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## **SUPPORTING LEARNING IN TRAUMATIC CONFLICTS: INNOVATIVE RESPONSES TO EDUCATION IN REFUGEE CAMP ENVIRONMENTS**

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### **Summary**

The issue of mass migration and population movement has dominated European discourse for at least 40 years. Since the invasion of Iraq and the various destabilization efforts against countries like Libya, Syria and Afghanistan, however, an entirely new phenomenon has erupted onto the centre stage – millions of people fleeing failed States, violence, terrorism and despair. Especially in the case of Syria (now in its fifth year of war) the problem of millions seeking to depart from the chaos has become huge.

We are now entering a period of real transition however. Far from the malicious impact of war and violence, new problems arise around family fragmentation, emotional trauma, and the need to rebuild lives. Education provision for refugees is simply not being done in a consistent and qualitative manner in Europe. In this paper, we outline how creative measures have been implemented in Greece, through work originating with the team of Lesvos Solidarity, initially solely operating in the Pikpa Camp on Lesvos. This initiative reflects the engagement of the authors at theoretical, design and implementation levels in addressing conflict resolution theory with practical steps to support learning in crisis or traumatic environments.

Lesvos Solidarity began as a response to the crisis that developed on the Greek islands, especially Lesvos, in 2015. It is a self-organized autonomous space, run with a small core team and many volunteers. Lesvos Solidarity is the only open camp in Lesvos and its main objective is to work in active solidarity with refugees and address European immigration policies. Awareness and advocacy work is undertaken in cooperation with local people to promote community and sustainable action, and services have developed and expanded since 2015 to provide other supports, particularly in the educational sphere.

### **Context**

The desperate plight of Syrian people is now a shocking reality whose full dimensions are not appreciated in the wider world. As of June 2017, there were 5.5 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR statistics). From the Summer of 2015 on, hundreds of thousands have attempted to enter the European Union. These desperate people have often survived traffickers, criminal gangs, corrupt police and other exploiters in their journey. The human cost of drowning,

disruption, injury and deaths on land has only underlined the legal obligations of international law and treaties – the requirement for States to provide sanctuary and succour.

This has not been done consistently. Although the warning signs were there, the scale and intensity of the refugee problem seemed to catch the European Union by surprise. The responses were uncoordinated, fragmented and often counter-productive. While many Member States were unprepared, others became actively antagonistic. Driven by a rising tide of xenophobia, they began to erect barriers not seen for decades in an effort to repulse these often-desperate populations. Only one EU country articulated an initial policy of acceptance and welcome - Germany. For other countries in the front line the social and economic impact was significant with the burden falling particularly intensely on Greece, Italy and Malta.

The situation has continued to escalate with the ramifications of a rising tide of racism and discrimination in many Member States matched by a highly prejudicial mass media and incoherent policy response from the European Union, whose landmark Schengen free-travel initiative is itself now under grave threat.

Initial responses were well-intentioned and genuine, but underestimated the scale of the task. As the crisis develops, we are now looking at a situation that is expected to continue for a number of years. And just as Europe addresses its needs and policy in this area, it often neglects the fact that the main burden of coping with refugees from the wars and killing fields of Syria lies not in Europe but in adjacent countries to the conflict – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan.

As we enter 2018, the situation has developed into a number of needs: as the constant arrival of refugees and the political lack of response means that the humanitarian *response* continues, but as the numbers of refugees trapped for extended periods continues to grow, the need to develop concrete *supports* has emerged. These supports need to engage (and benefit) host communities so that mutual advantage can be sustained. The next stage, therefore, entails a move from support to *integration*, as some refugees stay in the camps indefinitely, and many receive Greek residency. There has been the potential for considerable conflict which has erupted in physical violence at times, and in many instances ongoing unrest between some locals and the refugee population. This entails the need to concentrate on the classic tools for meaningful and sustainable integration as a core tool in alleviating this conflict and leading to a more harmonious co-existence. In both the short-term responses to refugee welcome and support and in the longer-term need for integration and conflict resolution, “Education, Training and Employment” are the means to afford most opportunities to develop inclusion.

## **Potential of Education and Training**

UN statistics indicate that some 55% of Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. This fact underlines the huge opportunity for all to benefit from a proactive educational response. This means however that host countries need to ensure quick access to quality education and training opportunities. If this is done well and consistently, this young but severely disadvantaged generation of refugees can acquire the tools to succeed. This success can be

## **Supporting Learning in Traumatic Conflicts: Innovative Responses to Education in Refugee Camp Environments**

*Alan Bruce et al.*

achieved either in the new host country or, in the case of return, eventually back in their home country.

