

GRASS ROOTS

THE
COVID
ISSUE

Issue #2
20th June 2020
World Refugee Day
Theme: Covid-19

An **Action for Education** Publication
www.actionforeducation.org

Looking for Solid Ground

Alise Shafer Ivey
The Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles

When nations turn their backs on those fleeing war, violence, religious persecution, and domestic abuse, children are often the collateral damage, caught in the crossfire of political machinations. The Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles, commonly referred to as PILA, is a grassroots organization that supports vulnerable children worldwide by providing early educational experiences that mitigate the effects of extreme stress and trauma.

Like most grassroots movements, we take the ground for granted – where there’s grass and there are roots, there is always ground. And from this ground we build. Yet suddenly, as COVID-19 ravages what was already a bleak landscape for millions of refugee children worldwide, the ground is harder and harder to identify. Shuttered in our Los Angeles office, with our funding and mission stalled, we struggle to find solid ground on which to respond to the alarms sounding across the globe: borders closed, supply chains choked, hunger, disease, families holding on by an ever fraying thread, barely.

There are two ways to tell the story of how PILA responded to the pandemic. The first way is full of heroic undertakings – stepping up, reaching out, empowering.

We quickly gathered masks, money, food, and supplies to distribute to the shelters and communities we serve.

With the Nests shuttered, our community volunteers in Tijuana set up their own makeshift Nest in a small space inside the shelter. Borrowing supplies from the Nest across the street, these dedicated Nesters carried on the work without us. The pandemic gave voice to our Nesters as they stepped into leadership roles and found ways to support one another. For example, Wiston, a 20-year-old percussionist from Venezuela, started a music program for toddlers in the shelter where he and 150 other refugees isolated themselves.

We organized online parenting classes to support parents as tensions and fears of the virus grew. In the Congo, our Nest teachers made their way through their villages spreading health and hygiene information, distributing food, and playing a leadership role in their communities.

The second way to tell this story is to share how COVID-19 shook PILA to the core, disorienting us and causing us to fall into a temporary crisis of identity as we tried to decide how to respond to hypotheticals. What do we do if the shelters... if the camps... if the children...? How close do we stay to our educational mission if COVID-19 tears through the overcrowded shelters in Tijuana? How far do we stray from our purpose as we try to meet the emergency needs of refugees infected with the virus? From what seemed like an impossible distance, we tried to make sense of conflicting information about the needs on the ground.

As a small, young organization that grew up quickly, we are always running as fast as we can. When the pandemic hit North America, PILA was juggling five Nests on three continents and supporting four low-income public schools in Los Angeles. We are stretched thin, financially, and organizationally. If the pandemic had an upside, it’s that the time shuttered allowed us to stop running, or at least to slow down to a steady, measured jog. It gave us time for a long, backward, over the shoulder glance at what we have accomplished and where we could strengthen our programs and systems.

In retrospect (though we are by no means out of the woods), we learned a lot from this unexpected, tumultuous time. We learned that even in an emergency, counting to ten is helpful. There’s value to waiting and seeing, even when a ticking time bomb requires that we simultaneously prepare for the worst. We learned that there’s immeasurable benefit in understanding the broader NGO environment and how each organization fits into the picture by addressing particular needs. We can’t be and thankfully don’t need to be all things to all people, not even in a crisis. Our first instincts to mobilize and act in the face of an impending disaster had to be balanced against the reality of our resources, our mission, and the protection of our organization. These were hard lessons – ones that kept me up at night – but invaluable and an inevitable part of our growing pains.

Our next steps will be tempered and informed by the knowledge that our bold grassroots achievements are precariously laid upon a ground that can never be presupposed. Knowing this, maybe we tread more gingerly, with measured steps and less certainty. Or maybe we intrepidly shore up the ground, and fiercely keep on going because now, we know this terrain. We’ve recalibrated the GPS to recognize the road closures and detours wherever they lie. And we’re stronger for it.

