

Greece, November 2016



A note to begin with. The following is based on visits to the eleven camps we work at in the North of Greece (I have not visited Drama, but equally, we have not as yet – 21/11/2016 – started working there), conversations with MdM staff, conversations with refugees, employees of other organisations (particularly UNHCR), the Greek army and the Greek government. It is also the product of my political analysis, and media work over the last five months.

The 60,000

The first point to make is that there are only 60,000 refugees in Greece.

This is not to downplay the number of people in urgent need of help – 60,000 is not a small number – but simply to point out that in the overall crisis, the number of refugees currently in Greece should not be causing the problems it is. When we consider that Greece is a long-standing member of the EU, the situation becomes even more difficult to justify.

By way of comparison, Lebanon, with a population half that of Greece, has 1.125m Syrian refugees – almost 19 times as many refugees in a nation with half as many people.

Turkey has three million Syrian refugees, and a little over one million from Iraq and Afghanistan. Turkey's population is far larger than Greece's (Turkey = 75m; Greece = 10m) but its population is 7.5 times larger than Greece's and it has almost 67 times as many refugees. For every one refugee in Greece, there are 67 in Turkey. To put that another way, refugees make up just over five per cent of Turkey's population, and around 25 per cent of Lebanon's – in Greece, refugees make up just 0.6 per cent of the population.

Of course, there are mitigating factors. Greece is in the midst of the longest economic crisis any European state has experienced since the last World War. It is being forced to entirely restructure its economy, which is not only time-consuming, but is also significantly weakening the state's capacity

to act, before the 'replacement' privately-funded service providers are strong enough to respond to and meet need (we should also note that the private sector has never once responded sufficiently to a crisis, anywhere on Earth – it is not designed to do so, and in fact it is usually legally-required to make profits for shareholders through its actions. As we know, humanitarian aid is not a profit-making activity).

There is insufficient housing stock to meet needs, and not really the cash or the capacity to create it, while the Greek health service has suffered significant brain-drain and restricted funding which means that there are too few staff, and too little medicine, to meet the needs of the Greek population. Added to that, the general lack of cash in Greek society at present means that the Greek government and Greek population is too poor, too under-skilled and too overstretched to respond alone to this crisis.

But Greece is part of the EU. The EU is the single richest political bloc ever to have existed, containing three of the world's six richest states (until Brexit happens, anyway). It has a population of 510m people, and even once we factor in the refugees to have arrived since 1 January 2016, it has around 1.5m refugees – about two fifths of the number Turkey, alone, has within its borders.

And yet in Greek refugee camps, a rapidly-despairing population is suffering increasingly-awful conditions, and the physical and mental health problems which result are increasing week by week.

One Syrian refugee at Katsikas put it to me that if they moved all the refugees into towns in Greece, almost no-one would notice the difference. Though that might not be entirely true (he was focussed on Katsikas camp, rather than the whole refugee population in Greece), if the population was resettled in only the 144 towns in Greece with 10,000 residents or more, that would mean each one taking 417 people – no town or city's population would increase by more than 4.1 per cent, most by far less.

Across the EU, there are 6,200 (a conservative estimate as many states' most recent figures are up to ten years out of date) towns and cities with populations of 10,000 and more. If the refugees in Greece were distributed evenly across those cities, each one would take fewer than ten people – no town or city's population would rise by more than 0.09 per cent.

And if we were to set the bar at towns and cities of 1,000 or more people (using the UK as a benchmark, with 3871 such towns and cities, compared to 907 of 10,000 or more) the 26,548 towns and cities would each have to welcome just 2.2 people on average. No town or city with a population of 1,000 people in the EU would see its population rise by more than 0.22 per cent.

There has been too much 'acceptance' – too many organisations (ourselves included) have for far too long accepted a narrative from politicians across Europe of 'we can't do more'; or at the very least have accepted that line as a reasonable, even if incorrect position.

We can, and must, do more. Conditions at the camps are bad and deteriorating, and it's not acceptable. I say this not as a 'foreigner' coming to Greece to criticise the Greek government, but as a citizen of the EU, shocked that the EU is allowing this crisis to continue, within its own borders. We are humanitarians, and that means we should and do care about this.

The EU, the UN, and Greece

This section is intended primarily as guidance on the crisis, and our (by which I mean Greece, the EU and humanitarian organisations') failure to deal with it. I do not intend this to be a focus of advocacy, but it parts of it will inform and colour my suggestions.

The point is that the three major actors in this crisis at its 'external' (that is, European and to an extent Turkish, Jordanian, Lebanese and North African) points are the EU, the UN and the Greek government.

The three are not working well together, and 'blame' for that lies, inescapably, with all three.

First, the Greek government.

The Greek government has systematically sought to 'control' the crisis within its borders. It has insisted on being the 'lead' at all points, including having control of housing, feeding, clothing and providing other forms of care for all the refugees within its borders, as well as all processing for relocating people.

Its army, police and air force are directly involved and engaged in running camps, and are expected, along with the Ministry of Migration, to deal with everything which happens at the camps, from food and clean water provision, to repairs and the provision of showers and washing machines.

The problem is, that not only does the Greek state not have the money to provide what is needed at camp level – and as we shall see later on, the primary need of the men, women and children at the camps is to get out of the camps and into decent accommodation – but also that no government could deal with this crisis alone, and in the EU, it should and does not have to.

The major reason it is attempting to do so is, counter-intuitively, a huge lack of security and confidence in itself.

The Greek government has come to power at a point at which the EU regards Greece as an economic basket-case, and it simultaneously, as the first 'genuinely' Left-wing administration to hold power in post-war Greece, feels it needs to 'prove' its capability and capacity to the Greek public.

