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“Without Education They Lose Their Future” Child Asylum-seekers Deprived of School on the Greek Islands

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Key points

This policy brief outlines the challenges that the Greek educational system for refugee children faces. Although Greece was confronted with the difficult task of absorbing a great number of refugee children into the country's schools, significant progress has been reported from 2015 until today. Practical hindrances persist, depriving the children of their right to education.

- It is possible to avoid obstacles and further delays to the formal education of refugee children by the immediate action of all the stakeholders involved in the subject. This initially depends on the revocation of the containment policy that stranded the refugee families on the Greek islands and, secondly, their prompt transfer to the mainland.
- A more inclusive educational system is a necessity in order to ensure that all children receive knowledge and practical skills that will assist their regular incorporation into the Greek society. Recruitment of specialized and experienced staff will prove essential in alleviating the weaknesses that encumber the Greek refugee reception system.

Introduction

Minor asylum-seekers in Greece

As of November 2018, nearly **34.363** asylum seekers -amongst them **2.661** minors- were stuck in Greece in overcrowded camps with a capacity of approximately **300** to **10.866** people ^[1] according to Greek government data ^[2].

These children have a right of access to the educational system just as Greek nationals do, “as long as there is no pending enforceable removal measure against them or their parents” (Article 9(1) PD 220/2007) and “must be registered in school within three months of applying for asylum, or within one year if special language training is provided



in the meantime to aid their access to public school (Article 9(2) PD 220/2007).”^[3]

How can Europe help?

Amidst its other objectives, the European cohesion policy has invested a lot in education. By 2020 the EU aims to meet “five concrete objectives”, one of which being education.^[4] However, only a small part of the EU funds goes to education. National governments and international organizations, such as the European Commission, must invest more in order to assist policy making. The EU can also coordinate the process with European-level guidelines.

Legal framework

- The *Geneva Convention* (1951), the first convention relating to the refugee status, the states that signed the document agreed upon the refugee rights, among which is the right to public education (article 17).^[5] Depository of this Convention is the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**^[6]
- With the Decree-law 3989/59 “*Peri kiroseos tis polymerous simvaseos peri tis nomikis katastasis ton profigon*” (in Greek) [ΦΕΚ 201-26.09.1959], the above are ratified in the Greek legislation.^[7]
- The request for just and equitable education was initially expressed with the *Universal declaration of human rights* (1949)^[8] and, later, with the 1989 *United Nations convention on the rights of the child (CRC)*.^[9] (article 2 paragraph 1, article 28 -ratified in Greek legislation with the law [v. 2101/1992, ΦΕΚ Α’192]^[10].)

What has been done so far?

In August 2016 Greece established a program of afternoon preparatory classes based on “**Reception Structures for the education of refugees**” (DYEP in Greek), that operate on the country’s public schools neighboring the refugee places of residence and camps^[11] Therefore, child asylum-seekers may go to school by the Greek law as long as they are vaccinated.

The **Ministry of Health**^[12] appertains to the responsibility of the children’s vaccination, while the **Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs**^[13] has undertaken the task of designating the public schools where the reception classes operate.^[14] The **International Organization for Migration**^[15] is responsible to shuttle the pupils from their place of residence to school. Kindergartens operate within the refugee camps, under the design of the UNHCR and NGOs (certified from the Greek Institute of Education Policy).



In Greece, education is compulsory for all children, “including refugees and asylum seekers, boys and girls, who are aged between 5 and 15 years old. Mandatory education includes pre-primary (one year), primary and lower secondary education. Primary education (Demotiko) lasts six years, lower secondary education (Gymnasio) lasts three years. Upper secondary education lasts three years and includes a unified upper secondary school (Eniaio Lykeio) and technical vocational school (TEE). Students may choose between vocational or academic courses at the age of 15, at the end of Gymnasio.”^[16]

Why is it important for Greece?

The lack of education deprives the children of skills crucial for their future. Good skills foster equity, cooperation, social activity and political engagement, laying the foundations for a more active society. Most children stranded on the islands have a background of crisis and violence, that stained their childhood innocence. Their access to school along with other children, where they can occupy themselves with activities suitable for their age is vital for soothing their trauma. Education can help them feel secure and normal. Their future incorporation into the Greek workforce -should they be offered equal opportunities for employment-will benefit the economic growth of the country. Equitable access to education is, therefore, one of the best investments for the additional economic development of Greece.

