

# Humanity and Solidarity: Working with Refugees on Greece's Samos Island

By [Chris Jones](#)

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*I hope that readers won't find this post excessively long. It is the basis of some talks that I have been asked to give to social workers in England in February 2017 reflecting on some of our key experiences of being involved with refugees on Samos. I am especially pleased that I will be speaking at Liverpool Hope University as students and staff there have been amongst our long term major supporters. This is an open lecture on Wednesday Feb 22nd starting at 5.30pm in the Senate Room of the University.*

Our work with refugees on Samos has been rooted in our common humanity and informed by mutual respect, solidarity and empathy. In Samos we have come to recognise that these human qualities are shaped by where you stand with the refugees. If you stand shoulder to shoulder as brothers and sisters it nearly always followed that relationships formed where people connected, despite massive differences in background and experience. Even 2015 when the average stay of the refugees on Samos was between 2 to 3 days it was astonishing to see so many friendships made between the refugees and the local activists who met them on the beaches and helped provide clothes and food. Even 2 years later many of these connections have endured.

On the other hand we also saw many 'helpers' who did not stand with and alongside the refugees.

These people could talk the talk of their concern for the refugees but they saw themselves as both different and superior. Such an attitude prevented meaningful contact with the refugees and often led to 'help' being given in ways which were humiliating and disrespectful. This was evident in many ways. Refugees for example were and are viewed as supplicants with almost no rights to even choose the clothes they were given. If a young male refugee refused a needed pair of jeans for example they were immediately seen as ungrateful. The very idea that they should care about how they looked or comment on the labels/brands on offer was seen as outrageous. Yet in so many ways the young adult refugees are just like their European counterparts in that they do obsess about labels and brands and do care greatly about their appearance; one of the very few parts of their lives they now have any sort of control over. Virtually every other aspect from what they eat to where they sleep and when they can move are under the complete control of others.

Since the EU/Turkey pact in March 2016 refugees have been detained for months on Samos and it is possible to see more clearly how refugees fight to hold on to some control. At the cricket matches organised by the Pakistani refugees the hair styles of many of the players are stunningly fashionable. These are all done within the camp and those with the skills and equipment are in high demand. Their clothes and shoes are not up to much - they never get

to choose the clothes that are handed out in the camp -but their hairstyles are top drawer. And this is true for the majority of young male refugees on Samos. Control over their hair style is about all they have!

### **Here They Come!**

The summer of 2015 marked the beginning of a new period in Samos' long history of being a gateway into Europe for undocumented migrants. The massive increase in arrivals with over 90,000 coming to Samos - three times the population of the island - precipitated by the devastating war in Syria simply overwhelmed the already feeble capacity of the authorities. It was an experience which was repeated again and again as the tidal waves of refugees swept northwards out of Greece during that summer.

On Samos, the previous practice of detaining refugees in a camp that looked like Guantanamo Bay surrounded by a double fence topped with coiled razor wire had to be abandoned. The camp built in 2007 (replacing an equally horrendous ex-police station) had a capacity for 240 detainees and despite the warnings of the impending increase of refugees about to cross the Aegean from nearby Turkey, no additional provision (such as opening closed military camps and empty hotels) had been made.

The decision was taken that the only way to manage was to move the refugees off the island as quickly as possible. Of course, there were other options, but on Samos at least those with power and authority were firmly of the view that anything which made Samos look positive to the refugees would result in even more arrivals. This they wanted to avoid at all costs. So from early summer 2015 all the daily arrivals were no longer taken to the camp but were immediately directed either to the port in Karlovassi or in Samos Town where they could get a ferry to Pireaus/Athens. At the outset the authorities privileged the refugees fleeing from Syria, who were considered to be the most vulnerable. Whilst constituting around 80% of the arrivals there were also significant numbers of refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, north Africa and Iran. The plan was that Syrians would be 'fast tracked' at the port and on to Athens within 72 hours of arrival. All other nationalities were to be detained in the camp where a more intense processing would take place.

