

**From Lesvos to Samos: Asylum Seekers speak out.**

This report is based on the visits and the conversations Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity had with the Asylum Seekers living in the islands of Lesvos and Samos about the living conditions in the hotspots.

By Silvia Giuliani

*“Once I asked a camp worker, ‘How can I live in this situation?’. ‘Try to survive’, he answered.”*

**Introduction**

Only a few kilometres away from Turkey, the Greek Islands on the Aegean Sea are the first European lands that asylum seekers arriving from Turkey reach, in their long and dangerous journey. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, the day of the application of the EU-Turkey Deal, the number of people landing in Greece has drastically reduced. Recently, the European Commission affirmed in its 7<sup>th</sup> report that *“The EU-Turkey Statement of 18<sup>th</sup> March 2016 had continued to play a key role in ensuring that the migration challenge in the Eastern Mediterranean is addressed effectively and jointly by the EU and Turkey”*<sup>1</sup>. But how is, in reality, the situation in the Greek islands? To answer this question, Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality & Diversity (Generation 2.0 RED) decided to visit two of the islands that host the majority of the refugees in Greece (Lesvos and Samos) and talk directly with the asylum seekers. The distinctive characteristic of this report is that it is based exclusively on the testimonies of the Asylum Seekers living there and, for this reason, quotes of the asylum seekers are a fundamental and integral part of it. In fact, Generation 2.0 RED has as a primary goal to empower the migrant communities living in Greece, offering tools that will allow them to claim their own rights.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20170906\\_seventh\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_progress\\_in\\_the\\_implementation\\_of\\_the\\_eu-turkey\\_statement\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20170906_seventh_report_on_the_progress_in_the_implementation_of_the_eu-turkey_statement_en.pdf)



As we will see later, despite the decreased number of new arrivals (which count in reality dozens of thousands of persons a year) in the last year and a half, the situation for the asylum seekers seems to be even harder than before.

With this report we also want to thank all the Asylum Seekers willing to talk with us and showed us what living in the islands means. In the same way, we want to thank our fantastic Interpreter for helping us both in the communication and the translation.

### The Islands

There are a few common aspects in Samos and Lesbos. First of all, the EU-Turkey Deal and its interpretation by the Greek Asylum System did not stop new arrivals, but blocked asylum seekers in the hotspots, making almost impossible any move to the mainland. As a consequence, the two camps are overcrowded: more than twice the number of people that each hotspot is supposed to host are living there. However, the growth of the number of people in the hotspots was not supported by a correspondent growth of services and many people are now living outside the camp, in tents. The lack of infrastructure has led to very poor hygiene and living conditions. Moreover, it is very difficult for an asylum seeker to get basic information. For example, with only one exception, all the people who talked to us did not know the reason why they were stuck in the islands.

### Lesvos

Out of the fences that delimit the hotspot of Moria, around 200 people (all males older than 18) live in tents. In fact, the hotspot managed by the State and the Police in Lesbos is overcrowded and there is no more space inside.

In the area outside the camp, basic infrastructure is missing: there are only 8 toilets for 200 persons circa. Toilets are cleaned every 3 or 4 days and most of the time they are dirty, so people prefer to go directly in the so called “forest”, a strip of land near the camp. *“The toilets are not connected to the soil, so we have to clean it but it remains dirty for 3 or 4 days before they come and clean. (...) There are more than one hundred people. What about outside? And there are only 8 toilets for all of us. And no shower”*.

There is no shower for those outside the camp, so asylum seekers cut a public tube where some cold water flows. They wait for their turn in a long queue. *“The cold is coming, where can we wash ourselves? We cut a public tube to try to make it a shower. The people of the village tried to speak to the police. The police came and they understood we created a shower. Now the police don’t come there [where there is the so called shower] because they know there is no shower here [in the outside part of the camp]”*. *“For 7 months we have to shower on the road”*.







