

Security and conflict mitigation in EU migration 'hotspots' in Greece

An inquiry into the perceptions and practices of aid groups



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Preface - A sector entangled in new and overwhelming stress factors

Conflicts related to the reception of asylum seekers on Greek islands like Lesbos, Chios, and Samos, put humanitarian organizations that are active on those islands under stress in more than one way.

First, humanitarian actors find themselves in the center of a very political crisis. The longer the crisis dragged on, the more intense political discussions have become. In this debate, we see on the one hand those who are utterly disappointed in European policies to deal with the deplorable situation of the asylum seekers in the camps on the Greek islands humanely. On the other hand, we see those who accuse NGOs to facilitate human trafficking and an ongoing influx of asylum seekers and fortune seekers into Europe. The mere fact that humanitarian organizations provided aid to people in need, was understood by European politicians, by European civil servants, and by the European public, as a firm stand in a political debate. Humanitarian NGOs, normally very cautious to take any political stand and anxious to remain neutral, became politicized actors only by doing their main job: save lives. At the same time, working in a European context created - perhaps unconsciously – expectations. The common understanding, certainly at the beginning of the humanitarian crisis with asylum seekers on the Greek islands, was that ‘we’ in Europe would manage the influx of asylum seekers properly. Expectations that were and are not fulfilled.

A second factor that caused humanitarian NGOs on the Greek islands stress, was the unprecedented rise of new humanitarian actors. Citizens, confronted with the sorrow of asylum seekers in their villages or during their holidays in Greece, turned into activists overnight and started to save and assist lives. Many of them started to do so long before the more renowned humanitarian NGOs set foot on Lesbos, Chios, and Samos. This created quite a different setting than in other refugee camps. In refugee camps in Sub Sahara Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere, humanitarian activities are more or less coordinated. Most agencies and NGOs are familiar with one another and are familiar with another’s way of working. Bigger agencies manage information sharing and coordination; most NGOs know where this coordination and information sharing takes place and are happy to be part of it. On the Greek islands, however, new, young aid organizations work alongside old, experienced humanitarian organizations.

Cooperation did and does not happen naturally. Most damaging is perhaps an underlying mistrust. Newcomers blame experienced NGOs for coming in very late, notably in a crisis evolving at the doorstep of Europe. Experienced NGOs were reluctant to rely on the expertise and capacities of new initiatives, not familiar with ‘professional’ standards and practices. And again, the European context was perhaps misleading. The common expectation was probably that coordination and information sharing between various European stakeholders would be easy and self-evident.

Both stress factors have become particularly visible in security issues in the Greek hotspots. Furthermore, the described underlying tensions related to the highly politicized debates about asylum seekers, did contribute to several security issues in the Greek ‘hotspots, such as protests against asylum seekers, protests against aid workers, and the fires in the camps.

And I am afraid these stress factors will not disappear. Due to bigger global trends like climate change and geopolitical shifts, Europe should consider that it will be confronted with other influxes of asylum seekers; Europe will be confronted with (the consequences of) new humanitarian crises within European borders. In addition, experienced humanitarian NGOs should acknowledge the rise of new humanitarian actors in the field: the private sector, local actors from the Global South, and citizens in the Global North turning into activists overnight.

All this makes this case study most relevant for KUNO. This study is at the crossroads of new stress factors that are here to stay and is illustrative for fundamental issues the humanitarian sector will be confronted with in the future. And this study is relevant because discussions about these security issues can bring new and old humanitarian players together. Security is in everyone's interest - for employees of humanitarian organizations *and* for the people who depend on humanitarian aid.

Please consult the visualization with the main findings and recommendations of this study at the end of this paper. It is an attractive visualization and can be used as a manual: the comments are formulated sharp and to the point, and they are relevant for practitioners and policymakers. Furthermore, it could serve as a starting point for further discussions on these urgent topics.

Finally, a few words of thanks. I would like to thank Bram Jansen, from Wageningen University, for reaching out to KUNO to see how Wageningen University and the humanitarian

knowledge platform KUNO could reinforce one another. This report is based on desk research, field studies and interviews performed by WUR, and on several working sessions with researchers and humanitarian practitioners organized by KUNO. Furthermore, I would like to thank the Knowledge Management Fund of the Knowledge Platform for Security and Rule of Law for their financial support for this project.

Peter Heintze

Coordinator KUNO

Introduction

This project examines policies to mitigate and prevent conflicts between asylum seekers, host communities, and aid actors along the EU border in Greece. Since 2015 there has been much attention to the plight and circumstances of asylum seekers, and the practical and moral challenges of the ‘hotspot approach’ on the Greek islands. The containment of asylum seekers in inadequate conditions has had large effects on the local communities and island dynamics. This has resulted in clashes and threats thereof among and between asylum seekers and the host community, and aid workers and volunteers have become targets of hostilities. Rather than a humanitarian safe space, these islands have become increasingly insecure for actors involved, complicating governance and protection of asylum seekers and the security of aid workers.

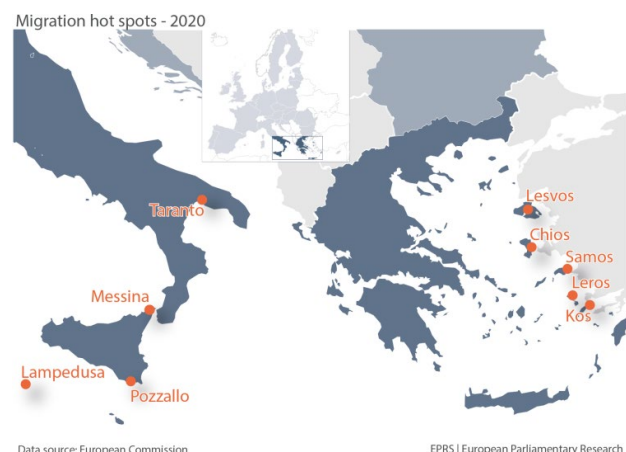
We aimed to explore how local and international actors engage with asylum seekers and host communities that mobilize around their frustrations in three migration hotspots of Lesbos, Samos, and Chios. The aim is to bring together experiences and best practices that can improve programming and cooperation for stakeholders involved. The policy-relevant output is used as input for further sharing and debate with the humanitarian community and the more independent volunteer organizations.

This inquiry is a collaboration between researchers from Wageningen University, and the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange, KUNO. It was funded by the Knowledge Management Fund from the Platform for Security and Rule of Law. Additional funds were made available by the Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS).

The project

This study explores how local and international actors engage with asylum seekers, host communities, and protest groups from elsewhere, that mobilize against each other and the organizations governing and assisting the migration hotspots on Lesbos, Chios, and Samos in Greece. We are interested in how stakeholders approach and understand this mobilization, and what strategies are employed to mitigate this mobilization from turning violent, for instance in the ways relations are shaped, maintained, or altered between humanitarian actors, aid groups, and the host and migrant communities. In this report, we compare to what extent and effect these mitigation approaches are mainstreamed into program design, and how these measures differ between the various stakeholders, but also how these may be constrained by government and donor regulations.¹ In addition, we view what measures apply upon escalation, such as evacuation, scaling down, or remote control, that allow service delivery to continue.

The project marries two angles. First, it focuses on security for aid organizations, and its effects on effective aid programming. Much of the existing knowledge relates to fragile or (post) conflict settings in the global south.² Arguably the European hotspot areas present a different context. The hotspots are not warzones or post-conflict landscapes, nor disaster areas in a strict sense. Rather, they are sites where particular migration management materializes. As an answer to the ‘migration/refugee crisis’ in 2015, the EU agreed on the hotspot approach, in which asylum seekers would be held in sites in Greece and Italy, from where they would be further relocated to other EU member states if they were eligible for refugee status. However, due to political decision making by the EU and Greece, processes of relocating refugees stalled, and the capacity of sites has exceeded six-fold, the largest sites being on Lesbos, Chios, and Samos, with populations of 21,407, 5,640, and 7,636 respectively, while more permanent migrant camps have been proposed by the Greek government.³



As a result of the policies of containment, and its effects on people, the migration hotspots have come to inhabit a violent character.⁴ In these sites, ‘conditions of exhaustion and uncertainty breeds frustration and anxiety, and adds to fighting and criminality among asylum seekers, which may then in turn feed xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments among the host population’.⁵ Next to tensions between asylum seekers and hosts, protests have targeted aid groups that are seen as part and parcel of this ‘architecture of containment’. In this view, humanitarians and volunteers can be seen as ‘implicated in the politics of migration’, simply by being present and enabling the hotspot context. Conversely, aid actors are simultaneously seen by other protest groups as extensions of human trafficking and enablers of immigration which lead to an erosion of ‘European culture’.⁶ As a result, threats from asylum seekers, host communities, and international protest groups have turned on aid and hotspot workers.⁷

Second, the hotspots are also characterized by a *variety* of institutional actors, mandates, and working cultures. Particularly interesting are new volunteer movements, or ‘solidarians’ as they are often referred to, who do not necessarily, or not at all, comply with UN, EU, or humanitarian cooperation frameworks, and may hold different norms and rationales for engaging with the hotspot environment. This new wave of initiatives engages in a wide range of service delivery, assistance, and other programs, yet these actors claim to act differently than governments, the UN, or more established NGOs. Mostly they are born out of a desire to ‘do something’ and an implicit disagreement with the more established actors, be they humanitarian or not. In this process, disagreement about policies and practices of these different organizations can clash or contradict, although from a wider angle they are all part of the same asylum-context.⁸ This raises questions about the variation, coordination, and obstruction that occurs between different stakeholders,⁹ and how these organizations manage and seek to mitigate risk and insecurity. Moreover, to what extent does this variation impact on the room for maneuver vis-a-vis (local) government, the wider aid and volunteer community, multilateral actors such as UNHCR, IOM, EU-ECHO and Frontex, and the migrant and host communities? By exploring the experiences with insecurity and conflict mitigation of the main stakeholders in these hotspots, and their underlying assumptions and rationales, we seek to better understand practices that work and identify approaches that are promising for improving security conditions in these areas.

This project is particularly interested in how this variety of actors relate to, engage with, and understand claims and frustrations of asylum seekers, host communities, and other protest groups, and perceive ways to reduce the risk of escalation, protect people, and remain

operational in the field until more durable solutions become available. The particular context of these migration hotspots and the mitigation of (future) conflict present an urgent knowledge gap. It is unclear how this variety of actors operating in these hotspots apply different strategies to approach and mitigate tensions, and to what extent these are indeed coherent strategic or more *ad hoc* measures. By uncovering the everyday challenges and practices of conflict mitigation in these particular institutional environments and measuring their impact and appreciation among the migrant and host communities, we aim to contribute to improving policies and see the potential for the results to be applied more broadly in the increasingly securitized EU borderlands.

The following research questions guided this inquiry:

In what ways are conflict mitigating measures included in assistance programming and service delivery in the three main migration hotspots on Lesbos, Chios, and Samos? And what measures are seen as successful and why?

An underlying interest is the question of how the above is particular for the Greek hotspot context, and how the lessons learned can harness the potential for contemporary and future engagement with aiding and providing basic services in migrant hosting areas along the EU border.

