

# Research Paper

March 2018

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## The Power of Civil Mobilisation: How ordinary people stepped in to help refugees in Northern Greece

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*Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Brian Fleming, Julio Lubianco, Nadja Abia, Shahine Ohanian and A-id's editors for constructive comments on an earlier draft of this report.*



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## Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary .....	1
2. Methodology .....	3
3. Organising help: the pro-refugee mobilisation of civilians.....	5
3.1. Filling the gaps.....	18
3.2. Working together.....	28
3.3. Helping refugees and motivation .....	30
3.4. Social Media.....	37
4. Feelings towards refugees and the mobilisation .....	38
4.1. Empathy.....	40
4.2. Relating with refugees .....	42
4.3. Perceptions about refugees .....	45
4.4. Reactions to the mobilisation .....	47
5. Conclusion.....	49
6. References .....	49

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# 1. Executive Summary

In June 2017, the UNHCR's annual *Global Trends* report stated that war and persecution had driven more people from their homes 'than ever' (UNHCR, 2017). The worldwide number of persons affected by forced displacement amounted to a staggering 65.6 million at the end of 2016. From this sum, 22.5 million were refugees, with Syrians representing the largest group (2017). As of November 2017, Syria had produced 5,344,184 refugees (UNHCR, 2017b).

With the escalation of the refugee crisis in 2015, Europe watched 1,015,078 million refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq and Syria reach its coasts through the Mediterranean Sea that year (UNHCR, 2016). By December 2016, another 362,376 people had arrived in the continent, the vast majority of them via Greece (UNHCR, 2017a). Between April 2011 and May 2017, 952,446 Syrians claimed asylum in Europe (2017b).

As the crisis rapidly unfolded, the Greek government was put under extreme pressure. The authorities struggled to cope with the high amount of sea arrivals, on several occasions failing to provide adequate support to migrants and refugees e.g. proper accommodation, medical assistance and other basic services. Therefore, many independent local organised groups, volunteers, NGOs and INGOs stepped in to partially fill the gap left by the State.

This research focuses on the efforts of non-professional aid actors in Thessaloniki (Greece's second city) and Idomeni, a village at the border of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), the first country of the Balkan route. During seven months (from October 2015 to May 2016), the author followed closely five initiatives running refugee related projects in those areas.

In total, 21 members of these initiatives were interviewed. Of these, 18 were associated with four social centres of different political backgrounds and one was the head of an independently run project. They all underwent long interviews to identify their *modus operandi*, their motivations in wanting to help refugees, their views on the migration crisis and how other civilians perceived their pro-refugee activities.

## **Key findings:**

### **Organisational issues**

The five initiatives analysed, struggled to cooperate and communicate with other actors, which led to a considerable amount of duplicated work conducted by themselves. Their operations in Thessaloniki

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(e.g. sorting out of clothes and food) and in Idomeni (e.g. food handouts) were highly inefficient in some periods due to lack of organisation, of experience and of training. However, after acquiring field experience these initiatives showed significant improvement in their performance. Some of them even became relevant emergency response workers in Idomeni.

### **Cooperation**

Political and ideological differences acted as strong deterrents for cooperation between these initiatives and other groups/organisations. Anarchists refused to collaborate with NGOs, who were perceived to be purely financially driven. Other groups also had a negative perception of professional humanitarian organisations, but opted to set aside their ideological differences in order to establish partnerships that benefited refugees.

### **Mobilisation**

The vast majority of the interviewees (74 per cent) considered the pro-refugee mobilisation in Thessaloniki and Idomeni (which involved both direct involvement in projects and donations) as the largest movement of the type experienced by them in the country. One organisation had 400 volunteers working with refugees in the peak of the crisis, for example. 58 per cent of the interviewees perceived their activities as responsible for covering at least some gaps left by Greek and EU authorities in terms of relief to refugees. In this sense, there was a high level of commitment from them to such projects. 68 per cent of the respondents dedicated at least three days of their week to refugee related programmes.

### **Empathy**

Empathy was commonly mentioned by the interviewees as the reason behind their decision to help. Almost 70 per cent of the respondents perceived Greece as a 'country composed of refugees'. Of that number, 26.3 per cent had refugees in their own families and 10.5 per cent were refugees themselves. Greece's modern history is deeply intertwined to the refugee theme. In the 1920s, a conflict with Turkey described by Greece as 'the tragedy of Asia Minor' resulted in an agreement of exchange of populations between the two countries. Muslim minorities in Greece were compulsorily dispatched to Turkey. Likewise, the Turkish government sent its Greek Orthodox population to Greece. Thus, those minorities became, in a way, refugees.

### **Anti-refugee rhetoric**

Almost half of the interviewees (47 per cent) reported having experienced negative comments due to their involvement with projects for refugees. Most of these episodes occurred online, with the 'attackers' questioning why the respondents were not helping Greeks. "Some fascists ask on the internet why [*there is*] only help for refugees and not for Greeks. It is an stupidity because we also help Greeks. The solidarity kitchen has existed for five years now, way before the refugee crisis started", said a member of one of the initiatives analysed in this report.

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## 2. Methodology

This research took place between October 2015 and May 2016. This report is based on 21 qualitative, face to face, individual interviews with non-professional personnel involved in aid projects and the assistance of refugees in both the transit centre of Idomeni as well as in Thessaloniki. It also includes participative field observations<sup>1</sup> and analysis of current literature review on humanitarian operations and its new actors.

This report is an effort to identify why and how civilians in Northern Greece mobilised to help refugees as well as to fill assistance gaps left by the central government during the migration crisis. The questions it aims to answer are relevant to analyse the role these local non-professional actors had in alleviating pressure on the Greek state and in preventing further human suffering by taking part of the responsibility of providing emergency relief to thousands of refugees transiting through the country. In doing so, these actors faced some backlash, but this was not a deterrent to their commitment. Therefore, this research also seeks to understand the views of the respondents on the migration crisis and how other civilians perceived their pro-refugee activities.

Eighteen of the interviewees were associated with four social centres of different political backgrounds and one was the head of an independently run initiative. They all responded to a long questionnaire. Their answers were then coded, categorised and organised under the themes presented in this report. This survey identified the reasons for their mobilisation and operational strategies in refugee related projects.

The majority of these 19 interviewees were from Thessaloniki, with some from Pella (an area within the same administrative region of Central Macedonia). All initiatives operated in Idomeni and Thessaloniki. These individuals are the focus of this report and were selected due to their mobilisation capabilities, the local relevance of their organisations, their constant presence in Idomeni and work with refugees in Thessaloniki.

The remaining two interviewees were a caseworker and a coordinator of Praksis, a Greek NGO that operated in Idomeni in cooperation with some of the initiatives analysed here. Following requests, those interviewed will remain anonymous. They will mostly be referred to as “interviewees” or “members/associates” of a specific group.

This report also compiles information from informal conversations with members of the five initiatives analysed as well as from other organised groups operating in Idomeni and Thessaloniki.

The author of the report volunteered in three of the groups analysed between October 2015 and February 2016 in order to closely observe and understand their *modus operandi*, internal

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews are filed with the author and are confidential.

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relations/struggles, motivation and coordination with other actors. Therefore, the author was immersed in the daily activities of some of these groups.

This report is divided into two sections. The first analyses the work of the five initiatives studied. The second looks into the reasons behind the pro-refugee mobilisation in Thessaloniki/Idomeni.

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### 3. Organising help: the pro-refugee mobilisation of civilians

Often in humanitarian crises professional actors such as International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and national Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), as well as Non-Governmental Humanitarian Agencies (NGHAs), play a relevant role alongside governments - and in some cases the military - in delivering rapid, life-saving support to the populations affected (Eriksson, 1996; Buchanan-Smith, 2003, Un.org, n.d., Africa Watch Physicians for Human Rights, 1992). As Michael Vanrooyen, director of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative at Harvard University, points out, the provision of humanitarian assistance is 'complicated by severe access restrictions, large-scale emergency needs, displaced populations, and complex political and social settings' (2013). Thus, in order to guarantee effectiveness and the safety of the aid receptors, it would be beneficial, Vanrooyen argues, if large-scale responses to humanitarian emergencies were carried out by professional actors following minimum standards of practices as to avoid a scenario similar to that of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, when 'many people suffered at the hands of inexperienced aid providers' who had no 'prior understanding of the principles, practices, or accountability associated with professional humanitarian agencies' (2013).

Well established professional humanitarian organisations, such as the *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC), obey strict codes of conduct in their operations. ICRC's voluntary code is also adopted by hundreds of organisations globally. It asserts, among other things, that aid should be 'given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients', that aid 'will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint', and that humanitarian actors should not 'act as instruments of government foreign policy' (1994). Most of these organisations also follow principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence, all of which are endorsed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2010).

There have been significant advances in the professionalization of the humanitarian sector in the past decades, especially after the humanitarian community failed to efficiently deal with large scale humanitarian crises in Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s - struggling with lack of coordination, unprepared staff and unprofessional actors (Africa Watch Physicians for Human Rights, 1992; Eriksson, 1996). New initiatives were then developed to improve accountability and to standardise/coordinate relief and development activities (Vanrooyen, 2013). One of these initiatives was the Sphere Project (Buchanan-Smith, 2003), which offered 'clear, measurable targets for the provision of aid in emergencies', defining, for example, 'the amount of clean water needed per person' (Vanrooyen, 2013).

Even though the efficacy of these 'quality control' systems has been questioned at times (e.g. the earthquake response in Haiti), they were created to bind humanitarian organisations and agencies to accountability, minimum standards of service and respect for ethical principles (Buchanan-Smith, 2003; CHS Alliance, Group URD and the Sphere Project, 2014). They are, however, mostly designed for and applied by professional humanitarian organisations in a sector where many other actors (often non-professional ones) operate. These actors tend to fall outside such monitoring mechanisms. This is

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the case of the five non-professional actors analysed in this report (see their profiles below), all of which were involved in aid projects for refugees in Northern Greece during the peak of the migration crisis in that country (between late 2015 and mid-2016).

These five initiatives provide a compelling example of the role and impact of new local humanitarian actors in a scenario where prominent organisations have defended bringing them to the centre of humanitarian response (World Humanitarian Summit secretariat, 2015). This report discusses their shortcomings, interactions with professional humanitarian organisations, absence of clear codes of conduct, and a lack of minimum standards of services as well as of coordination. At times, their challenges seemed all too similar to those routinely faced by professional organisations. Thus, comparisons between them will be drawn.

The five non-professional initiatives analysed were coordinated mainly in Thessaloniki<sup>2</sup>. Many of them had foreign members or received financial or material support from abroad to assist refugees in the transit centre set up by MSF in Idomeni in September 2015, ‘after many months of coordinated efforts and negotiations with authorities’ (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2015). The centre was located just a few meters away from the Greek-FYROM border.

In Idomeni, non-professional groups and NGOs ran the centre without much support from the central government<sup>3</sup> and with limited backing by the local authorities<sup>4</sup>. Some professional organisations, however, received funding from UNHCR and the EU<sup>5</sup>. In this adverse context, the relationship between the many actors involved in the relief operations in the village was not always productive due to operational and ideological differences. Most of these conflicts were eventually put aside, leading to a more cooperative environment between professional and independent actors. However, some groups were still working in isolation within the area.

In the years prior to the refugees crisis, four out of the five initiatives consistently implemented projects to assist low income individuals in Thessaloniki, as well as vulnerable persons in Greek Macedonia. Their activities ranged from distributing free meals once a week, donating food and hygiene items, to providing medical services in poor isolated areas and offering language classes. Some of these initiatives and/or their members had previously worked with migrants (mostly Albanians). A few had worked with refugees before<sup>6</sup>. The majority had their first direct contact with the topic during the migration crisis in 2015<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the organisations had part of its members operating in Pella, a region nearby Thessaloniki.

<sup>3</sup> Volunteers in Idomeni and the Greek NGO Praksis repeatedly stated that the only contribution from the central government to the transit centre was the presence of the police to secure the area.

<sup>4</sup> The local authority of the village of Idomeni tried to collaborate with volunteers and NGOs. It did, among other things, offer a storage room to keep donations in the train station nearby the transit centre. The space was used until early 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Praksis received funds from UNHCR to operate specifically in Idomeni. The Red Cross and MSF were also partially funded by the EU. In June 2016, the MSF decided to no longer accept funds from the EU and its Member States “in opposition to their damaging deterrence policies and continued attempts to push people and their suffering away from European shores”. See more at: <https://goo.gl/qmuZCb>

<sup>6</sup> Interviewees 8, 10, 12, 16, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewees 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 18.



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All but one of the initiatives were structurally defined as social centres, had a headquarter and several members (virtually all of them unpaid<sup>8</sup>). For clarity purposes, each of the initiatives will be referred to in numbers. The social centres will be quoted from now on as **organisations one, two, three and four**. The remaining case study was a project led by a sole individual assisted occasionally by volunteers in an improvised office. It will be called **initiative five** as to differentiate its characteristics from the other four groups.

Organisation **one** was connected to the Green movement and some of its members were officially affiliated to the Greek Green Party. Organisation **two** was led by the youth of Syriza, the party that currently governs Greece which is labeled as a 'radical left' party. Organisation **three** was a centre for migrants and 'political resistance groups' run by individuals of anarchist inclination. Organisation **four** was an Evangelical alliance with international connections and financial resources from abroad. Initiative **five** was led by a fashion designer in a store/atelier in the centre of Thessaloniki.