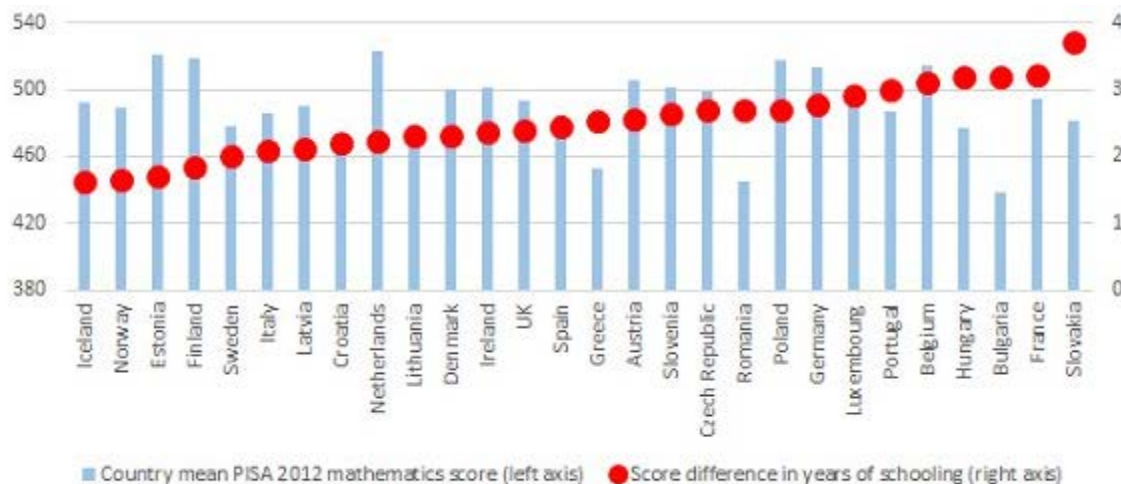
It is an established fact that education benefits both host and refugee communities. However, in general terms education systems in Europe often do a poor job in providing opportunities for existing disadvantaged students, let alone vast numbers of new (and often traumatized) populations. The evidence of PISA research, for example, demonstrates a gap between rich and poor students in Europe which is significant and was already growing before the refugee crisis emerged. The socio-economic crisis since 2008 exacerbated this. The reality is that education systems in most EU countries are not inclusive.

Segregation is often seen by school type: students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be disproportionately in vocational secondary schools. In these the quality of schooling appears poorer and the resulting reading and mathematics skills are weaker. Immigrant children end up in poorer schools, usually vocational, and problems multiply into a systemic crisis of low expectations and inadequate outcomes.

Refugee children and youth need targeted support as they enter these already challenged school systems (such as intensive language and general induction programs to allow them to participate in mainstream classes as soon as possible). Some also present with war trauma, suggesting that schools need to offer psychological support. But beyond that, refugees will benefit from measures that make education systems more inclusive.

This includes:

- ensuring students are not segregated into different types of schools based on socio-economic grounds;
- promoting early childhood development and education programs;
- making parents part of the education process;
- offering remedial programs; and
- equipping teachers with tools to provide support to students with multiple disadvantages.



Source: OECD PISA 2012

Figure 1.

This situation is likely to persist for some time. Meeting the needs of migrant and refugee populations has been described as the “new normal” in an already ageing and unequal Europe. Refugee children face other obstacles. If unable to provide evidence of past educational achievements, they are placed in grades lower than their actual educational levels. Many schools do not have teachers qualified to address the unique needs of these students. Many lack the specialized resources necessary to help refugee children integrate into school activities or embrace diversity within the curriculum. Where local language courses exist, they are not always sufficient to enable young people to acquire the skills necessary to receive a mainstream education. As a result, these children sometimes drop out of school, forfeiting any chance for educational and personal advancement.

UNHCR has urged each country in the region to create policy and practices, which will give these children greater access to formal and non-formal education of an adequate quality, and will eradicate discriminatory and xenophobic practices in its school system.

In the EU, this has simply not been done. The development of Education, Training and Employment opportunities through Lesvos Solidarity (and its allied organization in Mytilini, Mosaik), offers a strong model for successful integration. The use of advanced ICT supported learning in such environments offers new and creative options for teaching and support. In this way, the tragedy of producing a “lost generation” can be avoided by constructing a proven example of linkage and innovation that can serve as a model for best practice throughout the EU.

### **The Lesvos Solidarity and Mosaik Education, Training and Employment Model**

This model has been designed to build on identified needs and to construct a model of learning that is meaningful, flexible, adaptable and beneficial to all stakeholders. It includes deployment of digital learning supports to address competence-based learning, as well as best practice early-

## **Supporting Learning in Traumatic Conflicts: Innovative Responses to Education in Refugee Camp Environments**

*Alan Bruce et al.*

years education, integrating both local Greek and refugee children. Another element has been the advocacy and achievement of organizing of primary school age refugee children to attend local schools (often in the face of significant and intimidating local opposition). The model finally supported innovative vocational education for the older children not in school as well as vocational classes for adults.

