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# **COVID-19 and non-formal education: the challenge of humanitarian organizations in Greece during the pandemic**

Master Thesis  
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# **COVID-19 and non-formal education: the challenge of humanitarian organizations in Greece during the pandemic**

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“School is where refugees are given a second chance.”

Filippo Grandi  
(UN High Commissioner for Refugees)

## Abstract

The arrival of the pandemic in Greece in March 2020 has hit the non-formal education sector run by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) harshly. The COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Greek government were pointed out as arbitrary and were declared to be more severe against the migrant population, and especially those who resided in camps and RICs found themselves locked up and confined in their movements for an indefinite time. For many months, NGOs could not continue their educational activities, significantly impacting their young students and their mental health. Education worldwide has been moved online, and even NGOs made an attempt: some alternatives were found, but the scarcity of available resources at disposal made everything more challenging.

In this thesis, I investigate how the humanitarian actors coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining which alternative ways they found to keep providing education to the forcibly displaced minors living on the Greek territory, the obstacles encountered and the results achieved. The findings show the importance and the correlation between education, both formal and non-formal, and the mental health of minors, particularly of forcibly displaced minors, and how much has still to be done to ensure these children the opportunity to learn and grow in respect to their rights. Inquiring deeper, I also give an insight on the relationship within the humanitarian context, the discrepancies and different ideas but also the solidarity and collaboration, and the relationship between the NGOs and the Greek authorities, troubled and problematic, made of rules that limit freedom and the unwillingness to find a dignified solution to problems that have persisted for years.

**Keywords:** non-formal education, COVID-19 Pandemic, well-being, forcibly displaced children, refugee camps, Reception and Identification Centers (RICs).

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## 1. Introduction

Migration is a complex phenomenon and is inextricably linked to stressful events that impact the people who experience it (Stompe, Holzer, Friedmann, & Bhugra, 2011). Once migrants arrive in the host country, they have to face several obstacles, such as harsh living conditions, overcrowded and degrading accommodations and reception facilities, inadequate healthcare provisions, limited food availability and basic amenities (MSF, 2017); these can have a negative impact, particularly influencing and compromising the minors' mental health and well-being (Wilson, Murtaza, & Shakya, 2010).

The degree of traumatization varies among individuals, and it is the interplay of different situations and aspects that determines the graveness of stress a child experiences (Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998). There are, however, common symptoms that are manifested and that can be identified. According to WHO, the majority of children and youths affected by emergencies contract forms of mental afflictions, experiencing sadness, depression, anxiety, and nightmares, which can accumulate over time (WHO, 2019); these symptoms are part of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), which are found in the majority of the young respondents of many researches on the exposure of violence and flight experiences, with a consistent persistence of symptoms even after a long period from the events and traumas (Lusting, Ellis, Keane, & Kia-Keating, 2004).

There are nonetheless specific key interventions that enable children to maintain their well-being. Education, both formal and non-formal, is defined as one of the most important of these. Learning environments such as schools and child-friendly spaces are seen as places of hope that create opportunities and give children a sense of security, stability and routine (IASC, 2007). Schools are the places where migrant children can build their resilience, learn and elaborate social and personal identities, allowing them to take back control over their life and not be

passive victims, as they know again how to put themselves and their development in the first place. The lack of access to essential services such as school and education are part of the causes of depression and stressors: studies show that the level of distress and mental health issues decrease when participation in school and learning increase (Morina, Hoppen, & Priebe, 2020).

Although education is a fundamental human right, available data shows a sparse attendance of migrants in schools (UNHCR, 2019). Education is so important however more than half of refugee youth of school-age do not attend school: around the world, 91% of children go to primary school, and 84% of adolescents go to secondary school, while respectively, only 63% and 24% of refugee children and adolescents get the same access (UNHCR, 2019). In Greece, rates are also meager, with only a third of refugee and migrant children enrolled in formal schools on the mainland and one in four children able to access education on the islands (AIDA, 2019).

On the 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus disease a pandemic emergency (WHO, 2020). Knowing the effects of the virus, its modes of transmission and the methods to prevent it, it is easy to understand how migrant people are exposed to greater risk due to the critical conditions in which they live. In Greece, as in the majority of European states, COVID-19 restrictions keep changing, as does the possibility for NGO workers to enter certain areas -such as camps, hubs, or RICs- and provide aid services, educational programs included (Europe Must Act, 2020).

Worldwide, education has been hampered by the Coronavirus pandemic, which caused the closure of schools, affecting more than 90% of students and leading to drastic repercussions on the positive trend of the SDG Goal 4 'Equitable quality education' as was made in recent years.

*«School closures to stop the spread of COVID-19 are having an adverse impact on learning outcomes and social and behavioral development of children and youth. They have affected over 90% of the world's student population - 1.6 billion children and youth.»*

- Secretary General, 2020

While using digital platforms has been one of the most immediate solutions for most students, still more than 500 million students cannot continue their studies remotely. The situation has been particularly hard for those forcibly displaced children and young adults who already had limited access to education programs and services (Secretary General, 2020). Although grassroots organizations have proposed some solutions, several obstacles have been encountered by displaced children in the Greek emergency settings, starting from the limited availability of technological supplies to the impossibility of respecting the social distance. While few students have been reached, many have been left behind without the opportunity to learn, adding further negative effects on their mental well-being (UNHCR, 2020).

This research seeks to understand, collect and highlight the different methods NGOs have adopted to provide educational activities to forcibly displaced children in Greece since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. While stressing the correlation between the well-being of children and the opportunity of receiving education, the research aims to understand whether and which type of education is accessible for displaced children in Greece, the obstacles encountered by grassroots organizations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the alternatives proposed to overcome those obstacles; moreover, it sheds light on the interlink between governmental and non-governmental actors active on the territory.



## 1.1 Outline

In this paragraph, I will outline the structure of this thesis: in the following section, I will firstly elaborate on the methods used to answer the research question and sub-questions, the ethical considerations and the limitations. To gain a better understanding of the critical concepts of migration and the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological distress and mental health, and formal and non-formal education, a theoretical framework will be provided in section 3. In analytical sections 4, 5 and 6, I will present all the findings based on the data I gathered during the online interviews; finally, I will provide my conclusions summarizing the topic of this thesis.

Hence, the driving research question of this thesis is the following:

*How have humanitarian organizations adapted their educational programs for forcibly displaced children in Greece as a response to COVID-19?*

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions will be answered:

- 1. In what ways have humanitarian actors been able to provide education to forcibly displaced children in Greek emergency settings since the outbreak of COVID-19?*
- 2. How has the absence of aid workers affected the provision of educational aid programs in Greece during COVID-19?*
- 3. How do humanitarian actors perceive the effects of the disruption of educational programs on forcibly displaced children's well-being?*
- 4. Which are the relationships among the main actors present in the area?*

## 2. Research Methodology

Given the uncertainty of the historical period in which we are living, the danger that the COVID-19 virus, and its variants, constitute not only for my person, but above all for those around me, and the different restrictions that continue to be enacted by individual states, I had to make the decision not to collect my data through a traditional ethnographic approach. As stated before, the sanitary situation of a context such as refugee camps or Reception and Identification Centers, where my target population mainly reside, is precarious, and it is risky to allow people from different places to access it, while COVID-19 is a threat that can still get out of control.

The methods I thought I would have employed, i.e., participant observation, face-to-face interviews, small talks, etc., have been replaced by online methods.

I have used online interviews for my research: they have occurred via Skype and, most generally, through communication platforms that allow calls and video calls (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc.). These software constitute a valid alternative to the onsite interviews used traditionally for qualitative research data collection: in fact, thanks to the use of the webcam, the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee is analogous to the one onsite (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). Many others are the advantages of synchronous online interviews: it is possible to reach interviewees that are geographically distant or who have movement limits, avoiding time and resources constraints, expanding the number of key informants from different locations (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2010).

Another way to develop interviews has been using asynchronous online interviews: in case a participant was unable to schedule an online interview but still wanted to participate in the research, the questions were sent in an email, as a text or in a word document. This option allowed to reach a greater number of actors and

allowed interviewees to take their time to respond and encouraged them to participate (O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens, 2008).

As stated by Kendall, these interviews, defined as qualitative interviews, include structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Kendall, 2008). Structured interviews are mainly employed for asynchronous online interviews: they are lists of prearranged questions and for their remote and asynchronous mode, they allow little space for follow-up questions. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews leave more room for discussions and the development of further topics and aspects; they are more time-consuming and will be implemented in interviews with a single subject or small focus groups (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

In order to dive into this online fieldwork, I have also employed an ethnographical online observation methodology: I have accessed Facebook groups created by volunteers and NGO workers, where they share their experiences, thoughts or ideas that are published and visible to all the groups' members. I have also participated in online events, webinars, masterclasses or any online activity related to my research topic. In this way, I had some opportunities to interact with the speakers, asking them questions useful for the research, creating a debate and discussion and collecting more data. Through these activities, I have expanded my network and connected with new actors and experts willing to participate as respondents to my thesis research.

The main target of this data collection is NGO workers and volunteers: unlike the residents of the emergency settings, they are not forced to reside in camps or IRCs where usually internet connection is poor, and they have the tools to connect online to respond to my questions.

I was able to interview a total of thirteen NGO representatives who contributed to the realization of this research: the interviewees all work in NGOs which provide non-formal educational activities to forcibly displaced minors living in the Greek territory. As shown in Figure 1, seven are based on the bigger island of Lesbos

(Little Lotus, Borderline Lesvos, Danish Refugee Council, Refocus Media Lab, Better Days, Mosaik Support Center, and Stand by Me), and the others on the islands of Samos (Samos Volunteers), Chios (Action for Education) and Leros (Echo 100Plus); the remaining three NGOs are located in the mainland, Athens (Khora and Velos Youth) and Polykastro (Open Cultural Centre).



Figure 1: Map of the location of the NGOs interviewed.

To preserve the interviewees' privacy, and in accordance with them, throughout the chapters of this thesis, I will refer to them either through the organization they work for or the use of their initials.

## 2.1 Ethical considerations

In order to understand whether forcibly displaced children in Greece receive education and how learning activities are provided before and during these pandemic months, I have employed the point of view of NGOs and humanitarian actors who are actually working or have worked recently on the Greek territory. Only NGOs that provide educational activities and psychological support to displaced and refugee children have been contacted.