The perception of the latter has been severely damaged by the government's handling of the EU 'bailout' and by the sheer difficulty most Greek people are undergoing as a result of the economic crisis.

With this in mind, Syriza¹ and its allies are striving to prove to the EU and the Greek population that they are a safe pair of hands, and can be relied upon.

The problem is that they have chosen the refugee crisis to do so, and this was a serious mistake. By 'taking the lead' on this – and by attempting to sideline the UN, and reduce the visibility of the EU – they have left themselves far too much for one government to do alone (especially one struggling with a massive economic crisis), and left themselves open not only to the majority of the congratulations when things go well, but also the majority of blame if they go badly.

And things are going badly.

¹ It should be noted here that most current opinion polls put the right-wing Nea Demokratia party at least ten points ahead of Syriza – an enormous amount. But few Greek people believe that Nea Demokratia will deal any better with either the economic crisis or the refugee crisis. This is an indication of fatigue with Syriza, rather than a belief in its main rival for power.

It is, in this context, a distinct embarrassment to the Greek government that the UN is active in a crisis on its soil, and that the EU, which in the context of the economic crisis is justifiably seen as a villain, is in the context of the refugee crisis attempting to act like a 'hero'.

Ironically, the worse things get, and therefore the more Greece and the refugees need the UN and the EU, the more the Greek government stands to lose by allowing either or both to help.

It should be noted here that the Greek government in all regions of the state is reliably (by workers within the Greek government, as well as by at least six separate aid organisations whose employees I have spoken to) reported to deliberately and systematically undermine the UN in meetings, ignoring its proposals, overruling votes at meetings to impose its own 'responses' to matters such as food supply and living conditions, even where it is clear to representatives of other NGOs at the meetings that the UN proposal is more likely to meet needs on the ground, and 'briefing' NGOs against UN initiatives, sometimes within meetings at which UN representatives are present.

Simultaneously – albeit understandably – the Greek government also seeks to downplay the extent to which both the UN and EU are funding the refugee response in Greece, despite the uncomfortable fact that ECHO and UN money directly and indirectly funds more than 90 per cent of activities related to the crisis.

And while the Greek government may be embarrassed by the presence of supra-national organisations within its borders, a second uncomfortable fact is that Greece is entirely reliant on UN housing initiatives and EU relocations to empty the refugee camps.

However, the government is only one part of the three-way disfunction of the crisis response.

Second, is the UN.

The UN's response to international emergencies has been developed over 60 years, and has gradually evolved to become what it is. Though it is certainly not perfect, it is widely accepted that both the organisation's reach and power, as well as the very fact that its response protocols have been gradually developed, rather than hastily imposed, are marks of their relevance and reliability in emergency responses.

The problem is that those protocols have been developed in states which are almost entirely dissimilar to Greece – where war and/or natural disaster have caused extensive damage to infrastructure and/or government structures and systems have never been truly or well developed.

The unfortunate effect of this is that the UN's responses in Greece take at least as much time as its responses in, for example, war-devastated Libya in 2011, or earthquake-ruined Nepal last year. In fact, because of the government's wish to sideline it as far as possible, they often take longer.

One example of this is in litter collection at camps. At Lagadikia, where the UN employs DRC as camp manager, the latter requested permission to engage the municipal litter collection agency to regularly empty the camp's communal bins.

Because of UNHCR rules on engagement of services, this process took three months – especially frustrating because Lagadikia is within walking distance of the closest village to it; a village where the municipal collectors were working throughout the period. As well as being frustrating, this led to overflowing bins, vermin, and an infestation of flies (it was sometimes hard to see when walking through the camp, in summertime), resulting in regular outbreaks of dysentery and other hygiene-related disease.

At Redestos, MdM has repeatedly requested a prefab building to be used for psychological consultations. Though there are six empty units on site, UNHCR staff (apologetically, it should be noted) explained that it would take less time for it to source and purchase a new building than to sign over one of those already on site for our use. It took two months for a new building to arrive.

UNHCR is also seen as being high-handed and dismissive by other ngos and the Greek government. Though this is in part a result of relatively high stress among agency staff, and the genuinely demoralising effect of working daily at camps where situations are visibly unacceptable and worsening by the month if not the week, it is certainly not helping the combined ground-level response.

Equally, in part because of the above, the UN is coming to be hated by refugees. When you speak to people about the Greek government, they shrug and sigh, as if to say 'what can you do?' but the UN is a focus of genuine anger. This is in part because of its manifest failings over Syria, and to a lesser extent Iraq and Afghanistan, but in almost every camp at which we work, there is graffiti reading, for example 'No More UN Lies' (Katsikas), or 'UN, We Are Tired of Your Empty Promises!' (Oreokastro).

At Katsikas, this is due to a variety of reasons, but in particular a complete failure of UNHCR to respond to refugees' fears about the unsuitability of their accommodation at the camp. They requested in April, and again in August, that the tents they lived in had to be upgraded before the weather turned again for the worst. UNHCR not only did not provide new accommodation, it failed even to respond to the refugees' requests. When, in September and October, high winds and rains saw widespread flooding and in some cases tents were actually blown over the fences into the fields beyond, the refugees' response was understandably outraged.

At Oreokastro, the UN is blamed for poor living conditions, and for the extraordinarily slow relocation process which they feel forces them to remain trapped. While both are certainly happening, and are unacceptable, the EU plays at least as large a part in the latter problem.

Thirdly, the EU.

The EU is central to the situation in Greece, less because of the economic crisis (Greece would, despite the protestations of Greek people, be in extraordinary trouble even if the EU had not imposed its outrageously harsh bail-out upon it – possibly even worse trouble than it is now) but because it is central to the international refugee crisis.