Organisations **one to three** conducted a range of activities aimed at providing support to refugees, such as collecting donations (mainly food, clothes, hygiene products, shoes, blankets and tents), preparing these items for distribution and handing them out in Idomeni.

Organisations **one, two and four** jointly managed a kitchen in Idomeni, where they helped prepare/pack/distribute wet meals to refugees from early January 2016 to late May 2016. The kitchen was set up in a container funded by a German evangelical church. The food was prepared by professional chefs (most of whom were unpaid) and the project was supported (logistically and financially) by other independent groups and NGOs (e.g. MSF).

Several members of organisation **one** were extremely active in the kitchen. They commuted on a daily basis from Thessaloniki to Idomeni to run the project and to hand over items such as infant food and diapers. Some individuals from organisation **two** often assisted in the kitchen, whilst those from **three** did not take part in this effort. On Wednesdays, the container was entirely managed by organisation **four** members. Before the kitchen was installed, organisation **four** would also bring a fully equipped medical van and a doctor to provide health support to refugees<sup>9</sup>.

Finally, initiative **five** focused on assembling backpacks with items that would be useful to refugees during their journey through the Balkans, such as clothes, flashlights, batteries, children's toys, hygiene products and food containers. The bags were prepared in Thessaloniki with products requested via Facebook and delivered in Idomeni by organisation **three**. Throughout the refugee crisis, the project expanded to other parts of Greece.

One relevant aspect highlighted by many interviewees was that even though most of those involved in the organisations analysed were unpaid, they strongly objected to being labelled as "volunteers". Such definition did not seem to properly reflect their engagement as part of a social movement that sought

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of this research, only the Evangelical non-profit (the profiles of the organisations analysed in this report will be presented further on) had the capacity to offer paid employment to a limited amount of individuals. Yet most of its staff was unpaid and composed by members of local churches in Thessaloniki and other areas in Greek Macedonia.

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee 14.

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to improve the lives of ‘anyone in need’. This view was particularly stronger in organisations **one**, **two** and **three**. “An important distinction is that many people do not see themselves as volunteers. We see ourselves as a solidarity movement trying to make people’s lives better”, stated one interviewee<sup>10</sup>.

*Without governmental support, locals organised on their own*

In recent decades, a large number of complex conflict-driven crises arose globally, creating ‘humanitarian needs on an epic scale’. On the other hand, as Claudia McGoldrick argues, the gap between those demands and ‘the ability of international humanitarian actors to address them appears greater than at any other time in recent history’ (2015). In this sense, local humanitarian actors might be placed in a favourable position to play a relevant role in providing relief. This discussion has already been present in UN’s forums for a while, with the 2015 Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) emphasising the need to ‘recognise that affected people are the central actors in their own survival and recovery’, to ‘put them at the heart of humanitarian action’ by recognising them ‘as the primary agents of response’, and to support ‘individual and community-based self protection coping strategies, systems and mechanisms’ (World Humanitarian Summit secretariat, 2015).

WHS’ report admits that such an approach requires a ‘fundamental change’ in the humanitarian sector, ‘from one driven by the impulses of charity to one driven by the imperative of solidarity’ (2015). At least in principle, the non-professional humanitarian actors analysed in this report conducted their operations based on solidarity, bringing their civilian initiatives led by locals in Northern Greece to the frontline of the emergency response to the refugee crisis. Although they mostly lacked efficient coordination, funding and training, these actors compensated for such disadvantages by making use of their excellent local connections in order to mobilise support for their operations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that they prospered in a secure developed country, with a stable government and good roads. Their challenges would have been much more complex had they been operating in a conflict-torn country.

During the summer of 2015, organisations **one** to **four** started working in Idomeni. That was a few months before MSF set up its transit centre in the village and prior to the international attention that brought a large number of NGOs and volunteers to the area, implying that local aid actors tend to be the first to respond in emergencies (Sy, A. E. 2015’; Shaw-Hamilton, 2012).

Although these organisations were not professional, they showed a certain level of skills when it comes to project management. Before committing to providing humanitarian support in Idomeni, their members visited the village (sometimes more than once) to assess the needs of the refugees, the type of assistance they would be able to offer and how to better operate in the area<sup>11</sup>. Initiative **five** also visited Idomeni periodically to monitor if the backpack items were still relevant to the changing needs of refugees<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>11</sup> Some interviewees from organisations one to four mentioned having visited Idomeni a few times before establishing operations there.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee 1.

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Initially, they kept operations simple by installing a few tents or just tables to distribute food, water and clothing items in the village. Some helped to collect large amounts of rubbish left by refugees since the local authorities struggled to efficiently remove the garbage. The constant changes in the transit centre forced the actors involved in the relief to continuously adapt their projects. When sea arrivals peaked in October 2015, with 221,374 persons entering Europe via the Mediterranean (UNHRC, 2015) - 211,663 of them through Greece (UNHCR, 2015a) -, organised groups and NGOs already operating in Idomeni tried to fill the gaps left by the Greek government in terms of support to refugees.

In this scenario, NGOs, INGOs, locals and foreign aiders/volunteers took upon themselves the role of providing assistance to refugees reaching the country. In Thessaloniki, those involved in such efforts in the five initiatives seemed to have made that decision spontaneously, after being exposed by the media to the challenging situations faced by refugees<sup>13</sup>. They decided to adapt their existing activities to incorporate projects for refugees<sup>14</sup>. “I could not understand why the government did not have a plan to feed people, to help the refugees. Why does it not just ask us [*experts*] to manage the clothes, food etc? I have realised that there is no plan. Everybody has to do something”, argued the coordinator of initiative five<sup>15</sup>.

Organisations **one to four** became reference points to ordinary people interested in cooperating, whether by volunteering or by dropping donations. Yet many interviewees believed the mobilisation could have been ‘larger’<sup>16</sup>, despite the deep financial crisis that had put 35.7 per cent of the Greek population at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2015 (Eurostat, 2015). “Everyone is doing as much as they can. Even a pair of shoes is something, but we could do much more”, said an interviewee<sup>17</sup>. “I feel like there is so much more to do, but this is what I can do”, stated a member of organisation one<sup>18</sup>.

Often times, ‘we’ was used not only to refer to the Greek people but also to express frustration towards the lack of involvement of local and, mainly, the central government in assisting refugees. Amongst members of the five initiatives, there was a common understanding that Athens was ‘doing nothing’ during the most intense moments of the crisis, while still benefiting from ‘someone else’s efforts’, such as the MSF, Doctors of the World and other actors<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, some pointed out the limitations of the government to respond to a crisis of massive proportions without stronger support from the EU<sup>20</sup>.

The coordinator of initiative **five** was particularly keen in convincing the central government to work alongside independent groups throughout the country. With decades of experience in the clothing industry, the coordinator sent a letter to Ioannis Mouzalas, Alternate Minister of Immigration Policy, offering advice on how to improve the logistics for the distribution of clothes, shoes and other goods to refugees transiting through Greece.

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<sup>13</sup> Field observations, informal and formal interviews.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewees 11, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewees 1, 9, 10, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 12.

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As most refugees used to, at that point, take buses from Athens directly to Idomeni, the document suggested that the authorities compiled a list of items needed by the passengers in each of those vehicles before they left the capital<sup>21</sup>. The list would then be shared with organised groups, allowing them to separate the goods and to make them available in some stops throughout the journey. The system had the potential to decrease the burden on humanitarian actors in Idomeni. Yet, the government replied only to express gratitude for the interest. The suggestions were never adopted, which did not come as a surprise to the author of the letter<sup>22</sup>. “I work in the council [in my region] and I did not want to do my project there [within the council’s structure] because it would fail. We would still have papers to fill in and now [by myself] my project is done already<sup>23</sup>.”

In 2015, WHS’ Synthesis of the Consultation Process report defended the recognition of ‘the primary responsibility of the State with respect to protection’ in situations of humanitarian response and argued for ‘all humanitarian action to put affected people’ at its heart (World Humanitarian Summit secretariat). Throughout Greece, local communities affected by the refugee crisis put this argument to the test. However, as exemplified above, this is not to say that the State actively cooperated with them. On the other hand, as Vanrooyen precisely observes, a host government may allow several actors to provide assistance, ‘but they often do not have the national structures in place to coordinate’ large influxes of aid, ‘much less the ability to assure quality and appropriateness of the response’ (2013). This seemed to be the case in the period analysed.

Between late 2015 and mid-2016, the central government failed to efficiently respond to the crisis. For instance, in January 2016, the island of Lesbos hosted a myriad of volunteers and organisations from all over the world. But from the 81 NGOs operating in the region, only 30 had been registered with the local authorities. The islanders worried that such an influx of volunteers was ‘creating more chaos’ ‘rather than a coordinated response’. Spyros Galinos, mayor of Lesbos, even asserted that the presence of the responders was not always positive since ‘many NGOs and individuals’ would not register or cooperate with the municipality. In this sense, they became ‘disruptive rather than useful’ (Nianias, 2016).

In Northern Greece, the government began to exert a tighter control on the aid providers a few weeks prior to the termination of the transit centre of Idomeni. The goal was to increase coordination with some humanitarian actors and to limit the operations of those deemed unprofessional. Organisations already present in Idomeni had to request formal authorisation to continue their work in the state run reception centres around Thessaloniki, where refugees from the transit centre were relocated to<sup>24</sup>. In the makeshift camp, which was never officially recognized by the Greek government, anyone could simply join groups already present there. In the reception centres, visitors had to request prior permission from the authorities and formally register their presence before entering the official camps<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> From October 2015, the authorities monitor buses coming from Athens directly to Idomeni used only by refugees.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>24</sup> Field observations.

<sup>25</sup> Field observations and personal experience visiting official reception centres in Diavata and Oreokastro.

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This approach often excluded non-traditional local actors, such as those analysed in this report, from maintaining their activities in these reception centres. It did seem to prevent non-professional actors (or at least those less organised) from providing aid within governmental structures. Among the organisations analysed in this report, only number **two** expanded its activities to the reception centre of Diavata (around Thessaloniki), operating there for a short period<sup>26</sup>. Hence, the government focused on granting access to and cooperating with professional humanitarian organisations of various degrees of experience - from the widely respected Norwegian Refugee Council to younger initiatives such as InterVolve, a Greek NGO created in January 2016 (prior to that, it was a group of independent volunteers working in Idomeni<sup>27</sup>).

Filtering out non-traditional groups probably helped the Greek government to improve cooperation with those actors it chose to partner up with, leading to better services offered to refugees. This line of action is commonly defended in the professional humanitarian system. Vanrooyen, for instance, argues that ‘not all relief is good relief’ and that national governments must create coordination structures to ‘properly regulate’ responders (2013). Peter Walker, director of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, and member of the Editorial Board of the *International Review of the Red Cross*, points out that humanitarian operations often involve ‘a huge range of skills, and an enormously diverse body of knowledge’, encompassing a combination of many professions - from medicine to engineering, law and political science -, all of which are costly to assemble and complicated to manage. Thus, even though humanitarians ‘seek to serve victims of crisis’ in emergency scenarios, minimum standards of professionalism are important to reduce suffering and avoid leaving disaster victims ‘at the mercy of the vagaries of personal whim’ and ‘well meaning, but possibly ineffectual, action’ (2004). The arguments of both authors, amongst others (Shanks, 2014; Buchanan-Smith, 2003), are reflected in the efforts of many international organisations and agencies to develop codes of conduct and guidelines aimed at guaranteeing quality services in relief scenarios (ICRC, 1994; Buchanan-Smith, 2003; CHS Alliance, Group URD and the Sphere Project, 2014).

The case for more professionalism and minimum standards of service in the humanitarian system is a strong one, especially when considering that the five subjects analysed in this report lacked clearly defined codes of conduct, ‘quality control’ or official accountability mechanisms. Still, this does not necessarily mean that they did not implement part of or some variation of codes of conduct used by professional humanitarian organisations - whether intentionally or not. While there were many examples of impartiality on the treatment of refugees by some of the analysed actors (*read more in 3.1. Filling the gaps*), they did follow other professional guidelines. Organisations **one**, **two** and **four** often adopted the *per capita* criterion in food handouts, giving out only one portion meals per person. This would supposedly ‘guarantee’ the equitable distribution of goods amongst the recipients (Harrell-Bond, 2002). Although the *per capita* criterion does not address the question of whether everyone gets enough to meet their basic needs (Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold, 1992), its adoption by these non-traditional actors indicate that they can be persuaded or influenced to follow certain guidelines

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<sup>26</sup> I visited Diavata with members of organisation three once around March 2016. We all had to send our names in advance to the administration of the reception centre. Our identification documents were kept by the guards at the reception centre until we left the facilities.

<sup>27</sup> Read more here <https://intervolvegr.com/about-us/>

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capable of improving their operations or become relevant partners of professional organisations. The adoption of the equitable criterion was possibly a suggestion of MSF (*we shall discuss their relationship later on*) or a decision that was reached after observing other NGOs working in Idomeni. Either way, it shows their capacity of adaptation and openness to new concepts. As Hugo Slim, a leading scholar in humanitarian studies, puts it: 'some degree of exclusion is responsible', but professionalism 'also serves to exclude', 'like the medieval artisan guilds that ensured that no one other than their mates or their heirs could ply their trade' (Hugo Slim, cited in Walker, 2004).