When children and young adults are involved in research, there are some ethical issues to be considered: it has to be found an equilibrium between the will of the minor, whether s/he feels comfortable in participating in the research, and the approval or denial of the adult responsible for them. Unlike what was believed in the past, evidence has proved that children can be considered like adult participants, as far as researchers are able to understand their communicative way. It is indeed essential to involve children's perspective, as what adults think is the representation of the child's world is not always correct (Kirk, 2006). Due to the difficulties of researching the Greek territory and considering the online modalities for the data collection, unfortunately, I could not guarantee the involvement of minors.

Consent is one of the most important considerations that have to be made during the research. When participants were contacted to be part of the research, their consent to participate was asked at the beginning of the interview, before asking the questions or starting to record the interview. For asynchronous interviews, consent was asked at the beginning of the document where the questions were written. For the data collected online during webinars or masterclasses or through comments and posts published on social media groups, the issue of consent is more particular. When conducting research in a public domain, consent is not asked of people observed in that space, in order not to contaminate the context. Posts on the internet are then equated to public spaces,

and consent may not be explicitly requested for research purposes (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). However, there are conflicting views on the subject, and several factors need to be taken into consideration to collect data online in the most transparent way possible: it has to be considered whether the discussion is taking place in a close or open group, the size of the page, whether a webinar is open to the public or registration is needed and whether it will be published online available for everyone, whether participants are registered or will stay anonymous (Salmons, 2010). Considering all these factors, I have presented myself as a researcher, and I have asked for consent to collect my data, while sometimes I have used the “fly on the wall” method to observe and draw my own conclusions on the situation.

## 2.2 Research Limitations

Some limitations have influenced this research. The first one that has already been discussed is the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This external factor has limited my freedom to conduct on-site research and meet people. Technology has been fundamental in allowing me to find valid alternatives, although some techniques and experiences could not be undergone.

Another limit therefore closely connected with this has been the lack of possibility of spending considerable time on the Greek territory and, more specifically on camps, RICs, hubs or community centers. Being there would have allowed me to be in direct contact with NGO workers and international and local volunteers, the possibility to talk formally and informally with them, participate in educational activities, observing the humanitarian workers, the children and the youths' behavior.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter elaborates on the key concepts that will help the reader understand the complex situation of the Greek emergency settings during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly how it affected the non-formal education sector and the activities of the NGOs workers.

#### 3.1 Migration and psychological distress

Migration is a complex phenomenon: people have multiple reasons to flee and ways and distances to travel; there are people with different personal histories and capabilities to cope with adversities, but it is certain that this phenomenon is inextricably linked with stressful events which have an impact on the people who experienced it (Stompe, Holzer, Friedmann, & Bhugra, 2011). What is known is that, during this time, the world as children were used to knowing was shaken on its foundations. There are three phases that can be identified in the life of a migrant: the pre-flight phase, the flight phase, and the integration phase; during each phase, different forms of trauma and loss can be experienced. While fleeing, there is only one important thing to succeed in: surviving the journey to reach the place that should be safer and where it should be possible to start a new life; this is one of the most uncertain periods for children as they are exposed to all the migration-related difficulties that can threaten their life and several losses might be experienced (Lusting, Ellis, Keane, & Kia-Keating, 2004). Among the most traumatic and distressing experiences is the loss of parents or parental support and protection, family separation, the loss of home and remoteness from a known environment (Ajduković & Ajduković, 1993) (Miller & Rasco, 2004). Eventually, when children arrive in emergency structures like camps or identification and reception centers, they have to cope with additional obstacles, e.g., adaptation to a different country, discrimination, cultural barriers and social exclusion; living without basic services and guarantees, and the uncertainty and fear for their future. Moreover, unstable

living conditions and poverty may create anxiety – particularly for youths – over the difficulties in getting a job, which is essential for earning money to survive or to be sent back to families (Wilson, Murtaza, & Shakya, 2010). The exposure to all these events is confirmed to result in a more marked vulnerability of the children's psychological condition: more than the reasons for the migration itself, are the stressful events that come along with it that produce most of the psychosocial disorders (Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998).

The degree of traumatization varies among individuals, and it is the interplay of different situations and aspects that determines the graveness of stress a child experiences while migrating (Guarnaccia & Lopez, 1998). There are, however, common symptoms that are manifested and that can be identified. According to the World Health Organization, the majority of the people affected by emergencies contract forms of mental afflictions, experiencing sadness, depression, anxiety, and nightmares, which can accumulate over time (WHO, 2019); these symptoms are part of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), which are found in the majority of the young respondents in many studies on exposure of violence and flight experience, with a consistent persistence of symptoms even after a long period of time (Lusting, Ellis, Keane, & Kia-Keating, 2004).

### 3.2 The Greek refugee crisis

The beginning of the so-called “refugee crisis” in Greece can be identified back in 2015 when the media focused for the first time on the immediate need to remedy the lack of an accommodation system for the populations in need who were transiting the territory (Kandylis, 2019). Since the EU-Turkey Statement & Action Plan was signed in March 2016, which put in place more restrictions on border crossings, thousands of people have been trapped in a bureaucratic as well as in a physical limbo on the Greek territory. In those years, the Aegean Islands became the main points of arrival for the people who wanted to reach the European Union by



sea seeking asylum, while emergency settings born as transitory and temporary points, slowly turned into long-term overcrowded living places (IRC, 2018).

In 2015, in response to the increased need, the European Commission instituted the “hotspot approach”, in order to help Greece to deal with the great flow of migrants: Reception and Identification Centers (RICs), also called hotspots<sup>1</sup>, arose as centers where people without a valid visa would go through the main stages of the administrative procedures for foreigners, i.e. identification, reception, asylum procedure or return (Aida & Ecre, 2021). On the Aegean islands there were five RICs, in Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos and one in Evros, in the north-east of the mainland; but the hotspots are not the only type of facilities that have been created throughout the years: there are the Temporary Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers, the Temporary Accommodation Facilities for persons subject to return procedures, the Closed Temporary Reception Centers and the Closed-Controlled Island Centers for asylum applicants subject to a detention order. Additionally, there are temporary accommodation centers, which are commonly known as the camps in the mainland, and emergency facilities such as hotels, used as temporary shelters. Finally, there are urban accommodations provided by the UNHCR, as part of the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) project (Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). Most of these facilities were transformed soon into unofficial closed detention centers, and several movement restrictions and obligations were imposed on the residents. This has led to rapid facilities deterioration and overcrowdedness that lamentably became a mark of these emergency facilities throughout the years (Aida & Ecre, 2021). Although the number of people crossing the Greek borders has reduced since 2017, thousands of people have been stranded in Greece; as a matter of fact, the Moria camp, the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), hotspots are «first reception facilities» which «aim to better coordinate EU agencies' and national authorities' efforts at the external borders of the EU, on initial reception, identification, registration and fingerprinting of asylum-seekers and migrants» (EPRS, 2018)

largest and most famous in Europe, which was designed to host 2,800 people, just before the fire that destroyed it completely in 2020, was hosting almost 13,000 persons (DW, 2020); the Samos camp, with initial space for around 700 people, turned out to host a population of twelve times its capacity (Bathke, 2019); and the RIC of Chios, five times the capacity limit, with an internal capacity of around 1,000 and an occupancy of more than 5,700 (Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). In 2021, most of the people who arrived in Greece and then moved to live in these facilities came from Afghanistan, Somalia, Dem. Rep. of the Congo, Palestine, Iraq and Syria (UNHCR, 2021).

At the end of 2021, the total number of arrivals in Europe was 98,560, in line with the trend of the last few years: 95,700 people arrived in 2020 and 123,700 in 2019 (UNHCR, Data and Trends, 2021). Around 2,000 people have gone missing or have lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea in 2021 (UNHCR, Mediterranean Refugee Situations, 2022). In 2019, Greece received a total of 74,613 persons; in 2020 around 15,700, while during 2021, the total arrivals amounted to 8,800. (UNHCR, 2022).

At the end of 2021, children, i.e., minors below 18 years of age, are estimated to constitute 42% of the forcibly displaced population worldwide, i.e., 35 million out of 82.4 people in total (UNHCR, 2021). In 2020 around 4,600 children arrived by sea and land in Greece, 82% fewer than the previous year (UNHCR, UNICEF, & IOM, 2020); at the end of the year, in Greece, children represented over one-third of the sea arrivals, with more than 60% of them below the age of 12 (UNHCR, Sea Arrivals Dashboard - Greece December 2020, 22 February 2021).

I believe it is important to give the reader an overview of the numbers of the situation of Greece and Europe in the last years, but we must not forget that behind those numbers are always real people.

### 3.3 The right to education

According to the literature, formal education is *«an organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology»*, which *«involves the teachers, the students and the institution»* (Dib, 1988).

Non-formal education is *«flexible in terms of curricula, and methodology but learning [...] is intentional and organized. Students' needs and interests are placed in the center and the time frame is lacking. [...] non-formal education focuses on skills and the development of attitudes such as tolerance [...] and is quick to respond to the changing needs of individuals and societies»* (Grajcevcic & Shala, 2016). Every organization has its curricula, but what unites them is the flexibility of the educational activities based on the needs of the students: in fact, in informal education, it is possible to listen more to the necessities of the students in order to plan and structure the activities according to the willing of the real protagonists of education.

From a legal perspective, many are the obligations that Greece, as well as the other European Member States, are committed to and have to respect regarding education and school attendance: education is recognized as a fundamental human right for children. Art. 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention underlines how refugees should receive *«the same treatment as is accorded to nationals»* regarding education and that the *«contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favorable as possible [...], as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships»* (United Nations, 1951).

Art. 28 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that *«State Parties recognize the right of the child to education»*, that they should *«make primary education compulsory and available for all»*, as well as *«making higher*

*education accessible*», taking *«measure to encourage regular attendance at schools»* (United Nations, 1989). In 2016, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants pointed to education as a critical element of the international refugee response. Art. 32 specifies the effort of the State Parties to *«ensure that all children are receiving education within a few months of arrival»*; and Art. 81 again stresses the importance of providing *«quality and secondary education in a safe learning environment for all refugee children»* since *«access to quality education [...] gives fundamental protection to children and youth in displacement contexts»* (United Nations, 2016).

For children and youth, going to school is a fundamental part of life, and it is dramatic when they have to abandon it. Children forcibly displaced have a high chance of remaining in the same displaced situation for most of their childhood -if not all, and consequently, they are very likely to live their school cycle in exile (IASC, 2007). Regrettably, although education is a basic human right, available data on attendance of displaced children in schools are very low: worldwide, more than half of those of school-age do not attend school; around the world, 91% of children go to primary school, and 84% of adolescents go to secondary school, while respectively only 63% and 24% of displaced children and adolescents get the same access (UNHCR, 2019). UNHCR called for all the main actors to fill the gaps through the construction of buildings, hiring trained teachers, and supplying financial support to families and individuals. States and local governments are also called to put in place a way to include youth migrants in official and national education systems, to allow them to have a formal and approved educational career and curriculum, as the barriers that the migrant status brings with it must be overcome (UNHCR, 2019).

