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The looming crisis of illiteracy

Many have forgotten the precarious condition of refugees in Lesbos. The most vulnerable among them — children — are at risk of growing up illiterate

The headlines about push-backs in the Mediterranean and the ongoing criticism of the European border protection agency Frontex have been dominating the media coverage of European refugee policy for weeks. Less present in the media discourse at the moment, however, is what has been happening 'on land' in the refugee camps of the Greek EU hotspots, especially on Lesbos, where the Kara Tepe refugee camp has now superseded the burnt-down Moria camp.

In these camps another disaster is looming: the lack of education. As observed by human rights organisations, most children of refugees are excluded from the education system in Greece.

Almost every third camp resident in Kara Tepe is of school age, but has often not been properly educated for a year or more. This has massive consequences and can lead to irreparable damage in the children's cognitive and social development. The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating their precarious situation even further. With informal education in the camps barely progressing, thousands of children are at risk of growing up illiterate. The EU, its member states, and the UN must not turn their backs on this problem.

When policy doesn't turn into practice

Better coordination with Greece is urgently needed, but Athens must also respect the existing laws. Under Greek law, places in schools should be allocated to refuges children after three months of being in Greece. However, this rarely happens in practice. The refugees' lives are marked by waiting. Months go by before a first interview and often one to two years go by before an asylum decision is made.

But who looks after these young people's right to school and education? Article 22 of the Geneva Convention on Refugees guarantees refugees

public education and access to the same schools and study opportunities as locals. Admittedly Greece and UNICEF have signed a programme for formal education in Greek schools for refugees, but this is apparently too new to produce sustainable results yet.

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It has once again become clear that the UN and Athens don't always work together in Kara Tepe. Yet, as Moria has demonstrated, this is absolutely crucial now. Insecurity, crime and violence are becoming more widespread there. The pent-up aggression culminated in the fire on the night of 9 September 2020. Six suspected arsonists were recently sentenced to ten years in prison in a dubious judicial process.

The responsibility of the EU

But the real culprits for the disaster in EU hotspots are the EU and its member states. Together with Greece, the United Nations and aid organisations, European authorities have shifted responsibility for the refugees back and forth for years until in the end no one felt responsible. That is why Moria and Kara Tepe, along with the children's educational needs and the push-backs, should be a matter for an EU committee.

While people around the world have been learning online during the pandemic, refugee children on Lesbos have no such opportunities. In Moria, three hours of electricity a day was often the maximum. Blackboards, pens, paper — everything that constitutes teaching is only available in short supply in the camps, often provided by aid organisations. With few exceptions, there is a lack of internet access. Although it is technically possible, Europe is not managing to provide the people seeking protection on Lesbos with comprehensive WiFi. There is no question that the people in the camp have a right to adequate means of communication.

The aid organisation *Stand By Me Lesbos*, has, together with a partner organisation in Kara Tepe, converted two discarded buses into mobile classrooms: the steering wheel and benches were removed and a partition wall was put up in the middle of the buses. Folding chairs provide space for up to nine pupils. The converted vehicles form one of the few internet hotspots in the camp. But asylum policy must be about more than just WiFi. When Greece relaxed the strict lockdown measures for tourists in mid May, the people in the refugee camps were kept under lock and key. This was a disproportionate decision. This will generate fresh anger and frustration, of which there is already too much in EU discourse.

The importance of education

Between autumn 2019 and the fire in Moria, the most visionary among the refugees built half a dozen independent 'schools' in Moria. Stress, depression, and violence in the camp were thus temporarily curbed. In addition, education is a top priority for the parents of the refugee children. They are supposed to find a good job later in Europe, among other things to support relatives left behind in their homeland. For them, the cancellation of classes is therefore a worst-case scenario.

Some of the teachers in the camp are refugees themselves. For them, it is important to be able to make themselves useful, because, as recipients of donations, they have been condemned to passivity as refugees until now. This can be fatal, as is unfortunately known from many suicide attempts. Protection seekers must therefore urgently be given the chance to be more proactive in order to escape the vicious circle of dependence on aid.

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There are methods for integration and inclusion on Lesbos. However, they are politically alien to the current government. Greece should not have to integrate refugees, the Greek Minister for Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi, recently said about the EU's lack of solidarity towards Athens. In the Spring, Greek parents protested against the integration of refugee children into public schools. Conversely, Greek teachers defend the rights of refugee children. Their parents and grandparents were often themselves expelled from Turkey in the course of the ethnic cleansing of 1922.

If European countries want to show solidarity, they should finally stand by Athens adequately and take in more than just small contingents of people as emergency victims. By the end of 2022, a new refugee camp costing several million euros is to be built on Lesbos, this time deep inside the island. It will come with enormous security precautions and be located away from inhabited areas.

Will the many children of Moria then be able to attend a school? What about their equal opportunities? And will locals and refugees then meet at all? Seldom have Europe's failures and contradictions been more obvious.



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