Methodology

Due to the sensitivities inherent to the topic of study, we valued the use of fieldwork methods such as informal conversations, observation, and participation in addition to more formal semi-structured interviewing. We realized from the onset that this was challenging due to the Covid-19 outbreak, and its effects on travel and fieldwork opportunities. Indeed, a surge of infections on the Greek islands specifically in early September, impacted scheduled field travel by three researchers and was reorganized into a field visit of one researcher to Lesbos and Chios between 8-26 September. In addition, we held interviews and organized working groups online, and explored written resources and articles.

Next to Covid-19, another event impacted our inquiry. On 8 September 2020, the night after our researcher arrived on Lesbos, a large fire destroyed Moria camp, the largest and most iconic camp on Lesbos, and arguably of the whole European hotspot archipelago. Although the responses and aftermath to this fire are revealing in many ways, it also complicated the interview process and access to field sites considerably, as physical access to field sites and relevant locations was prohibited due to unrest and protest and police measures.

The destruction of the camp and the response of the Greek and European authorities caused perplexity with our fieldworker and - to some extent - among aid actors. Roadblocks had been erected immediately, preventing former residents of Moria camp and the Olive Groves from reaching Mytilene, the capital city of Lesbos. In the morning after the fire, in the city of Mytilene there was almost no sign of the tragedy that evolved a few kilometers away. Simultaneously, the roadblocks prevented aid workers and solidarians from reaching the people that had fled the fire.

While the destruction of Moria camp and the tensions that led to it are closely related to our research subject, talking to those most directly affected by the presence of the camp and its residents was complicated by the roadblocks and concerns of security. In Moria village and Panagiouda, the two villages next to Moria camp, asylum seekers, aid workers, and solidarians had been attacked in the days after the fire. Therefore, we limited our scope to aid workers and locals in Mytilene and Skala Sikamnias - a village in the North of the island, where most boats arrive. A major challenge was getting in touch with those groups that were actively involved in (anti-migrant) protests. While solidarians and concerned citizens were accessible and willing to

talk to us, those fiercely opposed to migrants, not shying away from threats and violence, were almost impossible to identify. How to access these groups, however, remains a challenge for possible future inquiry.

Similar challenges arose for fieldwork on the other Hotspot islands. Covid-19 had also reached Vathy camp on Samos, forcing aid actors to impose strict security guidelines. Fieldwork on the island would have required working around these guidelines. Since ‘working around security to work on security’, is ethically questionable, Chios seemed to be a more legitimate option. At the time, there were no active Covid19 cases in Vial camp, and compared to Lesvos, the situation was calm, aid actors were available and ‘snowball sampling’ worked well. This allowed for a comparative approach, which highlighted the nuanced contextual differences between the Greek hotspot islands. Following up on the preliminary findings of the fieldwork and the project at large, fieldwork on Samos and possibly Leros and Kos would still be desirable. Differences in terms of the size of the population of refugees and asylum seekers as well as differences in terms of the proximity between camps and local villages/cities are assumed to influence tensions and subsequently security on the islands, which could be examined in potential further inquiry.

Interestingly, on Lesvos and Chios, many aid actors that were interviewed were also locals who grew up or lived on the islands for a considerable time. As aid workers, they shared experiences regarding the activities of organizations they (had) worked for and as local citizens, they reflected on social and political dynamics and debates with friends, relatives, neighbors, and other members of society. Due to this two-fold perspective, conversations with these informants were particularly productive, shedding-light on the points of contact between aid actors and the local communities.

We deal with the informants and aid groups on an anonymous basis, so for this reason we have not included a list of participants in this document. We also don’t refer to names and organizations directly, but, when relevant, show where and when data was obtained, with additional information if applicable, to remind that this analysis is based on first-hand information.

Definitions

In debates about the EU hotspots, a variety of terminology is used to denote the people that seek to access Europe. Migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, forced migrants, displaced, life seekers, and others are terms that are used interchangeably, or with a political aim. This risks clouding the analysis. Terminology is not neutral, nor is it free of associations and political meaning. For this reason, we want to be strict in the terms and concepts we use to address the debates underlying the larger contemporary asylum and migration question in and around the EU. In addressing people that are present in the hotspots awaiting their claim, we resort to the term asylum seekers, as this is, before any validity of their claim is decided upon, the proper term. After a decision is made, we resort to the outcome when this means people are accepted as refugees. People that are denied but hold on to their claim will be referred to as denied asylum seekers. Interesting to note is also how aid actors seek to evade the political implications of terminology. I.e., one aid group prefers to talk about people on the move/people stranded, rather than refugees or migrants; another about ‘hosted community’, rather than refugee population.

To designate the broad association of aid actors in the hotspot we will refer to ‘aid groups’ to designate the combined humanitarian, volunteer, legal, and other actors that are part of the ‘humanitarian community’ on the Greek isles, but that do not necessarily identify with the mainstream image of humanitarian (I) NGOs. We do however differentiate between established international NGOs and newer volunteer groups when it is relevant to distinguish between these backgrounds.

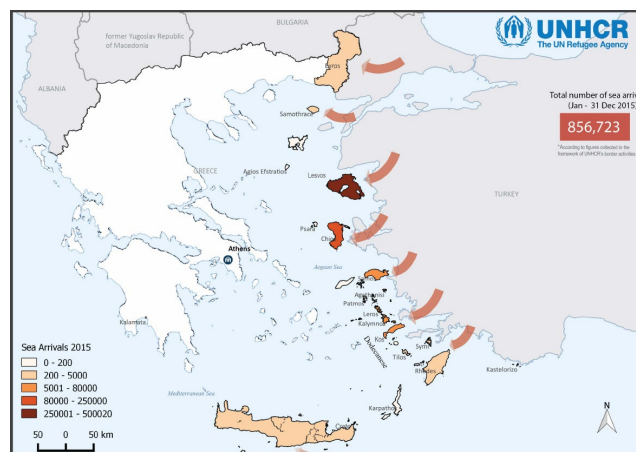
Structure of the report

This report is organized into four main sections. The first discusses humanitarian aid and assistance in the hotspot context. It shows the entanglement of aid and migration management in the specific context of the Greek islands. The second section discusses insecurity for aid actors in the hotspot contexts. In the third section, we will discuss our findings about mitigation measures. In the last section, we will conclude our findings, and provide recommendations for improving security awareness and approaches for aid groups in this particular context.

Aid and assistance in the Greek migration hotspots

There is a common narrative that over the years the initial hospitality of the local population has gradually receded and changed for anger and frustration. Various respondents recall how from the very beginning, in 2015 at the height of the migration/refugee crisis, but also before, locals were very helpful, and showed incredible flexibility towards the plight and predicaments of asylum seekers arriving on their shores. Over the years, however, people have become frustrated and angry with the lack of resolve and the cumulated effects of hosting such large numbers of people on their islands. With the prospect of expansion and construction of new and permanent facilities for asylum seekers, a ‘boiling point’ was reached in the beginning of 2020. The effects of this for the aid community is picked up in the next section, here we describe how aid and assistance are part of the hotspots.

The story of the Greek migration hotspots is one of a stalled implementation of the relocation of asylum seekers. As a response to the overwhelming arrival of asylum seekers at the height of the migration/refugee crisis,¹⁰ the EU-Turkey deal of 2016 arranged for a two-pronged process in which eligible asylum seekers would be relocated and distributed among the EU member states, while migrants that were deemed ineligible would be received back by Turkey.¹¹ In addition, the Turkish authorities were to prevent irregular migration from its shores to the Greek Islands, and into the EU. Although a hefty fee for the Turkish efforts was provided by the EU, and indeed the number of new arrivals decreased significantly, the relocation and distribution within the European Union largely failed. As a result, the asylum seeker population on the five Greek hotspot islands of Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Leros, and Kos, remained and resided in and around camps which capacity was stretched beyond appropriate conditions.



Sea arrivals to the Greek islands in 2015. Source: UNHCR.¹²

Officially, asylum seekers in the five hotspots are supposed to await their application in the formal Reception and Identification Centers (RICs), such as the original Moria camp on Lesbos, Vial camp on Chios, and Vathy camp on Samos. However, due to the growth of arrival of people and the stalling of the administrative processes of relocating them, these facilities reached their limits. On Lesbos, people settled outside the Moria RIC in informal settlements such as ‘the Olive Grove’ and ‘the Jungle’, sites with tents and shacks adjacent to Moria, and vulnerable people were transferred to a second formal camp Kara Tepe. In addition, other initiatives such as the informal Pikpa camp grew out of the overwhelming need for shelter and the incapacity of the official RIC. Originally a squat, Pikpa was closed just shortly after our fieldwork and its people relocated to Kara Tepe on 20 October 2020, while Kara Tepe itself is projected to close and its people relocated to the new RIC/ Moria 2, shortly also.¹³ Similarly, on Chios, the official Vial camp expands into the fields around to give shape to a similar Jungle.

In this context, both in the formal and informal camp settings, aid groups of various origins emerged on the islands since the main influx in 2015. Established international humanitarian organizations (INGOs) such as MSF, IRC, The Federation of the Red Cross, and multilateral organizations such as UNHCR and IOM, operate side by side with spontaneous local initiatives, and European volunteer groups, such as Euro Relief, Samos Volunteers, Movement on the Ground, Because we Carry, and many others, some with creative names like Refugee Biryani and Bananas.

This resulted in a context in which various, sometimes contradicting, mandates, political positions, and humanitarian aspirations coincide. The humanitarian context thus is diverse and multiple and can be seen as a blurry and complex operational field, lacking a clear distinction between the operating organizations. It is an arena whereby opposing political concerns, conflicting values, and different motives affect the collaboration and communication between the different actors.¹⁴ As a result, different groups are operating based on a variety of organizational modalities, moral convictions, the mandates of their donors, and particular beliefs and values as to how to position in relation to hotspot dynamic, humanitarianism and the European migration question more broadly.

The Greek hotspots, and in particular Lesbos, can be understood as what Vives refers to as a ‘Spectacular Border’ which is ‘heavily mediatized and dominated by a discourse of invasion,’ in comparison with Lampedusa and, earlier, or perhaps again, the Canary Islands.¹⁵ She notes

about the spectacular border: ‘these are sites (or stages) where fear of the unwanted migrant is produced. What follows is a declaration of crisis, which creates favorable conditions for exceptional policy responses that would, in other scenarios, be unacceptable’. The very status quo, or the stalling of the relocation process, resulting in asylum seekers being stuck on the islands in challenging conditions, can be understood as such. Or indeed as a consolidation of humanitarian needs, that are part of a politics of deterrence that creates and leaves room (or perhaps need) for aid groups to step in and support people that are residing in these conditions.¹⁶

Although NGOs and volunteer movements are inherent to the hotspot, and moved to Greece, or emerged there since the 2015 migration crisis, they are not necessarily easily accepted by the Greek authorities and inhabitants. NGOs and volunteer movements are confronted with prejudices, such as that volunteers are sponsored by their home country and do not have to pay for anything themselves. Paradoxically, volunteerism was also seen as a form of tourism, a.k.a. voluntourism, that in times of a more general slump in visitors as a result of the migration phenomenon, and now Covid-19, is recognized as reinforcing the local economy and tourism and contributing to future tourism demand.¹⁷

However, as the hotspot became a more long term affair, and the crisis normalized, aid groups and volunteer agencies were demanded to formalize into official NGOs. More recently, a newly adopted law in April 2020, makes it harder for NGOs to freely operate and have made the requirements to work in Greece more strict. This law is seen as an attempt to restrict the aid environment further, by imposing ‘additional, burdensome and intrusive requirements to NGOs’ registration and operation, including in matters of funding, which make it virtually impossible for certain NGOs to comply.’ As a result, this ‘risks paralyzing the work of NGOs assisting asylum seekers and migrants, especially when it comes to smaller or more recently established NGOs.’¹⁸ Nonetheless, many smaller aid groups are reported to operate informally.

