

Concept

LINKS solidarity.network.lesvos

We plan to open an Infopoint on the Greek island of Lesbos, for and alongside refugees, solidarity groups and activists. The goal is to create a network where refugees can support each other and get in touch with local groups, and to provide information about the resources available to refugees from NGOs and other groups on the island. We also want to provide independent information about asylum procedures and the situation on the island, in Greece, and in other countries both in and outside of the European Union. We hope to combine the abilities of refugees and solidarity groups, local and international, in a way that magnifies their strengths. LINKS will be an autonomous structure; a collective space where people can make use of their abilities regardless of skin colour, background, gender or class, and work together towards an open and solidary world.

Motivation

The Greek island of Lesbos has almost disappeared from the European media. Since the borders were closed and Europe decided to sign the inhumane Turkey deal there are almost no refugees arriving in Germany, Sweden, or other European countries without a sea border. The “crisis” seems to be over.

In actual fact, however, there are still over 6000 people on the island, both recent arrivals and those who have been trapped here for upwards of 12-18 months. In August there were over 1000 new arrivals, and in September more than 2000, among them many women and children.

The Moria “hotspot” has a capacity of 2500 people, for short term shelter, but currently more than 4500 people are living there and many are staying there long term. They sleep in containers, tents, and on the naked ground; the costs of this made apparent last winter, when a number of people died due to the cold weather conditions. The provision of food and clothes is excruciatingly slow, and both physical and mental healthcare can only be described as catastrophic.

Greece itself, deep in the economic crisis, as well as Italy and Spain, have been left alone in their situation by the European Union. Everybody blames each other: the local authorities cannot act because Athens is failing, Athens cannot act because Brussels has its hands tied, and Brussels cannot act because the members of the EU are unwilling to support. The UNHCR sits in between, a paper tiger in a cosy cage (or in this case an expensive hotel room, or an air conditioned bureau). Around it buzz the NGOs, both large and small, supporting refugees to varying degrees. Lots of the larger NGOs will soon leave the island or have already left, and until now the Greek government have not given any indication of how they will manage the situation.

As independent volunteers, activists and supporters we have seen for a long time now that effective and long lasting support, accurate provision of independent information, and genuine solidarity with refugees and locals is only possible with good networking between the different structures. It has also become obvious to us that the best resources available are the resources of the people themselves. Hundreds of activists, cooks, teachers, doctors, engineers, interpreters and other highly motivated people are trapped in the camps, living on the island, or interested in coming to help, but are paralysed by a lack of information about how they could support people and mitigate the situation on the island. With our project we hope to build a network to connect and empower people of all backgrounds to involve themselves in this struggle.

Goals

- 1) Better information about and improved access to the resources provided by NGOs and groups

We have seen many situations in which people are unaware of the specific resources made available to them by groups and NGOs on the island, and it is even sometimes the case that groups offer the same resources as each other, due to a lack of information about what is already provided. With the info point, we want to keep an updated directory of the full range of available resources, to support the groups and amplify their effects. We would like to provide the following information:

- What kind of support can I get, and from where?
 - Where are volunteers needed, and with which skills?
 - For whom is this kind of support possible, or who could offer something useful themselves?
 - Is my idea already implemented, or my need already met?
 - Which groups in Athens, or in other states of the EU could support me in my ongoing travel, or which groups in Turkey could support me after deportation?
- 2) To support local solidarity groups and connect them with refugees and other groups, and to try to improve understanding between agents.

Unfortunately many NGOs, especially the larger ones, do not make enough effort to communicate well with Greek locals. Bearing in mind that in summer 2015 when there were many arrivals in a short period and only local individuals were supporting, it is a shame that NGOs did not make more effort to involve locals since taking over operations themselves. When the NGOs did finally arrive on Lesbos, they brought very well paid employees from the mainland and from other countries, and even told locals that their efforts were no longer needed and that they should stand aside and make way. Instead of making use of the enthusiasm, solidarity and experience of the locals, some actors assumed they knew better and expected gratefulness. Local structures were run over, ignored, and not taken seriously. All this led to a situation in which locals felt stabbed in the back, isolated from the support effort, and their initial enthusiasm eroded into disdain. Unfortunately, it is often the case now that the locals do not distinguish between the NGO industry and grassroots projects. The info point should be a point where local structures are supported and made visible again.