At the Greek national level, Art. 13 L 4540/2018 imposes asylum-seeker children to be enrolled in schools that are close to their accommodations, within a limited time frame of three months, even in case of missing documents; all

measures which, theoretically, are in line with the international guidelines (Law 4540/2018, 2018). Unfortunately, although the Greek government made considerable progress in the involvement of forcibly displaced children in the educational system of Greece, in 2018, the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, was still concerned mainly for children inhabiting the Aegean Islands and their difficulties in accessing education facilities (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). Indeed enrollment rates in Greece are still meager, with only a third of forcibly displaced children of school age enrolled in formal schools on the mainland and one in four who is able to access education on the islands; in Moria camp on the Lesbos island, there is no access to schools at all (AIDA, 2019).

There are many reasons that explain this low attendance. Missing documents: while escaping or during the journey, important documents might go missing and not owning the necessary ones for school enrollment represent a significant obstacle in the continuation of the educational career; in addition, in order to access certain services, documents related to family status, house and job contracts are also necessary but very hard to obtain.

The lack of resources: forcibly displaced people are often relegated to areas where services and resources are scarce, and if schools are physically present on the ground, they might be overcrowded, the number of teachers might not be sufficient, and basic facilities might not regularly work.

Courses and activities are often run by volunteers and NGOs, as emergency settings should be only temporary and transitory, and refugees receive inadequate and low-quality program education.

The language barrier is another great impediment to accessing local learning institutions, and the classes provided are not sufficient. Accommodations too far from schools and weak -or impossible- transportation connections can also be added to the list (UNHCR, 2019).

Additionally, even if great solidarity has been shown over the years, some barriers

have been made by the local community, when xenophobic attacks and demonstrations against migrants have impeded displaced children from enrolling and attending the same classes as the Greek ones (Vergou, Arvanitidis, & Manetos, 2021).

Data for the school year 2020-2021 are even worse, as they show a decrease of around 32% in school enrollment of refugees compared to the previous academic year, and the statistics could possibly be lower as the Greek Ministry of Education could not make clear whether the numbers also include asylum seekers and displaced people, in addition to refugees (AIDA, 2020). Art. 54(1) of the International Protection Act (IPA) declares how the condition of enrollment must be fulfilled «*under the same conditions and prerequisites as foreseen for Greek nationals*» yet fails in apprehending the aforementioned disparities between the two groups (Law 4636/2019, 2019). Starting from 2020, the impediments created by the COVID-19 pandemic broadened the exclusion and marginalization of displaced children from the educational system; not being able to leave the camps, not being able to benefit from the infrastructures needed for online education and the lack of transportation to go to school, are among the reasons why 62% of school-aged children living in mainland camps were officially enrolled in public school, but only 14.2% of them could truly benefit of this right (AIDA, 2020). On the islands, at the end of 2020 only 178 forcibly displaced children were enrolled in school, but only 7 (0.3%) were attending the classes (AIDA, 2020).

### 3.4 Education and mental health

As we have previously explored, education has been recognized under international refugee law as having a vital role, but only in the last years there has been a change of perspective, and it started to be part of the primary humanitarian response, while before it was not considered as part of the emergency response package for the displaced population's survival (Hyndman, 2011). As stated by

IASC, education is certainly important for its own core function, i.e., empowering children by giving them tools and methods for learning and improving their intellectual and emotional skills, in an environment in which they can interact, socialize and build the pillars of their future (IASC, 2007); in fact, schools and learning spaces are places where they understand how to cope with the obstacles of the outside world, while they comprehend how to become citizens, productive and independent members of society (UNHCR, 2019). Quality education also helps to raise from a condition of poverty and to reduce inequalities – particularly among genders – discrimination and intolerances; it enables to live a more qualitative, sustainable and healthier life (Allison & Attisha, 2019) and prepares future citizens to build a peaceful society (INEE, 2012). According to UNHCR, culture can also help to find the right role models, giving youths the tools to amplify their voices and become the changes this world needs. Providing education to children is an investment that will give in return a more peaceful world (UNHCR, 2019). Several studies have also proved the importance of schools and learning spaces as places of hope, particularly for forcibly displaced children and teenagers; during emergencies, learning environments can give them a sense of security, stability and routine, as education is important although undervalued part of the daily life that is often missed since they start their new migrant life (IASC, 2007). Schools are the places where forcibly displaced children can build their resilience, elaborating social and personal identities, and where they learn the tools to grow and build their future (Fazel & Stein, 2002). When children find themselves in emergency situations, having received quality education can save their life, as they have acquired the knowledge that can protect them at physical, psychosocial and cognitive levels (INEE, 2012). Survival skills, critical thinking and coping mechanisms are internalized, and children are less likely to be victims of forced labor and marriage, sexual abuse, involvement in armed groups and criminal activities (UNHCR, 2019).

As the reader may well understand, education is very important to preserve children's mental health and well-being, an aspect that is unfortunately too often undervalued and neglected. In emergency settings such as the Greek camps and hotspots, anxiety and distress are common reactions to uncertainty and fear for the present and the future, and these emotions can have a negative impact, influencing and compromising minors' mental health and well-being (Wilson, Murtaza, & Shakya, 2010). These experiences might resurface in the form of emotional distress and deviant behaviors, and children who experience prolonged and extreme stressors might manifest mental and psychosocial problems from which it is hard to recover and which can even lead to extreme behaviors, such as self-harm and suicidal attempts. Humanitarian emergencies and crises impact children's development: in the early stages of life, a child is more vulnerable to external factors which might compromise the physical and mental maturing and induce what is called "toxic stress", which is manifested in a variety of symptoms such as regression to earlier behaviors, aggression, depression. A large number of children consequently have trouble sleeping, reporting nightmares and feelings of anxiety and fear (Cowley & Snider). It is important not to overlook Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders and depression symptoms, as researchers have demonstrated how they could evolve and become chronic disorders, in the long run, affecting many aspects of life, such as the ability to interact and establish relationships (Morina, Hoppen, & Priebe, 2020). Formal and non-formal education has been defined as a fundamental intervention for the mental health care of children and youth, while, according to the Intervention Pyramid for Mental Health and PsychoSocial Support (MHPSS), one of the first interventions of response is to provide safe and supportive places for children, and schools or child-friendly spaces are considered one of those (Save the Children, 2019). Fundamental is Morina et. al. in their article, where they analyzed how the lack of education is one of the many causes which contribute to a slower recovery from mental distress and that the level of distress and mental health



issues decrease when participation in school and acculturation increase (Morina, Hoppen, & Priebe, 2020).

## 4. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the camps in Greece: an impact weighing on the shoulders of migrants and NGOs

### 4.1 Introduction

In this section, after having explained the so-called “refugee crisis” that started back in 2015 in Greece, I carry on explaining how the situation rapidly worsened in a short time, leading to an out-of-control situation with poorly managed and overpopulated emergency settings with people forced to live in inhumane conditions, without basic services and rights. To make matters worse, it adds up to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and notwithstanding the prompt and at times the exemplary response from Greece through the implementation of restrictions and lockdown, many have been critiques encountered in the humanitarian arena for what concerns the management of the pandemic specifically in the hotspots and camps.

### 4.2 Greece and COVID-19: protection or reclusion?

While Greece was still dealing with a political and humanitarian crisis, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus disease a global pandemic emergency (WHO, 2020). The world that we knew suddenly changed, and as the Coronavirus pandemic spread all over the globe, all the countries had to put in place measures and restrictions to prevent the population from being hit harder (The New Humanitarian, 2020). The virus can be particularly dangerous for marginalized people who live at the edge of society and migrants are one of those categories exposed more in case of a COVID-19 outbreak (Vonen, Olsen, Eriksen, Jervelund, & Eikemo, 2020). The conditions of the camps and centers where most of these forcibly displaced people are found have always been denounced as critical and indecorous: people live in overcrowded and poorly hygienic spaces, without adequate basic facilities and scarce medical personnel and

medicines (Psychiatry Research, 2020). All the preventive measures that could control the spread of the virus are difficult – if not impossible – to respect and apply in such spaces. In addition, being informed is essential in the fight against Coronavirus, and due to cultural and language barriers, as well as the imposed isolation from the rest of the society, forcibly displaced people usually have limited access to government regulations and information about how to stay safe and on updates of the COVID-19 situation in the country (Kluge, Jakab, Bartovic, D'Anna, & Severoni, 2020).

Since the first case was confirmed and the declaration of a state of emergency due to the Coronavirus pandemic on February 26<sup>th</sup>, Greece, witnessing the critical situation of its neighbor Italy, took drastic measures in response to the virus spreading, conscious of the weak national healthcare system which did not completely recover from the 2007-08 economic crises (Rafenberg, 2020). The first containment measures began on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, starting from schools, universities, childcare centers, theaters and recreational centers, followed by the closure of the country's land borders and traveling suspensions to and from the most affected countries (Mavragani & Gillas, 2020). Since the pandemic started, Greece declared two main lockdowns: the first one from March 2020 until May 2020, the second one from November 2020 until May 2021 and, during these periods, the most proactive and strictest measures have been applied, while only a few essential activities have been allowed to continue. In the months between the lockdowns, movements and business activities restarted, and, as in many other countries, Greece opted for opening up or closing down local districts according to the number of COVID-19 cases in the area (A3M, 2021).

Greece has been pointed to as having applied preventive measures against COVID-19 disease at such an early stage, which has been fundamental in controlling the virus outbreak (Kousi, Simos, & Mitsi, 2021). However several critiques have been given by the national and international humanitarian actors and

activists: most countries have adopted a hardline response to the COVID-19 emergency which has inevitably affected the most vulnerable communities, but Greece has imposed stricter restrictions on the forcibly displaced population, leaving thousands of people locked up in overcrowded and anti-hygienic camps and hotspots, measures that have been condemned by the European Union and the international community (Iacobucci, 2020). During a visit, Belkis Willie, Senior Crisis and Conflict Researcher at Human Right Watch, warned the Greek government about the necessity of providing more tents, toilets, and water, as well as increasing COVID-19 tests, as in that situation the spread of the virus was a real threat (HRW, 2020).