Challenges

What are the challenges?

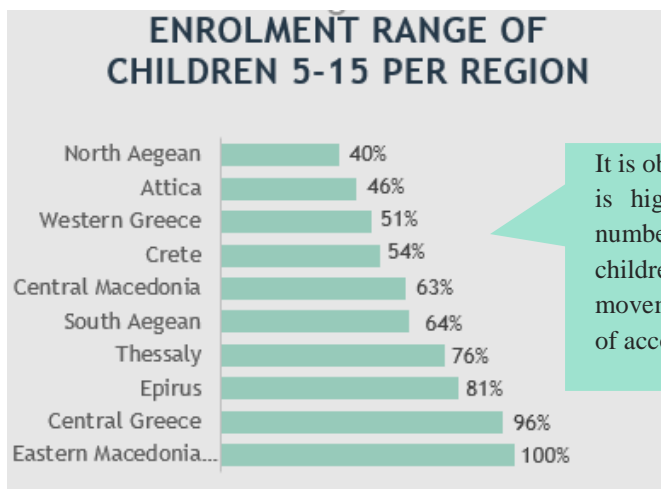
It has been reported that most child asylum-seekers, especially in the region of the Aegean, are not fulfilling their needs for equitable education. From the pilot program that was implemented, only 50% of the refugee and migrant children population was successfully integrated in the end. The result is inadequate because:

- The process is slow
- Pre-school, secondary and upper secondary education are neglected, as the program is focused mostly on primary education. Professional training is sidelined.
- The appointed teachers lacked the skills and the knowledge necessary to operate their task.
- There is xenophobia. On the Aegean islands, parents' associations have protested about the joint educational system that the government has introduced, where the refugee and native children attend the same classes (on September 2018, parent associations from Chios wrote an angry letter as an extrajudicial document aimed at Chios' school



principals. The document was shared with the ministry of education, the island's mayor and other relevant entities.)

- The confinement of the asylum-seekers to the islands. This stems from a policy that the European Union and the Greek government have implemented, which confines the refugees on the islands with the prospect that this should deter new migration to Greece and the EU.
- The insecurity relating to the communication barriers, age and other psychological reasons.



It is observed that the enrolment rate is higher in locations where the number of refugee and migrant children is lower and there is limited movement between different types of accommodation.

December 2017

55% of children 5-17 years old are enrolled in schools

90% of them are enrolled in schools on the mainland while

10% in schools on the **islands**

Recommendations

Taking the challenges above into consideration, the following suggestions are recommended:

- The containment of the refugee children on the islands, resulting from the EU-Turkey accord, prevents them from going to school. Thus, **the containment policy should end and the children with their families should be promptly transferred to the mainland**. This way classes won't be crowded, facilitating the learning process and allowing the children to smoothly integrate into the school environment.
- **Establishment of Reception classes both at primary and secondary education level**, to include all ages and knowledge backgrounds. Special care is needed for the adolescents older than 15 who have not completed primary education. These children need to follow a different curriculum specialized in covering their knowledge gaps and elevating their level as fast as possible.
- **Providing children with rudimentary skills and practical training for their choice of professional direction**. To achieve that, the curriculum should have a view of the needs of the labor market. It would be helpful to divide the children into groups by



criterion only their professional orientation, so they can focus on courses that they find more useful.

- **Ensuring that the candidate teachers of the refugee children are suitable for the job.** To ensure that the requirements needed are fulfilled, the *Institute of Educational Policy*, which has developed the platform for the education of refugees, should thoroughly **evaluate** the candidates and make sure that they undergo **special training**.
- Xenophobia from the native people of the islands needs to be eliminated. Healthy psychology is imperative for children to invest in learning. For that purpose, it is suggested to organize **activities** (sports, art, team games, inclusion in youth organizations) where the native and refugee children can join in together. **Hiring specialists** who will assist the kids psychologically will also help the children adapt to the new environment and socialize with their peers.



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