By mid-October 2015, organisations **one to four** had been overwhelmed by the large amount of donations received nationally and from abroad. In late August, FYROM briefly closed its borders to refugees coming from Greece, causing chaos in Idomeni (Dehghan, 2015). The international media reported extensively on the episode, which contributed to the increase in donations<sup>28</sup>. Organisation **one**, for instance, received packages from places in Greece, Malta, The Netherlands and Germany. It was also offered a stand in a national fair in Thessaloniki in order to collect more donations.

The unexpected volume of donations created logistical problems. Organisation **one** had considerable storage room available in October, but by December it had been forced to rent extra space to accommodate the donations that kept flooding in. Organisations **two**, which campaigned in supermarkets for contributions<sup>29</sup>, and **three** also reported enormous support leading to issues with storage<sup>30</sup>. At various moments, organisations **one to three** and initiative **five** had to temporarily stop accepting donations until they could distribute the goods already in their deposit<sup>31</sup>. "People wanted to contribute, and they took food and clothes to the places working with refugees", said an associate of organisation three<sup>32</sup>.

In Thessaloniki, the mobilisation seemed to have motivated many individuals to get involved in different levels of the assistance to refugees, such as sorting out clothes for distribution, working in Idomeni, collecting donations at supermarkets or simply making donations<sup>33</sup>. The involvement of some members of the five initiatives in Idomeni inspired others to join the efforts at early stages, even before the MSF settled in the village. "We started going to Idomeni on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2015, bringing 1,500 bottles of water in a van. After that, everybody wanted to join us to give food and clothes to the refugees", said a person from organisation four<sup>34</sup>.

Several members of organisation **three** were present in Idomeni before most other organised groups. "We have been going to Idomeni since September 2014. We found hundreds of refugees trying to reach FYROM without any help, food or clothes. So we started going every two weeks, then every week. We started the calls on the internet and people showed us that solidarity still exists in Greece. The support was amazing and we tried to help others without any help from the state or the local

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<sup>28</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewees 11,12.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews and field observations.

<sup>31</sup> Field observations and formal and informal interviews with persons and organisations involved in the assistance of refugees in Thessaloniki.

<sup>32</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee 16.

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee 14.

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authorities”, said a member of that organisation<sup>35</sup>.

Even though many members of the five initiatives thought of their support as a ‘duty’<sup>36</sup>, not all locals were amused with the pro-refugee movement, as it will be discussed later on.

### *Decentralising command*

The majority of the initiatives analysed adopted interesting management strategies, focusing more on participative and horizontal structures as a way of maintaining their members' full engagement. Organisations **two** and **three** held weekly assemblies in which tasks would be assigned to each member (not only for refugee related projects). Maintenance issues, social activities, events and projects were collectively debated and voted on. Organisation **one** adopted a scheme of frequent meetings to discuss its agenda and assign tasks.

In these three places there was a general understanding that all members had equal status, thus, no official ‘leaders’ were needed<sup>37</sup>, and the responsibilities ought to be shared. Yet such settings did not exclude, in practical terms, the role of unofficial coordinators. Senior members of these organisations often occupied such ‘positions’, taking on more responsibilities (e.g. administrative tasks), orienting newcomers and even directly assigning tasks to others<sup>38</sup>.

The absence of ‘bosses’ appeared to be a strong motivational element for several interviewees to join these organisations. Many argued that a hierarchical structure would prevent their ideas from being easily incorporated, besides making them uncomfortable<sup>39</sup>. This horizontal management seemed to be critical for the survival of these organisations as it made their members feel important, appreciated and connected to the social centres.

A few projects had clearly defined coordinators though. Within organisation **one**, the artisan production of baby slings was run by an individual who taught the participants sewing techniques, organised a crowdfunding campaign for the project and distributed the final product in Idomeni<sup>40</sup>.

The vast majority of those involved in refugee related projects tended to be the same individuals. Sometimes, ‘extra personnel’ would be requested on social media for the days when the influx of people in Idomeni was expected to be high.

Organisations **one to three** did not usually define shifts in advance for those interested in helping in Thessaloniki. Thus, often people would come to these organisations’ offices in moments when they were not necessarily useful. In other times, there would not be enough hands to help prepare the donations for delivery. In this sense, it was difficult to have a prior knowledge of the number of individuals available to work on a given day. On the other hand, adopting an excessively strict schedule

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<sup>35</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewees 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Interviewees 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Field observations.

<sup>39</sup> In official interviews and many informal conversations, this topic came up and those involved in the relief efforts were resistant in complying with a central command.

<sup>40</sup> Field observations and interviewee 7.

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did not feel adequate to those organisations either. They were not created to be professional entities. Such an environment would alienate most of their members. Yet, they could have tried to put forward a schedule that would make a better use of the volunteers' time.

The loose agenda might have discouraged potential volunteers from engaging more effectively in the projects due to lack of organisation. It made it harder to retain newcomers since it was unclear whether their time would be spent in useful tasks or just wasted. In this sense, the same individuals seemed to be always involved in the refugee related projects. Newcomers would rarely stick around for too long<sup>41</sup>. In organisation **three**, for instance, some members were often rude/unfriendly to 'outsiders' wanting to join their group<sup>42</sup>.

The creation of shifts would have enabled these organisations to spread their supporters evenly throughout the week, creating teams for each task and induction sessions for newcomers. Due to the lack of planning, some days would have as little as two persons working in refugee-related projects in organisation **one**. On other days, as many as 20 volunteers from universities in Thessaloniki would come. As the working space was limited, a large number of people often resulted in chaos rather than a productive task force<sup>43</sup>. Without enough members to instruct these new groups on how to properly sort out and categorise the donations, normally their work had to be redone. Many clothes or shoes would be inadequately placed on the shelves or would not meet the criteria for selection (e.g. being warm enough for winter)<sup>44</sup>.

Despite categorising donations using different systems, organisations **one** and **three** had a strong concern regarding the provision of 'adequate' clothing to refugees. That mostly meant selecting and distributing only warm and comfortable items from October 2015 to March 2016. The sorting out process also included a certain level of cultural awareness based on the perception of those involved in it about Muslims (the majority of the refugees arriving in Europe at that point): extremely colourful, revealing, tight, transparent and 'edgy' clothes were discarded due to the assumption that refugees would refuse them<sup>45</sup>. A similar concern was present in initiative **five**, that would choose 'carefully' the toys in the backpacks<sup>46</sup>.

That concern had, basically, two roots: 1) a genuine desire to respect the refugees' religious/cultural beliefs; 2) field experience: after a few stints distributing clothes in Idomeni, it was clear that some items were disfavoured by refugees, such as those deemed 'too short', 'too revealing'. In this sense, the organisations stopped bringing them to Idomeni.

Organisation **four** seemed to have a more corporate-like setting as a non-profit entity. Thus, the

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<sup>41</sup> Field observations.

<sup>42</sup> A few members of organisation one strongly vocalised their dissatisfaction regarding the unfriendly environment of organisation three. I felt the same way when I tried to approach their members for this research. I was allowed to observe them, but only a few of their associates would speak to me. I had the impression of being perceived as an exploiter since many of their members saw NGOs and the media as unreliable entities.

<sup>43</sup> Field observations between October and December 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Field observation at organisations one and three.

<sup>45</sup> Field observations in organisations one and three.

<sup>46</sup> Interviewee 1.



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horizontal management present in other organisations did not fully apply to its operations, even though some of its ‘reference’ members were not necessarily coordinators<sup>47</sup>. It included a considerable level of participation from members of the Evangelical church. Before the trips to Idomeni, members of that organisation had a briefing on the activities they would be performing that day. On the field, they were divided into groups and given tasks.

The ‘recruitment’ for the projects with refugees seemed to be influenced by their Christian faith and the Church’s request for its members to support those initiatives<sup>48</sup>. Nevertheless, associates of organisation **four** also demonstrated a strong personal conviction for joining the programmes. By early 2016, the vast majority of the 400 volunteers of the organisation were working with refugees, as opposed to only five persons per mission in a project focused on Muslim communities in rural areas in 2015<sup>49</sup>. “It is not only to give our money and buy things, the point is to make people take part in this, to motivate others”, said a member of the organisation<sup>50</sup>.

Many members of organisation **four** prepared donations and meals at their local churches. “In the beginning of the week, we start to organise the mission with the ingredients for the sandwiches, juices, chocolates, clothes etc. The great thing is that the teams are always willing to get together two or three times per week. On Tuesday, we prepare everything to be ready for Wednesday”, revealed the same associate<sup>51</sup>.

Initiative **five** was quite centralised on its organiser, who would prepare the backpacks and instruct any volunteers in a store in Thessaloniki. When the Balkan route was still functional, the project aimed to produce at least 30 bags per week. All steps to assemble them were closely monitored personally and online, since the project expanded to other regions in Greece, such as Athens, Evros and Kavala<sup>52</sup>. The products for the bags were requested in a Facebook page created especially to publicise the initiative. “I have been trying to find schools in the island [*where the refugees arrive*] to assemble the backpacks there. Every morning I receive calls from schools and communities wanting to help”, said the organiser<sup>53</sup>.

None of the five initiatives in this report received funds from the Greek government or the EU during the period analysed, and most of them struggled financially. Apart from private donations, organisations **one to three** raised revenues by organising bazaars, festivals and parties<sup>54</sup>. They also sold drinks and food in the bars at their offices. Organisation **one** rented part of its space for events.

Organisation **four** was clearly the most financially stable of these initiatives. It had a ‘professional’ office and received funds from Evangelical Churches in Greece and around the world (Germany,

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<sup>47</sup> Field observations.

<sup>48</sup> Faith and Christian values were quoted by virtually all interviewees of organisation four as their main reason for joining the relief operations for refugees.

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>50</sup> Interviewee 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee 1. Filled with the author. Confidential.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewees 2, 12 and field observations.

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Norway and the USA, for instance)<sup>55</sup>. Between August 2015 and February 2016, the organisation spent €100,000 to support refugees<sup>56</sup>. International resources were also critical to organisation **one**, which received a ‘big donation’ from the Evangelical Church of Germany. The amount was used, among other things, to secure a van and to buy raincoats for refugees from local producers, a demand from the donor<sup>57</sup>.

Transportation was a crucial barrier to organisations **one to three**. During the peak of the crisis, there were no trains or buses available to civilians from Thessaloniki directly to Idomeni. Therefore, members of these organisations had to rely on their personal cars or buy/rent vans to take the donations to the village. Consequently, the frequency of the missions was initially conditional to the availability of such vehicles.

In this aspect, the number of people and the amount of donations that could be transported to Idomeni were both very limited. The organisations had to often prioritise the items for distribution. During the winter, coats, gloves, scarves, blankets, waterproof shoes and hats were priority items. In the Spring, the focus turned to food, hygiene products and baby supplies. These limitations were lessened for organisation **one** after it managed to acquire a van.

Unable to deliver their donations, organisations **one, three** and **initiate five** had to constantly deal with storage constraints. “Many people donated things to me and my store is now full. I could not move inside it”, said the organiser of initiative **five**, that worked in collaboration with organisation **three**, responsible for distributing the backpacks in Idomeni<sup>58</sup>. “They are quite expensive, almost €50 each. So I only trust them [*organisation three*]<sup>59</sup>.”

Organisation **four** appeared to be the only party adequately equipped to transport the donations. It used a medium size truck to bring dozens of boxes of fruits, sandwiches, shoes, clothes, water and other items to the transit centre. However, part of its members would come to Idomeni in their private cars.

On top of the logistic challenges, the organisations had to bare high fuel costs - usually around €20 per car/per day. Organisations **one to three** tried to minimize these expenses by covering them with donations and contributions from those who got a ride to idomeni. Some ‘drivers’ assumed the whole burden for their cars<sup>60</sup>. Organisation **four** had a fuel budget and helped ‘many people’ to pay for theirs<sup>61</sup>.

In the face of several operational challenges, the five initiatives analysed in this report presented serious problems with organisation, lack of structure and absence of trained staff, which brings into

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<sup>55</sup> Interviewee 16.

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>57</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>58</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewees 2, 5, 6, 7, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Interviewee 14.

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the debate the ongoing discussion about the need to professionalize the humanitarian system. As Leslie Shanks, former Medical Director of MSF-Operational Centre Amsterdam, puts it nicely, humanitarian response must be based ‘very simply’ on the human refusal to let anyone suffer or lose their dignity in a crisis, but the ‘commitment to help without the necessary professional experience and organisational infrastructure can lead to poor quality assistance’ (2014). The goal, therefore, is to balance professional response and ‘the human response to suffering’. That balance could have been better achieved if the organisations analysed had invested in basic training for their members, improving their efficiency - although they would still suffer from a lack of structure due to limited funds. Training was part of the agenda of other independent groups operating in Greece. As George Tjensvoll Kitching et al. reported, in Lesbos new volunteers of grassroots organisations received training that included ‘how the organisation functions, the different roles of responsibility within the organisations, discussions about how to work effectively as volunteers providing humanitarian aid to refugees and migrants’ (2016). Occasionally, Kitching described, there were opportunities to ‘send longer-term volunteers to do training provided by other organisations including training in psychological first aid, protection training, or first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation’ (Kitching et al., 2016).