As noted above, there has never been a richer political bloc on the planet, and never has there been a political bloc so conveniently structured and geographically well-positioned to respond efficiently and effectively to exactly this kind of crisis.

And yet, more than 60,000 men, women and children are stranded in Greece, a long-standing member state of the bloc.

This is largely because individual nation-states – particularly the UK; Denmark; Spain; Hungary and Poland – have blocked EU proposals which would have seen a swift relocation of people across the bloc.

But it certainly also means that – as noted above – there is literally no excuse for the claim that the EU could not be doing more; or that what it is doing is acceptable.

Equally, the EU's deal with Turkey has had an enormous amount of negative effects. It has reduced innocent men, women and children to the status of criminals – at least while their applications for

residence are considered. It has trapped huge numbers of people on the Greek islands (16,000+) and in Turkey (some estimates suggest more than one million people wish to leave Turkey).

It has given legitimacy to an international attitude that people fleeing war are seen as a problem, rather than a group in desperate need of help and protection. And it has significantly weakened the EU's own standing in the world, as it indicates that the EU is prepared to lower the standards (of freedom and democracy) for which it claims to stand, when it comes to keeping people from entering it.

At the same time, for Greek people and refugees alike, the closing of borders with Greece by European states – including some in the EU and some outside of it – are regarded as being the 'fault' of the EU – the EU, rather than Greece is (arguably justifiably) seen as being the 'gaoler' of refugees.

At Redestos, this is literally illustrated by huge graffiti reading 'Open the Borders' and abusive messages about the EU.

Combined with the Greek government's desire to and practice of playing down the amount of funding spent on attempting to deal with the crisis in Greece, this all helps to paint a negative image of the EU in refugee camps, as well as in other parts of the state.

Added to this, ECHO itself follows similar purchasing protocols to the UN, some because it has learnt them from the UN, and some developed – like the UN's – working in completely different contexts than those in Greece.

And the EU's public, as well as private, relations with the Greek government are fractious. As recently as late September, the EU claimed there was more than €500m available to Greece to address the refugee crisis, and that Greece had claimed far less than €100m of it. The Greek government responded – also publicly – that this was the first time it had heard about it.

This is not an acceptable relationship between two political bodies – a state and a supra-national bloc – which are supposed to be working to assist one another to help desperate men, women and children who have nowhere to live and no income.

A final point is that as MdM Belgium noted earlier this month (November 2016) the Belgian far-right ensured Belgium removed its experts from Greece, citing potential danger due to violence.

Quite aside from the fact that that is exactly the reason we most *need* experts here, it is also worth noting that despite their promises, almost every EU state has failed to send experts to help at all.

So much for context – though it is important.

Living conditions

1) cold

It is now late November. But all over Greece there are people who are living in conditions entirely inappropriate for human beings.

At the open camps, it is simply too cold.

Although there are plans for isoboxes to replace tents, this is taking an extremely long time, and while it does, people are living in sub-zero temperatures.

As an example of the length of time things are taking, on 27 September, after a week of torrential rain and thunderstorms, I arrived at Lagadikia. There were a number of green covers erected above the rows of tents. I asked whether these were to deal with the wild Autumn weather and was told no, they are sunshades, which were supposed to have been in place in June – in response to the fact that it was too hot to sleep within half an hour of sunrise (Lagadikia is not alone in this: in Summertime, refugees at every open camp reported they were woken too early by heat).

The entire season they were required for, had passed before they were installed. There are plans to erect isoboxes at Lagadikia, but there were none when I visited in the week 7-13 November.

At Katsikas, refugees repeatedly noted that their tents were not designed to withstand extremes of weather and temperature until their tents began to flood and in some cases to blow away (one of our own tents on site also blew away) as Autumn began in Ioannina. Although some people (the vulnerable younger and older refugees) have been moved to nearby hotels, and there are isoboxes for 50 families, this leaves several hundred people facing a harsh winter in thin tents.

Nor are the warehouse camps much better.

Though they do at least (generally) keep the worst of the wind out, they were heat traps in the summer (meaning that people found it extremely hard to sleep, leaving them weakened and vulnerable to infection) and are often below freezing point in winter nights.

This situation is worsened by the fact that the electricity supplies to the warehouse camps are in no way fit for purpose. At Redestos, there are power cuts every half hour, as the circuits get overloaded when too many people – generally fewer than one in five of the people at the camp in most cases – attempt to use heaters to warm their tents. The power cuts can last several hours, and the result is that people are left freezing.

At Kavala, refugees have been told the warehouse cannot be heated – and in any case there are several broken windows, meaning that temperatures drop rapidly as soon as the sun goes down. Even staff members – myself included – who have stayed late to speak to and eat with the refugees, have experienced that by as early as seven thirty pm, you begin shivering, and within an hour people's teeth are chattering with the cold.

Kavala may be regarded as a special case, as nearby buildings are being converted to create family 'apartments' (extraordinarily small, but better than what people have now), but even if this happens, they will not be ready before February, and in any case ngos at Kavala and other camps across the north (Katsikas included) have been told by the Greek government to expect hundreds (600, in Kavala's case) of refugees to arrive from the islands in the imminent future (no specific date given yet), so there *will* be refugees expected to live in these conditions.

At Oreokastro, too, refugees are unable to heat their tents, as heaters have not been offered to them because it is clear to the camp's operators that their use will overload the system.

And already, young children are wheezing with chest infections, and their noses are running. There are at least three more months of a winter which has so far indicated it could be extremely harsh. This is a public health disaster waiting to happen, and it is far from impossible that people may die of exposure and hypothermia in refugee camps on the Greek mainland this winter.

