

A drawn-out humanitarian crisis

Since the introduction of the [EU-Turkey Deal](#) in March 2016, asylum seekers arriving in Europe from Turkey have been trapped for indefinite periods of time in 'hotspot' camps on the Aegean Islands. For 5 years this approach has produced mass suffering and widespread human rights violations as tens of thousands of people are forced to live in overcrowded, unsafe and undignified camps.

This situation has always presented grassroots and refugee-led organisations with a complex dilemma: provide assistance to asylum seekers in the camps thereby enabling the hotspot approach to continue, or do nothing while thousands suffer in undignified living conditions.

This drawn-out humanitarian crisis in the Aegean amply demonstrates that an approach focussed on deterrence and detention doesn't work. This is why Europe Must Act - a movement of organisations with years of experience working on the ground - can confidently say that the new Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centres, which in many ways are a continuation of the 'hotspot' camp policy, are not a humane and sustainable solution.

The hotspot approach and how it failed.

At the time of implementation in 2015, the hotspot approach was sold to Europeans as a [model of support](#) by EU agencies to Greece and Italy - countries facing increased migratory pressure - to register migrants and aid relocation and returns. It was intended to be a [temporary emergency measure](#).

Initially, the hotspot approach was to be closely connected to the Dublin Regulation, a scheme through which asylum seekers from specific countries would be eligible for swift relocation to other EU states. This system, however, [largely failed](#) because too few member states made relocation pledges, the limited number of nationalities eligible for relocation and the change in emphasis on relocation to returns in the hotspots with the introduction of the EU-Turkey Deal in Spring 2016.

The EU-Turkey Deal restricted access to mainland Europe by detaining and forcing arrivals to enter an asylum process on the islands. This new approach which focused on deterrence, detention and deportation of asylum seekers represented an externalisation of the EU's migration policy - it trapped asylum seekers at Europe's borders and put undue pressure on countries like Greece to deal with migration alone.

Why #NoMoreCamps?

Asylum seekers who arrived on the Aegean Islands after the EU Turkey deal was introduced were held indefinitely in abysmal and overcrowded camp conditions. In the absence of dignified shelter, refugees and asylum seekers are forced to live in container boxes, tents or makeshift shelters. The lack of running water, electricity, wifi, adequate sanitation facilities, safe spaces, education and recreational activities, health and other essential services in all Aegean hotspot

camps have produced widespread violations of people's fundamental human rights. The overwhelmed and under-resourced asylum system means that the process is lengthy, leaving people waiting in these poor conditions in a state of uncertainty for months or years.

Although the Aegean camps have become less overcrowded in recent months as the Greek government has made efforts to move people to the mainland whilst simultaneously preventing people from arriving through illegal pushbacks, the living conditions in the camps have scarcely improved. The harsh weather conditions of winter 2021 highlight yet again that the hotspot camps are thoroughly unsuitable and inhumane places to live.

The 'hotspot' approach has had profound impacts on the mental health of the already vulnerable people detained in the camps. Instead of finding safety and stability, the living conditions of the camps only serve to further traumatize people. In December 2020, an [MSF psychiatrist](#) on Samos described 'an increase of severe cases in our clinic, with a deeply worrying rise in suicide and self-harm thoughts from people trapped in the camp.'

Countless incidents over the past 5 years demonstrate that living conditions in the camps are not only undignified but are also dangerous, presenting a threat to health and survival of their residents. 2020 saw numerous Covid-19 outbreaks in the camps and also multiple fires on Chios, Samos and Lesbos destroying large areas of the camps. [Snowfall and temperatures below 0 degrees](#), [earthquakes](#), [lead poisoning](#), rodent infestations and disease outbreaks all create risks to the health and survival of camp inhabitants.

The hotspot approach has also created tensions with locals which have escalated to violence with both locals and the asylum seekers and refugee population becoming injured.¹

Although grassroots organisations should not need to be present in the Aegean, over the past 5 years many NGOs have exemplified how services can be provided in a dignified manner, the need for partnership and communication between different bodies as well as the importance of decision-making, working with and supporting refugee and asylum seeking communities to deliver projects which impact their lives. One such example was the [Pikpa](#) accommodation, a project which described itself as 'community-based space, built on the principles of solidarity, empowerment ... [and] an environment where people can find dignity, love, safety and respect'. Whilst the situation for most refugees and asylum seekers in the Aegean over the past 5 years shows the need for a complete re-think of the way that Europe receives people on the move, specific projects enacting humane practises offer opportunities for learning and models which could be adopted more widely moving forwards.

The EU-Turkey Deal has created a drawn-out humanitarian crisis on the islands and widespread human rights violations. But we know that a better future is possible. A new and humane approach must be implemented which insteads put the fundamental human rights and dignity of people on the move at its centre.

¹ A thorough explanation human rights violations experienced by asylum seekers and refugees in the Aegean can be found in our previous [report](#).

- a. Unsafe – especially in times of Covid-19
 - i. AGR
 - ii. [ECDC report](#)

Incidents

Timeline and milestones

- Incidents: Fires in camps, drownings, arrests of aid-workers, covid, local resistance, pushbacks
- <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/13427-seven-years-timeline-syria-crisis.html>

Can use AGR facts / graphs