Standardised training of aid workers and focus on their professional advancement have increasingly been perceived as a crucial step (Vanrooyen, 2013), but that does not mean humanitarians must become ‘automatons executing protocols and guidelines irrespective of the situation they find themselves in’, as Shanks reminds us (2014). Nor is this what most of them want. A 2010 survey by the Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA) with nearly 1500 humanitarian aid workers showed that most respondents were in favor of professionalization and standardisation, but raised concerns about humanitarian aid work being turned into a ‘service delivery business’ or that ‘greater professionalisation will attract people to humanitarian work for more mercenary and less altruistic reasons’ (Walker et al., 2010). Similar points about professional humanitarianism were raised by members of the five initiatives analysed here. Some openly refused to cooperate with professional humanitarian organisations under the argument that these only responded to crises due to financial reasons.

The global humanitarian landscape is composed of a myriad of actors working on several levels (local, national and international) with different degrees of organisation, approaches and goals shaped by their environment and evolving challenges (McGoldrick, 2015). New forms of ‘humanitarian action are emerging and a growing number of actors, including domestic actors, want to play their legitimate role’ (Hamza, M. and Cartwright, A., 2015). They should not be immediately considered by international humanitarian actors as lacking the capability to respond appropriately to crises as it is common in the current humanitarian system. Even though they have organisational, coordinative and training-related shortcomings (like many NGOs/INGOs/NGHAs), these should and could be resolved with the assistance of more experienced organisations, agencies and governments, if the local actors are to reach their full potential in the near future. In this sense, Hamza and Cartwright point out that local actors ‘are not yet being empowered to play the strong role that the international rhetoric now expects from them in international response operations’ (2015). Such lack of support hampered the

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efforts of the five subjects analysed here. However, when encouraged to cooperate with the MSF in Idomeni some of them rapidly improved their capabilities.

### **3.1. Filling the gaps**

In 2015, McGoldrick pointed out that the discussion about the importance of localising aid had become a dominant one within ‘various reform-oriented UN initiatives currently underway’. That same year, the WHS recognised that affected people ‘are the central actors in their own survival and recovery’ (World Humanitarian Summit secretariat), and IFRC published its World Disasters Report focusing on local actors, naming them ‘the key to humanitarian effectiveness’ and arguing that ‘strengthening their role’ could help redress some of the ‘perennial challenges of humanitarian aid, such as shrinking access, fragmentation and incoherency in operations’ (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2015). Following the same point of view, the Future Humanitarian Financing (FHF) argued that in the future, ‘much of the cost of providing humanitarian assistance will be borne by local and domestic actors’, including ‘governments, communities, civil society groups’, to name a few (2015). During crises, the FHF argued, the populations affected would receive a ‘bundle’ of assistance through a variety of channels, ‘including material relief and access to services provided by domestic civil society organisations’ (2015).

The debate is an interesting one, among other aspects, because local aid actors tend to be the first to respond to emergencies. ‘Their proximity and first-hand knowledge and understanding of their own contexts cannot be matched’, argues Elhadj As Sy, IFRC’s Secretary General (2015). The rapid response of local actors is a common feature in the Ebola crisis in West Africa, the Nepal earthquake and the conflict in Syria. ‘In Nepal, local volunteers and emergency workers were responding even as the dust from the earthquake still hung in the air’ (Sy, A. E. 2015). They know the affected areas, have easier access to these communities, are aware of the challenges and will be there after the crisis is over (Sy, A. E. 2015). Therefore, building the resilience of such actors can increase their participation in the recovery of regions affected by conflicts and disasters, especially in a context where only mainly large-scale natural disasters and ‘catastrophic humanitarian emergencies precipitated by war’ receive significant international interest by the media, the public and donors (VanRooyen and Walker, 2007).

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James Shaw-Hamilton, director of the Humanitarian Forum, remembers that ‘non-traditional’ actors have had a ‘great impact’, for instance, in the multiple parallel humanitarian crises of 2011-12 in the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, they ‘filled’ a massive gap ‘by acting earlier than the international community and having better links into the local community’ (2012). In this sense, IFRC has defended the recognition ‘of the role that local actors play’, besides inviting ‘governments and the international aid community to do more to reinforce and support that critical role’ (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2015). Although such recognition by the humanitarian community, scholars and donors has been on the rise, local actors are still afforded ‘little space’ by the international community in humanitarian operations (Hamza, M. and Cartwright, A., 2015). This often happens because the international humanitarian system assumes ‘a weak local or regional humanitarian community in terms of scale, principles and coordination’ (Shaw-Hamilton, 2012). Even though some of these ‘local evolving actors’ do not follow professional codes of conduct, it could be interesting for the international humanitarian community to support those with potential to provide efficient aid, and to recognise their legitimacy by ‘building trust, supporting capacity and encouraging cooperation’ (Shaw-Hamilton, 2012). In the process, these actors can be persuaded to commit (at least) to impartiality, especially on the egalitarian treatment of male and female beneficiaries.

Unable to rely heavily on the Greek government for support, most humanitarian actors in Idomeni (professional and non-traditional) faced complex challenges in order to provide aid to refugees. They had to manage the logistics of the transit centre on their own. Most of them also had to execute their activities with very limited resources. These actors were responsible for providing meals, hygiene products, clothes, health assistance and medicine to refugees. All of these whilst maintaining minimum standards of sanitation (even if arguably very low) in the transit centre by, among other measures, making showers facilities and large numbers of chemical toilets available. As one would expect, MSF played a substantial role in such scenarios since it had the funds and the know-how to respond to the situation. Yet, less wealthy/well structured actors also brought in important collaborations to the management of the centre.

In this sense, 58 per cent of the interviewees perceived their organisation’s activities as covering at least some of the gaps left by Greek and EU authorities in terms of relief support to refugees (37 per cent believed their efforts definitely filled the gaps, while 21 per cent argued they did at some extent). Only 26 per cent refuted that perception. Sixteen per cent did not comment<sup>62</sup>.

The main argument of the respondents within the 37 per cent group was that their organisations covered the refugees’ basic needs in Idomeni (e.g. clothes, food, hygiene products and medicines)<sup>63</sup>. As one interviewee said, they ‘could not find the state anywhere’ to secure ‘the big needs’<sup>64</sup>. On the other hand, many also understood their limitations, as one pointed out, they cannot do ‘as much as the government would’ due to their lack of financial resources<sup>65</sup>. By March 2016, the kitchen managed

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<sup>62</sup> Interviews conducted with members of organisations one to four and initiative five.

<sup>63</sup> Interviewees 2, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee 2.

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by some of the organisations analysed was producing over 3,000 meals per day in order to feed the refugees stranded in Idomeni<sup>66</sup>. Between the summer of 2015 and December of that year, organisation **four** delivered 3,000 sandwiches and thousands of bottles of water on a weekly basis. It also gave clothes, gloves and blankets<sup>67</sup>. Other humanitarian actors provided food and supplies in the centre, including the Greek NGO Praksis - that received funds from UNHCR to provide up to 5,000 daily bottles of water and basic medical assistance<sup>68</sup>.

Those within the 21 per cent who believed their activities covered the gaps to a certain extent generally argued their support helped alleviate suffering, but it was far too limited to mean much more than that, especially in terms of available personnel to maintain a strong presence in Idomeni<sup>69</sup>. The 26 per cent who did not believe their efforts replaced the lack of governmental support perceived their work roughly as ‘a drop in the ocean’ in comparison to the needs<sup>70</sup>. However, they highlighted the importance of keeping refugees well fed, hydrated and with access to clothes and hygiene products. Some pointed that the many organisations providing aid were not fully equipped to deal with the high influx of refugees<sup>71</sup>, and argued that the Greek government should have taken a more active position in order to help humanitarian actors in Idomeni<sup>72</sup>.

### *Working on the field*

Throughout its existence, the transit centre of Idomeni experienced different phases. The scenario changed according to the influx of people, weather conditions and political developments in Europe. These variables presented a constant array of new challenges to humanitarian actors. An interviewee accurately described the situation: Idomeni was ‘like a living organism’<sup>73</sup>. “Idomeni is a different place everyday. You don’t really know what to expect in the next day. I don’t know why this happens”, said a member of organisation one<sup>74</sup>.

### *October to late November 2015*

This period was marked by a deep lack of coordination between most of the actors operating in the transit centre, as well as by the inadequate infrastructure of the area. Even with the efforts of MSF and other organisations to improve living conditions, the situation was problematic. The majority of the tents were not equipped with heating systems, nor with bunkbeds or wooden floors, until late November. The centre used to experience frequent power outages due to problems in the generators. There was insufficient access to drinking water, extremely poor sanitary conditions, including dirty chemical toilets, inefficient garbage collection and presence of open air human waste in the transit centre and its surroundings.

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<sup>66</sup> Estimation by those involved in preparing the meals in the kitchen.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Praksis’ Coordinator for the organisation’s programme in Idomeni. The number referred to the period December 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewees 5, 8, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>71</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>72</sup> Interviewee 17.

<sup>73</sup> Interviewee 17.

<sup>74</sup> Interviewee 19.

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In that period, the Balkan route was still operational. Therefore, the refugees would stay in Idomeni only for a couple of hours before crossing to FYROM and heading towards Northern Europe. Usually, they would be brought to Idomeni in buses, mostly from Athens, divided into groups that were given a number by the Greek authorities. These groups would have to stick together and use the number to enter FYROM. In this sense, refugees were usually directed to tents where they would wait alongside their group for clearance to cross the border.

Members of organisation **one** and **three** would organise turns with other groups in order to be present at least twice a week in Idomeni. These 'shifts' would mostly be at night since they argued that the main NGOs and UNHCR operated only during 'working hours'<sup>75</sup>. Organisation **one** tried to be in the centre at least once a week, although it would normally be able to attend three times a week, working in the food and clothing tents. Organisations **two** and **four** would also be present often.

The professional and nonprofessional aid actors appeared to be struggling to organise their services and to cooperate with each other. Well established organisations such as MSF and Red Cross would not normally accept volunteers who had not been trained by them. Thus, many volunteers and independently organised groups opted to collaborate with organisations with less restrictive policies, such as Praksis. However, most times they would not receive proper instructions about the tasks to be performed. Several groups of volunteers would often do nothing because they had not been assigned work. "It's kind of weird because no one understands how the help works in Idomeni", pointed out an interviewee<sup>76</sup>. "Praksis manages the refugees arriving, as well as the food storage. It does a lot and its staff is usually nice. They try to orient you, but not really well. You basically have to ask how to help", revealed a member of organisation one<sup>77</sup>.

In that period, Praksis served as a reference in Idomeni for organisations **one** to **three**. The NGO was in charge of the food distribution tent at the entrance of the centre. It also managed two storages behind it - where food and hygiene supplies were kept<sup>78</sup>. Although other smaller sites ran by volunteers handed out goods, Praksis' tent was the main location to collect food and water. Ergo, it was constantly under high demand - thus, in need of personnel.

Praksis used to have a considerable number of volunteers in Idomeni, but all of them lacked training to operate in an emergency relief context. The organisation was concerned about the poor preparation of its volunteers, and was trying to create a system to provide quick training *in situ*<sup>79</sup>. On a similar note, independent groups were also unable to train their own people. "Our members are not trained, so it is very hard for them to work properly in idomeni. With big groups, the first thing is to avoid making a mess", admitted a member of organisation one<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> Interviewee 6. Filled with the author. Confidential.

<sup>76</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>77</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>78</sup> Field observations.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Praksis' Coordinator for the organisation's programme in Idomeni.

<sup>80</sup> Interviewee 10.

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Several times members of the organisations **one** and **two** would be available to assist in the food tent, but received no orientation about the items and amounts to be handed out to the refugees, or on how to organise the storages. The tasks would be fulfilled arbitrarily by those executing them. Without clear coordination, their effectiveness was hindered. For instance, the storage was monitored only sporadically, to identify items nearing their expiration dates. There was no proper cataloging and labelling of the products. Thus, the hundreds of boxes of donations arriving daily were just piled up and randomly distributed<sup>81</sup>.

One day in late October around 1am the tent ran out of spoons<sup>82</sup>. That month had been registering the largest number of sea arrivals in Greece, therefore, it was a well-known fact that thousands of refugees were expected to reach Idomeni every day. The food handouts included pasta, rice with lentils and soup. So, spoons were crucial. Still, the meals were distributed without them for hours, leaving many refugees frustrated (some even returned the portions). The ‘managers’ of the tent knew the spoons were ‘somewhere’ in the storage. Yet, they could not be found since nothing was clearly labeled and properly placed on the shelves. As a ‘solution’, it was decided that only biscuits, toasts, bread and boiled eggs would be distributed to the refugees. Only past 3am the handouts of wet food resumed, after the spoons were located. “We often face problems because many times the refugees have to wait in the cold. There were times that people [*helping in the tent*] didn’t really know what they were doing”, stated one interviewee<sup>83</sup>.

The example above brings into question major challenges facing the international humanitarian community: coordination, accountability, and effectiveness. In a scenario of crisis, there is not much attention being paid to the effectiveness of aid interventions, and the ‘affected population has no choice in the matter’ (VANROOYEN, 2013). As Vanrooyen notes the ‘very nature of emergency assistance’ ‘creates a setting where the amount of aid becomes more important than the effect of the aid’, leaving aside the standards of practice and the qualification of the actors (2013). Providing aid to populations in crisis ‘is never enough’, argues Shanks (2014). The response has to be ‘evidence-based’ and it must meet the most urgent needs, with those offering help determining the effectiveness of their response - which includes investment in building up capacity (Shanks, 2014).