Between the three hotspots, Lesbos comes out as the most challenging island to work. It is characterized as having many NGOs and volunteer movements, with divergent interests. When the migration/refugee crisis started in 2015, the first actors settled in Lesbos first and a few years later actors also went to other hotspots. Most media attention goes to Lesbos, while other hotspots are also in a critical situation. Somehow, Lesbos has an exemplary role, and the others follow, but with fewer repercussions. Until now at least, when an escalation of tensions or riots erupts on Lesbos, it may surface on the other islands also, but not with the same intensity. In

this sense, Lesbos is a spectacular example. We also saw this during the protests in February and March. When the tensions were rising and the actors on Lesbos became more alert, the other hotspots also sharpened their security measures, as dynamics from Lesbos spilled over to the other islands. As one informant noted after the Moria fire, in people would have been relocated to the mainland *en masse* as a result of this, there would have similar fires on Samos – where indeed smaller ones emerged – and Chios also.

However, most instances of insecurity have occurred on Lesbos. The situation on the island of Chios and Samos are seen as more calm. This does not mean that there are no hostile events on those islands, but they are less prominent, and the humanitarian setting seems more clear and organized. The context differs quite a bit also. Chios is relatively rich, politically more conservative but less polarized, on Samos the camp is very close to the city, while on Chios and Lesbos the camps are outside. These contextual differences have implications for tensions and hostility as they arise on the islands.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a mitigating effect on the tensions on the Greek hotspot islands that had escalated in early 2020. It overshadowed local conflicts and redirected people's attention to broader political and social concerns. The confirmation of one positive Covid-19 case in Moria camp had raised the stakes for residents and the population of Lesbos at large. Observers feared a fast spread of the disease in the overcrowded and densely populated camp. On the evening of arrival on Lesbos, our fieldworker met a friend who had spent the last three years on the island working for various aid actors. They speculated about the implications of the Covid-19 outbreak, also considering that the construction of a fence around the 'Olive Grove' had just begun. Although Covid-19 restrictions had already prevented residents of Moria camp and the Olive Grove from leaving the area without permission, a fence would further limit people's mobility in the long-term – with or without Covid-19. Both the construction of the fence and the confirmation of a positive case in Moria camp were very recent events – matters of a few days. Therefore, it was not surprising that a reaction from residents and asylum seekers, solidarians, and other groups had not yet materialized. Considering that plans for closed camps had provoked massive protests earlier in the year 2020, the possibility that people would mobilize again seemed high, and it did, but differently. Only a few hours after this conversation, a large fire destroyed Moria camp, and protests erupted in its wake in which also aid groups and workers were threatened and attacked.

Perceptions, experiences, and mitigation of insecurity

In this section, we expand on how respondents and participants reflect on insecurity in the hotspot context. After a general introduction, we describe threats and triggers from the perspective of local communities, and experiences with insecurity and its effects for aid groups operating on the islands.

One of the most relevant findings of this inquiry is that in the EU context of operation, insecurity for aid workers caught many aid groups by surprise. This counts for the more formal and established humanitarian organizations as well as newer volunteer groups. The former implicitly changed their modus operandi regarding security awareness and loosened these as compared to what they would otherwise employ in fragile states and previously existing crisis contexts in the Global South. As for the newer volunteer movements that came to the islands, for most this was the first port of call, and there was little comparison, and need, to sustain strict security measures. As a result, security mitigation capacity was present but not employed, or neglected, due to the EU context, or partially employed, ie focus on terrorist threat among the asylum seeker population, rather than asylum seekers – host relations, or political tensions. To better understand this, it is necessary to break down different security risks and threats.

The island(s) as a violence producing environment

In the hotspot context, NGOs and aid actors are part of the seemingly contradictory but intentional entanglement of aid and deterrence. From a more practical perspective, NGOs and aid groups can be understood as filling a gap that emerges between restrictive policies and human needs that result from the policies. The Greek state cannot / will not support asylum seekers in their basic needs, and allows aid groups to step in based on a crisis rationale. Many people understand this as a gap that Europe creates by its inability to implement the EU-Turkey deal, and as a measure by the Greek authorities that seek to contain asylum seekers away from the mainland. The hotspot policy creates this gap, and NGOs fill it.

People from the local community also understand the existence of the entanglement between aid and deterrence: NGOs will never leave as long as this policy endures, and the government

cannot do without NGOs. As one notes, ‘most do good work, people need support for integration, and in everything in daily lives.’¹⁹ Voices of concern from the local community are not xenophobic *per se*, and they are not all right-wing extremists or fascists – a term that is used locally by activists. The political status quo that enables the hotspot environment is by one informant understood as a ‘violence producing environment’ in which ‘tension and conflict are produced by the state’ as it allows this environment to exist.²⁰

This context then is one that came to carry specific risk, and that emerged with time as the support for the hosting of people on the Greek island gave way for worries and protest. The escalations of February/March 2020 (more on this below) are exemplary in this regard, and especially its fundamental reason, the creating of permanent places for asylum seekers to await their process, possibly indefinitely. This would make the islands as strategic sites in the EU's border control into a permanent borderland in which camps play a fundamental role in containing irregular migrants as undesirables.

Most participants in this study confirm that security issues have not been in focus much since the beginning of the migration crisis in 2015, but that this has changed based on recent events, mainly starting at the beginning of 2020. One Greek respondent with INGO experience abroad noted that ‘she could not believe that they needed security rules in her own country’,²¹ implying that the EU / Greek context is somehow specific, and different than other humanitarian contexts. In addition, much-anticipated security awareness, and protocols, were focussed on in-camp dynamics. However, after March 2020, and the attacks by local people, these perspectives were changed.²² This coincided with Covid-19 and the resulting stresses due to this.

In-camp risk

Contrary to expectations, in-camp insecurity and risks were not the most mentioned form of threat or potential threat for aid groups. Although some mentioned that the relation with the asylum seeker population and the asylum seekers amongst themselves can lead to tensions, this was not the main concern for most. The substandard hosting conditions in the hotspot affect security for people, as congestion, frustration, and poverty coincide. Although gender issues were mentioned, in particular of female aid workers among male asylum seekers, and various incidents were reported of verbal and physical harassment.²³ But these did not feature

prominently, and otherwise, aid groups were very aware of these risks and had policies in place. Arguably, since Moria burnt down, fire is high on the security agenda, as well as the trigger it represents for unrest, protests, and blockades in its aftermath that make access to asylum seekers difficult or impossible. On Samos, various fires have broken out since September, and aid groups operating in camps in the other Hotspots have been vigilant about this risk.

As an in-camp risk, we can distinguish between conflict dynamics between different asylum seeker groups (ethnic, national, religious, etc), potential escalation of these in which aid groups are caught up indirectly, and direct threats from the asylum seeker population towards aid actors. As additional risks were mentioned the different human trafficking, smuggling networks that are present on the islands, and presents certain risks that can be associated with criminality. Most organizations mention that they have measures in place to respond to in-camp risks and remedy these instances upon escalation, and some mention documents and plans for evacuation routes, emergency communication, and scaling down operations.

It may be that aid groups are overlooking or down-playing threats from the asylum seeker community because of the sympathy for their mandate, or because this is simply part of the aid dynamic, as one informant suggested. This is an interesting thought. Since asylum seekers are already victimized, aid groups don't want to enlarge this.²⁴ In addition, there may be some sympathy for the protest or deviant behavior of asylum seekers as it is to be expected as a result of their predicament.

Threats *against* the very asylum seeker presence and the aid groups that host them is a more fundamental concern in that respect, and speaking out against this aligns well with the mandate and agenda of most aid groups. In particular some 'solidarians' 'seem to think that all local people are fascist', which is problematic because it overlooks a more nuanced reality of perceptions, opinions, and ideas within the local community.²⁵

Out of camp risks

Although the right-wing organizations have been manifesting themselves since the beginning, and riots and clashes have resulted from this, dealing with an angry local community in a broader sense is considered as something quite new. Most respondents indicate that this has

mostly led to *ad hoc* responses and considerations of out of camp risks after the February / March riots of 2020, more on this below. Also here a distinction can be made between tensions from right-wing, nationalist or fascist, groups, from Greece and beyond, and more local community reactions from the islands. These two are interrelated in so far that protests may coincide, and groups may mobilize each other, but the motivations differ. The broader local protests do not necessarily have a right-wing or nationalist agenda but are instigated by people that are fed up with the stalled relocation process on the island, and the resulting thousands of people that reside in desperate conditions and its effect on life on the island, and the prospect of the more long term institutionalization of the islands as permanent asylum hotspots.

The question thus is, are these tensions isolated incidents or concerns, or do they signify a dynamic, trend, that is something of the long run? In our inquiry, these dynamics and how they produce risk for aid workers came out as the most context-specific and overlooked concern. It is for this reason that we focus on the relationship between aid groups and the local population.

Threats and triggers – a local perspective

The various aid groups and local people that engaged in our inquiry all reflect on a general atmosphere in which solidarity is increasingly eroded as a result of fear, anger, and frustration. This has been there since the beginning among some people in the community, but as the situation progresses and relocation arrangements stall, arguably more people have become frustrated over time. As one respondent noted, ‘it’s been too long and it’s been too much’.²⁶ Similar perspectives were raised by others.

It is frustration that is linked to specific concerns: for instance, some of the Greek islands are heavily dependent on tourist revenue. But, according to some, the reputation and effects of large scale asylum hosting on the islands led to a receding number of tourists, impacting negatively on local livelihoods. This coincides with Covid-19, lockdowns, and a slump in tourism as a consequence, and this adds to this frustration. The overall result is that island residents reflect on how ‘nobody thinks about the locals’, even by people who don’t live close to any aid project or asylum seeker project location. The government is not seen as helping them or other people who are affected by the ‘refugee crisis’, and the slump in tourism.