But it was not to be so simple and it was only ever partially implemented. For a start the refugees are not stupid. Most of them knew that the Samos authorities had implemented the Syria first approach. So unless your skin colour (e.g. black) indicated that you were unlikely to be Syrian all other refugees quickly realised that it was best to declare yourself as Syrian if you wanted to avoid being delayed. (Just as in 2006 most of the refugees coming then declared that they were Palestinian because they knew that to be Palestinian meant you wouldn't be deported.)

Most of the police at the ports clearly knew what was going on and often encouraged refugees from elsewhere (Iraq and Afghanistan) to declare themselves as Syrian because it meant that they avoided the hassle of detaining them in the camp and they could rapidly move them on. For some however this was taken as further illustration of the widely held assumption by the authorities that refugees lie; they are never to be believed. It is an assumption which can have fatal consequences as our friend Wasim discovered when the police refused to believe him in 2013 when he told them that his wife and 2 young children were trapped in the forest in a remote part of Samos. Not only did the police take no action they handcuffed Wasim to a chair for over 24 hours as he protested in vain. His wife and children died in the forest.

Refugees rarely travel 'alone'. Most of the refugees are with others, either friends or families and these are vital forms of support. But through their smart phones they are also in contact with a much wider network of others including those who have gone before them. These networks were and remain extremely important and valuable to the refugees. It provides information about routes, about smugglers and other contacts necessary to their onward journeys. It alerted them to what they could expect from the authorities they would be forced to deal with en route. It did not take long for some of the mainstream media to suggest that owning a smart phone indicated that the refugees were not having such a hard time if they could afford such a gadget. They wilfully ignored how vital they were to the refugees' survival. We met many refugees who told us how their family had all chipped in to buy the phone before they left home and many we discovered were paid for by their mothers. The phones were life lines. This is why one of the most pressing needs expressed by the refugees shortly after arriving here was phone charging and access to free wi fi. The phones and networks created by the refugees became crucial 'intelligence' resources in their hands.

In the summer of 2015 the two ports on Samos and not the camp became the focus of the islanders' efforts to help the refugees. It was here that the refugees were corralled waiting to be photographed and have their basic details (name, birth, country etc.) recorded before being given a 'white paper' which allowed them to move on to Athens. Once there they were expected to continue with their applications for asylum. Very few wanted to stay in Greece so there was no question of lingering in Athens for further processing. They were not interested in seeking asylum in Greece. They could see that the Greek economy was in ruins and that there was little or no chance of decent work. They wanted to move on and join the wave of refugees pushing northwards. In any event the Greek asylum service had collapsed and through a newly introduced application system operated through Skype it was virtually impossible to obtain even an initial interview to kick start the procedure.

### **The Boat Groups**

The scenes at the two Samian ports for much of this summer were extraordinary with hundreds of refugees milling around waiting to be dealt with by the police. Every available fence was used for drying the clothes that had been soaked during their crossing and every place that offered some shade was occupied. The great majority of refugees stayed together with those they had travelled with, especially during the sea crossing from Turkey. Some of the groups were mixed and included a variety of nationalities but mostly they were from the same countries - Syrians with Syrians for example. Within each group, of usually around 40 to 60 people, there would be sub groups of friends and families. But the solidarities that formed as a result of the sea crossing which threw people together who were often meeting for the first time were exceptionally strong and significant.

At this time the 'boat groups' became the most important survival resource for the refugees. With the authorities offering nothing in terms of food, shelter, clothing and comfort of any kind, the well being of the refugees depended largely on themselves. There were no NGOs on the island, and not only did the authorities do nothing neither did other significant local actors such as the army and the ubiquitous Greek Orthodox Church which turned their back on the refugees. It was in the boat groups that money was shared so food could be bought, or hotel rooms could be booked for those who were most in need of a proper bed and toilets - young children, those with disabilities, and those with the greatest trauma. It was from within the boat groups that money was raised to pay for the ferry tickets for those who had lost everything. And it was in these groups that compassion and support was offered. Many

times boat groups refused to leave the ferries until all their group had been issued with the necessary authorisation to leave Samos. Nobody was to be left behind.