The estimates suggest that it will cost upwards of €1.5m per warehouse to upgrade the electricity system to a point where refugees would be able to use heaters. There is no chance this will happen, according to UNHCR, IOM, DRC and the Greek Migration Ministry, Army and Air Force.

And this is the point. The warehouses – not to mention open spaces of land on which tents have been erected – were supposed to be a temporary measure. That's why even Kavala, where there was a month and a half's work done in preparation for the refugees' arrival, never received the electrical upgrade – or even the new windows – it needs to be fit for winter living.

The Greek Health watchdog Keelpno pointed out in the summer that the warehouse camps should be closed, the Greek government originally promised they would be empty by July (then changed the date to September) and the open camps were never supposed to be long-term 'solutions' to the crisis; because they are not solutions.

Nobody was ever expected to live in these places for so long, and now that the cold begins to bite, it is time to face the truth. Warehouses and open fields are not acceptable places to live, and thousands of people living them over the winter face disease and possible death.

The EU can and must work faster to help people find places to live. The alternative is a public health disaster which becomes increasingly likely with each passing day.

2) cold part two – fire

On 30 October, at Oreokastro camp, a fire broke out in a tent, causing three people to be hospitalised. One, a nine year-old boy, suffered 40 per cent burns across a third of his body, and after several days in serious condition at a Thessaloniki hospital, was airlifted to an Athens hospital for emergency specialist treatment.

On 10 November, a second fire destroyed a tent at the camp – on this occasion, the family members were not inside.

In both incidents – two dangerous fires within a week, both of which the Greek Fire and Rescue service has confirmed were only contained by the quick-thinking of camp staff and refugees (the tents are so close that either or both fires could have caused far larger blazes, affecting dozens or even hundreds of tents) – the cause of the fires has been confirmed as attempts by refugees to warm their tents using cooking equipment.

At Kavala yesterday (23 November) despite being in full knowledge of the facts about both Oreokastro blazes, refugees requested that they should be allowed to sign indemnity forms which would allow them to heat their own tents with cooking equipment and absolve the agencies on site of any blame if there were an accident (this was of course refused).

This was by far the angriest I have seen the refugees at Kavala (though at other camps across the country the rage and frustration has been simmering since late August, when it became clear the

promise to move people would not be met). They had, the week before, denied access to all NGOs to the camp for one day (though MdM and other staff said it was a very good-natured protest) in protest at both the cold and an infestation of vermin (see below).

The attempts to warm tents with cooking equipment are not a mark of lack of intelligence, or of naivety of the refugees. Syria was, at the start of its war, a developed and wealthy state. The refugees at Oreokastro and Kavala are very well aware of the danger they face by using this equipment in the way they have/have asked to. But they are freezing cold. In the Greek refugee camps in the Winter of 2016, men, women and children are risking their lives and health to protect their lives and health from extreme cold.

They are risking being burned to death to escape from hypothermia.

3) hygiene

This point is connected to those which precede it and those which follow it.

In all of the refugee camps in Greece, hygiene is an enormous problem. People have nowhere safe to store food (which both helps to cause infestations, and means those infestations impact on their health swiftly and severely). They have nowhere airtight or cool to store food, meaning that bacterial attacks are regular, again, damaging health.

Though all camps have washing and toilet facilities, and the latter are regularly emptied, both also regularly leak at all times, leaving standing pools of fetid water on site – the danger to health from this is clear. One major problem at the camps is that the Greek government insists it should have sole control over the upkeep and maintenance of all facilities and equipment installed in them.

The problem is that this effectively means one person is in charge of the day-to-day operation of dozens of camps – in the North this is Antonious Alexandridis. He is expected to visit and understand the problems of every camp in Northern Greece, and to engage the appropriate workers and firms to solve those problems.

As if this were not difficult enough (and it is – Mr Alexandridis is renowned across the camps for taking weeks to visit when a problem occurs, and then taking weeks longer to engage anyone to fix what is broken), the financial restraints faced by the Greek government mean that even once people are engaged to carry out the work, they often never do, because the government fails to pay them (at Kavala, the roof leaks due to holes, and because the windows set into the roof allow water to gather during heavy rain, which seeps its way in and wrecks possessions and soaks clothing – and the government has sent three different firms to solve the problem. It has paid none of them, so each firm has downed tools; the roof still leaks. As a mark of just how bad the situation is with the government paying those it engages and employs, Thessaloniki's public transport workers staged a five day strike in October. It transpired that they had not been paid for seven months.)

The Greek government insists on controlling a crisis it has not the wherewithal to control, while the EU allows a relocation and reunion scheme to drag on for a year at least.

The final point is of course that refugee camps are not places fit for human habitation.

Despite the efforts of the refugees – who spend most of their days sweeping, mopping and cleaning – they are dusty, dirty and litter piles alongside overflowing bins.

And they are crowded – people are living almost on top of one another, so that when an outbreak of disease occurs, it spreads extremely quickly.

The camps are incubators for disease. They were never intended to be lived in for anything other than the shortest possible period, and it is unrealistic and to some extent unacceptable that humanitarian organisations should be charged with trying to turn them into decent places to live. They are not, and cannot be.

It is to the same of us all – Greece, the EU and the international community – that 60,000 people are forced to live in such degrading conditions, and to risk their mental and physical health every day by doing so. Though I do not believe that these circumstances are a deliberate effort to discourage others from crossing to Europe – by showing them a grim, pitiful existence that awaits them here if they do – many refugees I speak to do believe it.

And from their perspective, it is easy to see why they do.