A critical time for refugees: Campaigning for immediate policy change

Kirsty Evans, *Europe Must Act*, Campaign
Coordinator

Why is this such a critical time for people in the camps of the Aegean islands?

Coronavirus has restricted the operations of so many NGOs on the Aegean islands. From those who organise human rights observations at sea to those who run projects on and off camps, from legal advice to medical support, from emergency response to informal education, grassroots NGOs (who have filled vital gaps since 2015) have either been unable to operate, or seriously restricted in their roles. We know there are violations at sea, we know injustices are onshore and in camps, we know 'non-refoulement' (International Humanitarian Law) is being flouted BUT we cannot report what we cannot see.

This quarantine period has spotlighted the gaps that exist. Coronavirus has not only made clear the ways in which people's basic needs in camps are not being met, but also the direct actions being taken by authorities which worsen people's well-being at this crucial time. Immediate steps absolutely have to be taken by Greece and the EU to decongest the hotspots and address the shortage of necessary, life-saving supplies.

When cleanliness is vital, hygiene kits are not available on camp and running water is irregular and insufficient. When a strong immune system is necessary to fight the virus, nutritious food for a healthy diet is inaccessible and drinking water quotas sometimes unfulfilled. When we should be social distancing, those in overcrowded hotspot camps are left to fend for themselves.

How has this affected NGO operations on the ground?

The NGO I am currently a coordinator for operates in the field of Emergency Response. Pre-corona, we attended every boat landing on the island to ensure that those transferring to damaging, uninhabitable, dirty, dangerous island camp structures had some basic supplies to take with them. We were there on the beach, on the roadside, or at the port, to welcome every person that had risked their life and boarded a boat in the hope of something better, something safer.

Pregnant women received maternity kits and new-borns, a new, warm set of clothes; men, women and children got thermals, blankets, food and water; everyone was treated kindly and with care during their first moments in Greece. Since coronavirus struck, we no longer attend landings. People who do reach our European shores now get no supplies from us; we do not know the reception they receive when they land. There is neither NGO oversight at sea nor onshore. This is really concerning. Reports we read and accounts we hear are troubling. Our inability to respond and to ensure dignity in reception weighs heavily on our tired minds. People arriving on our shores are people no different to us, they have just been dealt a different hand. We Europeans should not disconnect from our duty to others, our social responsibilities to our human family during a time of global crisis.

How have I (and others) responded effectively during coronavirus?

In one year, on Chios and Lesbos, and for a brief time in the Balkans, I have every day seen the negative impacts of the EU-Turkey deal and gross violations caused by the hotspot set up. I have seen conditions worsen in camps as the political will exists to make camps hostile environments – this includes having restricted water supplies, irregular waste management, aggressive police responses, misinformation intended to confuse and limited legal and medical support. Authorities, too, are put under increasing pressure as demands from government structures pressure them to control that which is uncontrollable. Human lives are put indirectly, unnecessarily at risk in grossly overcrowded camps.

I was on the ground as a wave of anger and violence took over in February – this was directed at camp residents, authorities and grassroots NGOs. It was scary, we were under threat, but we understood the frustrations of many local Greek islanders. Ultimately, as numbers of people fleeing to safer shores has risen once again, and the EU Migration Deal has not adapted to the reality on the ground, Greece and Greek citizens have felt abandoned by EU Member States who should have shown solidarity, flexibility and provided structural support.

As a response to the critical situation, I was part of a team of volunteers who decided to set up a campaigns group, Europe Must Act (EMA), to raise awareness of what was happening on the Aegean islands.

Why are you targeting the EU ?

Leaders need to understand the impact of their actions. Policies cannot be developed without clear communication channels between legal experts and those with real-life knowledge. Feedback must be considered when concerns are raised by those with lived experience – when criticism is voiced constructively, it is our representatives' duty to listen and adapt.

