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REPORT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS EVENT “REFUGEE CRISIS: CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS”

Title of the event: REFUGEES CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Date of the event: 12-13 May 2016

Place of the event: Europe Direct of North Aegean, Aegean University

Speakers:

- Ms Eirini Vlachaki, General Director of ANCE NGO
- Ms Aggeliki Georgiadou, Migration Expert, ANCE NGO
- Ms Alexia Nikomani, Responsible of Europe Direct of North Aegean
- Mr Mixalis Kapitanelis, Superior Officer of the Coast Guard ship 602
- Kuriakos Papadopoulos, Captain of the Coast Guard Ship 602
- Boris Cheshirkov, Communications and Public Information officer, UNHCR Lesvos
- Katerina Efstathiou Selaha, President of NGO “Aghalia”
- Nikolaos Nagopoulos, Associate Professor, University of the Aegean, Department of Sociology
- Athina Iosifelli, Vice-Mayor for Volunteerism and Youth, Lesvos Municipality
- Marios Andriotis, Advisor to the Mayor of Lesvos
- Nasia Hourmouziadi, Assistant Professor of Museology Department of Cultural Technology & Communication, University of the Aegean
- Sikoutris Giorgos, coordinator of interpreters of NGO Metadrasi
- Antonis Zeibekis, coordinator of NGO “Iliaktida





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Short presentation of the event:

A two day information event and community workshop took place in Mytilini on 12 and 13 of May 2013. The main scope of the event was to inform the local communities, representatives of local and state authorities, CSOs and police/coastguard departments, as well as the wider public, about the project's scope, activities and expected results, and elicit/motivate their participation. The workshop also aimed at: (a) strengthening the interaction among CSOs acting in the field of migrants and refugees and asylum seekers in this area, and the local and police and/or coast guard authorities, (b) increasing awareness and identifying problems regarding migrants rights and (c) engaging the communities in migrant-friendly practices.

In total, 46 people attended the event (50% of the participants were academics, 30% NGOs, 8.5% public officials, 8.5% intergovernmental and international organizations, 3% others).

Main points of the speeches and presentations:

Ms Vlachaki Eirini, General Director of ANCE welcomed the participants and analysed the scope of the event while at the same time made a brief presentation of ANCE and their relative projects.

Ms Georgiadou Angeliki, Migration Expert of ANCE, presented in depth the project and analysed the activities and expected results. She mentioned the significance of cooperation between two countries (Greece and Turkey) for the better coordination of the refugee crisis.

Ms Athina Iosifeli, Vice-Mayor for Volunteerism and Youth saluted the event on behalf of the Mayor who was unable to attend because of other obligations. The Mayor, by the mouth of Ms Iosifeli, noted the willingness of the Municipality for cooperation with organisations who deal with the refugee crisis and mentioned his acknowledgement of their activities.

Mr Marios Andriotis, Advisor to the Mayor of Lesvos presented the way the municipality has been trying to respond to the needs that have arisen from the refugee crisis on the island. He described step by step the actions that the municipality undertook in order for, on the one hand to serve the refugees and on the other hand to ensure balance in the local community. Mr Andriotis claimed that the refugee crisis concerns not only the coordination of these people and the assurance of their feeding, accommodation and registration. The refugee crisis has multiple effects to the operation of the Municipality since it creates a lot of "new" problems that the municipality has to deal with. For instance, due to the refugee crisis, the Municipality of Lesvos had to deal with the following issues: a. "management" of the people that died in the sea, b. management of thousands of kilograms of plastic gathered on the coast (life vests dropped by the refugees), c. management of the plastic (life vest and outboards) lying on the sea bed. As concerns the first issue, after a long investigation about the legal procedures the Municipality established a cemetery in which all the people that die in the sea, are buried according to the Islamic customs. For the second and third issues, the Municipality organised cleaning operations of the beach, while the operation for the collection of the plastic on the sea bed is now being designed.