In other examples, it was noted how these hotspot islands were ‘sacrificed’ in the national political dealings with the migration question. This is also seen by some respondents as an effect of the increased anti-immigrant rhetoric from the mainland after a change in government in 2019. As one noted, if the government were to transfer large groups of people to the mainland they would risk losing the support that brought them in power. Meanwhile, the government strengthened the border with additional coast guard (and increasing push backs of vessels to the Turkish coast), further reducing the number of arrivals, and those who arrive remain on the islands, out of sight – in a safe distance to people on the mainland.²⁷ The effect is that the long term status quo of asylum seekers on the islands are then seen as a government decision, or at least condoned by them, who then outsource the delivery of basic services to aid groups. In this view, the government *can* sacrifice these islands, because of the presence of aid groups. This is a problematic perspective but it holds to some degree, since, indeed, aid groups help in maintaining asylum seeker services and constituting the status quo.

In addition, there is some misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about the condition under which asylum seekers are hosted and received. I.e., some hold the idea that people arrive in a comfortable situation, that they received 400 Euro a month, and do not have to pay tax, electricity, rent, etc.²⁸ Misunderstandings about aid workers and the conditions under which these are employed also lead to questions, for example, that they are paid by the government to help the refugees, that they do not have to pay for themselves, etc. This makes sense to some extent. Many aid groups do receive government funding, Greek or from another European country or the EU directly, adding to this notion of sacrificing the islands. Moreover, with the emergence of many new volunteer movements in the hotspots, people are right in suggesting that for some, these provide economic, or other (career, adventure) benefits.²⁹ Quick interventions of organizations who just do things quickly and leave again and ignore the local population, as some form of hit-and-run-solidarity, fuel frustrations.³⁰ In any way, time, and the lack of resolution despite the implicit and explicit promise of this in the EU-Turkey deal, has given way for these frustrations to mature.

Many local people are reportedly fed-up with the situation, and as a result, move closer to a rightist agenda. The expansion of the camp and the prolonged presence of asylum seekers has affected locals ‘feeling of stability’. Therefore, their rhetoric has also started changing, shifting towards the right. Statements like ‘Lesbian people are desperate, even the non-conservative

ones,’ or ‘they made us racist’ indicate how tensions are not so much ideology-driven but fuelled by the tangible and abstract impact of the presence of asylum seekers on the daily lives of locals. Many anecdotal examples support these claims, i.e., the fact that livestock was stolen/slaughtered, the looting and demolishing of holiday homes on Lesbos by asylum seekers to obtain materials for building shelters in the Olive Groves, or the Jungle, and so on. However, these examples are countered by narratives of manipulation. For example, the story of the alleged burning of two churches near Vial camp on Chios, ostensibly done by right-wing protesters so as to blame asylum seekers, and shift the political narrative.³¹

As mentioned above, aid groups, and in particular solidarians, may not feel comfortable highlighting how negative consequences of the Hotspot approach, and the behavior of asylum seekers upsetting local people. Asylum seekers are already victimized in this sense, and to stress how they harm or violate the livelihoods of local communities may exacerbate this. However, neglecting these tensions may be worse in the long run, and mount until a straw breaks the camel’s back, and conflict escalates.

The protests of early 2020

Most actors refer to the beginning of 2020 as bringing change in the security dynamics on the islands, in particular with regards to tensions between aid groups and local communities. There were incidents before, and protests and manifestations escalated earlier also. However, the beginning of 2020 ushered in protests as a result of government intentions to create permanent camps, or closed camps, on the three islands. For many of the concerned island population, this was seen as solidifying the islands as permanent migration transit sites with long term reception of asylum seekers, and thus consolidating the problems they have seen developing since 2015. This included the proposed fencing of the Olive Grove and the Jungle, hence taking more private land for the hotspot arrangement, and enlarging the encampment for the unforeseeable future. The plans to establish closed camps did not fit the narrative of the migration hotspot as a temporary measure, and the suggestion that it could become permanent, fed a strong reaction, in the forms of (violent) protests, roadblocks, and aggression to those that were seen as part and parcel of the consolidation of this form of asylum reception.³² Details and timelines of the events can be found elsewhere,³³ for this report, it is relevant to note that these protests showed a new phase of animosity towards aid groups. A participant in one of our seminars working for

a long-established INGO that operates worldwide noted that his organization had suffered more attacks and violence in the Greek hotspots than in Yemen this year.³⁴ That this insecurity is little recognized, yet for NGOs can be of similar concern as contexts such as Yemen, fits the idea that special status is accorded to the Greek context as part of EU democratic environment. This image then needs scrutiny.

As respondents noted, initially ‘everybody was protesting against the plan of closed camps, refugees, locals, aid actors, nationalists, etc. There was a ‘shared interested’ that united the various position on Lesbos. According to one respondent, the local population that protested against the construction of closed camps can be divided into two groups: first, those in solidarity with refugees/asylum seekers. Second, those who do not want more camps, i.e. more people on the island. Within this group, there are a few extremists that were also violent.³⁵ Interestingly, the respondent notes that these few people felt particularly strong after the plans for the construction of closed camps were canceled because they perceived it as their success. Therefore, more actions followed. Later the respondent adds that the violent group ‘is small but has a lot of space.’ This is because they are ‘supported by the police’ in the sense that roadblocks, for example, were not dissolved by the police, even though they knew about it and were close by (‘a km away’). This idea is voiced by others in our inquiry also. More broadly, it was suggested that local groups feel empowered to act as a result of the change of rhetoric and stricter policies of the government.³⁶

Less prominently reflected upon, but relevant all the same, are the protests of right-wing or Antifa supporters that sometimes clash with each other, or with the authorities and police. These protests and demonstrations are quite common, but their escalation into riots and violent events, that can either directly or indirectly affect aid groups, i.e., by targeting them, is of concern. However, this seems primarily related to local politics where aid workers and volunteers are advised to stay out of. In the demonstration our fieldworker attended, there was only a handful of foreigners, and the absence of international volunteers was remarkable.

Interestingly, this led to another dilemma voiced by some aid groups, namely, being seen protesting government plans side by side with nationalist (or in their use) fascist groups. At least it shows that at times in the hotspot environment, aspirations, concerns, and positions between ostensibly incompatible actors align. It is perhaps here, where alternative routes for acceptance and mitigation can be found. This means thinking of the alignment of demands as

they are also shared. What do people want and how does this connect with the work and, in particular, the advocacy of aid actors. See more on this later in this report.

Then, Corona struck the islands. This resulted in the quarantine of the islands, and not long after the fire broke out that burnt down Moria.³⁷ Also, the fire resulted in widespread protests that underscored the demands that asylum seekers be relocated. Aid groups were prevented from reaching out to many asylum seekers roaming around. In addition, renewed calls for the creation of closed detention centers on the islands after the fire on Moria, and in times of Covid, reignited protests and riots.³⁸

Implications for aid groups

Although humanitarian NGOs may have a lot of experience in dealing with local communities, the situation in Greece has taken many by some surprise. This leads to a sudden awareness that the aid environment is more multi-dimensional regarding security threats, and highlights areas of neglect and attention. Most importantly, security concerns have moved beyond the camps or specific sites of aid projects. This has several effects, that may hamper everyday security planning. For instance, one aid group noted how at the beginning of March, when the tensions were high, they called several hotels to find a new and more safe place for the volunteers to stay. Many said no because they were afraid of the reactions and responses of their neighbors and the rest of the community. More respondents note that their freedom of movement outside of the areas of operation, thus elsewhere on the island (mainly on Lesbos) is effected, or sometimes curtailed, by the perception and experience of a threatening environment for aid workers. A respondent from an established international NGO notes in this regard that she feels uncomfortable about telling others about her work, and tries to keep a low profile by for instance not wearing t-shirts with the agency logo. One strategy that seemed vague but indicative was the instruction to (foreign) volunteers: ‘don’t do anything that might harm ‘x’ (the local founder of the aid group).³⁹

Someone else narrated that she cannot go to particular shops, as she is made aware that she is not welcome, and the shops don’t want to be seen as a place that ‘supports NGOs’. Others note that it has become standard routine to drop the aid groups’ attire and logo’s, and other items of identification, before moving away from the program site. This indicates how symbols that are

otherwise thought of as instrumental in stressing a non-political, neutral, and impartial approach seem irrelevant in this context, or indeed are impossible to maintain in the particularities of the Greek Hotspot context. More in general, except in particular areas where aid had been conflated with the war on terror, these logos are seen as keeping aid workers safe. Here, respondents note that cars remove NGO logos. Indeed, rental cars of companies renting to aid groups, remove their logo's also (which only works so far as the cars are not recognized, as reportedly, these cars are known to many local people anyway).

Some organizations canceled their activities in March 2020, due to safety concerns that emerged as a result of the protests. One particular group notes how before March they had encountered fewer incidents, except for one car that was burnt down by right-wing extremists. In March, they had encountered five incidents, in which cars were blocked, and staff threatened, and then one of their facilities was burnt down. As a result, they felt unsafe and feared more insecurity. At the time of the interview, the respondent indicates that they don't want to return to Greece as a result of these experiences.⁴⁰

The example also indicates something more difficult to grasp, namely the suggestion that not being accepted by the local community is also largely a matter of perception of the aid staff or volunteer. One respondent noted how she felt 'watched' by island residents all the time, also in Mytilini. This made her feel uncomfortable, feeling that they blamed her for her NGO role, and support to the migrant case. Even though nothing in particular happened to her, she felt insecure by this, knowing how others had been approached, threatened, and attacked. Such a perception of NGOs is common in (post)conflict contexts, but less within an EU environment, and more so, in one where many, relatively inexperienced short term volunteers are drawn, sometimes for as short as one week.

Hostilities

Below we share types of incidents that were mentioned in the interviews. We don't aim for a comprehensive and exclusive list here, and some of the incidents may have multiple understandings of its causes. We merely use these examples to illustrate the type of experiences of threat and risks that informants mentioned as part of the specific hotspot environment.⁴¹

Physical violence

Among the experiences with violence and hostilities that respondents mentioned are the following. Attacks on aid staff during protests and demonstrations, and on other occasions in more isolated incidents. The burning and damaging of cars (windows smashed, rocks thrown). The burning of a school on Lesbos.⁴² The burning of a warehouse on Chios (although there is some debate about intentionality). Blockades of cars and threatening of staff; in particular instances staff being beaten after they were stopped at roadblocks. Aid facilities had to lockdown for several days due to unrest. Staff evacuation and relocations. Stones that were thrown at staff houses. And blockades and roadblocks, where people were being checked inside the cars. In some instances, aid staff was taken from cars and beaten. Other aid organizations were blocked from passing. In a broader sense, the effects of these blockades have direct repercussions on aid delivery. One instance was mentioned in which asylum seekers did not have food and water supplies for several days due to this.

Verbal violence

Verbal attacks to aid group staff, ranging from calling names to threatening and aggressive behavior. Staff interviewed mentioned being uncomfortably followed through the streets. Others note that staff houses were graffitied.

Threats on social media

Many respondents reflect on how they experience threats via social media, and that pictures of aid workers that circulate can lead to online threats to the workers. As an example, an aid group that was working in the Olive Grove and made a post about that on Facebook. This post was shared by a politician who is against migrants, with his own text ‘NGOs are destroying our country’. The message has been reposted thousands of times, while one of the aid group’s volunteers was on the pictures. A local contractor involved also felt threatened as a result of this. In another example, during one of the protests in Feb-March whereby asylum seekers went on the street, the police used teargas to get them back into the camp. One aid staff present at the protest was photographed, which was shared by right-extremists, even with her surname.

