

Time to Change: Coronavirus and Refugees on Greece's Samos Island

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The global coronavirus pandemic is affecting every aspect of human life on earth. The challenge is awesome in its scale and scope.

To date we have no cases of the virus on Samos. But still its impact on life here is huge with businesses and schools closed, the tourist industry completely stalled, and deeply engrained social activities such as drinking coffee and church going prohibited. All this is further compounded for as common with much of Greece, Samos has not come through the social and economic crisis that has crippled so many here for the past 12 years. It is only access to gardens and land on the island with islanders growing and producing food for themselves and their families and neighbours that has kept hunger at bay for many here. (Not all are so fortunate). The loss of any income, however small, is a disaster.

But even worse is in store should the virus come to Samos. People here know that their health care system is weak and that respecting the lock down and the other protocols is essential for their well-being. Many here are very proud by their response, and Greece to date has one of the lowest rates of infection and deaths from the virus in Europe.

This makes it all the more shocking to see how the authorities both here on Samos and in Athens are treating the refugees who continue to be detained in conditions that "make them particularly vulnerable to respiratory infections, including COVID-19. These include situations such as overcrowded living and working conditions; physical and mental stress; and deprivation due to lack of housing, food and clean water" (WHO). Every single recommendation made by WHO (Europe) on March 25th concerning the treatment of refugees during the pandemic is ignored on Samos and is highlighted by the relocation of the 400 or so people who lost their homes to the recent fires in the jungle. Look at the photo!



Photo from Samos Chronicles

Whilst much of the world is being told to keep a 2 metre distance, here we find some of the most vulnerable people on the island being expected to live like this! **All of us** on Samos now face a greater risk by this action.

What makes this action even more reprehensible is that it need not be like this. Why for example was the stadium not pressed into service with its space and toilets and showers. What about the empty hotels and army barracks?

One truth we all know is that coronavirus attacks people without any discrimination. We also know that it is more deadly for those who are vulnerable either through ill health or poverty. In the fight against the virus we are only as strong as our most vulnerable. We are so used to the official neglect of the poor and the vulnerable that it has come as a welcome surprise to see deeply unequal societies reach out to its most excluded which in the UK included offering accommodation to all homeless people and the distribution of a million food parcels. Portugal has gone further in extending its health care system to embrace every refugee even those without papers. A spokesman for Portugal's Ministry of Internal Affairs, Claudia Veloso, summed up the logic behind her government's decision:

"People should not be deprived of their rights to health and public service just

because their application has not yet been processed. In these exceptional times, the rights of migrants must be guaranteed.” (Counterpunch 4 May 2020)

But this is not happening on Samos. The rights of the refugees are not guaranteed and this is a threat to us all. It is surely time that here at least we start to do things differently and better. Whether you like it or not we are all in this together. But by neglecting and even worsening the vulnerabilities of refugees here, the authorities are acting irresponsibly.

As we see across the world, the pandemic is compelling states to act in completely new ways. We must take similar brave actions. Throw out the old and cruel approaches and start afresh in a spirit of human togetherness. We know that we cannot expect much support from Athens. Last week the government broke its promise to remove from the frontier islands 2,500 refugees deemed to be at the greatest risk from the virus. If the situation here is to be improved it will depend on us in Samos. I believe that here on the island we have many of the human and physical resources to make massive improvements which will protect **all** of us. And this time we will stand shoulder to shoulder with the refugees who for weeks now have been doing what they can to protect themselves including holding classes for the children on hygiene, making masks and distributing food. Working together to fight the virus and to protect all the people of Samos could and would be inspirational! Imagine no longer being seen as the place where refugees suffer but as a beacon of humanity. We can do it. Divided we are in danger. Together we stand a chance.

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