-term reception site (Shelter Projects, 2016). As such, Greece is currently home to 61,000 refugees and migrants: this figure continues to grow, bringing with it issues of overcrowding and safety as needs continue to surpass reception efforts (UNHCR, 2018). The island of Lesvos received the majority of the refugee population in Greece. Hernandez (2016) describes the evolution of the volunteer response in Greece from primarily emergent organisations, to ones which became more formalised over time. Here volunteers and local residents established organizations “to better fund-raise, recruit more volunteers, and build credibility in order to provide a more comprehensive humanitarian response” (Hernandez, 2016). While the humanitarian response evolved and became more professionalised, NGOs and volunteers collaborated on activities such as providing safe spaces for children and single mothers as well as distributing food and essential items (Hernandez, 2016). While there have been a number of successes Hernandez (2016) explains there have also been difficulties in connecting and coordinating activities between NGOs and volunteer organisations.

Formal volunteering in Greece has shown to be lower than compared to other European countries (Volunteering Among Immigrants, 2018). Authors have noted that volunteering in Greece takes place more informally as support comes through family circles, friends and acquaintances, which may explain the low statistics (Kalogeraki 2018; Karamichas 2007; Rozakou 2011). The informal nature of this manifestation of civil society is often separate from the state and is geared to safeguard specific local areas or to assist those in need (Sotiropoulos 2004). During the economic recession, there was a growth of volunteering and social solidarity to help provide alternative ways to deal with economic hardships (Kalogeraki 2018). As the refugee crisis unfolded, this saw some of these organisations expanding to support refugees coming to Greece. Moreover, when the EU-Turkey deal went into effect many international NGOs began to pull out from areas such as Lesvos, while local organisations committed to continue to help those in need (Mizara, 2016).

Profile of Volunteers in Greece
The European Web Site on Integration Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens’ Initiative: Greece (2016) described the profile of volunteers supporting immigrants’ long-term reception and integration. The majority of volunteers were non-Greek and many volunteers arrived in Greece to help were usually unexperienced in humanitarian response (EWSI, 2016). The study done by Kalogeraki (2018) surveyed 2061 volunteers in Greece. Volunteers were identified as primarily
women, ranging from older age groups (<55) to younger (18-34), higher educated, individuals engaged in unconventional political acts (such as signing petitions, boycotting products for political/ethical/environmental reasons, attending a demonstration, march or rally, joining a strike and joining an occupation, sit-in or blockade) and with a higher level of social capital (Kalogeraki 2018).

6. SUPPORTS FOR VOLUNTEERS
While the response of civil society and volunteers have been applauded, a number of authors have echoed the need for support for these initiatives to create effective and sustainable structures for volunteers to continue this momentum beyond the immediate emergency (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016; Latimir, 2016). Support is needed to better coordinate activities, to ensure responses are appropriate and to ensure humanitarian standards are applied (Delgary, 2016). Being aware of and being able to access resources such as Sphere standards3, guidance materials, and training sessions have proven to be positive, as volunteers feel more equipped to handle the challenges with which they are faced. Erskine and Robertson (2016) highlight that while the work of the volunteers is invaluable, it can be a challenge and overwhelming to continue without the “benefit from the experience or support of existing structures” such as those in the humanitarian system.

Additionally, support for psychosocial needs of volunteers is essential in dealing with burn-out, stress and PTSD. Pistolla et al (2016) conducted a study on the occurrence of PTSD among 217 rescue workers operating on the island of Lesvos. The study found that probable PTSD prevalence among volunteer rescuers was at 14.6% (the world wide pooled prevalence of PTSD amongst rescue workers is 10%, Pistolla et al, 2016). In addition, the research reaffirmed the findings of similar studies that volunteers with limited prior disaster training or experience are at greatest risk of PTSD (Pistolla et al, 2016). The findings also indicate that more attention is needed for female rescuers, including the need to ‘create targeted interventions to reduce their psychological burden’ (ibid). The impact of burnout and psychological stress is seen not just in those working in rescue operations but throughout, as noted by Stephen Dunnwald of the Bavarian Refugee Council in an interview with The Guardian. In Brammall’s (2015) article Dunnwald states “We have many cases where the volunteers are saying ‘I can’t handle it anymore’; that it’s too heavy a load, psychologically”. Moreover, volunteers in smaller towns and villages where there is little support are often overwhelmed by the complexity of resettling refugees. Some initiatives have started the ball rolling to assist volunteers, though these have often been specific to organisations: the IFRC for example has a Caring for Volunteers Psychosocial Support Toolkit for its national societies (IFRC, 2012).

7. CONCLUSIONS
While the response from civil society and volunteers is recognised as invaluable in providing assistance and support, there is a need to create sustainable structures for volunteers to be and feel more equipped. Support to coordinate volunteers’ activities with those of NGOs and government will help to avoid overlaps and ensure appropriate responses: this is vital in meeting the needs of the populations volunteers are effectively trying to assist. Evidence also supports the need for psychosocial supports for volunteers to reduce vulnerability to secondary trauma and PTSD, as well as to increase resilience to stressors.

3http://www.sphereproject.org/