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The way that the Municipality of Lesvos reacted in the crisis is exemplary and it could be characterized as a good practice for other municipalities which are in the same situation as concerns the flows of refugees/asylum seekers. For the future, the municipality intends to initiate the following projects: a. establishment of a factory where the collected plastic will be reused for the creation of daily useful items (bags, dossiers, etc), b. a campaign on social media through which the municipality will try to bring out that the island of Lesvos is not only connected to the refugee crisis, but it is also a wonderful island for vacation. Mr Andriotis also made reference to the Moria and Kara Tepe camps and the difficulties that the Municipality faced in the first stages of these registration/identification Centres. Finally, Mr Andriotis reported that the municipality sent to the European Commission an appeal in order for the Municipality to gain direct funding from EC in order to cover the needs. The answer of EC was negative since these amounts from EC are given to the State and to Regional Authorities and not directly to Municipalities.

Ms Nikomani, Responsible of Europe Direct of North Aegean, presented the European Migration and Asylum policy. More specifically, she analyzed how this policy was formulated since 1997 and onwards, the policy itself and she presented the challenges and perspectives. During her presentation, Ms Nikomani provided the audience with very important information about the migration flows, the Schengen crisis, the routes of illegal border crossings, the funding for third countries, the existing hotspots in Greece, the EU –Turkey agreement. Ms Nikomani pointed out that from April 4 2016 that the above-mentioned agreement took affect the migration flows have reduced. However, she claimed that the refugees have just found other routes in order to approach Central and Northern Europe and not that the actual flows towards Europe have reduced.

Two Hellenic Coast Guard officers, Mr Michalis Kapitanelis, Superior officer of the Coast Guard ship 602 and Mr Kyriakos Papadopoulos, Captain of the Coast Guard Ship 602, presented their daily experience with refugees and migrants' rescues. It should be noted that the crew of the Coast Guard Ship 602 was awarded in 2015 by the Academy of Athens for their excellent high humanitarian value acts during refugees' search and rescue operations. They showed videos filmed during rescue operations in Lesvos and they described the procedures that they follow. They pointed out that during these operations they noticed a lot of pregnant women and unaccompanied minors. In these cases, they tried to investigate if the children were alone on the boat and if this was true, they delivered them to the police in order for the appropriate procedures to be followed. They also mentioned that during the rescue operations, until the ship approaches the port, they do a first control of the refugees/migrants especially if they notice something strange in someone's attitude. At the end, they described the shipwreck of October 2015 in which almost 50 people died in the water and 250 people were rescued. They also noted that during the last summer the flows were so high that in one single day 9.000 people arrived on the island.

Mr Boris Cheshirkov, Communications and Public Information officer, UNHCR Lesvos, presented the past (from the start of the refugee crisis) and current situation on Lesvos concerning the arrivals of refugees on the island and their coordination. He outlined UNCHR's role and how closely it collaborates with the Municipality of Lesvos in order to confront the situation. It should be mentioned that according to the presentation of Mr Cheshirkov, UNHCR supports the Greek Government, NGOs and volunteers in





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improving Moria camp, Kara Tepe camp and the assembly points of Molyvos/Oxy and Skala Sykamineas, while at the same time it provides transportation (buses and mini bus) and grants for the housing program running for refugees. Finally, UNHCR is providing regular advice and support to the authorities during the registration process, provides information to asylum-seekers about the registration, facilitates the prioritization of people with special needs, and provides interpretation services. At the end, Mr Cheshirkov provided statistical data about the number of refugees/migrants having passed from Lesvos, the number of refugees/migrants which are still on the island and the difficulties that these people are facing in order to gain asylum.

Ms Katerina Eustathiou Selaha, President of the NGO “Agkalia” presented the NGO and how they assist refugees in Lesvos. NGO Agkalia has a small but very effective network which provides clothes, essential items and food for the refugees/migrants. Agkalia provides a relief-stop during the refugees’ long walk, some food and rest for the night, and uses crowd-funding methods through social media in order to collect money for serving all these people. It is really worth mentioning that sometime after a call made by Agkalia for raising money for supporting refugees, so much money was gathered than they actually needed and could manage. So NGO Agkalia informed people that the necessary amount was already collected and asked them to stop donating, and proposed to people to donate money to other NGOs active on the island. Inspirer of NGO Agkalia was Priest Stratis, a very well-known (for his solidarity) priest in Lesvos. He was characterized as the Good Samaritan of Greece.