4) infestations

The inability to clean clothes and bedclothes regularly (complicated by the fact that if you own only one set of sheets, you must be able to wash them and dry them all in one day, a difficult task in a wet and cold winter; if you own two, you must be able to store the second in dry conditions – almost impossible in camps prone to damp and flooding) means that skin conditions are among the most common new health complaints of refugees at the camps.

Combined with the inability of people to keep food in airtight conditions, and the failures listed above for organisations to sort out reliable, regular litter collection, it also leads to the fourth major challenge – infestations.

At Redestos, in mid-October, hundreds of refugees reported to MdM staff at the camp's clinic with symptoms which revealed that there was an infestation of bedbugs. We reported this immediately, but no action was taken. As the days went on, more and more people, from a steadily widening area of the camp, came to the clinics with identical symptoms.

Though our staff handed out cream to reduce itching and the size of bites and rashes, that did not – and could not – slow the spread of the bugs, which advanced relentlessly until the entire camp was infested.

The outbreak is still in full swing, more than a month later. Literally nothing had been done to get to the cause of the problem.

The reasons why are quite simple. As one worker at the camp put it: 'When there were infestations like this in the army, we took the bedding and burnt it.'

This is impossible at Redestos, where very few people have a second set of bedsheets, and even those who do may find that second set also infested, as they are unable to store it in airtight isolation.

Just washing a set of bedding is a challenge, let alone attempting to wash and dry that of over 1,300 people.

The sole sensible alternative to the burning and/or disinfecting of the bedding of 1,300 refugees is to spray it with poison. But because it has taken so long to deal with this issue, this will now require moving every single person from the site for a period which may be up to three days. This is an example of when and how failure to act decisively and quickly has significantly worsened and complicated a health outbreak.

Rats and other vermin are common at the camps – in some cases this is actually an improvement (for example, the camp at Chalkero, just outside Kavala, was swarming with snakes: they are not present at the Kavala warehouse site, to which the refugees were moved from Chalkero).

They are attracted by the food and uncollected litter at the camps. In some cases (notably Lagadikia), some of the residents have 'adopted' dogs and cats, which keep rat and mouse numbers under control, but vermin is slightly less of a problem at open camps like Lagadikia and Katsikas, as the animals roam relatively large areas and are usually to be found far from humans, except on food raids; also, many of the refugees – particularly the children – are terrified of dogs, so their presence in the camp causes some discomfort and fear (though in fact the dogs are quite well-behaved and pose no real danger to the refugees – in many cases they are fed and looked after by them).

In the warehouses, the problem is more acute. Not only do rats roam the warehouses, they sleep there as well, and regularly gnaw through cardboard food containers to steal and defecate in food, coffee and tea supplies.

They sleep in corners of the warehouses, and this in itself is also a problem, as a cornered rat does not freeze, or run, it fights. Cornering a rodent is far more likely in a warehouse than in an open camp.

The refugees are killing rats at Kavala at a rate of roughly two per night, but the larger rats (some the size of small-ish cats – I have seen two of these) are too big to trap or kill.

Nor is the problem confined to Kavala. At each of the warehouse camps, children tell me stories about the rats they have seen (at the open camps it is adults who most often report seeing them, in part because under normal circumstances, the animals are more active at night when the children are asleep), and show me where food has been stolen through holes they have gnawed.

The threats to health are clear, and are compounded both by the small space in which people are forced to live (meaning that any disease vector, such as rats, are likely to be far faster at spreading conditions, and that their natural patterns of urination, defecation and territory-marking will by necessity coincide where people are forced to live) and the fact that because most refugees have little to no money left, having been on mainland Greece since March at the latest, they are loathe to throw away either food or luxury items, meaning they are faced either with going without food, or risking disease.

At Kavala, the children first told me about the rat infestation in September. I passed the information on, and was told that people already knew, and UNHCR was working with the Greek military to come up with a solution.

More than a month later, at the end of October, exterminators arrived and set traps, which proved to be too small to trap the rats.

Now, at the end of November, the military has promised the exterminators will return, though with no date specified. Refugees and ngos are talking about the purchase of cats, having seen so little response to the problem so far.

As noted above, a third major infestation at many camps has been of flies. Because of irregular litter collection, thousands of flies have been a permanent feature of life at most camps.

At Lagadikia, in the summertime, the clouds of flies literally made the air appear black, and closer to the bins it was often hard to see the ground or the colour of the bins themselves.

Even now, in November, the flies are a significant annoyance. As noted above, the reason is that litter is collected infrequently, if at all, and the resultant rotting food attracts flies in their thousands.

Also as noted above, the result is dysentery and other food-carried and hygiene related diseases. We are effectively fighting a losing battle not just because we have too few supplies, but also because nobody is dealing with the causes of disease, just trying to treat or cure them after they are in full swing.

Once again, the camps are incubators for disease. They are not fit places for human habitation, and neither are they places where health can be maintained at any good level for significant periods of time.

5) space

A final fact about living conditions is as follows – no-one has enough space.

This includes the fact that tents are tightly packed together (and in warehouses, looming walls add further to the sense of containment and lack of space and freedom) meaning that people feel – and from every significant physical health perspective are – forced far too close together.

A major impact of this closeness on physical health is that people pass diseases to one another extraordinarily fast. In a real sense, there is virtually no such thing as personal space.

Equally, the camps are extraordinarily noisy – worse again in the warehouse camps which effectively act as echo chambers – and tents offer very little insulation against noise.

The effects of this are to prevent people sleeping properly, leaving them physically prone to diseases as their bodies are exhausted and less able to fight off viral and bacteriological attack, and leaving them mentally exhausted, prone to depression and other mental health complications.

Another effect is that nobody has – or can even fool themselves into thinking they have – any privacy: if you can hear everything said and done by the people around you, you know that they will be able to hear everything you do, too.