In general, those running the tent would not choose in advance the meals to be distributed in a certain period of the day. Whatever was available would be handed out, often resulting in many individuals receiving larger meals and ‘better’ items than others - which created resentment amongst refugees. Providing basic training to volunteers and establishing clear responsibilities per shift would have helped to increase effectiveness in the tent. “Many people left Idomeni because there is no organisation, no one can manage it. No one is in charge”, said an interviewee<sup>84</sup>.

Aware of the problem, some organised groups decided to make an effort to coordinate their activities in order to provide better services. Initially, this step resulted in a weekly schedule dividing the days

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<sup>81</sup> Field observations. Only a few people who worked almost daily in the tent would keep vague notes of the entries and of the items stored. However, these lists were not made available to all volunteers in Idomeni. Therefore, most people did not know what was in the storage.

<sup>82</sup> That day I helped members of organisation one to distribute food at Praxis’ tent.

<sup>83</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>84</sup> Interviewee 2.



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each group would be responsible for running the food tent. Prior to that, members of these groups would call their own separate contacts in Idomeni as to know when they could help. Many of them used to call Praksis<sup>85</sup>. “It looks like we are different countries. They all have to be open to communication, but they are not”, reckoned an interviewee<sup>86</sup>.

Due to disagreements between groups, the only person able to serve as the mediator of the schedule was the deputy-mayor of Idomeni, who would receive the calls and fit the groups in the calendar. This arrangement only put a group in control of the tent on a given day. It did not define the amount of hours the groups would stay in the tent. In this sense, members of organisations **one** and **two** would help for as long as whoever brought them to Idomeni wanted to stay in the centre. It was quite hard to efficiently run the location since the personnel was constantly rotating, with groups leaving without instructing the next about the management of the space/services<sup>87</sup>.

Organisation **three** cooperated with the food tent for a short period, but operational differences eventually forced it to work independently. Many members of this organisation were unhappy with the guidelines of professional NGOs to only provide one portion of food to refugees as well as with Praksis’ policies. One member expressed discomfort after realising the Greek NGO had been refusing to give winter coats and extra meals to those who requested them, even though his group had brought several boxes of those items<sup>88</sup>. The group became unwilling to cooperate with any NGOs because it considered them indifferent to the refugees’ suffering.

After that incident, organisation **three** began to distribute its own food, clothes and other items<sup>89</sup>. “UNHCR and other NGOs tried to give us advices but we did it our own way because they do not want to help people. Some people from the Red Cross did not give clothes to a Syrian woman with kids, did not even give them jackets. They just told them to go. We had so much clothes. Some people from other NGOs said that Syrians could get food in FYROM. We questioned them because we had brought food”, stated an associate of that organisation<sup>90</sup>.

Organisation **four** had its own structure and would distribute its own food, in addition to offering medical support in a van.

### *Clothing*

The lack of organisation also affected the distribution of clothes in Idomeni. Sometimes, the refugees would be allowed to choose their garments in a tent run by various independent groups. Other days, the distribution would occur in a temporary storage where the refugees would only give their size in order to receive an item. No organisation seemed to be officially responsible for managing a centralised distribution of clothes, thus, different groups would do handouts separately.

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<sup>85</sup> Interviewees 2, 6, 10, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>87</sup> Field observations.

<sup>88</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Interviewee 3.

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In November 2015, organisation **one** and other groups were allowed to use one of MSF's tents as a fixed distribution point. Different groups used the space throughout the day, but they would close the tent by midnight. This meant that during winter nights, many refugees did not have access to the coats and shoes they desperately needed.

Organisation **one** used to bring its own clothes for distribution in Idomeni, displaying them on tables by size, type and gender. A 'section' for shoes would be near the exit of the tent. The 'corridor' system worked well, but it did cause some tension with FYROM's border authorities and the Greek Police because the refugees would spend too much time choosing the items. Therefore, long queues often formed outside the tent, delaying the crossings. As such, refugees were constantly pushed out of the tent by volunteers<sup>91</sup>.

The Idomeni local authorities offered the volunteers a large room in the train station as a storage. By November 2015, the space was full. Many volunteers sorted out the donations there. Still, organisations **one to four** would normally bring their own clothes from Thessaloniki and take the leftovers back.

The lack of a central coordination between different actors in Idomeni was acknowledged as a serious problem by the vast majority of the interviewees. There was a clear understanding amongst them that setting up a coordination group would be beneficial to their operations<sup>92</sup>. "It is much harder to work without central coordination", admitted one interviewee<sup>93</sup>. "I do not have a problem with a central command. It would make things clearer, I would know what I have to do. We do not have energy to lose<sup>94</sup>", said another. Organisation **three** kept working "independently"<sup>95</sup>.

On the other hand, some argued that a central coordination should avoid 'dictating rules', otherwise there would be a high risk of alienating those involved in the field operations<sup>96</sup>. "If a command [*with an authoritarian profile*] was created, people would not want to cooperate. It is nice to have everyone working on equal terms", stated a member of organisation **one**<sup>97</sup>.

During this period, efforts to create some level of coordination between the humanitarian actors in the field were attempted. Some failed due to political differences<sup>98</sup>. On the long term, however, such ventures flourished. They resulted in joint initiatives with positive results, especially after the first evacuation of the transit centre.

### *December onwards*

In the days prior to the first evacuation on 9 December 2015, some 2,000 refugees were stranded in Idomeni. Most of them had been in the village for several weeks after the Balkan countries only

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<sup>91</sup> Field observations.

<sup>92</sup> Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 18, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Interviewee 3.

<sup>94</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>95</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>96</sup> Interviewees 2, 7, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Interviewees 2.

<sup>98</sup> Interviewee 2, 12.

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authorised the entry of Afghanis, Iraqis and Syrians in their territories. During that period, a few riots were registered as well as conflicts between FYROM's border patrol and refugees trying to force their way into that country.

In that scenario, the Greek government ordered the removal of the stranded refugees, and offered buses to take them to shelters in Athens. Humanitarian actors and volunteers were temporarily removed from the area during the evacuation. The process was relatively violent, resulting in a riot that destroyed most of the storages in the centre. "It was a difficult time with thousands of people to provide for. It was impossible to organise lines to distribute meals and clothes", remembered an interviewee<sup>99</sup>.

#### *December 2015 - May 2016*

In the aftermath of the evacuation, the Greek authorities put in place a strategy to prevent a large number of refugees from gathering in Idomeni. A camp was improvised in a gas station 20 kilometres away from the village, where buses with refugees had to wait for clearance before heading to the border. Some actors began offering meals and medical support in that location.

That strategy made the transit centre almost empty. During that period, refugees were not usually allowed to use the larger MSF tents. They were forced to stay near FYROM's checkpoint, waiting for the authorisation to cross the border. Most refugees had limited time to get meals, clothes and hygiene products before leaving Greece.

The first evacuation of Idomeni created a more organised and cooperative environment as the actors working in the area improved their relationship. Still, for a few weeks there seemed to be a reduction in the number of independent groups operating in the centre.

Daily meetings to discuss management issues became routine between actors operating in the area. These reunions tackled recurring problems in the transit centre, created unified approaches to these challenges and divided responsibilities amongst the groups. Well coordinated projects, such as the Colours Kitchen, were created. This initiative integrated some organised groups in one project, including members of organisations **one, two and four**. Together, these organisations were able to prepare up to 3,500 wet meals per day by March 2016.

Instead of working in tents as before the evacuation, some of the organisations analysed in this report were allocated into containers in 'Camp B' - an expansion of the centre created around November 2015 to accommodate more refugees. MSF's temporary shelters were upgraded with heating and wooden floors. Among other improvements, more chemical toilets and sinks with drinking water were installed.

By the end of December 2015, the Evangelical Church of Germany started to fund (via organisation **four**) a container where the Colours Kitchen was installed<sup>100</sup>. Professional volunteer chefs prepared the

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<sup>99</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>100</sup> Interviewee 14.

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meals, often with the assistance of refugees. In that period, the meals were distributed by Praksis only in the main 'camp'.

The kitchen was managed in shifts, with organisations **one and four** bringing their own teams and dividing the tasks. Some individuals packed the food, others distributed it, some organised the storage etc. Those who had more field experience inducted the newcomers. Nevertheless, the individuals involved in the operations tended to be the same ones.

Organised groups managed the containers with food and products for babies, pregnant women and personal hygiene. Organisation **one** was keen on keeping an updated inventory of the available items. This time, there was a clear concern in the groups to organise the storages properly. Notes of entries and exits were taken, and at least some items were labelled. "The situation is better now [*January 2016*]. Before, the organisations and the NGOs had no idea on how to deal with the stranded refugees and this led to conflicts", said a member of organisation two<sup>101</sup>. "It was really chaotic before. Everything functioned better after chaos erupted and the camp was rebuilt", argued another interviewee<sup>102</sup>. "Before, you had no organisation and 10 people not knowing what to do", pointed out another interviewee<sup>103</sup>.

By around February 2016, most of the organisations analysed no longer provided clothes to refugees. Their focus shifted into bringing vegetables, oil and other items for the kitchen and for packaging wet meals. The Colours Kitchen was able to run mostly on donations received by the groups until thousands of people became once again stranded in Idomeni by March 2016. In that new scenario, the numbers of refugees kept increasing and the sanitary conditions in the camp quickly deteriorated. The independent groups were put under extreme pressure to significantly increase the amount of meals produced per day, even though they lacked the personnel and the financial resources to do so. Therefore, the MSF funded the extra meals produced by the kitchen.

By late March 2016, 12,000 refugees were stranded in Idomeni (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016). The Colours Kitchen had to start distributing meals in 'Camp B', where organisation **one** became the reference point. Handing out food there involved some challenges, such as creating isolation cords, organising queues and dealing with conflicts caused by refugees trying to jump the line or by large numbers of people demanding more than one meal.

Between March and April, the extremely high amount of work forced organisation **one** to accept help from some refugees. They would pack meals, organise queues, distribute food, carry donations to the storages and act as interpreters (mostly to calm down other refugees during the food handouts). However, this arrangement caused problems because the 'volunteer refugees' received 'extra food' for their services. Therefore, many refugees began to force themselves into the containers trying to find any task as a way to obtain access to the storages or the kitchen - from where they could get more food. As a result, organisation **one** had to refuse assistance from refugees in order to avoid any further

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<sup>101</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>102</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>103</sup> Interviewee 18.

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conflicts. The kitchen kept its activities until the full evacuation of Idomeni in late May 2016.

As described in this chapter, the five subjects analysed in this report showed clear organisational issues and difficulties to cooperate with other actors. These shortcomings are not unique to non-professional aid responders though. They are also common in the professional humanitarian system, as seen in the very problematic humanitarian operations of Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s (Africa Watch Physicians for Human Rights, 1992; Eriksson, 1996). Hence several initiatives were created since then to improve accountability, cooperation and standards (Buchanan-Smith, M. 2003). It is not simple to establish effective cooperation in humanitarian operations, especially amongst professional and nonprofessional local actors. However, most of the five subjects in this report eventually set aside their differences and worked together to manage the transit centre of Idomeni.

MSF, an internationally respected professional humanitarian organisation with all the know-how, structure and funds to work anywhere in the world, engaged with local non-professional actors in order to forge a partnership that would benefit refugees stranded in Idomeni. The French organisation was willing to recognise the legitimacy of new 'untested' local actors, something that many international organisations and agencies tend to be wary of due to concerns over their adherence to humanitarian principles, their professionalism, transparency and accountability, and their operational standards (McGoldrick, 2015). However, as McGoldrick highlights, 'excessively rigid criteria for partnerships have certainly led to lost opportunities' (2015). Establishing solid, well-managed operational partnerships usually takes time and effort. MSF certainly took months observing the work of the local actors it chose to partner up with before it decided to engage with them. But building mutual respect and real commitment is an investment that pays off once 'clear structures and processes are created, strengthening both partners' and enhancing their capacity, according to ICRC (2015). This is what happened when MSF partnered with some of the organisations analysed in this report in Idomeni, putting in practice advices by WHS and ICRC.

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## 3.2. Working together

As previously discussed, a fair amount of the problems faced by the five subjects analysed here in Idomeni could be attributed to the unwillingness of some to collaborate with external actors. This is not to say that they did not cooperate with others, but some would not engage deeply<sup>104</sup>. Organisation **one** was by far the most open to partnerships. It handed clothes and shoes out in a shared tent with several independent organised groups in Idomeni; it occasionally distributed initiative **five's** backpacks and it worked well with organisation **two, four** and Praksis<sup>105</sup>. “We want to create solidarity networks, exchange good practices, and avoid doing things that other groups are already doing”, said a member of organisation one<sup>106</sup>.

Organisation **two** also cooperated with various groups, but it admittedly lacked coordination<sup>107</sup> and had political differences with others. “There have been efforts to cooperate but many did not work well. There are many differences”, said a member of organisation two<sup>108</sup>. Organisation **three** tended to be the most wary about cooperating with external actors. However, it did work alongside other groups in the beginning of its activities in Idomeni and it partnered up with initiative **five** to distribute its backpacks<sup>109</sup>. On the long run, though, its political beliefs isolated organisation **three**. Organisation **four** was open to cooperation, having worked with organisation **one** and Save the Children in Idomeni ‘because they were already there’<sup>110</sup>. However, it would manage the Colours Kitchen on Wednesdays only with its own team<sup>111</sup>.