- What local structures are there and how can they be supported?
(Sports clubs and other clubs, schools, food and clothes donations, environmental protection, political action, lawyers, doctors, car- and room-sharing)
- Where are refugees welcome?
- Where can refugees get involved?

- 3) Support refugees to self-organise and to support each other.

Very often, refugees are seen only as recipients of help, donations or counsel. For a long time though, we have seen and experienced immense solidarity among refugees. Many projects, such as No Border Kitchen Lesbos, One Happy Family Social Centre, the warehouse Attika and United Rescue Aid, work with refugee volunteers and refugee activists and are driven primarily by their efforts. Urgently needed supporters, teachers and helping hands are often to be found among refugee communities. Both in and outside the camps, people are organising themselves in groups, and we want to facilitate their connections with each other, with new arrivals, with locals, with NGOs and so on and we want to provide the following information:

- What structures already exist in the communities?
 - Which groups/individuals are there that want to be solidary and support others?
 - Who can support the work of groups/NGOs?
 - Who wants to connect more with the locals?
 - Who needs support in their daily lives, and with what specific problems?
 - How can self-organised groups be supported in their work?
- 4) Independent information about the procedures and the situation on the Island, in Greece, and in other countries in and outside of the European Union

The situation in Greece is complex and changes daily. The procedures for registration, recognition, application, housing and so on are complicated and highly opaque. Theory and practice are far removed, with even lawyers often struggling to navigate the process. Rumors spread like wildfire and many people take huge risks due to lack of information. Often they miss their deadlines, or are forgotten about in the chaos. Many refugees are also misinformed about their legal situation and administrative procedures in their destination countries, for example Germany.

We want to collect, structure and dispense information. We want to support existing organisations in their provision of counsel, and we want to be a point of connection between different institutions, projects and information points for refugees, activists, media and politics. We want to document and communicate arrivals, deportations, living situations, assault, and changes to procedural processes. For this we would focus on the following questions:

- What happens on Lesbos and the other islands?
- Where can I get reliable information?
- What are the procedures?
- How do procedures continue in Athens and other EU states?
- What is the situation with deported refugees in Turkey?
- What does voluntary deportation mean in practice?
- How can I prepare myself for different potential scenarios?

Target Groups

Our target group is people that want to be connected and in solidarity with one another: people who need support for their projects, or who provide or need help in their daily lives. Refugees, activists, volunteers with or without European passports, locals, NGOs, local groups and structures, private individuals; all of these people here on Lesbos, the other islands, the mainland, in Europe and worldwide.

Lesvos

Lesvos has a long history as a destination for refugees. Besides the fact that many locals and their families here have a history of forced relocation, refugees have been arriving by boat to Lesvos from long before the “refugee crisis”. Some of the local structures, for example the Pikpa camp, have existed for many years.

With the war in Syria, the situation on the island has escalated dramatically. In 2015 about 500.000 people arrived on the island. In 2016, it was 91,000. In 2017, up to now, more than 9,000 people. In summer 2015, sometimes over 100 boats would arrive in a night. Huge numbers of people died during these dangerous crossings, by drowning or due to being crushed in overcrowded boats. Intervention from the locals was key to the prevention of even more deaths. They worked in their normal jobs during the day and helped with arrivals at beaches across the island during the night. At this time there were very few structures, and people had to walk the 60km from the north of the island to the Moria camp on foot. They slept in the olive groves and in the streets, and had to wait in the harbour for several days until the ferries carried them to the mainland, where they continued their travel along the Balkan route.

Much later, the NGOs arrived on the island. The first months of 2016 were characterised by makeshift camps and improvised assistance. The EU-Turkey deal, signed in March 2016, led to a dramatic decrease in the number of refugees arriving on Greek islands. They were, and are, trapped in Turkey in profoundly inhumane conditions. Pull- and push-backs in which refugees making their crossings are pushed back illegally from Greek to Turkish waters are happening daily. And still, the number of people on Lesvos remains consistently high.