Mr Nagopoulos Nikolaos, Associate Professor at University of the Aegean, Department of Sociology, started his speech by presenting the mass media’s crucial role in influencing the public opinion concerning the refugee issues. Additionally, Mr Nagopoulos explained the different views between Greece and other Northern and Central European countries about the refugee crisis and its coordination. He claimed that in the case of Greece the humanitarian side of the issue has outweighed the typical procedures of refugee registration. This means that for the Greek people what really matters is the rescue of these people and the assurance of food and accommodation, while their identification and registration are procedures that follow. Other Europeans have claimed that the first issue must be the identification and registration of the refugees/asylum seekers. This was also the reason why a lot of Europeans accused Greece for Europe’s fascistization. They claimed that since Greece is just a transit country and the majority of the refugees are just passing through and will not reside in the country, the country does not care about the typical and legal procedures. Finally, Mr Nagopoulos stressed that it is wrong to connect cultural and religious issues with citizenship, when asked by a participant if it is possible for people with different cultures and religions to be fully integrated in the Greek reality.

Ms Nasia Hourmouziadi, Assistant Professor of Museology, Department of Cultural Technology & Communication, University of the Aegean, talked about the mechanism of memory, what people want to remember and what they prefer to forget and how the museum contributes in order for the memory to remain alive. She set the question about when (specific point in time) a historical event can be considered as “finished” and as a consequence we can refer to this event as “past”. Under this point of view she wondered how easy it is to make an exhibition dedicated to the refugee crisis and what kind of tools can be used for this purpose. She claimed that probably the story of people leaving Syria for a





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better future is easier to be told through pictures or even better through people talking about their experience in a conference/event.

Mr Giorgios Sikoutris, Coordinator of the interpreters' team of NGO Metadrasi, made a presentation of Metadrasi and how the NGO is involved in the crisis related to migration/refugee flows. Metadrasi has under its protection more than 100 unaccompanied minors. The unaccompanied minors remained for long periods of time in the registration/identification centres which does not ensure their protection and only covered their basic needs. Metadrasi has experience in escorting unaccompanied minors and created a flexible network of guardian's for the direct and safe escort of children in suitable accommodation facilities for minors.

Mr Antonis Zeibekis, Coordinator of NGO "Iliaktida", presented the activities of "Iliaktida" in Lesvos. NGO "Iliaktida" mainly runs the housing program of the UNCHR in Lesvos. In other words, Iliaktida takes care in order for the refugees' families to be accommodated in houses in Mytilini. Mr Zeibekis pointed out how committed must the staff of the NGO be, since their work demands 100% of their time. Also he analyzed how the volunteers can assist organizations such as "Iliaktida", but at the same time can cause many problems if they are not properly trained. Finally, Mr Zeibekis analyzed the value of volunteerism, the acceptance or not by the local community of the refugees in the areas where there are houses that host refugees, and the "volunteerism tourism".

Conclusions

During the event, very important aspects concerning the refugee crisis were highlighted. Each one of the speakers presented a different dimension of the crisis, however all of them agreed on the following:

- a. Greece as well as Europe were unprepared to confront the refugee crisis
- b. The coordination of this crisis demands among other things the close cooperation between different actors (government, local authorities, international –intergovernmental organizations, ngos, volunteers, etc). Each actor must have a very clear and well defined role.
- c. An impact of the EU-Turkey agreement has been the reduction of refugee flows on Lesvos, however it is not certain if the refugees have stopped leaving their countries or if they have found other channels and routes in order to approach Central and Northern Europe (more probable).
- d. We can assume that the large number of pregnant women and unaccompanied minors' arrivals is something that does not happen accidentally, but the refugees aim for family reunification at a later stage.
- e. Volunteerism is a very significant asset for the coordination of the refugee crisis, however it is necessary that these people (volunteers) are very well trained, otherwise a lot of problems could arise.





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- f. At this time the situation in Lesvos as concerns the flows is much better than last summer, but we have to mention that the Moria camp is already overcrowded (almost 4.500 people instead of 1.500 which was the initial design). The situation in Kara Tepe is much better (1.500 people). The major concern now is how the situation will evolve when the first rejections concerning the provision of asylum will be communicated to people already hosted in these camps, which will mean that they will have to leave Greece and go back.
- g. The coordination of the refugee crisis is a multidimensional issue.
- h. Greece has started conforming to the necessary procedures as concerns the coordination of the refugee crisis which means that the identification and registration of the refugees is the first priority.
- i. There were some cases of international civil society organizations which had a pretty “weird” behavior (knowing exactly the time of arrival of boats, as well as the exact spot on the coast that the boat would approach).