Most interviewees agreed that fully cooperating with other humanitarian actors in Idomeni was a difficult goal to achieve due to their political and ideological differences. “Some groups cannot work together. There are conflicts. Here [*in organisation one*] we work with everyone, but other groups do not. Everyone has a political movement as their background”, pointed out an associate of organisation one<sup>112</sup>. “Sometimes there are problems [*with other groups*], especially when they know that I have political ideas [*associated with a radical left party*]. I find it troubling to collaborate”, argued a member

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<sup>104</sup> Nineteen interviews from November 2015 to February 2016 and field observations.

<sup>105</sup> Interviewees 2,7,8.

<sup>106</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>107</sup> Interviewee 8.

<sup>108</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>109</sup> Interviewees 1, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Interviewee 13.

<sup>111</sup> Field observations.

<sup>112</sup> Interviewee 2.

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of organisation two<sup>113</sup>. Another associate of the same organisation went further on to say that some groups 'hated' each other<sup>114</sup>.

Members of organisation **four** seemed less concerned about politics, but some resented being unable to get their Christian messages across to refugees. They feared that preaching their faith in the transit centre would create conflicts with their partners. "You cannot preach to the refugees, so we just show them love", said an associate of that organisation<sup>115</sup>. "The problem is that we would like to talk about Jesus, but we understand that this is not possible", said another<sup>116</sup>.

A second common issue revolved around cooperating with NGOs. Organisation **three** strongly opposed partnering with professional actors<sup>117</sup>. An associate of organisation **four** stated having problems with NGOs 'because they had different goals' ("we work for God, they get paid"). A different member said the nonprofits were not actually making an effort to help refugees<sup>118</sup>. Nevertheless, the organisation did not refuse to cooperate with them. "There were times when they were just sitting down and we were doing all the work. They often said they would not give some items to refugees", remembered an associate of organisation **four**<sup>119</sup>.

Several individuals from organisation **one** found the rhetoric of shutting down collaborations with professional actors unreasonable. "When we have an honest motivation to find solutions for a problem, we have to collaborate with those who want to help. Not collaborating with Praxis just because some of its members are paid is an unreal logic", said a member of that organisation<sup>120</sup>.

One of the issues that tends to hinder cooperation with professional organisations is the absence of commitment of local actors with values such as impartiality. Certainly, as described in episodes in previous chapters, most of the actors analysed here lacked impartiality in alarming levels.

Organisations **three** put its political/ideological agenda above any cooperation with actors that had different views, even if that meant decreasing its effectiveness in helping migrants. Some members of **organisation four** resented being unable to talk about Christianity with refugees, when even considering such idea was ethically absurd if one analyses the vulnerability of the refugees receiving their assistance and the power asymmetry between recipients and givers (see Harrell-Bond, B., Voutira, E. and Leopold, M. 1992). **Organisation one**, as described previously, recruited refugees to assist in the kitchen and gave the 'selected ones' benefits that other refugees did not have. One could argue that these examples make a strong case against cooperation between professional international

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<sup>113</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>114</sup> Interviewee 8.

<sup>115</sup> Interviewee 15.

<sup>116</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>117</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>118</sup> Interviewee 16.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Interviewee 10.

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humanitarian organisations and agencies and non-professional actors. On the other hand, these flaws do not necessarily diminish the relevance that local actors have in providing aid. Sometimes, these actors will object to certain professional guidelines to which they disagree or consider unfair, such as organisation **three** did by questioning a distributive justice model for aid distribution that often leave people starving (Harrell-Bond, B., Voutira, E. and Leopold, M. 1992). Hence, Shaw-Hamilton points out that it is also important to understand that ‘newly recognised humanitarian communities treat accountability and humanitarian principles differently’, being necessary to ‘understand the organisations and their values’ (2012).

### **3.3. Helping refugees and motivation**

The mobilisation of civilians to help refugees across Greece was a truly impressive one. In this scenario, locals and international volunteers played a crucial role in providing a level of basic assistance that should have been offered mostly by the government, the EU or well structured NGOs/INGOs. The commitment of Greek islanders to rescuing refugees reaching their shores culminated in their nomination to the Nobel Peace Prize of 2016, for instance.

It is fair to say that part of the population took into its hands the responsibility to deal with the refugee crisis. Such reaction led 74 per cent of the interviewees to believe that they had never



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experienced such a large social mobilisation. Many mentioned being proud of their countrymen/women for helping others in times of intense economic struggle, and doing so with no support from the government<sup>121</sup>. “Greeks are very generous. Even when they do not have any spare money. I have seen people I know do not have money donating clothes and supplies”, said a member of organisation **four**<sup>122</sup>.

Many did not expect that the mobilisation would grow so rapidly or maintain its momentum for so long. “When we started collecting donations, we did not expect it to be much of a big deal. However, we had to rent a new storage to stockpile clothes and food that we received”, said a member of organisation one<sup>123</sup>. “The mobilisation is quite big in the sense that many people who do not know us, ended up finding our work and making donations to refugees”, pointed out an associate of organisation two<sup>124</sup>. “We have many friends [*personal friends and faith friends*] who want to join us. Our evangelical network team has about 400 volunteers”, revealed a member of organisation four<sup>125</sup>.

The extent of the mobilisation was, however, not unanimous amongst the interviewees. “I do see people mobilising, which is good. The younger generation understands the problem more and wants to help more than it can. In this sense, I think it is a limited effort. It could be bigger if there was assistance by the government”, argued an interviewee<sup>126</sup>.

Some also highlighted the disparity levels between material support and actual commitment in the field. “Those who are actually involved in Idomeni, the hotspots and the islands are relatively few. It is normal because people have their jobs and lives. But most Greeks contributed with clothes and food at some point. The degree of solidarity was incredible”, said a member of organisation two<sup>127</sup>.

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<sup>121</sup> Conclusions drawn from 19 interviews taken between November 2015 and February 2016 with individuals involved in the assistance to refugees in Thessaloniki and Idomeni.

<sup>122</sup> Interviewee 13.

<sup>123</sup> Interviewee 19.

<sup>124</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>125</sup> Interviewee 15.

<sup>126</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>127</sup> Interviewee 12.

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An older individual remembered similar mobilisations during moments of crisis in the Balkans, quoting the war in Serbia and tensions in Albania<sup>128</sup>. “Greeks have always been very generous. My parents hosted an Albanian man for one year in their house<sup>129</sup>”.

It is important to point out that the sample of interviewees of this report (which do not include inhabitants of the other areas of Greece affected by the refugee crisis) is insufficient to extrapolate the results as the general perception of Greeks on the subject.

### *Getting involved*

Several interviewees revealed they joined projects for refugees in their organisations after discovering them online (mostly via social media), hearing about them from colleagues or seeing news of the crisis in the news<sup>130</sup>. “In the first month, volunteers came to my store because people know that I work for the municipality. However, I used all the media possible, including a Facebook page for my project and interviews to journalists”, said the head of initiative **five**<sup>131</sup>.

Organisations **one to four** also used social media to attract new members. They also invested in convincing friends and other personal connections to join. Organisation **four**, for instance, ‘recruited’ members of the Evangelical church<sup>132</sup>. Nevertheless, a considerable part of those connected to refugee projects already had prior links to the organisations analysed in this report.

### *Who was helping?*

Even though the profile of the interviewees should not be seen as quantitatively representative of the entire mobilisation in Thessaloniki, it does offer some clues about those involved in the movement.

As graph 1 shows, the vast majority of the interviewees were women, which does not necessarily reflect the demographic of the membership in the organisations analysed. Nonetheless, the female/male ratio observed was consistent with that of the teams working in projects for refugees, whether in Thessaloniki or Idomeni<sup>133</sup>. There was simply more women than men involved in such programs.

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<sup>128</sup> Interviewees 13.

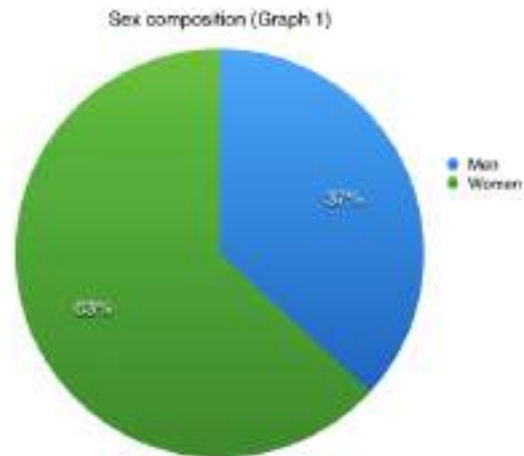
<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Interviewees 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 18.

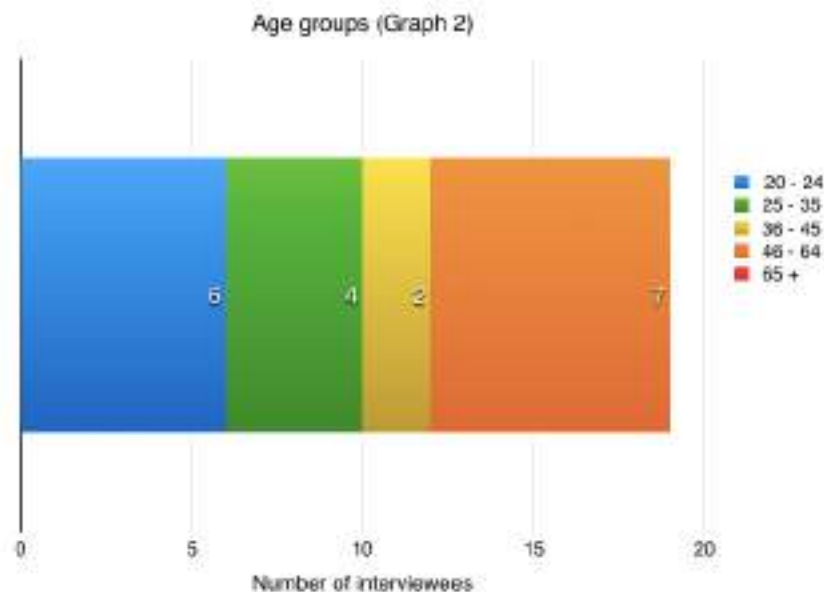
<sup>131</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>132</sup> Interviewees 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 18.

<sup>133</sup> Field observations from October 2015 to March 2016 and formal interviews.



The two most represented age groups amongst the interviewees were 20-24 and 46-64 years-old, as one can see in graph 2. Eighty per cent of the respondents - which does not include the students interviewed (see footnote) - had some type of employment while engaged in refugee related projects (whether full or part time). Only 20 per cent were unemployed<sup>134</sup>.

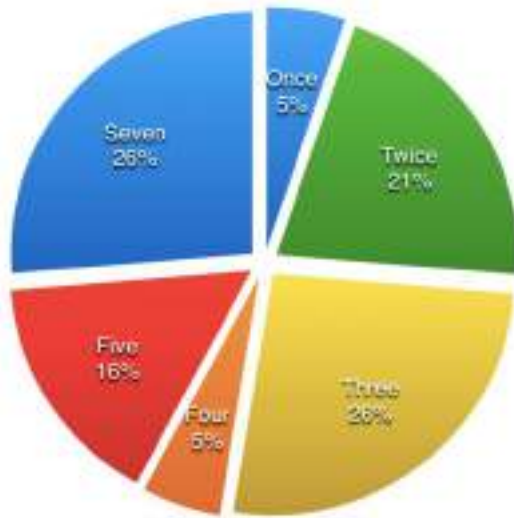


Twenty-six per cent of the interviewees used to come to the their organisations' headquarters everyday of the week. A fourth of them showed up at least three times, and a fifth appeared five times. Thus, 68 per cent of them dedicated at least three days of the week to their organisations, mostly working in projects for refugees (graph 3)<sup>135</sup>.

<sup>134</sup> Students with no job were removed from this calculation because their main occupation was to study. Their proportion in relation to whole number of interviewees is 21 per cent.

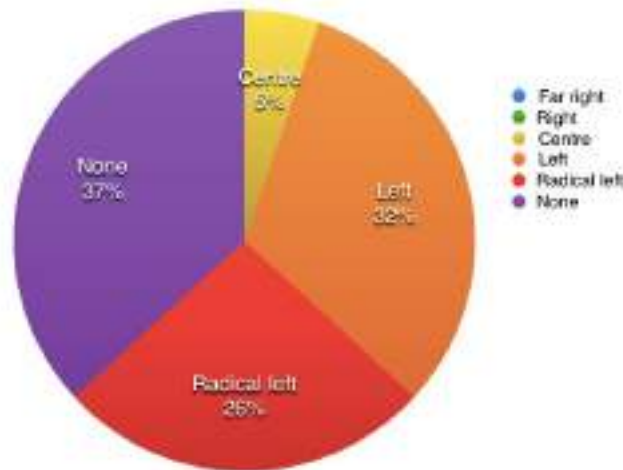
<sup>135</sup> Field observations.

