

Greece in 2016: Vulnerable People Left Behind

Seven months after the closure of Greece's border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and the signature of the EU-Turkey deal, more than 50,000 people are stranded in Greece, 15,000 of who are trapped on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos. The thousands of men, women and children, the majority of whom have fled war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan *live* in often appalling conditions, in remote camps, without adequate access to medical care including mental health support and are rapidly losing hope and direction. *"The Greek authorities, the European Union and humanitarian organizations have collectively failed to establish humane and dignified reception conditions, guarantee protection and deliver humanitarian aid to a proper standard"*, says Loic Jaeger, MSF Head of Mission in Greece. *"Despite hundreds of millions of euros given to the Greek government and to international NGOs, the humanitarian response here in Greece remains inadequate and unacceptably slow. In October 2016, the failed and failing response continues to leave thousands of vulnerable people without the assistance they desperately need."*

SUBSTANDARD RECEPTION CONDITIONS

People who arrived in Greece after the signature of the EU-Turkey deal (signed on 20 March 2016) are trapped on the Greek islands and unable to move to the mainland. The majority are accommodated in "hotspots" (centers established by the European Union and the Greek government to register and identify people) which are at 200% capacity. As of today, there are around 15,000 people in the hotspots of Lesbos, Chios and Samos which have the capacity to host just 7,450. The reception conditions on the mainland where those who arrived before the EU-Turkey deal are accommodated are no better. Whilst the situation differs a lot from one camp to another, most asylum seekers exist in appalling conditions, which all too frequently results in negative health consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable. **In October 2016, the inability of the Greek government to take the lead and to ensure proper cooperation with the other actors is having a serious impact on the quality and speed of the response.** The situation is particularly obvious when looking at the lack of coordination, planning and transparency regarding preparations, or lack thereof, for the upcoming winter. *"For the second year in a row, winter is approaching and families, from newborns to the elderly, are without proper shelter"* continues Jaeger. *"The filthy conditions plus the cold could have serious impacts on the health of those stuck in Greece, particularly those with preexisting health conditions or with specific vulnerabilities"*.

THE VULNERABLE ARE LEFT BEHIND

For vulnerable people, the lack of appropriate accommodation and specialized care is directly contributing to their worsening health status and could well be life threatening. For the **victims of violence or other forms of ill-treatment and people with psychiatric disorders** inadequate living conditions further undermines people's efforts to re-establish a sense of normality and safety

and to engage in a therapeutic process. Those with **chronic diseases** like diabetes or hypertension who rely on food distributions in the camp to survive, are in several cases not provided with the appropriate diet and as such are deteriorating day by day.

Accessibility for persons with mobility limitations is also a major concern and **people with physical disability** face enormous difficulties to meet their daily needs independently and in a dignified way. The situation is also particularly difficult for **pregnant women, lactating mothers and their newborn babies**. *“Poor living conditions, isolation and high levels of stress directly impact the health and wellbeing of pregnant women and this can have severe repercussions for the health of the baby, says Apostolos Veizis, MSF’s Head of Medical Operational Support Unit In Greece. “Today women are discharged from hospital as soon as two days after birth in order to return to the tough living conditions and poor hygiene of the camps.”*

The system in Greece lacks efficient mechanisms to identify those with vulnerabilities so that they can be properly cared for. As of July 30th, 3,481 persons were identified as vulnerable as per Greek law¹, that is **12,6%** of the total of people who were pre-registered at that time. MSF has repeatedly raised concerns that people with less visible vulnerabilities such as victims of sexual violence, trafficking, torture or those with mental health disorders remain unidentified. From the 18th to 29th of August 2016, MSF’s health promoters and cultural mediators undertook a mapping exercise in 5 camps where MSF runs mental health activities around Thessaloniki. The results from the mapping showed that the percentage of people identified as vulnerable by MSF’s team was much higher (**18,5%**) than the percentage of people identified as vulnerable during the pre-registration exercise. As a consequence, many people identified as vulnerable by MSF were not referred to the relevant actors and did not have proper access to either protection or care.

