

Supporting refugees in Greece: A small contribution to a global challenge

Aleksandra Godziejewska was CARE's Head of Mission in Greece during the peak of the refugee crisis from 2016-2018. Here, she reflects on progress and personal challenges.

What were your expectations when you came to Greece?

I had previously worked in a number of other humanitarian missions, including the Gaza Strip and Somalia. I have to admit that it was quite an unusual feeling that there is a need for this type of work inside the European Union. As Europeans, we know that our Union is resourceful and we expect capacities available to support a sudden influx of people crossing borders. Personally I was ready for a new assignment and I felt that it was the right moment to show greater solidarity with people crossing the Mediterranean Sea, risking their lives and at the end sadly facing "a wall" instead of being able to find a safe haven and restart their lives. I was hoping that Europe could be seen with a different face, a continent where people are compassionate about the suffering of others and willing to help. Because this is a small contribution to a global challenge.

Comparing the living conditions of refugees in Greece then and now: How has the situation improved?

Currently there are over 21,000 refugees and asylum seekers accommodated in urban apartments and there is an intention of the government to still significantly increase that number. Almost 45,000 refugees and asylum seekers receive cash assistance on a monthly basis. This was not the case back at the beginning of 2016. Back then there were a lot of improvised camps. However, even today there are still people living in insufficient conditions in overcrowded facilities, including on the Greek islands or in the North of the country. There were important improvements achieved with the help of the European Union's Humanitarian aid throughout the last two years, but more remains to be urgently done.

How did CARE contribute to these improvements?

Back in 2016, CARE decided to focus on refugees and asylum seekers staying in the urban areas of Greece. At that time, most of the humanitarian organizations have been focused on formal and informal camps. We found that there were (and continue to be) people in urgent need of support in cities: they stayed in shared rented apartments, in squats or hosted by other people, and they often fell through the cracks of humanitarian assistance. CARE has contributed to the shift in recognizing needs of self-accommodated refugees and asylum seekers and initiated the provision of cash in urban areas as part of the coordinated nationwide cash assistance program. CARE also teamed up with Greek NGOs, namely PRAKSIS, Amurtel and Melissa. Together we provided legal and psychosocial assistance, specialized accommodation for vulnerable women and young men and very much needed support with translations and bureaucratic processes. We also supported expecting mothers during and after their pregnancy and survivors of gender-based violence. Each person has their own story, their own needs – and this is what we tried to deliver, a very personal and individual type of support, keeping in mind a person's gender and needs. Finally, CARE has been one of the first organizations which emphasized the urgency of developing a long-term strategy for recognized refugees to become independent from humanitarian assistance and has piloted enrolling a few recognized refugees to a social welfare mechanism.

Which memories will you keep from your work?

Maybe surprisingly working in Greece was one of the most diverse experiences I have ever had. Our team in Greece was very diverse and I enjoyed that a lot. Of course we had Greek colleagues and staff from other European countries, but we also hired team members who were migrants and refugees themselves and who also went through this challenging journey and lengthy legal procedures. They came from North Africa, from the Middle East and from West and Central Asia. It was really a beautiful experience working together and I am very grateful to the whole team for their contributions.

Why is CARE ending its work in Greece?

2018 is a year of transition as the Emergency Support Instrument through the European Commission is phasing out. Most of the programs have been consolidated through the UN Refugee Agency and national NGOs, so there is a limited role to be still played by international actors. While we acknowledge that the government is still not ready to take the lead over the response, no other funding sources are currently available to continue activities. CARE made all efforts so that services it has been offering are not stopped but will continue to be offered by local organizations. CARE has established its mission in Greece as a temporary emergency response and it is welcoming the increasing role played by the local organizations and the municipalities, while it is still looking forward to a more strategic leadership to be taken up by the government.

What would you like to see happen in the next months?

Of course first of all I continue to hope for a better world where people don't need to flee their homes because of violence and hopelessness but can move freely for other good reasons like education or an interesting job. That probably sounds like a dream but I wish for this dream to come true. In the meantime, I would like to see a dignified reception system in Greece for those newly arriving, with efficient, in-depth and fair processing of individual asylum requests, and with long term opportunities for those who are planning to stay. A system that gives people tools to be able to integrate into the labour market, giving children a chance that their parents didn't have when they had to leave their homes.