Beyond the dramatic hygiene problems, one important issue concerns food. The food is not enough for everybody, even if the majority of the asylum seekers in that area refuse to eat it. In fact, the food is definitely not good; we saw ourselves that the chicken still had some blood. *"I force myself to eat it"* said an asylum seeker. Another person added *"one time they brought us expired food with very bad smell"*. There are people that re-cook the food they receive; others prefer to buy some on their own, from outside. In both cases, they set fire close to the tents even when it is windy, putting themselves and other tents at risk.

Electricity is available from 2 to 4 hours a day. Inside the big tent, where more than 100 persons seemed to sleep, there is only one available light.



Inside the camp there are no activities. To have lessons or workshops asylum seekers are supposed to go to Mytilini, where some NGOs organize amazing things. But not all the people are psychologically ready to learn a language or to do activities. *"They [the courses] are free but I haven't gone yet because I have still problems and I don't feel like attending courses"*, *"I study, the others don't have the motivation. Their application is rejected in a month, three months, they don't have the motivation. They don't have the strength to go"*.

Moreover, some have faced problems with the police while walking towards Mytilini. For this reason, they feel safer in the outside part of the camp. For example, a person told us *"in case we try to go out to the Mytilini city centre, the police officers take us to the police station, pretending that they are searching us, asking us to take off our clothes. They are trying to give us a hard time, I would prefer to die in my country instead of this treatment"*; another said *"I am a refugee, I go for a walk in Mytilini, there is the police that stops me and tells me: give me your papers (...). I show my papers and they tell me: get in the car"*.

Asylum Seekers are thus wasting their time and their lives. Despite they are young and could be full of energy, they have so much stress because of the conditions they have to bear. *"We wake up with this, we go to sleep with this [referred to the general situation]. This is bad. My day in Greece is: eat-sleep, eat-sleep until the day I die. It is bad"*; *"we are doing nothing the whole day"*; *"we don't have anything to do during the day, there is no entertainment activities in general: in the morning we having our breakfast, we have lunch and dinner. Then we sleep"*.



Basic information is missing and asylum seekers have no idea of the reason why they are stuck in the island. They don't know why they can't move to the mainland or go to another country. *"In general we don't understand anything. Will we stay here forever? Will we be sent to another area? We are always under pressure and stress", "all the time I stay in the camp. I don't know", "After all these long months living here, I think it is a political problem. I checked on the net (...). Nobody told me, we do not have a trustful answer, but we searched on the net". "I don't know why we are in prison. Nobody told me".*

The majority of the people we talked with has been living there for many months: some from 5 to 9 months, other for one year or more. We met only one asylum seeker that arrived the week before our visit and he could not understand the situation. Another one we talked with arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, the day of the application of the EU-Turkey Deal, and since then he has been living there in these conditions.

They also explained us some procedures. When asylum seekers arrive in the Island, a doctor visits them: he, as first person, decides if they are vulnerable, depending on their health issues. Even if in this case there are more chances to have papers in less time, it doesn't mean that the person lives in better conditions: one of the asylum seekers we met was living in one tent at those conditions despite of the chronic disease he is affected by. *"The doctor wrote "yes" I am vulnerable, very vulnerable. I am ill, I have a chronic disease. I don't have anything to sleep properly; I have a blanket, that's all".*

During the asylum interview, the interpreters of some languages were not physically present but were called via mobile phones. Moreover, sometimes, during the interview they were first asked why they left Turkey, instead of being asked why they left their countries. Unfortunately, without knowing it, an asylum seeker told us that misleading justifications are given *"the person that was making the interview told a friend of mine that it is not important what happened in our country, because he knows how the situation is there, but he asked to tell him why he left Turkey".*

If on the one hand asylum seekers feel safer to stay in the camp, on the other hand, they feel in prison. One person told us *"It is an organised prison, organised, we have understood it".* Another added that *"there are people that don't want to go there [inside Moria] now. They are afraid to go there, of being deported. It is a cell and... Surprise! There are guns, police, there are no possibilities to go out. You get in and... it is finished".* For this reason they don't understand why the police ask them papers: *"I am already a prisoner, why are you asking me my papers? It is not necessary".*