Days spent in the projects per week (Graph 3)



Sixty-three per cent of the respondents did not identify with any political party in Greece, against 37 per cent who did (71 percent identified with Syriza and 29 per cent with the Green Party). However, most of them had leftwing political tendencies. Thirty-two per cent considered themselves leftwing, 26 per cent were radical left, 5 per cent considered themselves as 'centre' and 37 per cent had no preference (Graph 4).

Political spectrum (Graph 4)



### *Motivation*

The main reasons mentioned by the respondents for helping refugees are divided into four categories: 1) the argument that refugees needed support appeared 14 times; 2) personal duty

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was mentioned 11 times; 3) personal gratification appeared 10 times; 4) religious reasons were quoted six times<sup>136</sup>. Fifty-two per cent of the interviewees were simultaneously motivated by at least two of the categories above - many presented more than one reason for their involvement with projects for refugees. A couple of secondary reasons were discussed, such as the lack of action by the government<sup>137</sup>, spare time to be involved<sup>138</sup> and the proximity of Thessaloniki to Idomeni<sup>139</sup>.

Personal gratification was defined by when interviewees stated that they hoped to improve themselves in some way by helping refugees, or when they felt rewarded by doing so. For example: "If we help someone, you become a better person. You can understand how that person feels", said a member of organisation one<sup>140</sup>. "It makes me feel good with myself the fact that I am making something nice for someone in a difficult journey, rather than going out", stated another associate of that organisation<sup>141</sup>."

Personal obligation was classified as when the interviewees mentioned feeling obliged to help, whether due to personal values (e.g. solidarity) or because they had been refugees themselves or had refugees in their families. For example: "I should try to keep the things I believe alive. I cannot say only that I am a leftist person and do nothing for the things I believe", said a member of organisation three<sup>142</sup>. "If I want to have dignity I have to help other people live with dignity. Greece is a refugee nation. Many people left this country because of WWII and the dictatorship. So it is our duty to help people that helped us in the past", argued an individual from organisation two<sup>143</sup>.

The category 'refugees need help' incorporated arguments defending humanitarianism due to the harsh conditions faced by refugees in their countries of origin and in Greece. For instance: "I saw the situation in first hand in Samos. I saw the state in which they arrived at the shores and the difficult situations they faced to come here. They need our help to overcome this moment", said a

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<sup>136</sup> In some cases, interviewees quoted one of the four main reasons more than once in their replies. Thus, the figures mentioned in the paragraph include these repetitions in the final number.

<sup>137</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>138</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>139</sup> Interviewees 13, 16.

<sup>140</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>141</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>142</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>143</sup> Interviewee 8.

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member of organisation two<sup>144</sup>.” “The sight of people fleeing with children and not having anyone to help makes me want to support them”, told a member of the same group<sup>145</sup>.

The last category, ‘religious reasons’ incorporated those who helped refugees mainly because of their Christian values<sup>146</sup>. “No matter their purpose [*of the refugees coming to Europe*] or who they are. We are supposed to show them the love of God. We must put ourselves in their situation. What would I do for my family if my place was in war?”, argued a member of organisation four<sup>147</sup>.”

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<sup>144</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>145</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>146</sup> Interviewees 13, 14, 15, 16, 17.

<sup>147</sup> Interviewee 15.

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### 3.4. Social Media

Social media was a crucial platform to foster engagement in the projects run by the subjects of this report. All five initiatives, as well as some of their members, relied on Facebook to attract attention and personnel to their efforts. That platform was also used to gather donations.

Initiative **five** was the most prolific on Facebook amongst the initiatives analysed. The project itself started after its creator shared the idea for the backpacks on that platform and requested the items to assemble the bags on a personal profile<sup>148</sup>. “In the first two or three days, many people donated and my storage became full. I could not move in there anymore. It was then that I realised the power of social media<sup>149</sup>.” Following the positive response, the project gained its own official page with instructions on how to support the initiative, including videos on efficient ways of packing clothes for distribution to refugees.

Organisations **one to four** often used Facebook to request supplies in high demand in Idomeni. Organisations **one to three** frequently used social media to publicise events organised to raise funds for their overall activities, such as parties and festivals. “It was easy enough to write on Facebook what we need for the refugees in Idomeni and the islands. I am proud of Greeks for their support”, said a member of the organisation three<sup>150</sup>.

Facebook was used often by individual members of these organisations as a way of allowing others to follow their activities in Idomeni. The coordinator of the baby sling project within organisation **one** often posted pictures of refugees receiving the product on personal and official pages. “I have a Facebook page and the response has been good. People care about the baby carriers”, the coordinator said<sup>151</sup>.

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<sup>148</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>149</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>150</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>151</sup> Interviewee 5.

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## 4. Feelings towards refugees and the mobilisation

Greece's modern history is deeply intertwined to that of refugees. During the country's civil war (1946-1949), vast amounts of Greeks sought international protection. Decades later, in 1990s and early 2000s, Greece consistently received thousands of Iraqis and Iranians refugees, among others nationals<sup>152</sup>. In the past few years, the nation's Aegean Sea coastline became the main entry point for millions of people fleeing war and persecution in places like Syria and Eritrea.

Massive influxes of refugees are not particularly new to Greece. A similar situation occurred in the 1920s in an episode described nationally as 'the tragedy of Asia Minor' (HIRSCHON, 1998). In the aftermath of World War I, the country was given control over Thrace and 'received a mandate from the Great Powers (the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy) to occupy the region of Smyrna (currently known as Izmir) in Asia Minor', which was inhabited by dense Greek populations (STEPHANOPOULOS, C 1998). Those concessions were granted by the Treaty of Sèvres (Treaty of Sèvres, 1920).

In 1921, the Greek military tried to enforce the treaty by launching a failed offensive against Turkey. The Turkish nationalist regime repudiated the agreement and a war between the two countries ensued. With the defeat, Greece's troops withdrew from Asia Minor and returned part of Thrace's control to Turkey (STEPHANOPOULOS, C). Two years later, Greece had to accept the Lausanne Peace Treaty. In order to avoid new territorial disputes in Turkey (Human Rights Watch, 1999), the agreement defined that the Muslim minorities living in Greece should be compulsorily sent to Turkey. Likewise, the Turkish government would dispatch its ethnically Greek Orthodox population to Greece. Those minorities groups then became refugees by the hands of their own States.

Both groups lost the nationality of their countries of origin. In exchange, they received the citizenship of their new host nation (Government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and Greek Government, 1923). These individuals were prohibited from living in their previous countries without the authorisation of the governments that had expelled them (Government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and Greek Government, 1923).

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<sup>152</sup> For exact numbers, see UNHCR's Statistical Yearbooks from 1994 to 2000 at <http://www.unhcr.org/statistical-yearbooks.html>.



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Around 1.5 million people had to be relocated under the treaty. Of those, more than a million were sent to Greece, increasing the country's population by a quarter (HIRSCHON, 1998). Hundreds of thousands were resettled in rural properties in the Greek Macedonia (KRITIKOS, 2013). Therefore, many of the region's current inhabitants are descendants of those refugees. Such familiarity with the subject appeared to have influenced many civilians to mobilise in Thessaloniki and Idomeni, as shown in the sections below.

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## 4.1. Empathy

Despite the considerable growth in poverty in Greece due to nearly a decade of economic austerity, there has been plenty of empathy for refugees arriving in the country. Most members of the five initiatives analysed stressed that even in difficult times ordinary citizens flooded their storages with donations. These contributions, many argued, came from people struggling to make ends meet<sup>153</sup>. “I have seen people I know do not have money donating supplies”, said a member of organisation four<sup>154</sup>. “Even though, we have big economical and humanitarian problems, it is very good to see a lot of people trying to help”, argued an interviewee<sup>155</sup>.

A similar picture of empathy is painted by a survey conducted by the Greek non-profit diaNEOsis. After carrying out 1,220 telephone interviews in January 2016, the organisation concluded that the respondents had an ‘extremely high opinion’ of the Aegean islanders who helped rescuing refugees, of the coast guard and of the NGOs that received the refugees (Dianeosis, 2016). The survey also showed a positive opinion about refugees: 58 per cent of the interviewees declared that they had ‘actively demonstrated solidarity with refugees’ by offering food (39 per cent), clothing (31 per cent), and financial assistance (10 per cent) and by volunteering (4 per cent) (Dianeosis, 2016). A July 2016 survey conducted in 10 EU countries by the nonpartisan organisation Pew Research Centre brings a different scenario though. Fifty-five per cent of the Greek respondents considered that ‘refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism’ in the country. Another 72 per cent believed ‘refugees are a burden on our country because they take our jobs and social benefits’, while the average for the countries analysed was 50 per cent (Wike, Stokes and Simmons, 2016).

In the much smaller sample of this report, some humanitarian actors stated directly or implied that the more affluent part of Thessaloniki’s population was disinterested in pro-refugee relief efforts. “The wealthy are not so involved. I asked large companies to support my project, but they did not care. The small factories, that should be selling their items, were the ones that donated a lot”, point out the coordinator of initiative five<sup>156</sup>. “Everyone is doing as much as they can. People who have much less to give are making donations. Not the rich ones. The average ones, poor maybe”, said an interviewee<sup>157</sup>.

Even though the donations were pouring in rapidly (mostly from October to December 2015), some interviewees stated that the mobilisation could be larger, especially because the crisis was at the country’s ‘front door’<sup>158</sup>. A few brought up anti-refugee movements led by the Golden Dawn<sup>159</sup> and mentioned that refugees had been exploited by unscrupulous individuals in the country<sup>160</sup>.

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<sup>153</sup> Interviewees 6, 9, 12.

<sup>154</sup> Interviewee 13.

<sup>155</sup> Interviewee 10.

<sup>156</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>157</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>158</sup> Interviewees 1, 2, 7, 8, 9.

<sup>159</sup> Interviewee 8.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

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Virtually all interviewees stated or implied that they helped refugees because they empathised with their struggle or with human suffering in a general way. Frequently, these two feelings were pointed out by the same individuals. Some of them also said they had been immigrants or had family living abroad<sup>161</sup>, which led them to perceive refugees through more compassionate lenses.

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<sup>161</sup> Interviewees 6, 14.

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## 4.2. Relating with refugees

The vast majority of the interviewees (68.4 per cent) became involved in relief projects for refugees because they perceive Greece as country of refugees. From this group, 26.3 per cent had refugees in their own families and 10.5 per cent were refugees themselves. Twenty-one per cent mentioned that Greeks are related to refugees in general, even though they were not in either of the two previous categories. The respondents recognised Greece's modern history both as a producer of refugees and as host country.

These relatively fresh experiences with refugees, alongside the country's history of economic immigration to more prosperous areas of the globe, seemed to have boosted the empathy of many interviewees' towards refugees<sup>162</sup>. The language used by most respondents was very often one of solidarity. As one of them put it: "Greeks know what is like to be a refugee"<sup>163</sup>. His family had fled Turkey to Greece in the early 1920s during the Greek-Turkish war.

"Greece is country where people have experienced being refugees and immigrants. This has left imprints in our collective idea. Because everyone who sees these people suffering may very well see their families in the same position", said one interviewee<sup>164</sup>.

"We all have grandparents who were refugees. The current refugees came from a similar situation as my grandmother, an orphan of the war who came from Turkey in 1926 with her sister", revealed the coordinator of initiative five<sup>165</sup>. "My family was refugee at some point. This influences the way I see the topic", mentioned an associate of organisation two<sup>166</sup>.

A common narrative amongst the respondents was helping those in need was a duty, since Greeks received help in the past when experiencing similar situations. "At first, I thought Greeks did not like the refugees. But as the time went by, so many people got more familiar with this problem. Greece is a country of refugees, everyone has a relative who is a refugee. My family was a refugee family too. Because of this, people started to treat refugees better<sup>167</sup>", said a member of organisation one. "When I see the refugees, I see myself as one of them right in front of me. And I want to help", stated another interviewee<sup>168</sup>.

"I want to help them because they have to live with dignity and we have nothing different from them. Greek people were helped by many other people, especially from Syria in WWII. The Greek nation is a refugee nation, many people have left this country to live abroad because of WWII or the dictatorship.

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<sup>162</sup> Interviewees 6, 10, 14.

<sup>163</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>164</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>165</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>166</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>167</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>168</sup> Interviewee 14.

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It's our historical duty to help them. I think the Greeks help the refugees because we see them as equals", said a member of organisation two<sup>169</sup>.

"This is something we have already faced and it comes as natural for us to help. It's in our genes. The ancient Greeks had 12 Gods and one of them was the God of Hospitality. So, it is something sacred and high, because Greeks have been refugees many times. Greek society is open, as opposed to Northern Europe. We open our houses, feed you and give you what you need", said another<sup>170</sup>.

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<sup>169</sup> Interviewee 8.

<sup>170</sup> Interviewee 13.

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### 4.3. Perceptions about refugees

A general perception amongst the interviewees was that most refugees arriving in Greece had been genuinely forced to flee wars or serious danger in their countries of origin. Many respondents often used the word ‘escaping’ to explain why so many people were knocking on Greek’s doors. These individuals also appeared to have basic knowledge on the conflict in Syria and on security issues in Iraq<sup>171</sup>. “I believe that they are people forced to flee their countries and that since there is a war it is reasonable that they cannot stay there”, said one interviewee<sup>172</sup>. “They are fleeing war and lost everything. I believe that everybody must do something for them because if I was on their position I would need somebody to help me know I am not alone”, stated a member of organisation one<sup>173</sup>.