We recognised that the only way to get long-lasting change was to channel our demands more directly. The only way to be noticed was to raise the voices of those living, volunteering and working in the Aegean and to encourage European people to speak out against the conditions. We still believe that the majority of Europeans agree that we should have a humane, fair EU Migration Policy that sees hotspot camps decongested and people relocated fairly around Europe, treated with dignity at all steps of their journey.

To first get noticed at the EU level, we wrote an Open Letter to the EU Commission and EU Parliament demanding decongestion of the Aegean Islands, a replacement to the EU-Turkey deal and dignified reception, relocation and integration of people.

This was signed by 100,000 people, over 160 NGOs and 10 MEPs. After a meeting with Ylva Johansson (EU Commissioner of Home Affairs), we realised that to force the positive change we demand, we require representation at the municipal level from citizens, local politicians and NGOs alike. If pressure comes from the city level, this will be raised up to regional and national levels and so on to the EU where the compassionate change can be enacted.

From our overwhelming response and support, we can see that our initial beliefs were correct. To date, we have mobilised 40+ cities to set up solidarity chapters using our Cities Must Act project. In Germany, we collaborate with Seebrucke to enhance the capacity of their existing chapters. We recently collaborated with other NGOs to host an Action Day on 23rd May. The response was overwhelming, EMA was represented online and in the streets of 50 cities across 8 European countries with citizens projecting the hashtag 'We Have Space' in our cities for refugees and asylum seekers. Our next event will mark World Refugee Day on 20th June.

Is it challenging to organise under lockdown?

In some ways, lockdown came at the perfect time. It gave us time to reflect on the issues on the ground and consider what strategies were best to tackle the complexities caused by the EU-Turkey Deal and poor policymaking. It has provided us with breathing space from our hectic lives responding to the growing needs and human rights violations here on the Aegean islands. It allowed the opportunity to discuss our movement and reach out to other grassroots NGOs to gain their insight and input. Now, as restrictions ease, it is vital that we build on the momentum and push peacefully for positive change. We are ignited and effused by each and every person who has shown support for our social movement.

From our representation at the city level, we believe even more strongly that European citizens do want compassionate, humane change to EU Migration Policy. The discussion about migration and movement simply needs to be less taboo with facts made clearer. As EMA's city chapters apply soft pressure on our municipal leaders to pledge that they will take in refugees and asylum seekers, our team of volunteers work tirelessly to present counter-narratives to engage and inform our communities.

Our Europe is built upon humanitarian values such as freedom, dignity and solidarity. Positive, progressive actions should always be promoted by an active civil society who feel empowered to speak out with a certainty that our representatives will listen. Right now, EMA is delighted with our results from the first quarter of this year, we have proven that, with a little encouragement, people are passionate for positive Migration Policy change.





Chios and Covid-19

Melanie Liu, *Volunteer*, Action for Education

Earlier this year, as the threat of COVID-19 grew, we were forced to close our Youth Centre, Learning Space, and we had to halt the work within our new project on Chios.

As stress levels rose rapidly around the world, people were doing all that they could to protect themselves and their loved ones. People were flying home to their safe space, fighting over toilet roll, and frantically searching for hand sanitisers and face masks. Nearly every other news article was about being in lockdown, how many times you should be washing your hands, and what song you could be singing whilst doing this (Happy Birthday was a rather popular choice).

Much of our team in Greece is made up of international volunteers. As we struggled with our own decisions regarding whether we should return home, I was also clouded with hopelessness. I was constantly thinking about our youth centre participants and our school students, and how they, along with 6000 other people on this island didn't even have a choice. I found it difficult, and at times incomprehensible, knowing that I had the option to go home, quarantine in a house with my family, and to wait out the virus somewhere safe, whilst the refugees and asylum seekers had nowhere to go.

The conditions in the camp are abysmal. As government guidelines highlighted the importance of washing hands and keeping at least a 2-metre distance from others, it all felt incredibly ironic. How can they distance themselves from others, when so many people are living in a space built for just 1000? How can you wash your hands when there is a lack of access to running water? How can you socially distance yourself when there isn't even enough space for all of you to be there in the first place?