There had been cases of deportations and, one of those days we were there, a sick person was sent back to Turkey. *"This morning he was deported. It is not normal. It is not normal. It is not logic. It is insupportable. Even a sick person, you see that he is sick. I think he will die tomorrow".*

Finally, it was noted that the supermarket outside Moria put higher prices when asylum seekers receive the 90 euros per month. *"The prices change at the end of each month, the day we get money, prices rise. They augment automatically".*

### Samos

Samos hotspot is located on the steep slope of a hill. It is divided in three main parts: the proper camp, where there are the containers; the extension where there are big tents; and the outside part where there are small tents that the asylum seekers had to buy on their own. In this last part, whole families with babies are also living.

The camp has a capacity for 700 persons; however, it seems that few months ago there were 2.500 people living there; now they are around 1.800.

One of the main problems in the camp is water: it is available for 1 or 2 hours a day. If in the containers there are private toilets, in the extension area there are only two toilets and two showers for males, one shower and one toilet for females.



- You said that in one area of the camp there are 2 toilets for men and 1 for women. Are there any showers?
- Yes, 2 for men and 1 for women.
- For how many persons?
- Between 300 and 500 people.
- And do you have warm and cold water?
- We don't have water. Just two hours a day. We don't have warm water.
- You have only two hours of water a day for the shower for 300/500 persons?
- Yes, we have two hours a day. This is unfair. It's so difficult to take a shower. It's like you need to fight. And you can find a shit inside the shower. Yes, because there is no water, it's so hard. It's such a hard situation.

Outside the camp there is nothing, so people living there have to go to the extension area to take a shower. On this topic, we asked some people living in the island if they frequently face water problems. Generally speaking, islands might have this discomfort but the system used allows residents to have water every day: the constant lack of water seems to be only a problem of the camp. This leads to serious hygiene issues. Many times asylum seekers wash themselves using bottles of water they bought on their own and, thus, toilets are full of plastic bottles. We were also shown pictures of faeces inside the shower. Finally, the lack of water might bring to fights. *"There is no water in the camp. They need to use the drinking water to clean the toilets. I have to clean it before I am going, because I can't. This is not normal. I try to make it normal for me"*.

There is no electricity in the extension area: if you need it, you have to find an illegal way to have it. In the containers there is electricity and air conditioner but, in case of a breakdown or malfunctioning, they have to call a technician and pay on their own.

Another important aspect concerns food, for once more. As in Lesbos, people have to recook it, putting themselves and the tents at risk. Asylum seekers receive a food paper to get the food: however, if the paper is damaged some policemen might tear it up and don't allow this person to have food that day. Food is not tempting at all- *"the food is disgusting. I have never seen or listened that the food finished from people inside the camp"* *"No, really, my stomach is hurting. I ate one time"* - and thus it is wasted: a huge amount of food is trashed in the bins and the outside area. Every day, each asylum seeker is given one bottle of water.

About procedures, we were told that when a person arrives in the hotspot, the police takes the mobile phones of each asylum seeker for 20 days, to check if there are affiliations with terrorist groups, and the laptops and cameras for the entire time the person stays in the island. In this way, in the first 20 days the asylum seeker can not get in touch with his/her family until somebody lend him/her a mobile phone.

In the camp there are also organizational problems. Some persons complain because there is no "leader" inside, in the sense that there is no person responsible of the camp that can address correctly an asylum seeker: if an asylum seeker asks for something in a container, a game of ping pong starts and responsibilities are shifted from container to container, from organization to organization, from authority to authority.

Persons with several health problems have to wait for months before having an appointment with a doctor in the hospital. In fact, only people with chronic diseases, such as cancer and hepatitis, are sent to Athens. We were told that there is a person that can't move because he has a bullet in his leg: he has been waiting for an appointment with the doctor of the hospital for months now, with no result. Doctors inside the camp can't do surgeries and can only give pills. *"There is a person that has a bullet in his leg. He can't walk. He has been waiting for an appointment with the doctor, for at least two months now"*.