This means that you know everyone will know what you do, when you do it, from sex to discussions with partners, children and friends, whether in the latter case they are with you at the camp, or calling you from elsewhere. You have no ‘safe space’ where you can discuss what is on your mind, or what you hope to do; what has angered you, what gives you or causes you to lose hope.

We do provide spaces for conversation with other refugees, and with our staff, and those initiatives are welcomed by the refugees, and are having positive effects. But there is no real substitute, from a mental health perspective, for the sense of personal space and security – of ‘me-ness’, as it were – given by a house, an apartment, even a room of your own, with walls and a lockable door.

Simultaneously, even within the tents themselves, there is very little space.

Many family groups live 4-5 people to a tent, living and sleeping at extremely close quarters. Though children leave to go out and play, free time and space to ‘decompress’ are very infrequently accessible, adding further to the feelings of claustrophobia, mental and external noise that are a fundamental characteristic of the camps.

Added to this – and for the same reason – adult men and women find it extraordinarily difficult to have any kind of sex life, or meaningful physical contact. When your five year old daughter and eight

year old son – not to mention those with children aged 13-18 – are lying less than two yards from you, intimacy is seen as inappropriate, if not impossible.

For all these reasons – claustrophobia; noise; lack of sleep; lack of personal space; lack of opportunity to conduct verbal or physical relationships and all the frustrations that brings – the camps are not only incubators of physical disease, but also of mental illness.

Mental Health

As noted above, refugee camps are a breeding ground – and a hothouse – for the frustrations and mental challenges which lead to significant reductions in people’s mental health.

And there are other factors which make this an urgent part of Mdm’s work, and a growing problem across the refugee camps in Greece.

First, we should note that the refugees in Greece have fled war in their home countries. Experiencing conflict affects people in many ways, but in almost all cases the most significant (non-physical) impacts are felt only after the event. People in the refugee camps have lost loved ones, friends, their jobs, their homes and in a very real sense the entirety of their lives to date.

Physically, financially and spiritually, almost all of the adults have lost almost everything they had built to that point.

But we are not able to work on this with them. Because this trauma – combined with the extreme risk and suffering undergone on their journey from their homeland, which often also includes the temporary or permanent (and in some cases refugees cannot be certain even which one it is) loss of loved ones and companions – takes a great deal of time to process and help people to work through, and because of a general lack of information from the EU, the Greek government and the UN, we do not know how long we have to work with people.

But at the camps themselves, new challenges arise. Alongside the trauma they have experienced, the mental exhaustion caused by the noise and the claustrophobic closeness of so many people in such a small space, and the frustration and gradual slide towards relationship disintegration caused by the impossibility of maintaining a sexual relationship with your partner, comes an emptiness of existence.

At home, the men women and children now trapped in camps in Greece had specific roles. The parents ran the home, and/or went out to work (in the case of single people, to a greater or lesser extent they also did so) and the children went to school, and had friends with whom they met and played regularly.

Though the children have some (though small – see below) access to education, and have made new friends, they do explain that they feel alone, and that they miss their homes, their friends and their schools. The refugee camps leave children bereft.

But for adults, the situation is multiplied.

From being masters and mistresses of their destiny, their days now meander and drag. They have no work to do – and in fact are told they are not allowed to do paid or even voluntary work of any description – and instead they are left with virtually nothing to do other than reflect on their recent experience and worry about the future.

The removal of ‘usefulness’ is acutely felt. One refugee put it to me that ‘In Syria, I woke at 6.45am. If I awoke five minutes late, it would ruin my entire day. Here, if I sleep to 1pm, nobody cares. I do not care. Because I have nothing to do. That is not a life, it is just existing. We need to have a life, otherwise who are we? What do we do? We are nothing, and we do nothing. We just want to work, to do something and to be something. It is what I want. What I need.’

Even on the journey to Greece, adults had a clear sense of purpose – to ensure they and their families safely reached a destination. Having been frustrated in their hopes to get beyond the

borders (that failure being their last 'act' as they see it) they have now been placed in a 'holding pattern', left to sleep, eat, sleep, eat, sleep, eat on a loop.

And to make matters worse, not only are they doing nothing day to day to help their families, they are also acutely aware that what happens next – where they will go to live, where their children will go to school, where they will work and what they will do – is also entirely out of their hands.

They have literally no purpose other than to stay alive, and they have literally no option but to wait for someone else to deliver them a future. They cannot work for one.

This sense of powerlessness permeates the camps, and is causing serious mental health problems for refugees. In many cases, it is accentuated by the fact that many families have been split – a parent separated from their partner and children, mothers from their sons, fathers from their babies.

But even when a family group is together, the frustration and despair of being totally impotent, and feeling that you serve no purpose, is crushing.

At present, the advice from UNHCR to refugees at the camps is that relocation to other EU states could take up to five months (on top of the eight-nine they have already been in camps) and family reunion 18 months to two years – that is, it takes more than three times as long to reunite mothers with their children, as it does to fly single people to locations, and children aged five could be seven before they see a parent again.

A further complication is that some refugees have already been refused relocation – resulting in them having to return to camps.

They are never told why they have been refused (the system goes: register, run by UNHCR and the Greek government; hold two interviews with UNHCR; EU countries 'open' spaces each month in a central pool, and refugees are put forward from the list to take places; interviews with the potential host country with the refugees; decision yes or no), and they are not allowed to appeal – this is absolutely unacceptable, and places refugees in the relocation process below convicted criminals in terms of rights.

What this means is that in the camps now there are men and women who are a genuine physical representation both of the impersonal brutality (and it is brutal to dash a person's deepest-held hopes for a safe future and not even tell them why) and of the literal worst fears for the future of refugees at the camps.