Cases of COVID-19 positives and deaths among the migrant population have been low: and even if on one hand the low rates of cases made many breathe a sigh of relief, the small number of infections has hidden the negligence of the institutions in testing the migrant community, the shortage of medical personnel disposable and the imposition of stricter measures and lockdowns on camps, and a high number of victims has been avoided because of the lower average age of the people living in an emergency situation on the Greek territory (Godin, 2020). As a matter of fact, unlike in previous years, the migrant population is an average young population, with over 60% under 30 years old: in Greece, it is stated that children constitute 28% of the RICs inhabitants (Kondilis, et al., 2021). Furthermore, most refugee camps are designed as temporary settlements and at the same time are built in isolated areas, far from city centers and local communities (Jahre, Kembro, Adjahossou, & Altay, 2017), and this contributed to the low spread of the virus among the refugee community during the first months of the pandemic.

*“The rules for the mainland are applied differently on the islands: here it depends very much on the camp manager or the police president, whether they have common sense or not.”*

*C.K. – Echo1000 Plus*

Due to a lack of space and infrastructure, new arrivals or individuals with COVID-19 symptoms were isolated in small units or former detention centers, forced to spend the quarantine period in precarious conditions (RTI, 2020). Médecins Sans Frontières has reported abhorrent conditions in several Greek camps: people are forced to spend the quarantine in dirty containers, without basic furniture or services, and there are no separate rooms for people with different needs and vulnerabilities (MSF, 2020).

Because of the several administrative and legal barriers, access to healthcare services is rendered difficult, and seeing a doctor in case of deterioration of health is made difficult by the scarcity of availability and withdrawal periods, while few can recourse to secondary care (Kondilis, et al., 2021). While the management of RICs and camps are under the supervision of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, without the contribution of the Ministry of Health, forcibly displaced people are kept excluded from the national healthcare strategy, contributing to the maintenance of their isolation and vulnerability (Kondilis, Puchner, Veizis, Papatheodorou, & Benos, 2020).

*“The lockdown for the camp started in March 2020 and never ended.”*

*A.K. - Borderline Lesvos*

Unlike the rest of the country, the lockdown for RICs and camps has been maintained for a prolonged period: access and exit have been regulated with restrictive measures, and the residents have been deprived of the right of

movement (Dimitrios, 2020). All NGOs workers who participated in this research confirmed to me during the interviews that strict rules, such as one person per family or group being able to exit the camp in a limited time frame, have been applied and have caused distress and frustration, as well as difficulties in meeting basic needs in an already harsh situation. While talking with M.A. of the NGO Little Lotus, I noticed the disappointment in her words: *«even when no cases were found in the camp but in the city, it was the camp the one put in quarantine»*. The impression, which was shared by the other interviewees as well, was that arbitrary decisions on the containment measures were being put in place against migrants, causing suffering and anger among the migrant population and the humanitarian actors. Moreover, the movement into and out of the camps has been strictly regulated not only for the residents of the camps but also for NGOs: as testified by all the interviewees, during the first lockdown, particularly during the months of March, April and May 2020, all the activities carried out by NGOs and volunteers were stopped, and this included educational activities and closure of informal schools and child-friendly spaces as well. It was not possible to enter the camp without a valid motivation, and at the same time, it was not possible to bring people outside the settlement: *«the first lockdown was quite strict, everything closed and also our NGO closed for few months; it has been very hard»* said A.K. of Borderline Lesvos NGO, pointing out how the most painful part for her and her colleagues was the fact that they *«stopped getting children outside the camp since 2020»*.

The removal of NGOs from the camps and other hosting structures led to more marked isolation of the migrant community from the local society and led to a sense of dismay and hopelessness, and the mental health of people deteriorated quickly (RTI, 2020).

## 5. The challenge of NGOs to guarantee education to all children

### 5.1 Introduction

The following section is based on the empirical data I collected through the online interviews I made with the NGOs' representatives who agreed to share their knowledge and opinions with me. For three months I have contacted all those NGOs working in the non-formal education sector, trying to organize an online meeting and ask my questions to collect the data necessary to answer the main question and sub-questions this thesis is posing. In this chapter, I will answer two of the main questions I asked myself when I started this project: How have humanitarian actors been able to provide education since the outbreak of COVID-19? And how do they perceive the effect of the disruption of educational programs on forcibly displaced children's well-being?

I will elaborate on my findings, bringing the experiences and testimonies of the interviewees, who have experienced firsthand the phases of the COVID-19 pandemic since its breakdown and the alternation of lockdowns that have severely affected their work and the lives of their students. I will compare the differences between the education pre and post-COVID-19 and what the expectations of these NGOs are for the future. The commitment the humanitarian workers and volunteers have had in order to keep providing some sort of non-formal education during the pandemic has been extraordinary and notwithstanding the several obstacles encountered, the alternative ways they have found and created to reach their students are surprising.

Finally, I will dedicate a section on the proven correlation between education and the well-being of minors and how COVID-19 and the restrictions during the last two years have had an impact on the lives of displaced children in Greece, causing them distress and the worsening of their mental health, testified through the stories of my respondents.

During the data collection process, what reassured me the most was seeing how all

the people I spoke to conveyed to me their desire not to give up, and I perceived how they did their best while navigating their ways through lockdowns, restrictions and technical and logistic obstacles; even though the educational sector in an emergency setting such as the Greek one suffered a lot, they found the way to adapt to the situation and created alternatives way of teaching for their students, not letting them behind once again.

## 5.2 A right for all o a right for a few?

Worldwide, education has been slowed down by the Coronavirus pandemic, which caused the closure of schools, affecting more than 90% of students and leading to drastic repercussions on the positive trend the SDG Goal 4 'Equitable quality education' was making in the recent years (Secretary General, 2020). As a matter of fact, the COVID-19 outbreak has marked the largest education crisis worldwide, forcing governments to close schools and leaving more than 1.5 billion children out of it (WFP, 2020).

While the use of digital platforms has been one of the most immediate solutions for most students, still more than 500 million students were unable to continue their studies remotely. The situation has been particularly hard for those displaced children and young adults who already had limited access to education programs and services (Secretary General, 2020).

Many obstacles have been encountered, and all the tools that are usually needed to follow an online class for this group are limited: mobile phones, laptops, internet connection and data, proper environment to study are basic resources requested to keep learning during this Coronavirus time, but at the same time are poorly available in emergency settings. It is easy to understand the several additional obstacles these children encountered during these months of the pandemic, starting from the limited availability of technological supplies to access the classes to the impossibility in certain cases to respect the social distance, and while few



students have been reached, many others have been left behind, without the opportunity to learn (UNHCR, 2020).

Children are one of the most negatively affected groups by this pandemic (WFP, 2020): the disruption of services and daily routine, the movement restrictions and confinement at home, the impossibility to relate with peers, and the worsening of the socio-economic situation of the country they are living in, contribute to making up short and long-term consequences they will have to face in the future (UNHCR, 2020).

*“None is interested in giving them the right preparation.”*

*C.K. - Echo100plus*

Back in 2016, the official authorities, first among all the Ministry of Education, tried to include asylum seekers and refugee minors in the Greek public schools, planning a strategy to integrate them into the schooling system while facilitating their inclusion within the Greek society (Tzoraki, 2019). Due to several deficiencies, difficulties and inadequate measures, NGOs and volunteers stepped into the process and became the main actors in providing non-formal education for forcibly displaced minors, notwithstanding the fact that these educational and recreational services have never been regularized or standardized. Each NGO offers its own program and curricula, trying to fill a gap that over the years is becoming more and more onerous and difficult to heal (Daskalaki & Leivaditi, 2018).

### 5.3 The pre-pandemic era: how it was the non-formal education sector in Greece

Before the pandemic, all the NGOs worked at their maximum capacity, giving access to their buildings and offices to as many students as possible. Some NGOs owned their own building, and others collaborated with other organizations, sharing

common spaces and working within other projects. The NGOs interviewed for this research have different sizes, with the biggest active in several settings in Greece, such as the Danish Refugee Council, and the smaller ones that have been put in place and implemented by only a few people in a certain area, such as the Little Lotus NGO: no matter the number of people involved, I could see through their narrations how bringing education and joy to even one kid was the only goal and how it was worth all the effort.

Until the first months of 2020, everything was occurring in person: the informal schools and centers not only were places where classes and training would take place for students, but they were also spaces open to all those people eager to spend some time together, who could walk in freely to chat, drink a couple of tea or coffee, or simply play chess, as S.I. of Samos Volunteers explained me, remembering with a low and nostalgic gaze the times that were. Particularly on the islands, where camps have been overcrowded since the beginning of the migration crisis and thousands of people were living together in the emergency facilities, the biggest and most organized NGOs, able to run numerous activities, could see up to seven hundred people frequent and populate their spaces in just a week. The buildings were also used to organize cultural events and activities, to celebrate the diversity among the cultures but also the similarities that unite the population around the world. All the NGOs shared the same vision: it has always been important to connect the local population and the migrant community, to let each other know more about their peculiarities and to facilitate the socialization and integration of the different groups who coexist in the same territory. It is in this way that the NGOs become a tool of community cohesion among the two parts.

*“The school inside the camps is the safest place for children, that’s why I believe we should exist as long as camps exist.”*

*M.A. - Danish Refugee Council*

When my interviewees were asked to present themselves and what the NGO they are working at does, they all labeled their educational activities as part of non-formal education programs. It was pleasant to see the pride with which each interviewee listed to me the many activities that were organized in the years preceding the start of the pandemic: one of them was in her office when we video-called for the interview and proudly showed me live the classes and common spaces that were used to be crowded by “the guys”, as she liked to call her students. The most popular courses that were usually provided were the language ones: English and Greek among all, but also French and German, were the most demanded language courses asked to be taught, as they are the most used among the European countries, and NGOs such as Open Cultural Center, Danish Refugee Council and Stand by Me were offering courses for all ages groups, while Samos Volunteers was even providing alphabetization courses for illiterate people. Other subjects similar to the ones taught in school were mainly math, geometry and science, in the perspective to provide a curriculum as much as possible complementary to the public school’s one, integrating robotics and coding for the most interested youngsters in the classes. Geography and history of Europe and courses on ethics and values were taking place at Better Days and Borderline Lesvos because of the belief in the importance of familiarization with the European context in the perspective of a future integration at the social and working level. Music, art and sport were also the most popular and appreciated classes by the young students: Echo100plus was able to invite musicians from abroad, in Velos Youth students would debate about paintings and find inspiration by the authors’ lives, while the volunteers of Little Lotus would gather together the kids and bring them to the beach for swimming, to the inland for excursions or to the parks to do yoga, dances and games as therapeutic and recreational activities. Besides these activities, some NGOs have decided to focus on specific sectors, in particular for the

young people approaching adulthood, for them to develop skills and competencies necessary to enter the European job market more prepared. For example, Action for Education centered its attention on the development of soft skills, i.e. team building and communication, while practicing for job interviews and on how to confront and receive feedback from colleagues in the workplace. Even more pragmatics were the activities of Refocus Media Lab and Mosaik: the first prepared laboratories and masterclasses every semester, where students willing to commit and fully participate could learn and improve their skills in photography, cinematography, editing, journalism and video production, obtaining a certification once finalized the course. The second one had a project of recycling and upcycling materials that could be found in the surroundings of the camps, such as pieces of like jackets, dinghy boats or old clothes that cannot be worn again, creating new items such as handmade bags and crafts. Mosaik also renovated old apartments meant for refugees themselves, providing in this way training and creating job opportunities while allowing people to be occupied for some time outside the camp, learning new skills for the future.