Arrest by Greek authorities

For particular aid groups, specifically those that are engaged with sea rescue, but also others that are not registered, an additional risk is arrest by the Greek authorities. Since it sharpened

its control over NGOs and aid groups as described above, the Greek government aims to crack down on migrant and human smuggling networks. Recently, several aid groups and individual workers have been associated with this and arrested. Some NGOs indicate that this adds to an already more tense environment that makes working on the hotspots more problematic and insecure.⁴³

Perceptions of insecurity

Insecurity is not equally experienced by all, nor is it necessarily seen as a structural element of the political landscape. Several actors note for instance that on Chios these tensions are less felt, as one international aid staff recalled, “I was told there was no tension on the island”,⁴⁴ and other, on Lesbos in particular, relate to the events surrounding the protests of March 2020, as isolated incidents, and that have led to temporary evacuation and relocation, but not lasting insecurity. On another note, some aid groups are reported to have quit Lesbos altogether after negative experiences with violence and threats, of which some came back, but not all.⁴⁵ One of these reported that they felt so insecure that they did not want to continue operating on the island. Supposedly, as a new volunteer movement, they were caught by surprise. Our reading, following most actors we spoke to, is that this boiling point is still there and that riots and protests may return easily until a more comprehensive political settlement or solution is reached.

However, this also necessitates further scrutiny of the unproblematic use of the ‘local community’. This is not a homogenous group of people, nor is it unresponsive to periods of increased tension. Meaning that at some moments, some people will behave in a certain way, or will see frustration get the better hand of them. It is imperative to attempt a nuanced picture of what ‘local’ entails and to see where entry points are for communication and the building of relations, without disregarding the more structural oppositional elements within that group, or indeed with the attempt to mitigate frustration and opposition from boiling over into some form of escalation, threat or violence.

Indeed, some respondents note that it has been a mistake not to communicate more directly with the local community directly, and not working much on acceptance, which can only develop by learning and responding to the complaints, demands, and needs of that local community.

Although the notion of acceptance is commonly used among the more established NGOs, it is also very loosely defined and implemented, if at all, in the Greek case. Although actors of the established INGOs comment that in any other country of operation, there is always something they did for locals, to gain their acceptance. See more about this in the next section.

In addition, maintaining direct relations with local communities adds to a more nuanced understanding of local grievances and concerns, and indeed what the local entails in the first place. This understanding of acceptance and how it is embedded in the relations between aid groups and local people is of core focus in this inquiry, but largely as something that is absent or not very well developed. Arguably, most attention, logically, went to maintaining acceptance with the program target groups, not with the wider, non-asylum seeking island residents. Violent events have now shown that for a more long term presence of aid groups in this context, acceptance policies and strengthening the relations with people and organizations from the local community, is relevant.

For instance, many locals think that NGOs operate without consultation or approval of the government so they are seen as pushing their own agenda.⁴⁶ This argument is supported by the suggestion that many groups are not registered, which to some extent is true, but it stresses a distrust of NGOs as suggested by local aid workers interviewed, who hardly make the distinction between these groups, and perceive them as a sect.⁴⁷ This also stresses tensions between the authorities and aid groups that go at it alone, i.e., see rescue volunteer groups that engage in ‘illegal rescue’, human smuggling, and can be arrested upon being found out, and after the fire in Moria, several aid workers were arrested by the authorities on these premises.⁴⁸

As was raised by several respondents, much programming is *ad hoc* and short term. Not only security-wise, but in general. This is the result of the humanitarian aid needs being seen as temporary, in combination with the hotspot policy being posited as temporary also. As one respondent notes, the unpredictability on the islands discourages long-term planning.⁴⁹ Although this is understandable, many refugee situations around the world are much more long term than anticipated. The particularities of the Greek hotspot context as a ‘humanitarian border’ is unsettling for most actors, and they agree that the asylum seeker dynamic on these Greek islands, or similar as these, will be a long term phenomenon requiring more long term perspectives for programming. After five years this short term perspective and the resulting *ad*

hoc response needs calibration, hence, there is a need for more long term strategies, including strategies to anticipate and mitigate insecurity.

Strategies for mitigation

In this part of the report, we focus on the strategies that aid groups employ to mitigate insecurity. We will first discuss protocols and policies, followed by an analysis of communication and relations. We end with an elaboration of ideas about acceptance of aid groups and their practices among the wider community of the hotspots.

Preparation, protocols, and policies

There is a wide variety in how aid groups talk about their protocols and policies for security, in particular concerning out of camp challenges. These differ according to island also. Some indicate that they never had a security protocol because they felt safe. And they reasoned that they had good connections with the locals and the idea that they are in a safe place in the world, in Europe. There is a difference between the more established and newer organizations in this regard. More formal procedures may exist with the former, yet were to some extent neglected or dormant due to the EU operational context. Among newer groups that find their origin on these Greek islands, many simply never prioritized this, or only to a limited extent. However, this differentiation is not clear cut but helps for analytical purposes. I.e., one new volunteer movement operating on Samos notes that it employs a permanent security protocol that uses color-coded indicators. Green, all well, black, leave the island, with indications of the type of threat or incident per code, and a system of evacuation routes, vehicles, and lodging.⁵⁰ Also, respondents mention carrying walkie talkies, leaving phones on at all times, indications of evacuation routes, places, and procedures, and hiding agency clothes and logos outside of the camp.

Other groups note that their safety protocols have undergone a ‘massive overhaul’ after the riots and protests.⁵¹ One contracted a volunteer agency expert that was drawn from a wider volunteer agency network, and who arranged the sharing of field manuals and security protocols. As was explained, to qualify for joining this volunteer network, security and labor regulations are required, or copy-pasted, or adapted.⁵² Apparently, the organization in question only formalized this when the need arose during the February / March riots. We were allowed to look into these protocols and they elaborate practical security measures on an organizational level, mostly in

the areas and sites of program implementation, they are less engaged with out of camp measures, issues pertaining to acceptance strategies, or relations with local communities. Otherwise, most organizations were hesitant in sharing security policies, or the lacking thereof, with other aid groups, and us, and instead elaborated in words.

The security protocols and emergency response plans that were explained verbally differ per aid group in varying stages of proficiency. Some seem quite elaborate, others more ad hoc, but they mostly focus on in-camp events, such as fires and riots. Some camps stand out, i.e, Vathy on Samos, or Vial camp on Chios reportedly have more comprehensive plans. I.e., Vial Camp knows a central security protocol that applies to all organizations, mainly about gathering points, shared communication protocols, evacuation routes, etc.⁵³ These plans seemed absent, unknown, or non-adhered to in Moria and Kara Tepe on Lesbos, at least in the perception of the respondents in this inquiry, which is telling also. However, after the fire in Moria and the construction of the new RIC, reportedly, past practices are improved, and some of the respondents note that the Greek authorities take a much more firm role in the management and organization of this site, including emergency communication and coordination. What this means in practice remains to be seen, and precisely how it may impact out of camp security strategies, is unclear.

We have found little evidence of comprehensive emergency plans and security protocols for the wider islands, out of camp areas, either within or among the aid community. Some respond that these are in development, or that there are talks about these plans, or they are in preparation. In all, it seems that it had not, and still may not be prioritized, and there is no time allocated for pursuing this further. What some groups note is that they maintain lists of places where they advise caution or that are off-limits, others maintain color-coded hit maps that indicate where incidents occurred.

Related to this is the central registration of security incidents and the sharing of this information within the aid group community. See for concerns regarding wider communication below, here it concerns the reporting, documentation, and registration of these events. Apart from the separately mentioned incidents in our communication with participants, we also received a more comprehensive list, yet this was based on anonymity and a promise not to use its details, which for us indicates that indeed these are individual efforts. Arguably, several sharing mechanisms are in place, but they are not used or maintained structurally as it appears. Most

respondents simply state there is ‘no central point for registration of violent experiences’. In addition, although most groups are in a variety of Whatsapp groups, which are NGO initiatives, security is not an important topic in these meetings. It is noted that there is a lack of ‘organized, deliberate security information systems’, and that it would be helpful to have these.⁵⁴

Others noted that there were meetings organized by the ministry, who also coordinated these, but that security concerns were dismissed here, or perceived as isolated incidents and not prioritized. Added to this is that some aid groups experienced resistance from the authorities to go into these issues directly, and suggest that there is resistance to work with NGOs in general.

One goes further and states that the ‘level of security is based on luck and not on a structural approach.’⁵⁵ Also, UNHCR does not seem to take up a coordinating role and seems reluctant to treat security as something that needs a more comprehensive approach. As a result, any investment in security is an individual aid group action, and only a few have done so. In other areas of operation, UN organizations such as UNDSS (United Nations Department for Safety and Security) advocate and coordinate these issues, or security clusters are formed between NGOs. Not that this goes smoothly per se, but at least there is some attempt at oversight and central registration. Something that arguably might benefit smaller, less or newly established, aid groups most, as the bigger one may have experiences and resources to do this on their own accord. A participant to one of our working sessions, working with an INGO and with experience in a variety of other crisis contexts across the globe, noted that UNDSS in Greece is in effect one former policeman, which means that it is understaffed and by no means has the capacity to intervene or coordinate in a meaningful way.⁵⁶ This is clearly not a priority for them, or, due to the European context, below the radar.

Also here differences per island are mentioned. I.e., for Samos, it is reported that the interagency method for communication is Whatsapp and that the different players discuss a variety of events, thoughts, and opinions. Still the respondent notes that there is lots of miscommunication. But simultaneously there is mentioning of a monthly security meeting, in which UN, aid groups, authorities, and police join, and where updates are shared what they are doing. In practice, we learned that these mechanisms are not well attended, and in particular the local authorities are absent.

Training and pre-field preparation lead to a variety of responses: some respondents noted simply that aid workers are not prepared for the field. This can result in people getting tired, scared and even a wish to go home. Among some of the volunteer groups the high staff turnover, and relatively short durations of stay, i.e., a week, may make extensive training irrelevant. However, some sensitization makes sense.

Illustrative for how security protocols are employed is what transpired immediately after the Moria fire. With the residents of the camp roaming around the streets near Moria, and the basic infrastructure lacking and demolished, the problem of food and water became imminent. At some point, word got out in the informal networks of some aid groups that the Greek military had thousands of meals to distribute to the asylum seekers but feared doing this itself because of insecurity. Aid groups, whoever was willing, were called upon to take over this distribution. Our fieldworker joined one of the groups and noted mainly two things, first of all, a complete lack of communication and coordination between the different aid groups, in which the larger, established groups were seen to claim the lead. Second, a complete lack of security awareness, even though it was the main reason the army shied away from it. In his experience, people just started to hand out stuff to people a little bit away from other groups, without considering who they were, whether they already had received earlier, and most importantly, without any guidelines or regulation about what to do in case of an escalation, protest or riot, except for checking Whatsapp.