Representatives/spokespeople always emerged from the boat groups, usually selected on their ability to speak English. In Karlovassi port we had the enormous advantage of having an Arabic speaker who had come to Samos as a refugee in 2006. Creating effective communication systems with the boat groups was crucial. They were able to identify those within their groups who needed special attention, usually medical but also financial. It was important that our involvement needed to be fully engaged with the boat groups and directed to supporting and deepening their solidarities. For example, it was evident from the beginning that in order to avoid chaos and mobbing over food and clothing distributions that the refugees themselves had to be involved and given responsibilities. The boat groups became vital in this effort and they created effective systems for ensuring that food was shared and distributed with dignity and respect. They also organised the lunches setting up lines of sandwich makers. And they were especially important in terms of maintaining some semblance of hygiene in a very difficult situation.

The negligence of the authorities seemed to have no limits and this extended to a complete disregard for the hygiene and cleanliness of the ports. In Karlovassi for example, apart from the quayside bars some of which allowed the refugees to use their toilets there was a single broken w.c. in an abandoned port police building at the harbour. Yet there were often 200 to 300 refugees staying there. Within days this single toilet and the empty rooms in the building were a public health disaster area. Under pressure from the locals the local authority announced that it would install portaloos in the harbour. They promised immediate action. But as ever nothing materialised. No portaloos ever came. To do nothing quickly became impossible. The health risks from this stinking excrement filled building in the very centre of where the refugees stayed at the port were extreme. With nothing forthcoming from the system the activists at the port took over the abandoned police building, cleaned it out, painted the rooms and got the single w.c. working again. In the meantime another local group had managed to raise enough money to install additional toilets and outside washing sinks. No permission was sought. Direct action was taken.

Although driven by the immediate health needs of the refugees, both they and the activists were well aware of the broader context where refugees are routinely demonised as being dirty and diseased. The disgusting state of the port police building was taken as yet further proof of this stereotype. In Karlovassi, the importance of keeping the area free of garbage and keeping the restored building and toilets clean became a daily drum beat. It was not only about keeping themselves as healthy as possible but it was also a conscious fightback against one aspect of their demonisation.

This was the broad context in which islanders responded to the needs of the refugees. It took various forms and was spontaneous. There was no overall co-ordination although a web of relationships formed between the various groups which helped with effectiveness. Neither was there any time when any individual or group attempted to take control. This in part might be explained by the absence of the organised left parties such as the communist party (KKE) and Syriza in these initiatives. As anyone with any familiarity of the Greek Left knows, their thirst to manage and control is (in)famous. Their absence was justified largely on the grounds that these popular interventions allowed the authorities both in Greece and the EU to evade their responsibilities for the refugees. And with some justification they argued that the explosion of popular action across Europe in response to the refugees deflected attention from the machinations of imperialism and neo liberalism which were at

the root of the refugee crisis. But for the islanders who were at the ports the all too evident suffering of the refugees demanded immediate action. And for many it was never a question of either helping the refugees or criticising the neglect of the authorities or the evils of imperialism and global capital; both were seen as necessary. There was also some hope that their example would shame the authorities into doing something humane for the refugees. This never materialised.

### **Criminalising Help**

Help for the refugees came from a range of quarters on Samos. For example, before the NGOs arrived at the end of the summer, a collection of tourists and regular summer visitors to Samos (between 15-40 at any one time) made a crucial contribution in meeting the refugees when they landed on the beaches. A phone rota was created so that when refugee boats were spotted coming into land, usually between 4am and 7am they could be called on to drive down to the beaches and help both with the landing and above all to take them to the nearest port. Despite the high summer temperatures the authorities made no provision for either the landings (need for water and dry clothes) or transport to the ports. Without the drivers and their vehicles the already exhausted refugees faced a walk of up to 20 kms to get to the nearest port. Furthermore public transport was not an option as the bus company refused to carry refugees. The same applied to the taxis, although that changed later in the summer as it became evident that they were missing out on a highly lucrative source of income. But worse still was a long standing law in Greece which criminalised giving any lifts to refugees either by car, boat or even donkey. Even though this restriction was lifted in the early summer of 2015 (although you were still expected to inform the police every time you took a refugee) the police took a great deal longer to accept that the law had changed. So drivers were often stopped and told that they were breaking the law; they had to report to police stations with their documents and were generally harassed.