#### 5.4 Non-formal education and COVID-19: challenge accepted

All these educational and recreational activities and workshops, so important in the daily life of the migrant community displaced around Greece, faced a tough stop when the Coronavirus pandemic hit the world and arrived, around March 2020, in Greece as well. As already described, the Greek government took some drastic measures to prevent the spread of the virus, although it has been criticized for the decision to extend the restrictions arbitrarily in those emergency settings where the displaced community lives. NGOs tried their best to adapt to these restrictive measures which often affected them hardly, as for long periods they were not allowed to enter the camps or bring people outside to undertake any group activity. As testified by all the NGOs interviewed, access to the camps was denied for all the

organizations which did not have a base inside the camp, but even those who got it could not continue any educational and group activity for the whole first lockdown; only a few interviewees were able to access the camps, mainly those more known by the authorities in the territory and with a base inside the emergency setting, and they could share information and awareness about COVID-19 and the restrictions, distributing hygiene kits and masks to help people remain safe, adapting their role for this emergency situation.

The most logical thing to do when in-person activities are banned is to move everything online: but in emergency settings such as camps and hotspots, all the tools that are needed to follow an online class or activity are limited. Mobile phones, laptops, internet connection and data, and a proper environment to study and focus are resources requested to keep learning during Coronavirus time, but at the same time are poorly available in emergency contexts. It is very difficult for forcibly displaced children to own their personal mobile phones, even harder for them to have a laptop, and the internet connection is very bad, particularly in the camps, where a free Wi-Fi connection, when available, is most of the time unstable. Generally, parents need internet data for bureaucratic procedures, for finding a job and keeping in touch with relatives, and little data is left for the online activities of their kids.

Instead of being passive to wait, NGOs rolled up their sleeves, did not waste their time and once again worked hard not to leave these kids isolated, re-organizing themselves and reinventing their approach to education and to their beneficiaries. During the first and second lockdown, they came up with different alternative ways to deal with the new situation. Many of them were able to provide tablets, laptops, sim cards and internet data, while others started crowdfunding campaigns, reaching their worldwide online supporting community to help raise money and IT equipment for the student's online education, as Action for Education did for its students, raising more than 1,500.00 € which has been used to provide

data packages for three months for all the students. One of the first moves undertaken by all the organizations has been to create online groups using the most popular platforms available: on Whatsapp, Telegram and Facebook, teachers created group chats with the students to be able to text them and keep in touch on a daily basis. These platforms are the most known and the majority of students, and their families were already experienced in their use: teachers could send documents, pictures, links and voice messages and students could share back their completed homework for feedback and corrections; this has been the most used way of online education among the NGOs interviewed that allowed teachers and students to keep in touch in one of the easiest ways.

While interviewing, some common difficulties emerged regarding the organization and execution of video calls and online lessons on platforms such as Team, Zoom, Skype or Meet: many students did not have enough data for the hours an online class would require, and the connection instability was preventing them to understand and follow the teacher properly; often it was hard for them to find a quiet place where to focus, and as S.N. of Refocus Media Lab made me think about, *«imagine how it is possible to follow the class if you live in a tent with hundreds of people, if there are noises around you»*. And lastly, even if it might not come to mind right away, G.L. of Velos Youth pointed out how not being in possession of a device with the last update that would support these apps and online platforms constitutes a further big obstacle. As a matter of fact, the NGOs who worked with smaller children, did not even try these options, as conscious of the obstacles their target group would face, while those who made an attempt with the youngsters, then decided either to avoid this approach or to opt for a weekly video class for those few who could connect, mainly for a quick chat, keeping the bond with them and making them feel less isolated.

A couple of NGOs, namely the Danish Refugee Council and Mosaik, have been able also to develop online platforms that could also work offline: online activities such

as quizzes, games and exercises were uploaded to the platform, and this alternative tool could be used from all those having troubles with the classic online methods, while constituting a new resource for the NGOs themselves, as an archive to be used to collect all the material and save it for the future.

The group of NGOs whose target group was smaller children found out that the most successful and popular alternative was the “worksheet wall”: the representatives of Danish Refugee Council, Samos Volunteers and Action for Education described to me how this panel was placed outside the camp or in front of the office of the organization, where teachers would hang up the printed homeworks and coloring pages, divided for the different levels of their students’ education, which were then available for everyone. Kids and their parents could pass by and pick up the papers and come back a few days later, to exchange the completed assignments with new ones. I.V., manager of Open Culturale Centre, illustrated to me that they were also able to prepare the material and bring it directly to the apartments of the kids because it was easy to reach them as they live in the cities and in the same neighborhoods or even buildings: these two last methods allowed to reach those youngest students who cannot read and write, and who would have been the most excluded from the digital alternatives, while in this way they have been able to occupy their time, drawing and learning.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, and albeit to a lesser extent, the bright side of digital education has been perceived by them too: former students who left Greece and were now living in different states throughout Europe were able to attend the classes and follow the courses they had previously benefited from. In this perspective, some NGOs even added new courses to their repertoire, with the possibility for everyone to attend and earn a certificate online.

## 5.5 A bitter adaptation: a new coexistence with COVID-19

Already after the first lockdown and particularly after the second one, NGOs and forcibly displaced populations got slowly used to the new pandemic situation, while every aspect of daily life started to be adjusted in accordance with the new context. In order to be able to restart educational and recreational activities in-persons, when possible, Non-Governmental Organizations started to look for new, larger and more capacious spaces to respect the new regulations against COVID-19; in fact, as for almost all the sectors and actors, the capacity of the classes and common spaces has been reduced, and while before the pandemic the flow of people entering and leaving the buildings was practically free, now NGOs have been forced to create waiting lists, with students obliged to register in order to be able to participate to the activities. The classes are now composed of a maximum of ten to fifteen students, according to the square meters of the room, in proportion less than half than before: I felt like this aspect was one of the most frustrating for my interviewees, as the new rules implied somehow “choosing” which kid to give the possibility to follow an activity, an idea that goes against any principle and value of the NGOs and their representatives and which hurts at the same level both their and the children's side. Trying to provide education for all and then being forced to put in place waiting lists, registrations, and limited spots, I believe it was a difficult choice my interviewees experienced, while their greatest fear was to betray their students, turning their backs on them and making them feel excluded in a world that already treats them unfairly.

Larger organizations, in possession of open spaces and yards, were able to welcome more students and organize outdoor activities, especially during the summer, while smaller ones had to find different modalities to see the students, such as arranging short one-to-one meetings between students and teacher, very small groups of students with the same level of education, or divided people into



groups between morning and afternoon, limiting the time they can spend in the class but allowing more to participate in the lessons.

I personally want to highlight the effort made by the NGOs to make sure everyone would respect the official directives, such as the obligation to wear masks, sanitize hands, present negative tests: being in possession of assets such as personal protection equipment (PPE), i.e., masks and gloves, and hand sanitizer gel, is not obvious nor easy in emergency settings like hotspots and camps, particularly when it is required to do any action. These NGOs once again, with their own strength and the support of their community and donors, were able to provide masks, hand sanitizer gel, and COVID-19 self-test which students underwent before the start of classes, to ensure the safety of all.

To the question “Are you prepared to face a third wave?” I could see a spark of fear in the eyes of each of my interlocutors: generally, they were all confident that another harsh third wave would not happen again, but at the same time they were just as cautious about making predictions. Indeed, I can divide my interviewee into two main groups based on the answers they gave to me to this question. More than a few interviewees bitterly admitted that they were not sure whether their NGO would withstand another hard blow such as the previous ones; for them, the online methods have not been so successful, because their target age group was too small and did not respond positively to attempts at online education. Their activities have suffered from the lack of proximity and sharing that only physical presence can give, and, as they could not come up with more alternatives if not those already tested, which not always worked properly, believed that an additional period of inactivity would likely mark the end of their educational and recreational projects. The other group of respondents was more confident, due to the more positive experiences made with the online education in the past months, although they premised that certain conditions must be met in order for them to be considered out of danger: restrictions must not be so hard such as in the first and second lockdowns, so they

would be able to enter the camps and bring children outside, but also they felt stronger in being able in the future to negotiate with the managers of the RICs and camps and to advocate for their activities, finding more support from the authorities as well. Among this group, some have managed to see some advantages from these challenging months: keeping both modalities, presence and online, would allow ex-students living now in a different country or in a different city, as well as those who work and cannot follow during the day the lessons, to still participate to a class or a course of their interest. Additionally, getting used to the IT equipment, the different online platforms and apps, and the steps to download or upload documents, videos and pictures is already a training useful for their working future, that is why some NGOs were considering maintaining both directions, although always encouraging the students to show up at the offices to register, socialize and work physically with the group and the teachers.

## 5.6 The impact of the pandemic on the student's mental health

The benefits of education are scientifically proven, but even only through the testimonies of my interviewees is it possible to understand how the countless and diverse activities organized before the pandemic was vital for the well-being of the displaced kids and youngsters. When the Coronavirus issue hit, the impact on the lives of children was huge and affected all those positive aspects of their life correlated to education and had consequences on their mental health and well-being.

The restrictions have been harsh for everyone, but as many humanitarian actors reported, those implemented for the Greek camps and hotspots were defined worse than those for the locals, more restrictive and oppressive for a population already living in a precarious situation: while the world was discussing how to stay safe and while media were advising on staying isolated in clean environments, inside the

camps basic items like soap were not even there before, and the surrealistic situation, so contradictory and unlogical, was creating frustration and fear. Adding also arbitrary measures such as fines, checks, searches and perquisitions, and blocks at the exit of the camps, kids lived in a sense of insecurity and tension that was perceived as repression against them and their families, worsening their process of integration and sense of belonging towards a community perceived as increasingly hostile.