As a result, anger is increasing. At camps all over Greece, refugees are becoming increasingly desperate, fed by the frustration over their lack of purpose and lack of control of their futures, and their real fears of being turned down and forced back into wars they did not start and believe they cannot survive in.

They are demanding updates on their cases (UNHCR says it cannot do this) and access to lawyers daily (UNHCR points out that as the system is being run, that would be pointless).

Fear, frustration, boredom and powerlessness are creating a culture of anger, terror and mental health problems all over Greece.

While agencies including ourselves are working to deliver activities for refugees, the clear facts are that refugees need to be able to learn more, more quickly, about the progress of their relocation requests, they need the process to be sped up considerably, they need to know why they are

refused, if they are, they need a measure of control over their futures, and they need to be able to perform useful tasks – work, in other words.

Work

At Kavala refugee camp, the windows and roof leak. In some cases, windows are missing, in others, there are holes in the roof, and at Kavala specifically, the windows are built into the roof.

Though the effect of this is generally positive – making the camp far lighter than most other warehouse sites – there is a significant negative.

When it rains heavily, water pools in the windows, and after a certain point begins to flow through gaps between them, as well as through holes in the roof. The effect is to soak clothes, flood tents and ruin food.

Combined with the cold, repair to these is a priority for refugees.

But despite their repeated requests, there has to date been no progress made on fixing the roof or windows – at Kavala or any other warehouse camp – resulting in illness and anger.

One point which is repeatedly made is that at Kavala there is a group of men who had worked in construction in Syria. Nor is the camp alone. In every Greek refugee camp there are skilled men and women who could work to make life better for their fellow refugees, including builders, teachers, translators and in some cases even doctors.

But instead of being able to work on this, thus solving the immediate physical risks and going some way to providing people with a purpose and helping their mental state to improve, they are told that the law says they cannot work in Greece, and nothing is repaired.

Though we should be sensitive to the fact that Greek labourers urgently need income, the sad fact is that they are not receiving it – they are either not being engaged to do the work, or in the rare cases that they are, they are not being paid for it – and we must question whether, especially since that is the case, the cost of thousands of people's physical and mental health is a price worth paying. I believe it is not.

The camps are not fit places to live and they are incubators for physical and mental health problems. By enabling refugees to work – paid or unpaid – we would go some way to reducing both of these problems.

Education

In July this year, the Greek Education Ministry announced it would provide every refugee child in the country a place at school.

I called the Ministry to ask about some of the details, including its plan for non-Greek speakers (no refugee speaks Greek as a first or even second language, though the children in particular are making impressive progress).

‘We will employ Arabic-Greek translators,’ I was told.

‘How many, and by when?’

‘The school term starts in five weeks, and we will employ 400 translators.’

Needless to say this remarkable ambition has not been achieved.

One outcome of this is that though refugees in and around Athens do have access to school – a great positive as some children have already missed almost six years’ schooling – many elsewhere do not.

There are children and young people in camps across Greece who cannot read or write Arabic, Greek or English, and this situation is continuing.

Though this has no direct impact on physical health, the routine of going to school and socialising is a vital part of a child’s upbringing, and many children do feel acutely embarrassed about the fact they cannot read or write well – in some cases at all. This is a factor in the fragile mental health of young people at the camps, and indeed of the same in parents.

Food

The food at the refugee camps in Greece is agreed by everyone – from the Greek army to the youngest refugees – to be abominable.

In every disagreement or frustration raised by refugees, food plays an active part.

The major frustrations are that until September, when major protests were staged, and in some cases still, the menu was the same every day – macaroni with a watery tomato sauce (I tried this and it is genuinely an awful meal – the pasta effectively dissolves to mush before it even reaches your mouth) – feta, some bread and a few pieces of (often mouldy) fruit. This was to serve for all three meals, every day.

At several camps, hunger strikes were staged, while at others regular meetings were called and continued until changes were made. But at several camps, conditions have not improved.

The results are predictable – people are not eating regularly, and are losing weight and becoming ill as a result. This applies to children at least as much as adults.

In some cases, people buy their own food, but almost everyone is running out of money and are not allowed to earn more.

The irony is that communal cooking activities are exactly the kind of thing that help give people a sense of purpose, some structure to their day, and in initiatives such as an irregular programme run at Kavala, in which refugees cook for local residents and vice versa, helps people integrate and interact with the communities around them.

Instead, people are being provided with meals they cannot eat, and are suffering health problems as a result – lessening their immune systems in places which pose serious physical health challenges.

Safety

In late September, a mother and her son went for a walk outside Oreokastro camp, having been told they would leave to be relocated the next day.

They were run over and killed by a speeding vehicle.

The refugees inside the camp spilled out and – albeit for a short period – rioted.

Though there is no justification for rioting, the fact is that these are communities under intense pressure, feeling entirely powerless and the killing of a woman and child just hours before they were set to ‘escape’ is understandably horrifying for them.

Equally, in common with refugees at Diavata (on the same road as Oreokastro), Kavala and other camps all over Greece, they had repeatedly asked for traffic calming measures to be in place outside the camp.

With no result at all.

At Diavata, I speak to a number of women who tell me they are afraid to let their children out of their sight in case they run out into the road and are hit by speeding HGVs (of which there are dozens each day) – in the case of single mothers looking after 2-4 children alone, and in desperate need of relaxation time, never being able to relax unless your children are in your direct line of vision is clearly an unacceptable strain.

At Kavala, the MdM team has repeatedly taken up the appeals of refugees for traffic calming measures to be installed, but with no luck.