The model proposed and developed was one of a learner-centred strategy. This multiplied the benefits by linking learning methods to practical outcomes in a coherent and multidimensional manner.

The development and inclusion of an education and training dimension in the mission of Lesvos Solidarity Camp and Mosaik has served several purposes:

- Fitting the ethos of the camp through benefit to residents in a rapid, demonstrable and timely manner.
- Enabling Lesvos refugees in other camps to be trained and supported.
- Creating added value of competence-based learning for refugee youth.
- Opening paths for community development based on inclusive education models.
- Serving as a sustainable model for education and social integration in other refugee camps in Europe. This would be a crucial outcome from the perspective of the EU which has no template at present.
- Outputs are designed to be sustainable and usable. They will also form part of an integrated and planned earning strategy that will grow to encompass use of ICT, social media, entrepreneurship, Advisory skills and STEM related subjects.

Additional benefits include supporting the critical thinking and reflection needed to develop understanding of past trauma. This entails a deployment of principles of conflict resolution and diversity management within learning programs to encompass the need to adjust and integrate (either temporarily or over a longer time), intercultural competence, counselling support, cultural mediation, empathetic communication and innovative adaptation of advanced digital learning platforms.

Specific examples of the outcomes of the intervention can be noted.

### ***The Early Years Program***

This was designed to address the needs of the younger children. This began in May 2016 with a kindergarten within the camp based on the Irish curriculum framework for the age group 0-6, Aistear. The use of Aistear (with its core themes of *Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Exploring and Thinking, and Communication*) and the emphasis on child-centred learning through free play in a semi-structured environment, afforded the best opportunity to support the children as they settled into a stable routine and structure following their traumatic experiences in journeying from their war-torn and violence-ravaged homes, through the camps in Turkey and their final usually arduous sea crossings. The kindergarten has developed into the first integrated kindergarten in Greece for both Greek and refugee children. Operating within Pikpa

Camp, it is a forest school called now *Mikros Dounias* and run jointly with the local Greek community and Lesvos Solidarity.

### **Primary School**

The children in the camp began attending primary school in November 2016. Once the children are over six years old and have received their vaccinations they are eligible to attend.

### **Mosaik and Vocational Education**

Designed for both young people and adults, the Mosaik Centre opened in August 2016. It is operated by both Lesvos Solidarity and an NGO from Germany called Borderline. Mosaik runs a variety of classes: ICT; languages (Arabic, Greek, Farsi, English); vocational workshops in various skills such as candle and soap making, carpentry; music lessons; meditation; yoga. It has been fully subscribed at all times, with waiting lists for many classes. Teachers are drawn from both the local and the refugee community. Those attending now include refugees from all the camps on the island as well as local people.

### **Mosaik and employment**

Mosaik operates workshops which offer meaningful employment and skills development to refugees. The main output is the 'Safe Passage' bags and other items that are produced by repurposing the lifejackets which were left over from the people crossing to the island in the boats. In addition, the output from the workshops on crafts and wood are showcased. Money raising efforts are supported through regular craft fairs.

### **Choirs at Mosaik**

An important element of the social and healing fabric for both children and adult refugees has been the development in late 2016 of two choirs, *Polyphonica* for children (which now also operates in Athens) and *Cantalaloun* for adults. These choirs are fully integrated, and offer opportunities not only for singing, but for drama and theatre skills development through circus skills, body percussion for example. These choirs have put on major successful shows in Lesvos which serve to offer the opportunity to the wider community to engage with refugees, volunteers and those in support of them. The use of shared choral musical training and performance has proved to be highly innovative and successful.

### **Other Informal Activities**

Many expert groups and individuals come to volunteer in the camp and at Mosaik, and these provide short term opportunities to learn and develop. These have included Clowns without Borders; Flying Feet dance company; Shadow Puppet Theatre; Music and Art classes for all ages; Craft classes. These shorter-term supports are valuable in helping to develop variety and interest as refugees live in this transition period on the islands, and as some move to residency in Greece.

The entire initiative has been designed to use the installation of ICT supported learning and digital resources to produce a resource of permanent value to the Camp, enhancing self-

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*Alan Bruce et al.*

sufficiency and autonomy, while at the same time delivering parallel training and upskilling methodology to provides permanent benefit to refugee participants. The secondary benefit is construction of a viable and transferable training system and content that enhances the career prospects and employability of trainee beneficiaries.

The ultimate aim has been the construction of a model of best practice that, in addressing the needs of vulnerable and often traumatized populations, additionally creates a learning paradigm of benefit to Greek communities, teachers, students and employers. Multiplying the social benefits and reducing potential areas of conflict are designed not simply to improve communications and social engagement. They are also powerful tools in constructing a shared learning community, united by diversity, where joint benefits can create and sustain real learning outcomes and skill-acquisition innovation.

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