Citing G.B. of Velos Youth, «*there are two versions of the virus: the actual virus, which never stressed them out, and the system reaction to the virus, which gave them the final blow*». This idea is shared by all my interviewees: the virus itself was not a physical threat to the young displaced population, as it is known that they are less exposed to the risk of getting severe symptoms whether infected by COVID-19 (WHO, 2021). What would have later constituted a problem were the restrictions imposed on them to prevent the spread of the virus: minors suddenly found themselves alone in the camps, not allowed to go out, without the presence of the humanitarian workers, teachers and volunteers, and for long periods unable to attend the recreational and educational activities and classes they were used to participating in. All this has spilled over their already fragile mental well-being. The real impact of COVID-19 on this group could be seen both during the period of online education and during the period of reopening and returning to a “semi-normality” in presence.

Besides the obstacles in following an online lesson or workshop, after a while even the most dedicated students slowly lost enthusiasm, and teachers noticed every week fewer students showed up and completed the assignments; the difficulties of participating in a class from a tent without a stable internet connection, or from a room overcrowded and noisy, without privacy and personal space where to stay focused, inevitably affected their interest and disciplines, due to the feelings of

disappointment and exasperation for being constrained in such a humiliating situation.

*“Online education took away the human interaction between teachers and students.”*

*M.L. - Action for Education*

S.N. and her team at Refocus Media Lab know their students well: *«We knew there is something wrong when a student doesn't show up for 2-3 days in a row, and he is not writing why he is missing the class»*. There have been some cases during the months of lockdown in which a couple of students were skipping classes without notifying the teacher. In these situations, as they could not reach the student physically due to restrictions, they would involve the classmates to check on that person, convincing him/her to show up again, to get up from bed, as often a mild form of depression kicks in when things do not work out and seem easier to just close in on yourselves to escape from a frustrating situation. Once this type of support turned out to be insufficient, but fortunately, S.N., thanks to her network, found a psychologist from Los Angeles who could speak Farsi and helped the guy overcome that bad time.

Being always available to talk, to listen, to give advice and a bit of support, even if it was through a screen, was the only powerful tool not to make them feel abandoned, to keep track of their well-being; I could see how genuinely E.S. of Mosaik believed in the value that a simple and short video call had during the months of lockdown when she stated: *«I am not sure if we had a great outcome at an educational level, but I am totally sure that it was important to run these lessons even just once per week»*.

When the restrictions on anti-COVID-19 were less prohibitive, and the activities were allowed to be carried out in presence, a change in the children's behavior was immediately noticed. First of all, the fears of the parents were noticed to be also transmitted to the children: having witnessed people and families being separated and isolated in quarantine in informal structures as positive to COVID-19, the fear of contracting the virus made the parents more skeptical in allowing their children to follow the classes, and the children themselves were more fearful and insecure to move around. The behavior of the parents is understandable since, if tested positive, they would have lost the right to leave the camp or their home, which would create an inconvenience for their need to follow the asylum procedures, and the school was therefore perceived as an additional risk to limit. Moreover, seeing the concern and frustration of loved ones, even children did not have the same hope they were used to having before. *«They all feel they are not welcomed, and all this pressure is felt by children as well»*. A dark shadow of resignation suddenly falls on A.K.'s face while we talk about Borderline Lesvos's students: she remembers how in Moria camp, although one of the worst and most stressful refugee camps, people were still free to move and were hopeful to be able to leave the island of Lesvos and start a new life soon. Now in the COVID-19 era, the rules are stricter, the options for the inhabitants of the camps are limited, and rumors of inhuman episodes such as pushbacks in the Mediterranean sea and illegal rejections to Turkey are heard, while NGOs and residents are stuck between countless restrictions, and there are less and less witnesses.

*“Months of work was lost in just two months of COVID.”*

*M.A. - Danish Refugee Council*

Another important and alarming difference noticed in the students' behavior once back in class was the sense of disorientation: *«after the first lockdown, we could see*

how a lot of them lost their routine, they seem not able to integrate in the school environment anymore: this was the most evident impact on their well-being», M.A. tells me, adding that the prolonged time spent alone in their tents and rooms had a negative impact on their ability to follow schedules and school programs, a consistency that is so needed for the kids, particularly in early stages of life. Although the NGOs that participated in this research did not have the possibility of providing psychological support within their programs, they all ensured me they have always done the impossible to stay close to the children, console them and motivate them not to give up on the most difficult moments. I believe the words of A.K. enclose precisely this message: «we don't have tools to track their mental health in a scientific way, just the very human connection and love» and she continues explaining to me how simple it is to check on them through a trivial question like 'How are you?'. Children are transparent, and their emotions and feelings often transpire: when they cry the teachers approach them and try to give them comfort and understand whether they are feeling stressed, something has happened to their family, or if there is a deeper trauma caused by past events behind their behavior. The personal and close connection that is created between students and teachers is fundamental, «it's a bond of trust and respect» as S.I. states without hesitation.

## 6. The intertwining of relationships between the players in the field

### 6.1 Introduction

In this last chapter, I will investigate a little more in-depth the humanitarian sector, asking directly to the NGO participants of this research whether and what type of relationship there is among the humanitarian actors. Confronting the answers, some general trends emerged, based on the location where NGOs operate, which involved solidarity and collaboration, principles and traditions, to end up in discord and controversy.

While this relationship has its ups and downs, but solidarity always prevails, totally different is the relationship with the Greek authorities, with whom a meeting point seems not possible and does not want to be found. This leads the two parties not to communicate and not to work together for the common cause, between rights violated and duties imposed but not recognized.

### 6.2 The humanitarian arena: what kind of relationship is there among NGOs?

While diving into the non-formal education sector for forcibly displaced minors in Greece and finding out how NGOs managed to deal with the pandemic and its obstacles, some questions came to mind: how is the relation among NGOs? Do they collaborate and support each other? Do they have a common plan to organize their activities? To know more, I have asked these questions to my interviewees, and some interesting aspects have emerged, as well as some criticism on their own category.

Firstly, it is important to make a premise before analyzing the relationship between NGOs: in Greece, every emergency context is different, and just as islands are

managed differently than the mainland, each island is different from another. This difference we will take into account in this research is mainly linked to the number of Non-Governmental Organizations present and the number of forcibly displaced people who reside in a specific camp or area: in the island of Lesbos, the most famous and populated one, there have been more than eighty NGOs actively operating on the ground, while on smaller islands such as the one of Leros or Samos, the number of NGOs is re-proportionate; again, in the biggest cities of the mainland, where part of the migrant population moves, hundreds of NGOs have their offices there too: the exact number of NGOs is not known, but unofficial sources state that in the last years not less than 4,000 NGOs are declared to be present all over the Greek territory.

As I wanted to understand more about whether NGOs cooperate with each other for what concerns those organizations working in the non-formal educational sector, I found out that the connection between them is very varied and cannot be extended homogeneously to all the actors. I was expecting there was a sort of “common plan” these NGOs would first design together and then apply within their activities, but I was underestimating many factors. Based on my findings, for this analysis, I have identified two groups: one group includes those based on the minor islands of Samos, Chios, and Leros together with those based on the mainland, specifically in Athens and Polykastro, and the other is formed by the respondents working on the island of Lesbos.

The first group is where solidarity and collaboration between NGOs have worked best and appear to have given the best results. Even if the comparison between islands and cities might not seem immediate, I have put them together in the same group as the answers received from my interviewees are very similar, mainly due to the circumscribed area in which my NGOs are active. Overall the responses were very positive, and I saw some enthusiasm when this question came up: from the island of Samos, S.I. affirmed that between Samos Volunteers and the



other NGOs who are part of the educational sector, *«there is a dialogue and a very close relationship, every day there is the possibility to collaborate with them»*, while M.L. of Action for Education from the island of Chios stated that *«there are a limited number of NGOs here and whenever we can, we try to cooperate»*. It is clear that whenever the number of actors present in an area is limited, it is easier to organize and attend meetings, coordinate and implement activities that involve several organizations, discuss the progress the non-formal education is making in that period and join forces in order to cover as many people as possible, offering, as far as possible, a quality education. In the cities of Athens and Polykastro, the feedback received is similar: Open Cultural Center has a *«good network of links with other NGOs in the North of Greece»*, and I.V. explained to me that the camp in the northern city is small and while they operate outside it, the NGOs with which they cooperate work inside, creating a collaboration that aims to reach all the children in the area. C.K. and G.L., who work in Athens and respectively in Echo 1000Plus and Velos Youth, confirmed that in the big city, the solidarity between NGOs is a robust tool they rely on for the success of their projects. They both represent and speak on behalf of their organizations during the meetings and video calls with the other humanitarian actors concerned about the education of refugees and the displaced community, and the communication is excellent and effective. In Athens, not only NGOs from the same sector come together, but also NGOs that work on different topics, such as accommodation, advocacy, and mental health, and through their networks, they succeed when there is a need to help each other in reaching a goal that ends up being shared by all.