Another telling example was when volunteers were called to report to Lesvos airport shortly after the fire, to learn here that they were to go with the army to construct emergency shelter. Half of the group was flown to the site of the new RIC by army helicopters, and others went by bus, traveling around ‘the zone’, the closed-off area where asylum seekers were staying out in the open, and where aid groups, with some exceptions, were prevented from going. In the experience of one of the volunteers, they only found out while arriving at the new RIC site, what they were called upon to do, and even their own organization had communicated about this very poorly, let alone, consider any potential security implications of openly aligning with the army, or feeding tensions within the aid community as a result of this.

Communication & relations

Most actors note that they are part of one or more Whatsapp groups that allow immediate sharing of updates, threats, and incidents. Some of these groups are geared up for security issues, others are more general coordination platforms in which a range of issues are communicated. Formal and informal structures overlap, and it is worthwhile to suggest that social media such as Whatsapp and Facebook, replaces previous forms of information sharing such as physical meetings or other, more structural forms of communication. One can wonder to what extent the proliferation of Whatsapp as a functional and immediate response network, stands in the way of more central and coherent information sharing.

Some organizations use *hit maps* to indicate specific places and areas of concern, and that can be used to warn people to avoid protest areas or places where unrest or threats are anticipated based on previous experience. People on the ground have access to the map, and it is easy to communicate risk areas for people who do not know or are unfamiliar with the context. More so because people do not see risk in this European context easily. Others use color codifications.

There is a big gap in information sharing concerning security among the aid groups, and as one respondent argues, without info, there is no security management. There is also little discussion over security management and concerns. This is widely felt among the respondents. And a more practical approach is welcome, in which info is shared, and possible scenarios are mapped out, and anticipation can improve security in Lesvos. Until now, however, there seems to be little interest in or time for a security cluster due to other workload and available resources. This is also recognized by some of our participants, recalling the need for collaboration and therefore the organizations should, as one of our participants said, ‘stop being a cowboy’.

On Samos, another picture is emerging that shows that aid groups get together in a bi-weekly meeting in which security is considered, to share information and suggestion for solving problems. There is a shared emergency response plan together with all the NGOs on the island. This is arguably less complicated than on Lesvos, since on Samos, services are supposedly well mapped, and, with fewer aid groups, there is arguably less competition and divergence. One respondent notes that on Chios there is a meeting with all organizations, except for the big NGOs, every 2-3 months. Here, generally, communication and coordination

seem limited except in emergencies. This does not rhyme with our overall impression though. Likely, in the case of Chios, the scale of operations is such that *ad hoc* emergency coordination and communication is less difficult than on Lesbos.

On another note, despite these meetings and networks on Samos and Chios, among the aid groups, there is less attention for a bigger plan in which authorities and UNHCR are also included. So although there may be bigger attention and vigilance for security compared to earlier, there is no new policy, and every NGO is ultimately responsible for its own ways. One group notes that it tried to initiate a more comprehensive security platform several years ago, but that it failed because of a lack of responses. Attempts to revive this initiative after the Moria fire and the resulting protests are not successful so far.⁵⁷

Also, tensions between aid groups and government actors are reflected upon. For instance, to operate inside Vial camp, permission from the authorities is required. Since some organizations are reluctant to ‘collaborate’ with the authorities, they prefer working outside of the camp. As a result, some organizations are not registered, and it is unclear whether this deliberate or out of negligence, or because of the scale or character of solidararian movements. One aid staff from Chios notes that the positioning of organizations towards the camp and the authorities creates tensions between organizations. Collaboration between those operating inside the camp and those operating outside the camp is more complicated due to that.⁵⁸ In addition, this is also a central tension between organizations on Lesbos, and operating inside v.s. outside of the camp, or with the government v.s. against the government. Humanitarian INGOs navigate along with this tension.⁵⁹ it is unclear to what extent newer volunteer organizations strategize along these lines, however, in the aftermath of the Moria fire, close collaborations between several aid groups and the authorities in the building of the new RIC on Lesbos indicated a similar tension. After the new RIC was opened for instance, and the UNHCR build tents for the reception of people dislocated by the fire, storm and floods made floors erode immediately. Reportedly the Greek authorities blamed UNHCR, and UNHCR blamed the Greek government, as this is their responsibility. There was clearly unclarity about roles and responsibilities. Later we learned that one of the aid groups stepped in on its own, and ordered new and better floors, reasoning that UNHCR goes too slowly.⁶⁰ In effect, they thus co-construct Moria 2, where so many solidararians and NGOs rally against.

These tensions also surfaced after the Moria fire when the authorities allowed only specific aid groups to deliver aid to the affected people and prevented aid groups to access their sites or people on their own accord. It seems, based on how these dynamics unfolded in the first days after the fire that although efforts were disorganized, communication and coordination from the government seemed limited to the ‘big players’, i.e. the established NGOs.

Some respondents reasoned that their organization tried not to involve the police, to protect their sites as a ‘safe place’. They call the police only when large incidents occur – which remains undefined. One reason for this is not to create panic, so the organization in question first wants to assess the credibility of the threat. As for Chios it concurred that they simply are part of a not too complicated island community where they can share info via messaging when needed, and they make use of a coordination Whatsapp, through which they are also in contact with the UN and wider humanitarian community, but not on a regular or scheduled basis.

However, on a more fundamental level, it also indicates that the relation between Greek authorities and asylum seekers is mostly not one of trust. Aid groups are split over their position towards the state, and tensions have arisen over the extent to which the relations should be maintained or actively sought after, or instead resisted. In one case an aid group on Chios noted that they grew out of a local initiative that was later embedded in a formal international NGO body to adhere to new government guidelines. They are outspoken in that they don’t have an activist agenda, and in line with this see no problem in maintaining close relations with the authorities, the police, the coast guard, etc. As a result, they have access to sites that are hard to access for others and are engaged with local concerns to a larger extent than aid groups that openly take the side of asylum seekers regardless or despite local regulations and processes.

It is important to take into account that authorities, police, and border security teams are, similar to aid groups, not homogenous entities. Rather, these organizations also show a variety of responses and engagements, as is also implied in how aid groups experience relations with security services and authorities differently, also per hotspot context.⁶¹ Therefore, a blanket notion of police, authorities, or border protection agencies as the opposition would miss out on opportunities to seek common ground within an environment where aid groups and security services are in a fix anyway. In other words, coordination and engagement with state actors, the police and border security actors are inevitable, especially in the longer term.

The flipside is that this fix can confirm the very tensions within the aid community when cooperation becomes very close. I.e., after the Moria fire, it was noted that a particular international aid group participated in the construction of the police station in the new RIC. That is a shift in mandate that may be considered risky in terms of the perception of political positions towards the formalization of new encampments.⁶² Aid groups should be aware of the wider ramifications and effects of answering a call to assist the authorities in establishing camps and as a result, be seen as contributing to the architecture of encampment and containment.

Acceptance

Acceptance is generally seen as a way to achieve approval of target groups and local communities for an aid group's aims and aspirations. An acceptance strategy is a jargon that can be more broadly understood as grouping together the relations that aid groups forge with their target groups or communities, and the activities they employ with or for them, to maintain their security and prevent spoilers. Although this specific jargon is not used by every participant in the same way, the aspiration is reflected upon widely. Especially after the protests at the beginning of 2020, the relevance of understanding and building these relations has been recognized. Acceptance, as part of the security triangle with the other two components being deterrence (i.e. walls, fences) and protection (armed guards), is an often-used strategy in the humanitarian world. But what does this mean in the Greek context?

A problem with this is that it is easily said, but hard to put in effect. One aid group for instance notes that they are here for the island, not only for the asylum seekers. To stress this, they indicate that with Easter and Christmas they distribute food to others. Another indicates that they target local people with healthcare donations in addition to the asylum seeker population. Although organizations mention the existence of activities to include locals and create more acceptance, this is not always recognized by the locals themselves or even by the volunteers of the organizations.⁶³ This may have to do with a lack of communication but can also show us that the efforts of organizations to do something for the local community is more something on paper than reality. Most respondents agree that, except for piecemeal gestures, really reaching out to the local community does not apply to their organizations. As one notes about actively reaching out to communities to build acceptance, 'right, that's not happening'.

There seems to be an overall lack of strategies to include locals in programming,⁶⁴ and that is understandable. In bigger international organizations and smaller volunteer organizations, there have been conversations about acceptance as part of the security strategies, however, for most of them it just were ideas and it never was realized. Instead, as noted above also, aid groups operate in more short term ad hoc responses. It seems that there is always something more ‘important’, than security. As a result, acceptance campaigns have never been a priority.

One aid group remarks that it is focussing on an acceptance strategy by talking to communities, working with them, and gain more understanding. They also train staff on how to communicate with locals. But it remains unclear what this means in practice. Another indicates that they maintain a Facebook page for sharing information of NGOs with residents, but also here it is unclear to what extent this affects in mitigating frustrations or otherwise reaches out to local community concerns. A more established NGO works together with volunteers from the local community, who help them to pass messages to the locals. This is a way to strengthen relations with people and to keep an eye on what goes around. It also allows for overcoming language problems that others report as having an impact on reaching out to local people.

But dealing with an angry local community, and especially the extreme right is something new. INGOs may have a lot of experience with dealing with local communities from other operational contexts, but the situation in Greece is different, and what such programs might look like remains a question for the Greek context. In terms of acceptance, some aid groups have warehouses that are also open to local people. Some supply to the hospital, or local organizations such as the disability center, the local police (PPE-covid facial masks), the Roma community, or others in need. They are not sure to what extent this is indeed a security measure, but when addressing this, the respondent adds that she thinks this contributes to their local acceptance.

Another group that is not actively using acceptance as a term, does reflect on how they seek to establish and maintain relations with local people and communities. For instance, by supplying Greeks also, in addition to their asylum seeker target group. In this case, the focus of this NGO is very particular and specific, and by virtue of this niche, including locals in distribution makes sense. Also, they aim to procure their materials and aid resources from local market sources as much as possible. Which, according to the respondent, pays off in terms of being accepted by the local communities in which they work. It is an economic relation that then adds to being

accepted. A similar effect was noted on the hosting and lodging of volunteers, that in some degree compensated for the losses in the tourism industry due to Covid-19. (as a separate interest, a similar marrying of economic concerns and asylum seekers reception is reported on some of the Canary Islands in early November, where a sharp rise in arrivals occurred at the time of writing this report, and where asylum seekers were hosted in empty hotels due to Covid).

Other initiatives that were mentioned were a football competition between asylum seekers and locals, on Samos, and clean-up sessions around the beaches, but these are anecdotal examples. Much more direct engagement that can be understood as acceptance as a strategy that also has a conflict mitigating aim, remains elusive.

Some groups that note that they have good relations with local authorities and experience little insecurity are those that are homegrown, and that are local in essence, in some cases supported by or linked to international organizations. It is imperative to indicate that when tensions are present in the host community, to have a direct relationship with local people, neighbors, people that indeed speak the language and have a feeling for what is going on or brewing in society, is an asset. One way of doing this, and to strike that economic aspect simultaneously, is by involving local people. As several actors note, they do this deliberately with the asylum seeker community, but less intentionally with the host community. Better still would be to employ local people, but for volunteer agencies, this does not fit the organizational profile. It is here where the exploration of opportunities for acceptance strategies can be related to debates about localization, as a way to more fundamentally involve local people in program management.