Everyone in the camp is extremely vulnerable, but I found myself thinking a lot about the women and the minors in the camp. We hear stories from our participants, and we know that the cold showers in the camp are mostly inaccessible for women and there are no sanitary items. With the minors, I think about the support network that I had at their age, and how on top of living in the shocking conditions of the camp, some have had to deal with the fear of the virus alone. Not to be able to offer our services to them during this time, to all of our participants, is heart-breaking to even think about.

We often saw our participants and students out in the town, and they would ask, "Why is the Youth Centre closed?", "Why is the School closed?", "When will you be open?". All we could say was that we were closed because of Covid-19, and we weren't sure when we would be able to open. One of the most frustrating things that I would see in the city was the police stopping refugees and asylum seekers to give them fines, but locals who were also breaking government restrictions seemed immune to such sanctions. Prejudice and systematic racism are palpably felt here.

As further lockdown measures and restrictions were lifted across Greece, the same measures were not lifted off the camp. The lockdown was continuously extended, and it is currently still in place. I struggle to understand these restrictions here on Chios as there were a maximum number of two confirmed cases outside of the camp, and all those within the camp have been here since before Covid-19. There appears to be a lack of justifiable reasons to keep the camp under lockdown. It is hard to not feel constantly aggravated and exasperated by the unfair treatment that the refugees and asylum seekers face on a daily basis.

Recently, we have thankfully been able to re-open our Learning Space, and I was extremely excited to be able to return to school. However, the first day was rough: hearing the stories of their experiences were hard. Some had not left the camp for three months, and you could see the effect it had on them all over their faces. I am so grateful that we have been able to open the school again; it gives our students a bit of time away from the harsh realities of the camp.

As the lockdown measures lifted, we were also able to revamp our youth centre, and to continue the work within our new project. Our team have worked so hard and now finishing touches are being put in place. I am very excited to see our participants in all of our spaces again, and to be able to continue to provide both old and new students with a much-needed service.

Lockdown on Samos Distributing urgent items

Sarah Griffith, *Refugee4Refugees*

Refugee4Refugees is a small NGO founded by Omar Alshakal, a Syrian refugee himself. The NGO was born in Lesvos and opened here in Samos in January 2019.

Our focus is NFI's (non-food items) and we are the main NFI distributor on the island. We have a free shop near to camp and warehouse out of town. Goods come into the warehouse, are sorted, boxed, coded and supplied to the free shop on a demand basis. We were running with a team of 20 volunteers, 3 Coordinators, a Field Coordinator and an Operations Director who oversees the 2 islands of Lesvos and Samos.

Prior to Covid-19 sending us into lockdown, women came to the free shop and chose clothing for themselves and their children. But lockdown meant volunteers flew home and only the coordinators and 2 volunteers hunkered down to wait out the crisis. Our free shop was closed and we retreated to our accommodation, only allowed out for essential exercise and food shopping.

The effect on the camp was instant. Before lockdown, women were coming to the free shop 5 days a week – most days averaging 80 or so. The flow of clothing stopped and we had to work really hard to negotiate with the municipality, the police and the Camp Commander to allow us to carry out baby food & diaper distribution 4 weeks after we closed.

There was careful planning put in place, a system to socially distance the queue and the people working in the shop, masks, sanitizers etc. The planning paid off and to make these distributions, as well as 2 more since then, all very tightly controlled and calm.

The chance to really connect with the people from other NGOs, whose coordinators stayed on Island, has been an added bonus we did not anticipate. Since we have been able to continue some work, whilst most others have been virtually inactive, they have welcomed the chance to 'help' in a very practical way and it has meant we have been able to get more done by swelling the team. It has been a great way to forge new relationships in terms of future collaborations which are so important.

Prior to lockdown we were experiencing unrest from the people whose views on refugees do not align with ours – the virus entering our lives seems at least for now to have deflected the 'heat' coming from that direction almost completely.