On the other side, the second group, to which most of my interviewees belong, is the one that, according to all my NGOs, encountered more difficulties creating a solid network with the other organizations working in Lesvos. It has to be pointed out that the island of Lesvos and its famous Moria camp - now called Moria 2.0 after its destruction in the fire of 2020 - have been known for being the worst

emergency setting in Europe, the face of the failure of the EU migration policy (Vinci, 2022). The high number of migrants who over the years have landed in Lesvos, combined with the government's poor ability to cope with a phenomenon of this magnitude, has meant that many NGOs responded to the request for help, resulting in an overcrowded camp with peaks of more than 20 thousand people, managed without an official guide by dozens and dozens of NGOs. This peculiar situation led to the formation of a chaotic context challenging to control, where NGOs often would overlap, and were establishing a plan and a dialogue even between similar actors has been more difficult than in other places. During our talk, A.K. of Borderline Lesvos gave me an accurate picture of what the situation in Lesvos is and has been: she has worked there since the start of the refugee crisis, and during the years, she was always witnessing the (un)changing dynamics of the island and its camp. A sort of cooperation and collaboration among NGOs of the educational sector has always been a goal for most: *«there have been bi-weekly meetings, and even google meetings with people from Moria, teachers, the Ministry of Education...there has always been an exchange, but not much has changed»*. She recognizes the commitment that cyclically new people starting to work on the island put in trying to organize and change things: *«there is always someone new jumping in, proposing something to fix what didn't work before»* and after a short pause, she concludes with resignation *«it's good that fresh people come, but things are hard to be changed here»*. There are a few main obstacles to a more solid cooperation among NGOs working in Lesvos: one is the sense of competition that hangs in the air, and most of my interviewees agreed on this point. For M.E.A., it seems like *«it is quite important to be THE NGO who is providing THAT specific activity»*, for S.I. *«Lesvos is a completely different world regarding cooperation among NGOs, where, if any, it's very scarce and occasional»*; and while also S.N. states that *«often there is simply not much to collaborate with others»*, E.S. admits that *«sometimes we ourselves don't want to undergo the path of collaboration,*

*although we maintain easy relationships with the other actors*». Based on the testimony of my interviewees, this competition is an aspect which, as we shall see later, is mainly circumscribed in Lesvos, so I personally deduce that it is easier in the presence of so many actors and so few resources like those present on the island, to find a harsher and more austere atmosphere. It is also true that every organization has its guideline and principles, and talking with E.S. of Mosaik Support Center, I had the opportunity to get a different perspective on this. She proudly explained to me how much effort her organization puts into trying not to compromise its principles and to maintain its position, which at a superficial glance can be misunderstood as being rigid and unwilling to cooperate. She defines Mosaik as «*a bit more critical*» than other organizations as they «*don't want to collaborate with the authorities*» and this stance led them to be less cooperative with organizations that they believed were too distant from their way of being. The other side of the coin is that the perception is that many organizations «*just have a rigorous program, they don't really bond with other NGOs and are more like doing their own stuff*». The critiques leveled by the NGOs themselves against other colleagues must not mislead the reader: this “rivalry” does not compromise the solidarity and collaboration ultimately when needed; indeed, NGOs «*do complement each other in terms of items and materials, the bigger ones complement the smaller ones*» and indeed «*whenever there is a need for a student we work closely with other NGOs to find a solution for his or her issue, which can be the need for an apartment, a doctor or a lawyer appointment*» S.N. reassures me.

Beyond the more or less willingness of each organization to cooperate, which is dictated by different reasons, on the island of Lesvos, other obstacles make the process harder and laborious. I agree with A.K. when she states that «*if there were a good integration program implemented by a big powerful player, everything would be better and less chaotic*»; while interviewing, I understood there is indeed an attempt to coordinate initiatives and meetings made by the most known

organizations, mainly UNICEF or UNHCR, but it does not seem to produce many results, besides «*calling for meetings to update each other on what they are doing and what they might improve working together*», says M.E.A. with a skeptical tone. The opinion of my respondents is that all NGOs are independent, and none is officially in the position to be able to make and implement a shared plan involving all. The only important initiative shared by all the formal and non-formal education actors is reaching all the forcibly displaced minors living in Lesvos and ensuring they attend at least one educational activity.

### 6.3 NGOs VS Greek Government: a troubled relationship

*“When you don’t have a formal education, you try your best with the few resources available. But for the Government it’s not a lack of resources, it’s a lack of willingness.”*

*S.T. – Stand by Me*

If the relationship among NGOs depends on many factors and emerges in various forms, but solidarity and common goals prevail in the end, the relationship between NGOs and the Greek Government is different. Starting already at the end of 2019, the new Greek government implemented a series of reforms to the asylum and migration laws which limited the rights of asylum-seekers and migrants, while adopting on April 2020 the Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD), legislation that modified the Registry of Greek and foreign NGOs, where, in order to be able to be legally recognized and to work on the Greek territory, NGOs have to meet strict requirements (Amnesty International, 2020). Seventy NGOs reunited in the civil society organization called “Choose Love” denounced in a report the difficulties encountered in continuing to access the camps and RICs and offer their services to the migrant community: while they agree on the necessity of the State to maintain a

register of the organizations operational, they are concerned the new process targets the right of freedom of association and seems to aim to exclude as many NGOs as possible from the territory (Choose Love, 2021). The mistrust in the Greek authorities is the result of years of interferences and ambiguous episodes against the work of the humanitarian organizations and the migrant community, such as the accusation of being smugglers and human traffickers, the use of criminal investigations to harm and intimidate groups of individuals working in the humanitarian sector, police raids and confiscations in the city centers, the hiding of push-backs on the Greek sea and land borders, preventing migrants from seeking protection and aid workers to witnessing what is happening (Cossé, 2021). The additional restrictions the Government imposed on these actors during the pandemic of COVID-19, as already seen in Chapter 1, made very difficult the life of NGOs workers and volunteers, as well as the one of the migrant community, affecting how most essential services, assistance, and forms of support were provided and received.

Asked my interviewees what kind of relation, if any, their NGO has with the authorities, none of them, unfortunately, could retract the rhetoric that poses the Greek authorities in a bad light for what concerns the connection with the humanitarian sector. My respondents leveled many criticisms against the Government, starting from the lack of interest and proper attention to the education sector aimed at migrant minors. «*The system is not ready to welcome these children, even after so many years*» and while well aware that things are not easy, M.A. can no longer excuse so many delays from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Asylum and such a high number of forcibly displaced children still out of school. Also, E.M. is incredulous that one of their «*biggest issues as an NGO is the lack of transport*» which for her is absolutely inexcusable: «*we cannot accept that kids cannot access education for the lack of transport in 2021*», as particularly on the islands, the city centers and the RICs are not well connected or not connected at

all, and to be able to provide education, as well as other services, you have to either work inside the camp or be able to provide transport yourself. Moreover, the new center-right government took office in mid-2019 and carried out a hate campaign against NGOs and their work, considering them responsible for the migratory situation in Greece. What really angers my interviewees is the contradiction between the Government's negative representation of NGOs, followed by all the obstacles placed in order to make their work more difficult if not unsustainable, and their de facto necessary presence for an emergency that the Government itself has not been able - and never wanted - to manage. S.I. perfectly summarizes the concept: *«it's a moral blackmail, they put in place all the impediments, and then they blame us if things don't improve. Notwithstanding all the obstructions and the lack of services, they know some NGOs will find a way to fill that void for them»*. The narrative in which NGOs are involved is made up of great contradictions, with a Government that describes them as the cause of the migratory emergency, advancing to the cry "no NGOs = no refugees", passing laws and decrees to limit their freedoms and their presence in the territory, but at the same time making sure to always leave a window of opportunity to a few of them to continue their work and keep the emergency under control. It is a simple but subtle strategy: in this way, the Government maintains its austere line against NGOs and refugees, fueling dissent and hatred among those citizens who support it, showing them that it is keeping the promises made by "cleaning the islands" from the refugees and keeping the numbers low, but at the same time, allowing a few actors that go unnoticed to work in his place and not make the emergency escalates.

This strong opposition to the government has led to another great discussion among NGOs about accepting to work or not inside camps and RICs. These emergency facilities have been proved to be deleterious for those who live there and represent a space where a population is forcibly confined, as deemed as disturbing the national order of things by the authorities (Turner, 2015); they are

inevitably linked with the Government's policies and, as already seen from the testimonies of my NGOs, none of them wants to relate to it. However, there are two factions with two different ideas in this regard, each defended by valid reasons.

*“It's good that things are happening inside [the camp], but on the other hand it really stops children from being integrated outside. It's like a bubble, it's like maintaining them separately, in different spaces.”*

*A.K. – Borderline Lesvos*

The NGOs based outside the emergency facilities do not want to have any dialogue with the camps' authorities and managers, seeing their presence inside the camp as an indirect collaboration with the Government. On the other hand, the NGOs who provide their services inside RICs and camps do not want to be linked with the authorities either, although they believe a compromise for the good of their students is necessary, as well as their presence inside the camp is still fundamental, and as G.L. of Velos Youth said to me, *«We try not to work too close to the institutions to avoid being part of this hostile strategy, but work close enough to achieve some results and express our claims».*

*“Our team works inside the camps: we are aware of the necessity of also bringing children outside the camp but we are also very much needed inside and that's why you can find us here.”*

*M.A. – Danish Refugee Council*

## 7. Conclusions

In the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it had worldwide in all sectors, this Master thesis set out to investigate the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations providing non-formal education to forcibly displaced children in Greece. In particular, this research answered the main question “*How have humanitarian organizations adapted their educational programs for forcibly displaced children in Greece as a response to COVID-19?*” showing the alternative ways of teaching with the limited resources available, while deepening the investigation into the positive effect education brings to the well-being of students, all within the historical and social framework of Greece.

Fleeing your own home and migrating to another country is a complex phenomenon that is proved to have consequences at a psychological level, causing PTSD symptoms, particularly among the youngest slice of the migratory group. Greece, since the beginning of the “refugee crisis” on its territory, struggled to manage and organize a dignified response to the phenomenon and failed to prevent the rapid deterioration of the emergency structures, condemning thousands and thousands of people to live in overcrowded and unhygienic camps, not equipped with basic services for such a high number of persons stuck together in the same place. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a new chapter in the management of the refugee crisis, and sharp criticisms have been moved against the Greek government: in fact, as also my interviewees stated, the authorities have been accused of adopting arbitration decisions regarding what concerns the management of the pandemic over RICs and camps, letting the forcibly displaced population more isolated than ever. Applying different and harsher rules had deep consequences on an already vulnerable group, which faced the first months of the pandemic without the proper knowledge of the new virus or knowing the measures in place to be respected in the country. While I was interviewing, I recalled in my



head the scary moments experienced during the first lockdown, when none knew to what extent was dangerous the COVID-19 virus, while on tv and on all the social media panic and fear hovered daily in the news. I felt safe staying inside my own house while studying, working remotely, and going out only for basic needs. It was at that moment that I realized how terrifying it must have been for those living in a tent, aware that their living condition was the exact opposite of what was recommended, and how frustrating it must have been to have to resign themselves to having no chance of improving and bettering their position.

Children felt in their own skin all this chaotic situation and the restrictions imposed against them, which also fell on those few actors who stood by their side until that moment: tough restrictions hit NGOs too, preventing them from entering hotspots and camps, and those providing non-formal educational and recreational activities suddenly had to stop their activities, causing the disruption of a fundamental service for children and youth that over the months would have had more than few consequences.

It is hard to accept that millions of children nowadays are still excluded from national school systems and do not receive a formal and qualitative education. Despite international and national laws obliging governments worldwide to provide the means to allow all minors to access schools, for the forcibly displaced population the reality on the ground is unfortunately very different. Greece has a low percentage of migrant population enrolled in its national school system and progresses made over the years are insufficient to be considered even close to the acceptable minimum. In this context, Non-Governmental Organizations played a vital role; infact, this thesis wanted firstly to highlight the **effort and the willpower of the NGOs working** in the non-formal education sector in Greece: I believe it is important to recognize their work in providing any type of **recreational and educational activity** to children and youths, otherwise neglected without education.