This also stresses another point. The aims, aspirations, and positioning of aid groups are associated with one another. As one respondent notes, any action an aid group is doing is representing the whole aid community. People see them as humanitarian without differentiating. The same applies to solidarity organizations, any action is reflected to the whole humanitarian sector. This is happening all over the world, however, in the hotspots, two things are arguably different. First, the diversity within and among the aid groups, meaning that there are relatively many newer volunteer movements or ‘solidarians’ that may be less aware of these associations and their implicit ‘belonging’ to an aid community.

Second, the activism inhabited in these organizations makes it hard to dissociate them from political aspirations and claims, i.e., to allow better treatment of asylum seekers on the islands.

This second point may be in direct contrast with the concerns of a frustrated local community and is much more fundamental than a lack of sharing resources or inclusion in decision making and participation as we see in other aid arenas in the world where acceptance strategies are employed. As a result, the very being of an aid group is suspect or contrary to local political aims, permanently in the case of right-wing extremist, or nationalist groups, but also increasingly among more moderate people as indicated above, that may materialize when tensions run high, such as during protests or after the Moria fire.

One respondent notes that too much of an activist approach can result in a clash between the humanitarians and the locals.⁶⁵ Indeed, in terms of acceptance, humanitarianism v.s. human rights activism may need a different approach, or perhaps a more clear dissociation, as political acts will never get acceptance. Important to take into account here is the diversification of the local population as remarked upon above. As observed, there is some fluidity on how activists and local people align (at times) despite different political or humanitarian agendas. At the time of the protest against the detention center-plan, solidararians, NGOs local communities, and nationalists were found to protests side by side. As respondents note, there is still considerable support for humanitarian or human rights-inspired aid in the hotspots, as a result, to reach acceptance, political activism may indeed *be* a route towards acceptance. It is, in other words, not clear cut. The bottom line here is that no groups we spoke to seem to have much policy or strategy in this regard, except for those groups that are already embedded more organically because of their local origin.

The experience of PIKPA is interesting in this regard. The aid group that was running PIKPA, is one of the only local organizations that we heard of that also opens its services such as language courses, to the local population. Reportedly, they had a good reputation and were well embedded among the local community. Had, because they have been evicted by the government nonetheless. Acceptance, if that is applicable in this case, could not have prevented this.

In November 2020, relocations to the mainland seem to have picked up, and the situation after the fire in Moria is somehow uncertain. New arrivals are low, and the report of pushbacks of the coast guard, preventing new arrivals in the hotspots, may mean that ultimately the situation on the Islands, and particularly on Lesbos may look different soon. At the same time, most, if not all, participants in this inquiry consider the islands to be hosting asylum seekers for a long time and see no immediate solution to this problem, rather than the situation as it is now.

Conclusions



This project started with an interest in how aid groups relate to, engage with, and understand claims and frustrations of asylum seekers, host communities, and other protest groups, and perceive of ways to reducing the risk of escalation, protect people, and remain operational in the field until more durable solutions become available. We found resonance among respondents that the particular context of these migration hotspots and the mitigation of (future) conflict present an urgent knowledge gap. This inquiry started by positing that it is unclear how this variety of actors operating in these hotspots apply different strategies to approach and mitigate tensions, and to what extent these are indeed coherent strategic or more ad hoc measures. In the following, we will respond to this.

Among many of the interviewed respondents there is a clear message: the camps will not disappear anytime soon. While aid actors acknowledge this reality, they struggle to find their role within it. It appears as if the confrontation with this reality has reached an impasse. This roughly presents the *cul de sac* of potential insecurity in the aid environment in Greece. How

can aid actors take into account the frustrations of asylum seekers, local populations, and other external political actors, in a context where substandard hosting conditions are inevitable and intended as a measure of deterrence?

In addition to this, the politics of deterrence and exhaustion usually have asylum seekers as their target. The physical, legal and political threats that aid actors experience on the hotspot islands seems to add another layer to these politics - it's not only asylum seekers that are supposed to be exhausted and deterred but volunteers, solidarians, and aid actors also.

The hotspot is not a system of care. It is an approach to deter people from migrating to Europe in such ways that it 'consolidates humanitarian needs'.⁶⁶ This has consequences for NGOs, volunteer organizations, solidarians, and other actors that align with some aspect of care for asylum seekers. For our inquiry, it means that infrastructure and regulations to smoothen, coordinate and streamline their actions concerning security and wellbeing as aid givers are largely absent, or felt as such. In that sense, it is a classic humanitarian space in which the authorities are not able, willing, or capable to facilitate the most possible humane solution for affected people. As a result, NGOs, volunteer organizations, and other groups fill the gap between the basic needs of the asylum seekers and what authorities are not providing.

Conversely, authorities do not seem to be too concerned with local groups that protest the presence of these aid groups and show solidarity with their populace. The islands are already sacrificed in a sense, for the benefit of the larger political gain on the mainland, ie, anti-immigrant rhetoric. In other words, aid groups have to fill that gap themselves, without explicit support for their aims and mandates by the authorities. The coordination and communication structures between aid groups and between aid groups and other actors such as the government that are inherent in other crisis areas, in particular in the global south, seem largely informal, embryonic, or absent, here. Moreover, the Greek hotspots appear as highly particular arenas due to the presence of so many small volunteer movements and 'solidarians', that have the habit of distancing from mainstream NGOs, and maybe less experienced or capable in these matters.⁶⁷

Obviously, or at least until now, compared to other operational contexts there are few life-threatening risks for aid actors on the hotspot islands. However, aid work can be severely hampered by threats, protests, and harassment, which do not directly have to escalate into

hostile events. However, as the recent fire in Moria has shown, triggers can escalate tensions into violent or damaging behavior with great effects for NGOs and aid groups, also, or perhaps more so, in the future.

One of the main conclusions from this research project is that security as a concern beyond the asylum seeker population has caught many actors by surprise. The idea that ‘we are in Europe’, influences the risk perception of aid actors. People and organizations think lightly about (the need for) security analyses that come so intuitively in other regions of operation, such as in the Global South, in fragile states, or (post) conflict environments. However, it is important to include and prioritize security measures in these contexts also. This is not circumstantial insecurity as a result of operating in a war zone or being targeted because of religious or ethnic identity. It is insecurity that manifests as the *result* of the hotspot approach, in which aid actors are part and parcel of the architecture of containment and deterrence. As one interviewee conceded, the hotspot is a violence producing environment, and the target, rather than armed forces such as the police or military, are the soft components of the border regime, i.e., aid groups, regardless of individual positioning, ethics and (humanitarian) principles.⁶⁸

This leads us to the following main conclusions:

There is a Focus on Short Term Strategies for a Long Term Problem

All interviewees concur that these encampments will be here for a long time, hence, the violence producing environment, and the role of aid groups in it, will normalize, and a better awareness of how ostensibly neutral, humanistic, non-governmental groups are implicated or seen as such, is imperative. The challenges and dilemmas that come with operating on these islands are well understood, but not by all actors in a similar way. Mostly the newer volunteer agencies seem less politically savvy about longer-term political processes and their role in these dynamics and are more occupied with the day-to-day challenges of aiding the immediate need of the asylum seeker population. This is expressed in dilemmas that arise of choosing/positioning between disengaging and leaving asylum seekers at the mercy and inaction of government actors while keeping ones’ hands clean, and engaging in the humanitarian arena, and becoming implicated in one way or another.⁶⁹ The latter seems the common option, also for those that express disagreement with the hotspot policies, implicitly or explicitly. Engaging in the humanitarian

arena and with the migration and border regime, which is expected to persist over a longer-term, might, however, require more than short-term strategies that only address immediate needs. It is not our intention to value these choices in the report but to highlight how some form of connivance is inescapable. Reactions and responses to this then are to be expected, and these responses turning violent also, in particular in the longer run.

Security as Part of the Hotspot Context is Neglected

As a result of misreading or lack of understanding of the complexities of being embedded in a border regime, and the perception of a European exceptionality, security has not been on the agenda prominently, in particular risks and threats from the island environment at large, instead of in-camp threats. At best, with notable exceptions, *ad-hoc* responses to threats and violent protests have been the *modus operandi* of most aid groups, which works in the specificities of particular locations to a certain degree, but lack pro-active anticipation.

Related, almost all respondents note how the needs of people give precedence over thinking about the two points above, the embedding in the border regime and its effects for reputation and perception, and prioritizing security is simply not the main concern. This needs adaptation.

Gaining Acceptance in the European Aid Context is a Vague Pursuit

Acceptance is an ambiguous term but understood by respondents as maintaining relations with people, target groups, host communities in such a way that there is mutual agreement and understanding. This then contributes to safety. How to *do* acceptance is a completely different thing, ranging from sharing resources to participation or consultation in program design, any pro-active measure that can be understood as acceptance seems vague. A complexity is that operating in an environment where there is such disapproval of aid operations means that acceptance is either a hard to get goal or needs to be redesigned in such a way that mutual agreement *is* possible.

Most important in this regard is that the local population is diversified, and can not be understood or addressed as a uniform group. Some people are very vocal about particular

aspects of programming, some liaise with political agenda's that are more widely rooted in national or European political networks and forms of mobilization, yet others support aid programs and reception, and rather protest the minimal condition of these. Moreover, this diversity may at times lead to contradictory dynamics (e.g. fascists marching next to Antifa). For acceptance to become a meaningful strategy, an analysis of this diversification, and appropriate strategies to engage with this is imperative.

Better Understanding of the Multiple, Complementary and Contradictory Agendas of (International) Aid Groups

The variety of aid groups and other concerned parties that engage with the hosting and arrival of asylum seekers on the Greek islands show a diverse pallet of mandates and agendas. It is not straightforward to differentiate between humanitarians, 'solidarians', or political activist identities in a general sense, largely because these may shift according to time and place, as one informant recalled: 'humanitarian by day, anarchist at night'. Forging relations of acceptance, or mitigating concerns among groups that vehemently oppose the hosting of asylum seekers is therefore complicated, as at times these agenda's align (both locals and aid groups want the RICs to disappear) or clash (locals want RICs to disappear, aid groups want to aid people in RICs for the time being). These agendas and the ways they translate into action then are understood as having legitimizing effects. I.e. the assistance of asylum seekers outside of the new RIC after the Moria fire. Understanding how and why these alignments shift according to time and place, and how they relate to the variety of partially overlapping but also contrasting agendas and mandates of aid groups, may inform alternative ways of communicating with and positioning in the field.

In addition to addressing the main question of this inquiry, we also aim at suggesting ways to improve security awareness and strategies for and among aid groups in the Greek hotspots. Below are five recommendations that are formulated broadly, and added to the infographic as how they relate to our conclusion, that in our view pinpoint relevant directions for aid actors based on the above conclusions.