There was a perception that refugees were vulnerable individuals who could not wait until the government offered them help. Therefore, many interviewees felt the obligation to provide this assistance themselves<sup>174</sup>. “We see children, women and men running for their lives and drowning in the sea. It is in our country, only a few hours away. Nobody will swim at that beach and be calm again”, said an associate of organisation one<sup>175</sup>.

On this topic, diaNEOsis’ survey showed that 67 per cent of Greeks expressed positive feelings towards refugees, while 84 per cent claimed that they sympathise with them. Sixty-six percent had a positive perception of the word ‘asylum,’ 58 per cent had a positive perception of a ‘multi-cultural society’, and 66 per cent did not want Greece to close its borders as other European did because most refugees were ‘peaceful people’ (Dianeosis, 2016). The Pew Research Centre survey once again painted a different image: 65 per cent of the respondents in Greece had unfavourable views of Muslims and 78 per cent believed Muslims do not want to integrate in the European way of living. This perception of Muslims is a relevant aspect because most refugees entering Europe come from majority-Muslim nations (e.g. Syria and Iraq). Being Muslim and refugee in Greece are two highly connected points. The survey does indicate, though, that such negative perception of Muslims is much more prominent amongst those who define themselves politically as ‘right wing’ (81 per cent versus 50 per cent of ‘leftists’) (Wike, Stokes and Simmons, 2016).

A few members of the organisations analysed in this report disputed the language used by the media and the EU to classify those arriving in the country, refusing to accept the use of the term ‘economic migrants’ for some people. “I hate the explanations that they are economic migrants. In Somalia, many children die of hunger daily. What is the difference between economic migrants and war migrants? They are also war migrants, they flee the economic war against the poor”, argued an associate of organisation three<sup>176</sup>. “Refugees and migrants are the same. My daughter is an immigrant in Holland

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<sup>171</sup> Interviewees 4,5,6,8,11,16,19.

<sup>172</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>173</sup> Interviewee 19.

<sup>174</sup> Interviewees 6,11,9,12.

<sup>175</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>176</sup> Interviewee 6.

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because she does not have a job here. Many of our boys and girls have gone to Germany and America because of the financial crisis”, said another interviewee<sup>177</sup>.

In general, the respondents did not show a negative perception of refugees. A couple of them did, however, associate high levels of migration with the possibility of increase in crime rates and terrorism. These connotations were followed by the ponderation that refugees should not be perceived as a security threat though<sup>178</sup>. Other interviewees explicitly disputed the link between refugees and terrorism, mostly perceiving them as victims of groups such as the Islamic State.

“It is very important to give them a chance to have a secondary nation because their nation is being destroyed by ISIS and others. There are people that used be from middle classes, so we cannot accuse them of being criminals. I don’t think they will be a problem in our societies”, said an associate of organisation two<sup>179</sup>. “Yesterday they were like me. They had family, jobs, etc. All of the sudden, they lost everything. I wish people would look at them more individually than generalising, and calling them bad people. There are good people there and the terrorists are making a bad name for all of their people”, argued a member of organisation one<sup>180</sup>.

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<sup>177</sup> Interviewee 14.

<sup>178</sup> Interviewee 4,13.

<sup>179</sup> Interviewee 8.

<sup>180</sup> Interviewee 9.



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## 4.4. Reactions to the mobilisation

Even though the pro-refugee mobilisation in Greece was generally widespread, the examples of aggressiveness towards migrants were also extensive (Smith and Kingsley, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016). In November 2016, Molotov cocktails and large rocks were thrown at the Souda refugee, in the island of Chios. The attackers were linked with the far-right party Golden Dawn. Two people were injured and many others left the area fearing for their security (Smith and Kingsley). In July 2016, an unofficial shelter for refugees in Athens suffered an arson attack (Amnesty International, 2017). In its 2017 World Report, Human Rights Watch called attention to reports from civil society groups about an increase in attacks and intimidation of asylum seekers and migrants ‘on the islands and in the mainland’, and to an inadequate police response’ (2017). Amnesty International also reported ‘allegations of torture or other ill-treatment’ of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants ‘during arrest or in immigration detention’. The organisation mentioned the case of five Syrian boys who ‘were beaten up by policemen and forced to strip naked’ in a police station in Athens after being apprehended while carrying ‘toy guns’ that they were playing with (2017).

A similar scenario was experienced by interviewees of this research. Forty-seven per cent reported to have been directly or indirectly exposed to negative comments regarding their involvement with projects for refugees. The respondents would generally be questioned why they were helping refugees ‘instead of struggling Greeks’. Most of these comments happened on Facebook, whether on the respondents’ personal accounts or their organisations’. In at least one case, a few of the respondents also experienced aggression from a local member of the community.

“I wrote the idea for the backpacks on my Facebook profile. The first two or three days I had negative comments, not only from strangers, but friends and volunteer groups”, said the coordinator of initiative five<sup>181</sup>. “Particularly, we did not have bad comments, but some fascists asked why [there is] only help for the refugees and not for Greeks. It is a stupid question because we also help Greeks. The solidarity kitchen has existed for five years now, way before the refugee crisis started”, argued a member of organisation three<sup>182</sup>. “Some people say ‘you give food to refugees and do not care about Greeks suffering’, but they do not know what we do”, an associate of organisation one said<sup>183</sup>.

One day in late November 2015, an elderly local woman entered the storage of organisation **one**. At that moment, clothes were being sorted out for distribution in Idomeni. She wanted to take a few garments immediately. The distribution of donations to locals occurred on Fridays, when they could collect, among other items, a bag with dried food and hygiene products. On Mondays, wet meals were available to the local poor. Unable to get what she wanted due to the organisation’s rules, the woman became enraged. Before leaving the room, she yelled: ‘Everything now is for Syrians. Greeks have become second class citizens’.

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<sup>181</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>182</sup> Interviewee 6.

<sup>183</sup> Interviewee 2.

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This sentiment was reflected in other situations around Greece. In July 2016, a series of assaults against refugees and migrants occurred in Leros. After locals attacked refugees, they turned to threatening aid workers in the island's main camp, forcing many international volunteers and organisations to halt their operations. Some left the island. A member of a charity group in Leros said that volunteers were 'confronted and attacked by a group of Greek men', and then she received a phone call and 'was told to leave the island' or 'something terrible would happen' (Strickland, 2016). In October 2017, two Pakistani migrants who were working in a field in Greater Athens were attacked by 'a group of men using iron bars and knives'. The two migrants were hospitalised. According to their reports, the attackers 'yelled racist taunts as they struck their heads and bodies'. The police recorded 75 such incidents in the first half of 2017 alone (Strickland).

Despite the accusations of favouring refugees over Greeks, organisations **one to four** maintained projects aimed at relieving poverty in Thessaloniki. These initiatives included frequent distribution of food and clothes, and access to basic healthcare for locals. Thus, the majority of interviewees complained that their detractors were unaware of their work<sup>184</sup>. "We can help Greeks and refugees. With the backpacks, I have created a network that I can use to help the locals", said the organiser of initiative five<sup>185</sup>. "The items that are not suitable for refugees, can be used for the solidarity movement", argued a member of organisation one<sup>186</sup>. "It is not just for the refugees. We help others in Greece. The church has a food bank", told an associate of organisation four<sup>187</sup>.

Members of organisation **two** fiercely emphasised having started their solidarity movement three years prior the refugee crisis in order to help locals<sup>188</sup>. They run campaigns for several causes, besides offering cultural activities and free English and Greek classes to poor students.

Regardless of eventual negative comments, the interviewees believed that the Greek society in general was supportive of their work<sup>189</sup>. "I believe that if were not for the volunteers, things would be much much worse in Idomeni and in Lesbos", said an interviewee<sup>190</sup>. "I'm very moved by the level of mobilisation of the people. This kind of solidarity is embedded in our personal experience of being refugees before", argued another humanitarian<sup>191</sup>. "I'm very proud of my countrymen and women. The Greeks are very generous even when they do not have any money, they still give", stated an associate of organisation four<sup>192</sup>.

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<sup>184</sup> Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16.

<sup>185</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>186</sup> Interviewee 9.

<sup>187</sup> Interviewee 16.

<sup>188</sup> Interviewees 4, 8, 11, 12.

<sup>189</sup> Interviews 10, 12, 14, 16.

<sup>190</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>191</sup> Interviewee 19.

<sup>192</sup> Interviewee 13.

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## 5. Conclusion

The large influx of refugees arriving in Greece in the past two years has put the country under extreme pressure. Since 2015, over 1 million people entered Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, the vast majority of them through Greek shores (UNHCR, 2016). During the peak of the crisis, hundreds of local organised groups, volunteers and NGOs/INGOs had to step in to help an overwhelmed Greek government to provide basic assistance to refugees. In this scenario, the five initiatives analysed in this report highlight the crucial role played by civilians in the emergency response in the country. In Thessaloniki and Idomeni, non-professional humanitarian actors provided aid that would have otherwise been unavailable. These groups, alongside with professional INGOs/NGOs, were critical in alleviating human suffering.

Organisations **one**, **three** and **four** began operating in Idomeni months before well established INGOs started their response in Greece. These local non-professional actors proved to be valuable assets in the transit centre, a makeshift camp that the Greek government refused to support but was “obligated to tolerate” until it “was in position to transfer” the refugees stranded there to accommodation centres (Press Office of the Spokesperson for the Management of the Refugee Crisis, 2016).

Maintaining continuous operations in Idomeni and Thessaloniki was a significant achievement for these five initiatives, particularly considering their inexperience in emergency response scenarios and their lack of official support from the government. They showed strong commitment and creative thinking not only to keep their members engaged, but to find ways of raising funds and to overcome logistical obstacles. Although these initiatives struggled to deal with the scope of the crisis and failed to follow relevant codes of conduct, they showed a clear improvement in their capabilities by the end of the period analysed.

In the early stages of the transit centre (from October to early November 2015), some of the organisations (especially **one** and **three**) were unable to efficiently implement their projects due to several factors, including poor organisation. These issues led to a great amount of duplicated work, extra burden on volunteers, inefficient food handouts and high levels of stress. During this period, the absence of mechanisms to help coordinate the groups operating in Idomeni, had a negative impact on organisational efficiency. However, once non-professional actors decided to put aside their ideological/political views and accepted working collaboratively with professional humanitarian actors, it proved to be vital for the management of the transit centre in Idomeni.

Learning how to work with professional organisations was a comprehensive step for these subjects, especially for those that adopted a horizontal structure. For organisation **one**, for instance, cooperating with traditional humanitarian actors meant accepting some level of hierarchy and top down decisions. In the village, the organisation even defined a ‘coordinator’ to take part in the management meetings.

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Idomeni presented complex and evolving challenges. Considering their many limitations, the subjects managed to deliver strong results by helping to keep the centre operational. A successful case of cooperation was the kitchen managed mainly by organisations **one** and **four**. By March 2016, the project was producing over 3,000 meals per day, a portion of them financed by the MSF. The French organisation investment in these local non-professional actors was a sign of recognition of their work and legitimacy, which allowed the opportunity to increase their capability.

In the five initiatives analysed, the level of commitment to the activities in Idomeni and Thessaloniki was extremely high. After the closure of the transit centre, some of the organisations even expanded their projects. As of November 2017, organisation **one** is running a centre for migrants<sup>193</sup> and homeless in Thessaloniki, financed by German evangelical groups. The location offers psychosocial support, clothes (most of them donated in the peak of the refugee crisis), shoes, hygiene products, free showers and access to wash and drying machines.

One should consider that many members of these initiatives implemented projects for refugees while their members experienced negative feedback from part of Greek society. Yet they remained committed. Their work helped to build momentum for the social mobilisation in Northern Greece. Their efforts were certainly not flawless, with several issues ranging from lack of experience, structure and training to the absence of a code of conduct. However, their impact went beyond the refugees. The coordinator of initiative **five** planned to use leftover donations to help the locals. Organisations **one** and **four** developed strong connections to foreign donors that can now bear fruits to future projects, including those tackling local poverty that might have not been on the radar of international financiers before. In summary, despite their many shortcomings, the five initiatives analysed managed to assert themselves as legitimate actors on their own right.

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<sup>193</sup> The location also provides services to economic migrants. It is not exclusive to refugees.

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## **Annex 1.**

### **Date and location of the interviews**

Interviewee 1, 14 December 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 2, 17 November 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 3, 28 January 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 4, 28 January 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 5, 6 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 6, 16 December 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 7, 6 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 8, 16 December 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 9, 6 February 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 10, 6 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 11, 16 December 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 12, 16 December 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 13, 3 February 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 14, 15 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 15, 15 February 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 16, 15 February 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 17, 15 February 2016, Idomeni, Greece  
Interviewee 18, 15 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 19, 15 February 2016, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 20, 18 November 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Interviewee 21, 18 November 2015, Thessaloniki, Greece

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**Table - Initiatives analysed**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Organisation <b>one</b>	Connected to the Green Movement/ Green Party
Organisation <b>two</b>	Run by Youth of Syriza
Organisation <b>three</b>	Run by individuals of anarchist inclinations
Organisation <b>four</b>	Run by an Evangelical Alliance
Initiative <b>five</b>	Run by one independent person