During the data collection process, I have retraced with my interviewees the pre-pandemic times to emphasize and credit them for the work done alongside the so-called migratory crisis, the commitment of each NGO to building a network of teachers and volunteers who have dedicated their time and passion to their students, all the activities, courses and classes organized, to which hundreds of people participated and found knowledge and joy.

Before starting to collect data, I was concerned about what I would have heard from the NGOs' representatives: I was worried that the various waves of COVID-19 and restrictions had brought an already weak system to its knees and that no hope was left. I became positively surprised while discovering how the humanitarian organizations have been able to adapt to the new situation, in a rough way but still beyond my expectations; it is however clear how many difficulties and obstacles they have faced along the journey and still little, or no help is provided by the authorities.

In light of my findings, I would like to stress the positive and the negative outcomes of the alternative ways NGOs in Greece came up with for providing non-formal education to their students while deepening the analysis of those solutions that worked and those that did not, understanding why and which factors had an influence on the results.

I believe it is important to first divide the students into two groups based on the age range: the younger children, aged 5 to 12, and the older ones, approximately 13 to 18 years old. We can say that the education for younger students faced more challenges: it is very hard for teachers to be able to approach online those kids who have little or no knowledge of the subjects of the lessons or who have just started learning to read and write; and on the other hand, it is hard for kids of this age, who are less used to behave and participate in classes, to sit down and pay attention to the lesson through a monitor. With this group age, the presence of the parents or of an adult figure is important, both for helping them with the homework and for

allowing them to use a device with internet data to follow an online class. For them, the most successful alternative way of education during the pandemic has been the “worksheet wall” and the door-to-door distribution of assignments and materials, although it has to be said that these practices have been used little, as NGOs workers were able to put them in place only when the restrictions and regulations against the spread of the virus allowed it.

On the other hand, for older kids and young adults, online education would have been an accessible and easy-to-use option were it not for the obstacles related mainly to the bad internet connection, the limited data at their disposal and the often overcrowded places from where they could attend. The use of platforms such as Whatsapp, Telegram and Facebook turned out to be the most successful online alternatives for them: through group chats, teachers and students were able to exchange documents, pictures, links, and voice messages and these well-known platforms have the advantage of consuming little data, being more practical and accessible. Conversely, platforms such as Zoom, Meet and Skype did not work with older youth either, due to the high data usage and the requirement of a stable connection, in addition to being more complex platforms, in need of more recent devices to be supported. As the reader can understand, all the alternatives adopted had pros and cons, and the age of the target group was undoubtedly one of the most decisive factors for the positive outcome of the experiment.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, and albeit to a lesser extent, the bright side of digital education has benefited them too: former students who moved around Greece or were now living in different states throughout Europe were able to attend the classes and follow the courses they had previously followed, without having to travel to be physically present or having to renounce due to work or other commitments. Furthermore, during the pandemic, new online courses have been introduced by some NGOs, with the possibility for everyone to attend and earn a

certificate and those who developed online platforms that also work offline made available a precious tool to the community.

Despite all the goodwill and commitment put by both parties, COVID-19 had a huge impact on a very delicate level, i.e., psychological and mental health. The human interconnection that teachers and children used to have in class during the past months was taken away by the few alternative methods used, too impersonal, insufficient and inappropriate to be compared to the genuine interpersonal relations and connections there were in class. The bond of trust and friendship that children would create before the pandemic slowly started to crumble and the more the months passed, the more difficult it was for the humanitarian workers to rebuild it. The safe environment and places that the non-formal schools and classes represented for them were lost, and the behavior of students on their return to school in presence clearly showed the impact the months under lockdown and the restrictions against them had on their capacity to interact, socialize and trust again those NGOs workers who unintentionally left them alone. It was hard for teachers to keep up the engagement and the interaction with the new methods, it was likewise hard to understand whether the students were understanding the assignments and actively following the lesson, and inevitably the quality of education dropped drastically.

Ideally, the asylum procedures should be rapid, and people should be able to move to their final destination very fast; children should be allowed to attend a formal school in the definitive place where they are going to live, and emergency settings should be only transitory places. But the reality is very different, and people end up trapped in these places for months, sometimes even years. The results of the last section of my research show how NGOs who work in the non-formal education sector find many difficulties in planning ahead for their

activities and providing quality educational programs to their students. It is hard to organize classes and workshops in a situation that should be temporary, for kids who should spend only a few weeks in a camp, who should just be entertained for a limited period of time before moving and start attending school again as all the children of their age. Here emerged the difficulties that the humanitarian organizations encounter in finding a shared plan, as each organization has its own principles, curricula, and modalities of intervention, and the lack of a central figure that unites all the actors often makes harder the communication, even among the organization of the same sector. While it is true that organizations do come together to collaborate when there is a need, it is equally true that the island of Lesbos, which is home to the largest camp in Europe, can be seen as a different reality with respect to the minor islands or the cities in the mainland. Although opposed from many points of view, the large cities of the hinterland and the small islands have in common the strong solidarity that is created between organizations: while on the one hand there are few players in the area and dialogue arises spontaneously, on the other part organizations find themselves to work where humanitarian organizations have always been present, in large cities which also offer more services and it is easier to collaborate, and similar situations might already happen in the past and have marked the path for this great challenge. In Lesbos, the overload of migrant people in a region that has never been equipped to deal with them, combined with the mass arrival of humanitarian organizations that have worked to cope with the emergency but without any guidance, has led to the creation of a chaotic context that has persisted for years. Here a sort of competition is felt, and not all the humanitarian actors are willing to cooperate actively and consistently with the others; the only common rule is to ensure that all the asylum seeker minors living in Lesbos are following at least one educational activity. Although this might be seen as a very good intention, it has to be said that this goal

also presents a criticism, as each activity is part of a different program with different quality and, in the end, children have access to an unequal level of education.

Another big controversy among NGOs regards the choice of being based inside or outside the emergency facility, dividing the humanitarian actors in two factions that see opposing those who advocate being on the outside as a matter of principles and integrity, and those who see the lack of presence inside as worse than compromising with the institutions. The real issue, actually, is the tormented relationship that NGOs working on the territory have with the Greek government and authorities. The so-called “refugee crisis” has never been managed properly by the central authorities, which paradoxically obstructed the work of the humanitarian organizations through a smear campaign, while pretending and leaving in their hand the lives of thousands of people.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Overview of Interview Participants

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Name (initials)</b>	<b>Location (Greece)</b>
Little Lotus	M.E.A.	Mytilene (Lesvos)
Khora	E.	Athens
Borderline Lesvos	A.K.	Mytilene (Lesvos) and Athens
Danish Refugee Council	M.A.	Mytilene (Lesvos) and Athens
Action for Education	M.L.	Chios
ReFOCUS Media Labs	S.N.	Mytilene (Lesvos)
Samos Volunteers	S.I.	Samos
Better Days	E.M.	Mytilene (Lesvos)
Open Cultural Centre	V.G. & I.V.	Polykastro
Echo 100Plus	C.K.	Leros and Athens
Velos Youth	G.L.	Athens
Mosaik Support Center	E.S.	Mytilene (Lesvos)
Stand By Me	S.T.	Mytilene (Lesvos)

## Appendix B: Topic Lists for Participants

### Introduction

- *Welcome and thank participant for her/his time*
- *Personal presentation*
- *Purpose of the interview*
- *Data processing, consent and anonymity*

### Opening question

- Role of the interviewee within the organization

### **RQ 1: In what ways are aid actors able to provide education to forcibly displaced children in Greek emergency settings since the outbreak of Covid-19?**

1. What is the work of your NGO in relation to education?
  - a. What structure do you have? (child-friendly space, school, other)
  - b. How many children attend your school\*?
    - i. How do you choose them?
  - c. What type of activities or classes do you provide?
  - d. How many days/hours do you work as a school\*?
  - e. How is your team composed? (volunteers, locals, migrants)
  - f. Where precisely are you based? (mainland, islands, close to a setting..)
2. Have you been able to provide education during these months?
  - a. Have your NGO been affected by restrictions?
    - i. Since when?
    - ii. For how long?
    - iii. How?
3. Did you have to stop your activities?
  - a. For how long?
  - b. When did you start again?
4. How did you adapt your activities to the new situation?
  - a. Have your NGO come up with new ideas?
  - b. Which alternative ways did you implement for your activities?
  - c. Have these alternative ways been successful?
5. Are you now able to work again?

- a. Do you still use those alternatives?
  - b. Are you back to the past methods?
6. In case a new wave of Covid-19 hits again, do you think you are ready for that?
- a. Do you have any 'emergency plans' or strategy for a new wave?
  - b. Do you have any prevision for the next months?

**RQ 2: Which are the relationships among the main actors present in the area?**

7. Are you aware of the implementation of any emergency or crisis response plan in Greece?
- a. What do you think about the involvement of the NGOs in this plan?
  - b. Are NGOs involved enough? Are NGOs heard?
  - c. What about your NGO specifically?
8. How is education considered at the higher level?
- a. What about the Greek government?
  - b. What about the EU?
  - c. What about the international humanitarian arena?
  - d. What about the other NGOs?
9. Is there a common educational program for children among NGOs?
- a. If YES, is your NGO part of it?
    - i. How is this structured?
    - ii. How do you communicate?
  - b. If NO, why not?

**RQ 3: How has the absence of aid workers affected the provision of educational aid programs in Greece during the COVID-19?**

10. Do other actors replace your NGO during your absence?
- a. If YES, who?
11. What happened to your structure?
12. What happened to the kids involved in your activities?
- a. Do you know what did they do in the meanwhile?

**RQ 4: How do humanitarian actors perceive the effects of the disruption of educational programs on forcibly displaced children's well-being?**

13. Do you track the well-being of your students?

a. If YES, how?

14. How does your NGO consider and think about education for children in an emergency context?

a. Would you say there is a link between education and mental health?

15. What do you believe has been the degree of information about Covid-19 among children in the field?

a. What do they know before/now?

b. What do they believe and think about it?

16. Did you perceive a change in their behavior?

a. Towards you as workers?

b. Towards other children?

17. Did you see changes in children's attendance at your activities?

18. Did you see differences in their well-being since the start of the pandemic/once you came back?

**Conclusions and De-briefing**

- *Ask for further connections with NGOs who might be willing to participate*
- *Short summary of what has been said*
- *Possibility to ask questions or add comments/suggestions*
- *Explanation on how data will be managed and processed*
- *Thank participant again*