The (un)intended role of international actors as extensions of migration governance and its effects on reputation and access needs to be more acutely aware among aid groups. This calls for an understanding of how contemporary service delivery is entangled with the politics and practices of migration management, border control, and encampment. A better insight into this interwovenness of agendas and their effects can alert aid groups of the political context in which

they are or may be implicated. Aid in this setting is not a solution, nor can or should it be, it is a mitigation of immediate needs until a political solution is found. Moreover, aid and its intentions are not innocent and may lead to effects for others in the aid community, the local community, the authorities, the aid group itself, and its staff and volunteers. A response from a variety of groups in society is inevitable, and specific triggers may ignite frustration and political agendas into violent protest and action as instances in the past have shown.

Prioritize Security in the European Hot Spot Context

Following on the above, security in the hotspot is a more important concern than previously recognized as indicated by many respondents. Operations in Europe do not take place in isolation, or in substantially different contexts than other aid operations, and frustrations, political agendas, and resentment surface here as well, and may increase as the situation continues, and consolidates. It is imperative that aid groups reimagine the European hotspot context not as an exception to other crisis contexts, and instead understand that their presence is not appreciated per se, regardless of the ethics of their mandates.

Acknowledge the Wider Aid Community

Aid groups tend to go at it alone. And although this makes sense, as the field of needs and service delivery is diversified also, aid groups need to understand that the action of one, implicates the other. Otherwise put, reputations, individual actions, precautions, and relations can be damaged by other groups in the 'aid community'. This is first and foremost a call to understand that asylum seekers, host communities, and others will not differentiate between these mandates and modus operandi as a rule, rather they will experience a blur of international involvement. To distance from this community then is irrelevant in many instances.

More communication, coordination, and consideration (the three c's) between different aid groups would allow for such an acknowledgment, and especially finding a way to include the (smaller / newer) voluntary groups and re-aligning these with older more established humanitarian INGOs is recommended. Most of the coordination platforms are reported to be *ad hoc*, irregular, or not attended well, and this could/should be addressed, in line with the

expected consolidation of the hotspot approach, or a comparable arrangement in the future. Not unimportantly, newer groups don't have to re-invent the wheel, as is a risk in this particular setting that attracts new voluntary movements, and build on the experiences and advice of others.

In addition to this, a general awareness of being embedded in the community means that groups should be acutely aware that their practices, behavior, and positioning can 'spoil the field' for others.

Re-Imagine Acceptance in a European Context

Although security as a concern should not be seen in isolation from other humanitarian / crisis settings *per se*, a consideration for mitigating tensions should be. Acceptance as a strategy to gain the approval of stakeholders involved is mostly tested in areas where others, next to the direct target audience, are needy also, or unaware. However, the question is to what extent these measures make sense in an EU context. Some of the local people are directly affected by the presence of the camp and its residents. Farmers for instance may be affected by olive trees being cut and livestock being slaughtered or stolen, which means their livelihood is under threat. These are also the type of stories that spread and fuel tension among those that are not affected themselves. Conversely, there may also be people that directly benefit from the presence of consumers (asylum seekers, aid groups, journalists, etc). Reaching these in their specific conditions (and addressing rumors, myths, etc) requires a different approach than in other settings.

Take Localization Seriously

Finally, involving and embedding the local community. Adding to an existing agenda within the humanitarian sector as part of the Grand Bargain agreements, localization is seen as a way to streamline relations with the varied field of local actors, maintain an understanding of, and antenna for, local sentiments and how these change due to circumstances on the islands, and may provide access to significant leaders and influencers.⁷⁰ The experiences of local aid groups, or those that emerged as such and became NGOs in the process, is that they are embedded to

such a degree that acceptance is less difficult to attain than for newer or international groups that expose outside principles and agenda's that may be seen as an imposition. Experiences show that this local embeddedness may also smoothen and streamline relations with (local) authorities, police and navy. It is advisable to spearhead localization in the hotspot environment, which may contrast with many volunteer groups' current practices of distancing from local authorities, and the staffing of projects with international volunteers on short missions.

Follow up

This project started as a quick scan of concerns and practices of aid groups in dealing with insecurity. We started with the aim to uncover the everyday practices of conflict mitigation in their particular institutional environments and to measure its impact and appreciation among the migrant and host communities. The aim was also to contribute to improving policies and see the potential for the results to be applied more broadly in the increasingly securitized EU borderlands. We have started to uncover some important aspects of these everyday practices, as narrated in this report and the conclusion. But we mostly found that much is inconclusive, that incidents are not structurally measured and reported, and that ways of mitigating these tensions are *ad hoc*, individual and little defined.

Much of this had to do with the institutional environment and culture of aid groups on the islands, and the ways this environment and culture produce and shape everyday practices, perceptions, and understanding of the crisis, the playing field, and the responses.⁷¹ Due to the limited term and scope of this project, and the challenges of doing fieldwork in times of Covid-19, we feel that there is much more to uncover. After this initial scan, we can formulate different questions, and see different approaches for engaging with the wide variety of aid groups, volunteers, authorities, and in particular the more radical activist groups, that are not easily engaged directly in such a short term approach. The concerns of this study, and ultimately what they reveal about the challenges of the meeting of migration management, border control, and assistance to asylum seekers, in humane ways for both asylum seekers and local populations with a more long term perspective, are urgent and relevant. Deliberation and further scrutiny are thus imperative. Based on these initial findings, we aim to find ways to continue our engagement with these matters.

Undoubtedly, engaged actors will have something to say about these conclusions, and may want to nuance these, disagree, or add to them. In case of urgent remarks, questions, verifications, or indeed further discussion, please feel free to contact us at bramj.jansen@wur.nl.

Notes and resources

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- ³¹ Interview NGO staff, 21-09-2020, Chios.
- ³² Interview NGO staff, Lesvos, 23-09-2020, Lesvos.
- ³³ <https://apnews.com/article/805f15aa51024e886e28dc8275c582c6>
- ³⁴ Working seminar hosted by KUNO, 18-11-2020, Online.
- ³⁵ Interview aid group staff, Lesvos, 22-09-2020.
- ³⁶ See also: 'Hostility towards migrants and those working to support them continues as state policy in Lesvos, 27 May 2020, Legal Centre Lesvos: <https://legalcentrelesvos.org/2020/05/27/hostility-towards-migrants-and-those-working-to-support-them-continues-as-state-policy-in-lesvos/>
- ³⁷ See more details about the fire here: <https://solomonmag.com/on-the-move/the-time-bomb-exploded-at-greeces-largest-refugee-camp/?fbclid=IwAR3n4NooYix895MpZ4rKdVBDMdN8nxEnqNpTctlFUcdUYAeKtEVHDushcQg;https://migration.gov.gr/en/the-fire-that-destroyed-the-ric-of-moria/>
- ³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/04/refugee-covid-case-sparks-closed-camps-fears-on-Lesvos>; <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/09/greece-presses-case-for-closed-refugee-centres-after-moria-covid-case/>; <https://www.ekathimerini.com/255390/article/ekathimerini/news/commission-approves-130-mln-euros-for-closed-migrant-centres-on-three-islands>.
- ³⁹ Interview NGO Staff, 14-08-2020, Online.
- ⁴⁰ Interview aid staff, 24-08-2020, Online.
- ⁴¹ We have compared our findings with a specific chronology of violent events in Jan-March 2020 that was shared with us by a participant. We do not refer to this specifically because it was shared with us on the basis of anonymity. The details of the events in this record are however congruent with the ones we noted in this report. At present we feel it makes no sense to attempt to calculate more precise numbers and types of occurrences and this would indeed require further research.
- ⁴² See also <https://www.keptalkinggreece.com/2020/03/08/lesvos-one-happy-family-center-fire-farrights/>
- ⁴³ See also: <https://europe.infowars.com/greece-smashes-migrant-trafficking-network-arrests-dozens-of-ngo-operatives/>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece-ngos-idUSKBN26J1VP>.
- ⁴⁴ Interview NGO staff, 14-08-2020, Online.
- ⁴⁵ See for instance the elaboration on the decision of Refugee Rescue: <https://www.refugeerescue.org/latest-news/statement-suspension-of-operations>; and Lighthouse Relief (although here security is mentioned among a more general government hostility): <https://medium.com/@LighthouseRR/a-farewell-to-the-north-17959cf33ae8>
- ⁴⁶ Interview multilateral organization staff, 22-09-2020, Chios.
- ⁴⁷ Idem previous note.
- ⁴⁸ See for instance: <https://europe.infowars.com/greece-smashes-migrant-trafficking-network-arrests-dozens-of-ngo-operatives/>
- ⁴⁹ Interview multilateral organization staff, 22-09-2020, Chios.
- ⁵⁰ Interview NGO, 03-08-2020, Online.
- ⁵¹ Interview NGO, 14-08-2020, Online.
- ⁵² Idem previous note.
- ⁵³ Interview multiple local NGO staff, 21-09-2020, Chios.
- ⁵⁴ Interview INGO staff, 13-07-2020, Online.
- ⁵⁵ Idem previous note.
- ⁵⁶ Working seminar hosted by KUNO, 18-11-2020, Online.
- ⁵⁷ Working seminar hosted by KUNO, 18-11-2020, Online.
- ⁵⁸ Interview NGO staff, 21-09-2020, Chios.
- ⁵⁹ See for a more comprehensive analysis of these dynamics, Weishaupt, Sebastian (2019), *Humanity at the Borders of Europe : Unravelling and Reframing the Navigation of Humanitarian Ingos on Lesvos, Greece*. Netherlands: MSc thesis Wageningen University, <https://edepot.wur.nl/510234>.
- ⁶⁰ Personal communication with diplomatic staff.
- ⁶¹ For an interesting study related to this, see Kalkman, J. P., Bollen, M. T. I. B., & De Waard, E. (2018), 'Helping migrants while protecting against migration: The border security team in crisis,' In *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2018* (pp. 41-61). TMC Asser Press, The Hague.
- ⁶² Personal communication with volunteer aid worker.
- ⁶³ Interview NGO staff, 13-09-2020, Online.
- ⁶⁴ Interview NGO staff, 14-09-2020, Online.
- ⁶⁵ Interview NGO staff, 03-09-2020, Online.

⁶⁶ Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2018), 'Hotspots and the geographies of humanitarianism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38(6): 991-1008. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818754884>

⁶⁷ See also: <https://allegralaboratory.net/solidarity-humanitarianism>

⁶⁸ Williams, J.M., (2015) 'From humanitarian exceptionalism to contingent care: Care and enforcement at the humanitarian border', *Political Geography*, (47): 11-20.

⁶⁹ Chkam, H., (2016) 'Aid and the perpetuation of refugee camps: the case of Dadaab in Kenya 1991 – 2011,' *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35(2): 79-97.

⁷⁰ See more on the Grand Bargain and the idea of localisation here:

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>, and here:

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/more-support-and-funding-tools-for-local-and-national-responders>.

⁷¹ See for an elaboration on aid culture and the everyday practices of crisis response, Autesserre, S. (2014) *Peaceland. Conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention*. New York: Cambridge University Press.