The tourists and holiday visitors were not so fearful of this law nor of the Greek police and saw it as an outrageous attempt to curb their humanity. Not only did they continue to drive in the face of police harassment but they often came down to the ports with food once the refugees had settled in. Moreover, many of those continued to offer valuable financial support once they returned home by fund-raising for refugees on Samos and some have linked up with refugees who they first met on Samos and who successfully made it to northern Europe.

As always it was the refugees who suffered most from these laws. Countless cars and pick-ups with room for passengers never stopped to pick up refugees tramping to the ports. Many islanders reported of being afraid of the consequences if they stopped to help. As recounted in detail in *Samos Chronicles* for some refugees the consequences have been fatal as in the case of Wasim who was not helped by the local fishermen as he swam along the coast looking for help for his wife and 2 young children trapped on the shore. Boats would approach him but turn away once they saw he was a refugee. They feared if they helped they would be arrested as smugglers and lose their boat. It was not an idle threat as confiscations had happened and been widely reported. But for Wasim it was a contributory factor in the death of his family. Similarly when a motor launch capsized in 2014 and led to the deaths of over 22 refugees locked in the cabin, none of the small fishing boats in the nearby fishing village were prepared to go out and take part in the search and rescue of survivors. When pressed they all expressed fear that they would be arrested and risk the loss of their boats. We watched in mounting horror from the vantage of our home this drama



unfold when for over 2 hours we could see no attempt at rescue.

Laws criminalising refugee help, seeing it as an aspect of smuggling, are widespread in Europe and not confined to Greece. But there can be no doubt that here on Samos it has been a contributory factor in making locals fearful of helping refugees. The islanders live under an unrelenting drizzle of propaganda which demonises refugees. They are dirty, they are diseased and a threat to our health, they are violent, they are selfish, they are sexual predators, they are terrorists and not least they are mainly Muslim. The list is endless and changes depending on the latest 'outrage' and moral panic. It has many consequences and generating fear amongst the people is one. It was evident in the small numbers of islanders who offer lifts to the refugees which was not just the consequence of the law. It was evident in some of the ways in which much needed clothes, food, and water were distributed at the ports. Cars would arrive and simply leave a pile of clothes or fruit with no attempt to make direct contact with the refugees and help ensure its fair distribution. Similarly, very few refugees were ever invited to stay or visit the homes of islanders. The lack of a common language did not help but the fear element also played a role.

The nervousness of many local people wanting to help the refugees was in fact easily overcome. Those who crossed the line and sat and talked with the refugees soon found themselves in conversations like those they would have amongst themselves. Again and again islanders exclaimed that the refugees "are just like us" after spending time with them at the ports. For so many this was a life changing revelation especially given the intensity in which refugees are portrayed as being not like us; as different and often dangerous. It was a revelation which energised activists who flourished as friendships with the refugees deepened. It was just as well for with hundreds arriving every day and with the rapid turn over as the refugees moved on to Athens, systems had to be re-created almost on a daily basis.

