



Finding solutions to Greece's refugee education crisis

Executive Summary

A Theirworld Report

Written by Maysa Jalbout | April 2020

Theirworld



Theirworld is a global children's charity committed to ending the global education crisis and unleashing the potential of the next generation. Its mission is to ensure that every child has the best start in life, a safe place to learn and the skills they need for the future.

Theirworld is dedicated to providing education for refugees, and has been among the leading donors to refugee education in the Greek islands through its partnership with Education Cannot Wait. This report, produced in collaboration with the Global Business Coalition for Education, and our broader project and campaign work on education in emergencies, is made possible by the generous support of the players of the People's Postcode Lottery, Nationale Postcode Loterij (Dutch Postcode Lottery) and Dubai Cares.

The author of this report, **Maysa Jalbout**, made a field trip to Athens and the Aegean islands in December 2019 and conducted dozens of interviews with refugees, individuals in government, civil society and multilateral agencies.

A long-time member of the Theirworld family and a highly respected figure in international development, education and philanthropy, Maysa is a non-resident fellow at the Centre for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, and Special Advisor to Arizona State University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Open Learning on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

The refugee crisis in the Greek Aegean islands has reached an untenable situation which requires urgent action by the Greek authorities and the international community. This report shows a way forward.

There are 42,000 refugees stuck on the Greek Aegean islands, their entry point to the country and, they hope, to Europe. Their futures are precarious and their daily reality is extremely harsh, especially for the most vulnerable – women, children and unaccompanied minors.

Arrivals continued to increase significantly in the early part of this year. Numbers in the Moria camp on Lesbos have swelled to nearly 20,000 people when it was designed for 2,500. Tensions on that island and others had reached a boiling point in the last months, with violent protests against the refugees' presence and the agencies serving them breaking out.

To make matters worse, the coronavirus is threatening to take hold among a refugee population that has no access to healthcare. As the world grapples with the Covid-19 pandemic, the UN has been sounding the alarm on the potentially devastating impact on refugee communities. Whilst as of April 2020 there had been no recorded cases of infection among refugees on the Greek islands, the threat is imminent.

UNHCR and UNICEF are urgently requesting \$1.5 million in emergency funds to extend remote learning for refugee children whose education has almost entirely been stopped.



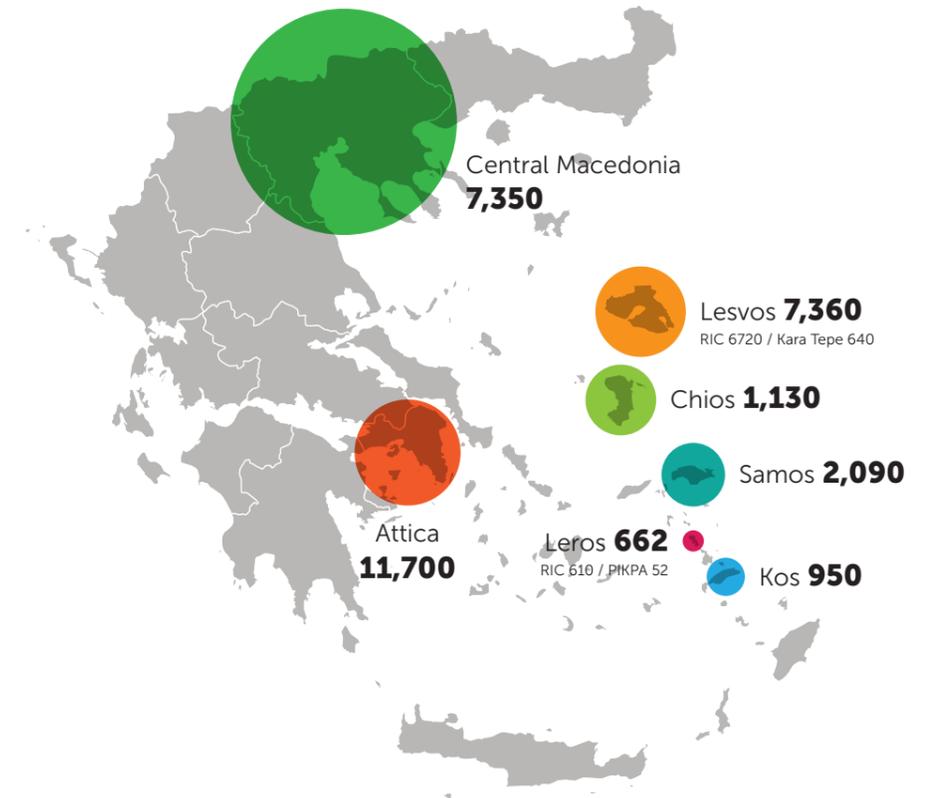
Theirworld calls on the international community to support this urgent request in order to mitigate the impact of the disruption of learning on refugee children who have already suffered from long periods of waiting to integrate into formal schooling.

Prior to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic to Greece, less than a third of school-age refugee children on the islands were receiving any schooling, even though learning is vital for the welfare of children living in emergency situations.

This report presents proposals for immediate action to support children and youth trapped on the Greek islands. It puts forward strategies to improve refugee education not just on the islands but on the Greek mainland, where 76,000 refugees have been transferred since 2015.