Another of the things we have done during this quieter period is to supply items to the hospital, municipality workers, the fire service, the police and the Social Market in Samos town. Through this, we hope to build some bridges and help locals to see that NGOs are not just targets to hate but responsible and thoughtful groups who care about humans of any race or creed.

The worldwide lockdown has meant many people have become navel gazers and lost the ability to consider what is happening to people outside of their personal bubble who do not have the opportunity to social distance – in the food queue on camp for example; who do not have the opportunity to social distance when living within feet of other families in a rudimentary shelter; who do not have the space to social distance from anyone on the camp at any time.

Europe Must Act to decongest these islands and not just pat themselves on the back when moving people to camps like Nea Kavala which are just different types of hell holes. They need to insist that the people in power in the marble halls of the EU sit up, take notice, and take meaningful steps to de-escalate this dreadful situation in a proper dignified manner.



Adapting to Change

Positive outcomes and pivoting to face the challenge of Covid-19

Holly Penalver,
Founder & CEO, Indigo Volunteers

Indigo Volunteers began as a charity placing volunteers responsibly and fee-free across the globe. In 2015, the European refugee crisis generated an unprecedented demand for immediate independent emergency aid on European soil and so supporting actors in this field became our focus. Through strong partnerships we have created a network of grassroots organisations in which we place volunteers, share resources and facilitate training.

Primarily, our work is to recruit the right volunteers for our partner charities and to place them where they are most needed. In response to Covid-19, however, most of our partners had no choice but to either significantly reduce their work, change their service model or shut down completely. In-country lockdowns, border closings and the health risks to already vulnerable populations as well as local communities and volunteers in the field meant that volunteer placements came to an immediate halt, but our work to support our partners didn't.

What do we do as a charity whose main purpose is to recruit volunteers and connect them with grassroots charities across Europe when a global pandemic strikes? We adapt, and we do so quickly! We found two things about the way we've been previously working to be great strengths during this crisis.

First, our work thus far - placing volunteers and supporting partners through e.g. consultations and training - has allowed us to cultivate a network of close collaboration; being able to build on years of partnership history has made adapting to this pandemic a lot easier than it would have been otherwise.

Second, the world has been our office since we started, so coordinating day-to-day operations remotely from behind our laptops is our norm. The fact that we were left with only one staff member still on Samos didn't get in the way of mobilising the team for an emergency response.

We set to work right away assessing, along with our partners, what they might need during this crisis: Training and psycho-social support were clear gaps that we were well-suited to support with. In April we coordinated 24 online training sessions and webinars on relevant Covid-19 and humanitarian topics. Furthermore, we've been trying to ensure the wellbeing of our partners by facilitating remote support sessions with qualified counsellors. It's been a challenge coordinating these new services on such short notice, but it has been well worth it.

The nature of our work and resources at hand means that we often don't have the time or capacity to advocate for the work of our network with a wider audience to the extent that we would like. One of the opportunities in reshuffling our work has been that our founder and CEO, Holly, began a series of weekly Instagram Live sessions, "Let's Talk Grassroots". It's been great to bring grassroots organisations to people's homes and give them the chance to ask questions and participate in the important discussion about the refugee and migrant crisis and how all of us can get involved one way or another.

Another positive outcome of these last few months has been the development of Indigo's internal risk management culture as well as of relevant protocols and policies to share with our partners. This is something we had been working on before the pandemic, but on-the-ground needs always had to be prioritised. We've come a long way in the process and are excited about sharing the results with our partners in the coming weeks. Creating and maintaining a safe environment for volunteers and the communities we serve is really important to our work, and we're so pleased to see that our recent efforts inspired a large grant to become available for other organisations to work on their risk strategies as well.