Moreover, in many cases, the system used to recruit volunteers among the asylum seekers, which brought power to some of them and problems to the ones that were excluded. In fact, we were said that the





selected volunteers help only their communities. *“To be honest with you, if the guys working are of a certain nationality, they will give things only to people of the same nationality or to their friends. That’s the big problem. If you are not of that nationality you can’t take anything. You can’t. If you need something, you need to fight and fight and fight and fight. You must be a fighter. You must have the patience to continue, everyday you must go from 7 o’ clock to stay in the line and then they tell you to come tomorrow and you go tomorrow. It’s a fight; you must fight to get what you want”.*



It seems that some nationalities are living in more difficult conditions. For example, we were told about a specific episode: two people from Algeria were arrested for theft. Despite it, that night at 3:00 in the morning, the police burst into all the tents asking if there were Algerians, kicking people with their feet to wake them up. That night all the Algerian asylum seekers were brought to prison. As a matter of fact, an Algerian told us that he has been beaten so many times by the police that he asked to go back to Algeria. Other very young people from Iraq asked to be sent back to their countries of origin: they were so disappointed of the lack of dignity that decided to try this dangerous option. Despite asking to go back, however, the answer was that there is not enough money to allow it. They can’t move to the mainland, they can’t go back. They are stuck in a limbo.

### Conclusion

It is evident that the asylum seekers are facing a very tough situation in Lesvos and Samos. However, it seems that the number of arrivals is the only criterion to draw public attention: apparently, now that Greece is reached “only” by dozens of thousands of people<sup>2</sup>, everything looks fine in the islands. *“People think that we are happy here, that here everything is well managed. We are in a prison, well organised. Very well organised. Organised. Organised”.*

The truth is that in Lesvos and Samos basic human rights are missing. People have been living there for a very long time, some for almost two years, without basic human living conditions. No hygiene, no

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<sup>2</sup> <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>



infrastructure, without perspectives, without information. One of the people we talked to in Lesvos said *"We live every day the same routine: we wake up, we take bread, we eat, we always stay at the same place. It is everything we do"*, while another from Samos added *"They don't care, we are just refugees"*. Nobody can understand why they are treated in that way and the situation is so tough that some people prefer to go back to their countries. Is it a strategy?

Actions should have started months and months ago: probably we would have avoided finding ourselves talking again about it. It is already too late. The weather in the islands is getting worse and worse, the rain is destroying tents and the cold will bring even more problems. Now, it is time for responsible actions. It's time to allow asylum seekers to reach the mainland and let them be accommodated in decent places and humane conditions. As long as the EU-Turkey Deal continues to be implemented, Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality and Diversity asks the Greek institutions to reanalyse their interpretation of the Deal<sup>3</sup>, remembering that EU was built by survivors of the Second World War with a mission to preserve freedom and human rights.

*"We must have the free movement in Greece. It is the only important thing for us. Tell it to all the authorities in Europe. The refugees don't need suits, clothes, food but the freedom. They put us there to let us die, we and our families. It's not normal. We are not animals. We are humans. (...) We are suffering terribly here. (...) I only want to say that the EU must understand that people living in Moria are living in unbearable stress"*.



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<sup>3</sup> Decision of the Director of the Asylum Service, 31st of May 2017, on: <http://bit.ly/2Bg7V4f>. The 5th of December 2017, the Bar Associations of the islands will appeal to the Council of State against the above mentioned decision to *"put restrictions on the movement of applicants to the islands of Lesvos, Rhodes, Samos, Kos, Leros and Chios"*. In fact, *"the Agreement between EU and Turkey does not explicitly provide this obligation"* and *"the body that issued the decision was incompetent (only the minister could decide on this), (...) the decision is unconstitutional and unreasonable, since it restricts personal freedom (...) [and it] is contrary to both the Greek Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights"*. More about the Bar association appeal on: <http://www.kathimerini.gr/929213/article/epikairothta/ellada/stis-5-dekemvrioy-sto-ste-8a-kri8ei-h-apagoreysh-metakinshs-twn-prosfygwn-apo-ta-nhsia>