### **Help from 'Below'**

Scores of islanders came to help the refugees in whatever ways they could. It was all the more impressive given that Samos as throughout Greece was in its sixth year of devastating austerity which had seen wages and pensions slashed and jobs evaporate. Poverty on Samos is acute and widespread and if it were not for the gardens that so many islanders cultivate and the high level of home ownership the situation here would be utterly desperate. With many having given up their cars and pick ups and a bus service which (poorly) connects the main towns leaving the smaller villages isolated meant that going to the ports to offer direct support to the refugees was not an option for many. But even so many organised clothing collections in their villages, others collected fruits and tomatoes from their gardens and some became involved in cooking groups and clothes washing and drying. In other words they 'dug where they stood' and contributed with great generosity and with love. It was exemplified by one older woman in one of the villages who after going through her few possessions came up with a pair of women's shoes. They were leather, in good condition but there were some scuff marks on the heels. So she had her friend re-dye the shoes before giving them. As far as she was concerned giving scuffed shoes would be an insult. This concern with the dignity of the refugees was common and reflected in the quality of the clothing donated. It was very rare to find rubbish.

Those who came down to the ports represented only a fraction of the local people who helped the refugees. Those who were there distributing food, especially cooked meals commonly had behind them a network of women who in their homes and villages were

preparing meals and who had organised rotas which allowed their efforts to be sustained over the summer months. Others spent hours washing, drying and recycling clothes. Family relationships and friendships with those in local businesses were also activated with great effect. Some pharmacies either donated or massively discounted essential medicines and first aid materials. The same was true for some of the locally owned (not the big, national/multinational chains) supermarkets and fruit sellers and one businessman gave rent free a large modern warehouse to be used as a refugee clothing and equipment store.

So much was learnt during these days. We learnt about the importance of working together with the refugees; of the myriad ways in which to communicate when there is no common language; of the power of humour; of the bonds which unite us despite our differences and of the importance of working in ways which strengthened refugee solidarities. It was during that summer that it became clear that personal contacts with the refugees were as important as providing meals and shoes. Landing on the beaches of Samos in the early hours of the morning is a tumultuous experience for the refugees. There is the relief at surviving an often terrifying journey through the night. Low in the water, packed in small underpowered rubber dinghies, being steered by another refugee who might have had 5 minutes practice with the engine before leaving the Turkish coast most of the refugees pray their way through the 4 - 8 hours it takes. Not surprisingly they are overwhelmed when they arrive with some just sitting sobbing whilst others who have got a signal on their phones are shouting with joy to friends and family as they tell them that they are alive and now in Europe. Not knowing what reception to expect it meant so much when they were met by those who gave them a hug which is such a powerful act of fellowship and solidarity and was just as important as the dry clothes and snacks provided. The arrivals often had no idea who we were. Many had endured months of being scared of strangers as they made their way to the Turkish coast. Some had been attacked and robbed. In this context an embrace, a hug and a smile can almost instantaneously vaporise their anxieties. They were at least for the moment with people who cared for them and who didn't see them as garbage.

### **Abusive Authority**

The contrast with the state authorities could not be greater. Newly arriving refugees were and still are met by police and other officers wearing masks and rubber gloves and in lieu of a common language revert to shouting at the refugees. 'Malaka' is one of the first Greek words many refugees learn. It is a vulgar term of abuse and is widely used by the police when talking to refugees. It resonates disrespect, of refugees 'counting for nothing'. Surgical gloves and masks are also powerful symbols. The police on Samos never tire to tell us and our friends that we should not take refugees in our cars because of the health risks. In this context then an embrace and simply being with and amongst the refugees is a powerful and necessary act of solidarity as well as a repudiation of the state's propaganda..

Abusive behaviour towards refugees is not unique to the police, who in any event should have never been given such a key role in the management of refugees coming to Samos in the first place. The Greek police has its own particular history which includes a significant long standing connection with fascism and is reflected in such facts that over 50% of the police in Athens voted for the openly fascist Golden Dawn party in the last General Election. Given a long and well documented history of endemic racism within much of the Greek police which includes deaths, severe injuries, torture and routine neglect of refugees and migrants, it is astonishing that the police were given such a crucial role in the management of refugees. But with no papers, refugees are still considered to be illegal arrivals to be managed by police and so placed within a penal rather than welfare

framework. That they are refugees traumatised and frightened leaving everything behind as they fled to safety is not the starting point.