Part of the problem, the team reports, is that the camps are supposed to be temporary measures. But with plans to move hundreds of people from the islands to the mainland, and with parts of some camps being converted and altered to better suit people living there for longer periods, the camps have already been in place for almost nine months, and are fast approaching semi-permanent status.

Prison – the islands and the mainland

We have hardly touched on the islands – in part, as you know, Jelle, because we have not been allowed to visit to see for ourselves the situation there. This is irresponsible, neglectful and unjustifiable behaviour by Giatroi Tou Kosmou.

But what we do know is the following:

- There are more than 16,000 people currently detained on the Greek islands – more than double the number UNHCR and IOM agree is safe.

From this, we can be relatively certain that the physical and mental challenges posed by the cramped living conditions on the mainland are multiplied and intensified on the islands – the physical and mental health challenges there are significantly higher than the extremely high-level of those at the camps to which we have been allowed access.

And roughly 3,000 refugees are arriving each month.

- People on the islands know they are being held there while the Greek government decides whether to send them back to Turkey (in a couple of isolated but notable cases, Amnesty and HRW report that people have been sent back without proper questioning and despite the fact that their lives were at direct risk in Turkey: this hardly builds confidence among the refugees on the islands), and like those on the mainland they receive no information at all until hearing the final decision, and have no opportunity to appeal.

They are exactly as powerless and fearful – and frustrated – as those refugees who have made it to the mainland.

- Like those on the mainland, they cannot work, and their days are spent worrying about their futures and being concerned about what comes next.
- They are imprisoned having committed no crime and having received no trial. In some cases they have basically been confined without trial for almost nine months.

It is true that this also applies to those trapped on the mainland – they do not wish to be in Greece, but they are unable to leave – but once again, to a heightened level.

- As ‘iconic’ points of the refugee crisis – and the EU/Turkey deal, which will almost certainly fail in the very near future – the islands also attract far-Right fascist and other extremist organisations, who attack refugees and on a number of occasions have committed acts of arson at the camps.

The islands are extremely pressured, tense places to be, with regular violent outbreaks and with high and increasing risks of disease and mental health problems.

There is no practical or moral reason why the Greek islands should be prison camps, and no sensible reason why they should not be emptied immediately.

For the health – mental and physical – and security of men, women and children who are fleeing war and are desperate for a safe place to stay, the islands must be closed immediately as detention centres and the people trapped there transferred to habitation fit for human beings. It is to the shame of us all that they have not already been.

The EU/Turkey deal

There is little need to go over the details of this deal – except to note that of course the EU has handed Turkey a blank cheque, inferring acceptance of measures the state has undertaken including opening fire on refugees on its borders – but we should note that the deal is almost certain to collapse extremely soon.

In a fortnight (mid-December) the EU and Turkey are set to meet to discuss the relaxation of visa regulations for Turkish nationals travelling to the EU.

In the light of Turkey's repression of all opposition to its government (including elected members of opposition parties, university lecturers, journalists, left wingers and its own Kurdish population, against which it is now engaged in an all-out war in its South-East) there is no way the EU can possibly deliver this.

The problem is that not only is this one of the three promises on which the deal was brokered and now rests, the others – speeding up negotiations for Turkey to join the EU; the payment of €6bn to Turkey in the next three years – have also been effectively taken off the table, or not delivered (the EU Parliament has overwhelmingly voted to show its intention to cease membership talks with Turkey; the EU has so far paid just €250m of the first €2bn tranche, some nine months into the first year).

The EU is desperate for the deal not to fail, and so is likely to give Turkey until February to 'clean up its act'. Turkey might refuse that extension, but there is reason (the hope of actually receiving some more of the money the EU promised it is one) to believe it might accept.

However, at that February meeting, it is extremely unlikely Turkey will have significantly changed its approach to opposition groups, and the deal would at that point have to end.

There are more than four million refugees in Turkey, and Europe has closed its borders with Greece.

Though not all four million will want to enter the EU, given how poorly the international community is dealing with just 60,000 people at present, the collapse of the deal spells catastrophe for refugees and Greece alike.

Summing-up

In the end, the sad fact is that tens of thousands of people are suffering – some of them suffering physical and/or mental illness – as a result of a series of failures.

And it can be summed up in one phrase – this was never meant to take so long.

It must not continue.

We can talk about a range of small-ish scale responses – giving people air-tight plastic boxes to guard food against rats; enabling people to work to improve refugee camps and improve their own mental health; better food; enable organisations to make decisions and purchases without the labyrinthine protocols developed by ECHO and UNHCR in entirely different contexts which are not sensible here in Greece; end the use of islands – and to an extent Greece as a whole - as prison camps; force EU states to open their borders in anticipation of the collapse of the EU/Turkey deal

But really, in the end, it's all about a simple fact: people should not be forced to live in refugee camps, where they are trapped in sub-human unhygienic, depressing conditions, despite the genuine best intentions of everyone working there.

They do not need to be in these camps.

There are 60,000 people trapped in incubators of disease and mental health problems.

That's far too high a number to be trapped for any time in such a situation.

And it's a tiny number given the power, wealth and space the EU has at its disposal.

People must not be forced to stay, trapped, in refugee camps. It is way past time they were allowed to move and begin to live their lives again, as contributing, healthy members of society.

The EU must speed up the relocation and the reunification process. Winter is upon us, there is a real risk of death. The time to act with urgency is now, and the EU must be the one to step up and act. People are suffering in the camps, where they have been trapped for far too long.

There is no single thing which will improve the health and welfare of the 60,000 more than speeding up the relocation and reunion process.

The camps are not fit for human habitation, and the men, women and children within them must be found decent, safe places to live.

The alternative is catastrophe.