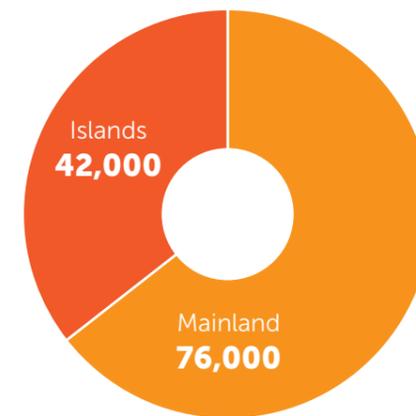
We invite the Greek government, UN agencies, the EU and the broader international community to adopt our three-point plan for action, and to respond to requests for immediate assistance with the response to Covid-19. ●

Refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece, ages 0 to 17



Based on UNHCR data, November 2019

Refugees and migrants in Greece
February 2020



UNHCR, 2020

Point

1

€20 million in urgent financial support for 2020–2022



Opposite
A class for refugee children at the Tapuat Centre, Lesbos
© Theirworld / Yorgos Kyvernitis

Our research has concluded that €20 million needs to be raised to prevent educational programmes operated by UNICEF and UNHCR and local NGOs closing this summer. Closure would deprive thousands of children not only of education but the only normality they currently have in their lives, with their existence in the camps blighted by poor diet, poor sanitation, tension and sometimes violence.

This funding would extend and expand those programmes to the end of the 2021–22 school year, and represent a near doubling in immediate reach to 2,000 children daily. It would also prepare for a likely 30% increase in refugee children. It would furthermore provide the confidence and trust for the development of plans to provide services to all refugee children in Greece.

More resources are badly needed to improve the quality of non-formal education as teachers often don't have the relevant training or qualifications, and many programmes rely on volunteers or recent graduates with no prior teaching experience. Current non-formal education programmes on the islands offer between four and 18 hours of instruction weekly, compared to 30 hours in Greek public schools. Class sizes are overcrowded and can be as high as 50 children compared to an average of 18 in Greek public schools.

As of January 2020, the refugee enrolment rate in public schools on the islands was only 6%. While we would like to see that figure rise, non-formal education is vital to give children and their families a mental and physical break from the unhealthy conditions of the camps.

At the same time, there is an urgent need to extend nursery services to children aged 3–5 and to support mothers with children aged under 3. With modest additional resources, UNICEF and its local partners could deliver pre-school services to 6,000 early learners and almost support 6,000 mothers with small children.

And it is essential the international community supports the emergency funding request by UNICEF and UNHCR to mitigate against the negative impact of a prolonged disruption caused by Covid-19 to the schooling of refugee children. Both UN agencies and their NGO partners are committed to provide remote education until they are able to resume face to face programming. ●

Point

2

International support for a comprehensive refugee education plan across Greece


Opposite

A teacher instructs a pupil in the Greek alphabet at the Tapuat Centre
© Theirworld / Yorgos Kyvernitis

The international community should recognise the pressure and drain on Greece's education system and more actively support the country's efforts to expand refugee education over the next five years. At the same time, the Greek government needs to demonstrate more thorough planning that would inspire greater support.

Of 31,000 school-aged refugee children, only 13,000 were enrolled in formal schools in 2019–20. That has to improve and the capacity of the Ministry of Education must be boosted to nearly double that figure to enrol 25,000 refugee children and youth for the 2021-22 school year. This would involve establishing a dedicated refugee education Programme Management Unit at the ministry to develop a national plan and to provide policy and programme leadership.

Greece, like many other refugee host countries, has found itself dealing with a crisis that it did not anticipate and is struggling to cope with. The Ministry of Education has made an admirable commitment to integrate refugee children into public schools, but it must rely on other government departments for everything from relocating the refugees to the mainland to providing essential services such as protection and health. More cooperation and coordination is needed.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has made a bold "No Child Alone" policy declaration regarding unaccompanied minors, which should be recognized, applauded and supported. However, despite some countries like Germany accepting small numbers of unaccompanied minors, Mr Mitsotakis has not received sufficient support from the EU for his call to help unite unaccompanied minors with their families across Europe. Greater political will must be shown, while the humanitarian community and private donors must come together to support the plight of these minors by advocating hard for a resolution to their future in Greece and Europe. ●

Point

3

Invest in the region and tackle the refugee problem closer to home



There are 1.5 million refugee children out of school in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, most having fled the Syrian war. Donor countries must fulfil the very public pledge they made in 2016 to educate those children.

But given that refugees come from dozens of countries across Africa, Asia and the Middle East, more must be done to provide the hope and opportunity that will make families less likely to make the dangerous journey to Europe.

All donor countries should consider increasing their support to Education Cannot Wait, a fund created in 2016 that offers governments, multilateral institutions and the private sector the chance to work collaboratively to provide education to children in emergency settings and in post-conflict countries.

The current crisis underscores the need for multifaceted and preventive solutions that address the root causes of the regional refugee crisis, especially the war in Syria that has uprooted more than 6 million of its people; the need for additional support to the largest host countries; and a revision of Europe's current unsustainable refugee policies.

In Greece and other gateway countries to Europe, our research found that private philanthropy has a significant role to play in closing financial gaps in the absence of sufficient flexible funding from traditional bilateral and multilateral donors.

Education will not address all of the needs of extremely vulnerable refugee children and youth, but it is an essential missing component to help them survive the unacceptable humanitarian conditions they are forced to endure and to begin to heal and build a better future for themselves. ●

Opposite

The Tapuat Centre allows children to enjoy safe, outside space and games
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This full report of this executive summary is available at theirworld.org

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For media enquiries or interview requests, please contact Alex Spilius on alex@theirworld.org

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