It's a challenging and scary time for all grassroots organisations, whose priority is to support refugees and migrants on their journey to find a safe home, and whose operations have had to be either significantly altered or stopped altogether. We already work in an unstable environment, and this has added to the uncertainty. Our team hasn't been exempt from that, but this period has reminded us that close collaboration - both internal and external - is key to carrying out our work. Our team culture of optimism, creativity and dedication has helped with this along the way; and while we've felt it thus far, it is once again confirmed beyond doubt that we are part of an amazing network of grassroots actors.

LOCKDOWN: A strange phenomenon!

Anne Bates, *Independent Volunteer Athens*

People in England were fed-up with the term 'unprecedented times'. Indeed they were! I had been working with Action for Education since it opened the doors of the 'Halcyon Days' project in Athens in the summer of 2018. I was their first volunteer, at the mature age of 68, and worked in the creche until they closed in December 2019.

Volunteering isn't just 'being in a box' because you become involved with people, places and things. It can become very emotional and by the time I flew back to England on March 18th, just as lockdown was starting, I was feeling exhausted and ready for a break. I expected to fly back to Athens within the fortnight, but that didn't happen.

Strangely, though I did not fear catching Covid-19, my emotions were on a roller-coaster! I had become addicted to my life in Athens. It was my 'home'. Should I have waited out my time in Athens, where the infection rate was less than in England? But I did need to recharge my batteries!

Listening to the news and reading Facebook comments didn't help. It proved how 'fake news' can disturb the mind. One day I would be hopeful of travelling back to Athens and then I would read something that said that Greece didn't want the British because they had delayed in taking lockdown. Over 60's will not be allowed to travel... what! That's discrimination as far as I'm concerned, and since I am well above this age, but very active, this really messed up my head!

Which brings me to this... if a young person wants to follow their hearts and volunteer/travel then do so. Life is short, follow your dreams. Over the past 3 years, while I have been in Athens, I have met many dedicated young volunteers with humanitarian hearts. I like to think that I have encouraged them in their work and admired them for putting their careers on hold. I have been proud to become their friend, 'mother', confidant and encourager. I have felt privileged to have been able to host weary volunteers in my humble abode as they transit from the camps and islands on their way home to foreign countries.

While being stuck in England, I have been grateful for my limited computer skills and for WhatsApp. which has allowed me to continue to emotionally support some refugee friends. For me the lockdown has been a time of reflection, a time for refreshing of the mind. But now I am ready to start new adventures!

'When the clouds go the sun will shine again!'



Authors & Organisations



Alise Shafer Ivey
Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles

PILA supports children and teachers in underserved communities throughout Los Angeles and in refugee settlements abroad.

Find out more: <http://thinkwithus.org>



Kirsty Evans
Europe Must Act

Europe Must Act campaigns for a new and humane EU migration policy, working with grassroots NGOs and civil society.

Find out more: <http://europemustact.org>



Melanie Liu
Action for Education

AFE works with refugee children and youth to host education spaces that meet basic needs in Aegean refugee camps.

Find out more: <http://actionforeducation.org>



Sarah Griffith
Refugee4Refugees

Refugee4Refugees offers humanitarian assistance and emergency response to migrants who arrive onto the Aegean Islands.

Find out more: <http://refugee4refugees.gr>



Holly Penalver
Indigo Volunteers

Indigo connects volunteers with humanitarian projects around working to support refugees and migrants.

Find out more: <http://indigovolunteers.org>



Anne Bates
Hull Help for Refugees

Hull Help for Refugees is a grassroots collective of individuals aiding refugees in humanitarian crises.

Find out more: <http://hullhelpforrefugees.org.uk>



Action for Education

Action for Education is a grassroots non-profit working on the Aegean Islands, providing non-formal education and safe spaces for refugee children and youth

GrassRoots Magazine

GrassRoots is an annual magazine published to give prominence and a voice to contemporary efforts in humanitarian support. Published by *Action for Education*.

Support Us

You can support our work by getting involved as a writer and promoter for GrassRoots or by donating directly to AFE's projects. Find out more on the AFE website.