There are a lot of new arrivals, and yet there remain many people have been here for 1-2 years. Their lives are in limbo; trapped by bureaucratic paralysis, waiting months for their asylum applications to proceed. The asylum processes are extremely slow and complicated, riddled with mistakes and of questionable legality. Other routes are closed, or even more dangerous. The funds relied on by many NGOs are depleting, and the Greek government should, but will not, take over the organisation of help. Up until this moment, it is not clear how this organisation might look. Most probably, this already highly difficult situation will only get worse.

Realisation and Timescale

We have already rented a small shop in the heart of Mytilene. It has open work space, and space for private meetings. There is water, electricity, and a telephone/internet connection. We have already contacted a range of actors; even before we started, in order to ask whether they saw the need for this project. All actors agreed on the fact that a project like this is needed, and some have already promised us their support.

We have started to collect the necessary equipment: furniture, internet/telephone, heating for winter, computer, printer, whiteboards and assorted stationary. Meanwhile, we have been getting in touch with more groups and actors, informing them about the project, and collecting ideas about how to use this space. We have also talked to the communities and found a lot of supporters among the refugees – some of them want to be part of the project, and others will simply share information about it with their networks.

We will soon have internet connection, and our working group will begin the necessary research, looking for information resources and investigating partnerships. We are working as fast as possible to realise this aspect of the project. The group will identify different actors, contact them, and establish a system for cooperation and information exchange.

The group is also focused on getting furnishings and materials, and a homepage, and is documenting their progress. We hope to be able to open the info point for use at some point in October. We want to open for a few hours a day, minimum 5 days a week, to be able to get in personal contact with people. We initially considered just having an online information platform, but we rejected this idea on the grounds that lots of people don't have access to the internet, cannot read or write, or face other obstacles in accessing information online. For these reasons we decided it was necessary to have a physical presence in town: we are convinced that for a lot of topics, a personal conversation is important and fruitful. When not in use by our group, the info point will be available to be used by other groups, for example for workshops and projects. We want to have an open and flexible space, able to meet differing needs according to what comes up.

Impact

We are building this network in order to realise our common goals. We are fighting for a world without borders, for safe passage, for fair use of resources, for the right of all people with or without European passports to live free and self-determined lives, and for a better life through respect and solidarity with each other. We are open to all people who agree with our core values of antisexism, antiracism, antifascism, and respect for others, and who enact these values in their own lives. We believe that all people should and can support each other in this struggle, regardless of skin colour, gender, background, or class. We will create a non-governmental autonomous structure that enables people from very different backgrounds to work together on common goals. We are convinced that with better networking, the existing resources can be used in a better way, with people's needs being identified and met more quickly. We know that people existing in a system that degrades and objectifies them (or sees them as “persons of concern” - UNHCR) are made unable to use their own skills and abilities, simply because they are not given the space to do so. We want to create this space. In doing so, we hope to improve the situation of refugees, locals, and supporters and make a political statement that has an impact across the borders and into Greece: that solidarity is the key to a better life for all people, and that we can reach this goal of a better life together.

Partnership

These are the groups, partnerships and organisations with whom we want to connect or with whom we have already connected

Pikpa (Lesvos Solidarity)
Mosaik Support Centre
One Happy Family (OHF)/ Swiss Cross
Attica Warehouse
United Rescue Aid
Volunteers for Lesvos
Médico International
Social Kitchen
Sini Praxis
Stage 2
Spotting-/Rescue teams (north)
Food sharing- Groups
Save Passage
CPT
Because We Carry
Movement on the Ground
Home
Displaced Designers
Alarm Phone
Help Refugees
Information Point for Lesvos Volunteers (FB)
Sport Clubs
City Plaza
Khora
Pro Asyl
Amnesty
Human Rights Watch
Sea Watch
LGBTQ groups

No Border Kitchen Lesvos
Refugee Activists
Antifascist Groups

Information Platforms:
Bordermonitoring/ HarekAct
Welcome to Europe/ Welcome to Lesvos/ Lesvos Infomobil
Borderline Europe
Enough is Enough
Are you Serious?- Welcome to Europe
Moving Europe
RSA

Legal Center Lesvos
Advocates Abroad
-Mülteci Der

Refugee Rights Turkey

Doctors Without Borders (MSF)

MDM

ERCI

BRF

Contact

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