LIMITED ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

The existing public health system in Greece is overwhelmed and the EU funded response is taking too long to translate into concrete improvements. *“While the right of free access to healthcare and drugs in medical centers and in hospitals has been extended to Greece’s refugee and other migrant populations by law, these services are still not accessible to all who need them”* says Apostolos Veizis. *“Administrative barriers, language barriers and a lack of adequate information for both patients and health workers continue to be of serious concern. Hospitals in Greece are struggling to respond to the needs of both local people and migrants, mainly due to the lack of financial and human resources. As a result, people regularly face difficulties in accessing proper healthcare, especially specialized care”.*

¹ As per Greek law, vulnerable groups are: a) unaccompanied minors, b) Persons who have a disability or suffering from an incurable or serious illness, c) The elderly, d) Women in pregnancy or having recently given birth, e) Single parents with minor children, f) Victims of torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence or exploitation, persons with a post-traumatic disorder, in particular survivors and relatives of victims of ship-wrecks, g) Victims of trafficking in human beings.

Other factors contribute to the worsening of the situation: transportation to and from health facilities remains one of the biggest issues as the most camps are very isolated. Furthermore, the health facilities run by the Ministry of Health don't have any **cultural mediators** meaning that it is impossible for the medical staff to guarantee proper care. Without proper communication, a patient cannot give a proper history, or give informed consent.

In addition, the few **facilities that exist to accommodate vulnerable people are overwhelmed**. There are some patients who need a temporary accommodation to perform a medical examination while some others need a permanent one to be able to benefit from a fully recovery. The lack of referral pathways impacts the capacity of vulnerable people to have access to healthcare.

DIRE MENTAL HEALTH SITUATION

During the second quarter of 2016, following the EU-Turkey deal and the closure of the borders, MSF's teams providing psychological care all over the country have seen the negative psychological consequences of being stranded in appalling conditions in a country they simply don't want to be in.

People fleeing to Greece have often experienced traumatic events. They left their countries because of violence, insecurity, conflict, or extreme poverty and the journey was fraught with danger including being exploited by smugglers, traffickers and authorities. *"During the journey, people usually put aside their suffering and distress, focusing on the future as a coping mechanism for dealing with the present"* says Christina Sideri, MSF's psychologist. *"When their journey is interrupted this process is also disrupted. The action of moving forward is then replaced by forced inertia. As a result, people are no longer able to avoid the intrusive thoughts that often haunt them"*.

CONCLUSIONS

The current restrictive migration and asylum policies create widespread human suffering. The authorities at both national and European level should change their approach of deterrence and invest in a more humane reception management system in order to ensure the respect of fundamental rights, access to appropriate services and to avoid further medical and humanitarian consequences.

Médecins Sans Frontières calls on:

- **The Greek authorities to consider alternatives to the current encampment system**

Alternatives to encampment and adequate reception conditions have to be considered. A holistic and coordinated approach must be put in place to respond to the humanitarian needs.

- **The European Union and the humanitarian actors to fund programs to cover the needs of the vulnerable people**

The reception system in Greece is under strain. Those with specific vulnerabilities urgently need to be identified, accommodated in specialized facilities with appropriate medical and protection follow up.

- **The Ministry of Health to provide effective access to healthcare**

The shortcomings of the national health system have to be addressed by improving the capacity of the hospitals to properly receive and assist people in need of care. Funding has to be fully allocated to fill the deficiencies in public healthcare.

- **The European Union and the EU member states to develop and strengthen safe and legal channels to other European countries**

The last months have shown that the Greek System is failing to provide efficient access to protection and decent reception to the most vulnerable people. In such a situation, the EU member states have to ensure that very vulnerable people are transferred to other countries where they can receive appropriate protection and care. Relocation, family reunification and the delivery of humanitarian visas are currently the only legal ways for migrants and asylum seekers to reach another member state of the EU. Those mechanisms need to be strengthened and promoted to fully respond to the humanitarian needs.