## **The Arrival of the NGOs**

The humanitarian NGOs which began to arrive in numbers from late 2015, including Medecin Sans Frontieres (MSF), Red Cross, Save the Children in addition to a number of Greek based NGOs. During the same period UNCHR greatly expanded its involvement especially in the provision of tents and temporary structures which made up the so named 'Hotspot' which was initially constructed in the port area of Samos Town. The arrival of the NGOs took the major burden of care off the shoulders of the locals as they took over trying to meet the basic needs of the refugees. Whilst the NGOs have benefited the refugees, their impact has also been problematic in a number of ways for both the refugees and the local activists.

For many of the big international NGOs such as MSF this was the first time they had ever operated in western Europe as it was widely believed that this part of the world was more than capable of dealing with such humanitarian challenges. That it was in fact incapable was not just a matter of politics but also a reflection of the extent to which neo-liberalism had hollowed out the social capacity of many European governments. They no longer had the agencies or the personnel to respond and were already over-committed to providing what shredded social services survived to their own vulnerable populations. This is spectacularly true for Greece where austerity has almost done away with state public services. Into this vacuum stepped the NGOs acting in much the same way as privatised contracted out companies which have taken over and richly profited from the vanishing social state. They may not be motivated by generating profits, but it was evident on Samos that not only are the international NGOs big business but they have come to form one part of the 'system's' response to the 'refugee crisis' which was reflected in their ambiguous stance to the refugees, to the local activists and also in their relationships to the Greek authorities.

Obsessed by their concern to stay in control, the authorities both in Samos and Athens have placed all kinds of limits on the NGOs. Basically every NGO action needs official permission which in Samos means endless delays, countless meetings and unimaginable amounts of paper work. Obey us or leave was basically the Greek state's message to the big NGOs. Despite their size and influence the extent to which the NGOs submitted to the control of the Greek authorities was surprising. It was exemplified in the contracts issued to their staff which required them to comply without comment, to the demands of the authorities and on no account to speak or disclose anything of their work. In short gagging contracts. We witnessed many examples where the NGOs failed to speak out so as not to upset the Greek authorities. Even though some did make an eventual stand over the EU/Turkey pact in March 2016 and declared that they could not countenance working in locked camps this should not be allowed to blind us to their temerity and concern not 'to rock the boat'. To many on Samos, the NGOs showed a remarkable lack of political 'nous' and courage.

But it was in their failure to stand full square, shoulder to shoulder with refugees which represented one of the most serious flaws in the NGO interventions. Refugees are routinely excluded from any involvement in setting the priorities and then the planning and implementation of NGO operations. Whilst the NGOs never hesitate to claim that they speak for the refugees they seem incapable of engaging with or even listening to them. Since the EU/Turkey pact of March 2016 refugees on Samos no longer move on to Athens after 48 -72 hours which was common throughout 2015. Instead they are stuck here for months. Many have been here for 9 months which is more than enough time to build relationships directly



with refugees and to get them actively involved. This has not happened.

The arrival of the NGOs significantly changed the nature of the refugee experience, both for the refugees and the islanders. Help has been professionalised with all that entails. Despite the presence of some truly inspirational workers it was surprising to see how many NGO staff kept their distance from refugees. It is unusual on Samos to see an NGO worker sitting with refugees offering them a coffee or juice in a café or in the squares. Groups of 10 -20 NGO workers can be seen every day in the summer months meeting up for a drink and a meal (on expenses in many cases). Never a refugee in sight. There was one notable occasion when the refugees forced open the gates to the camp in Samos town. It was a carnival atmosphere as the refugees flooded out of the open gates. Families with young children filled the streets as they made their way down to the sea front where they sat and enjoyed their freedom. In reality only a small victory but much enjoyed. However what stood out was that whilst the refugees and their friends sat on the sea wall all the NGO workers who came down were standing apart on the pavement and looking over to where we sat. None of them came over. That so few of the NGOs get close to the refugees and stay desk bound in their offices has led them to being nicknamed Never Go Out by the refugees.

In addition, top down social work has long been infected by infantilising those it seeks to help. Clients, in all shapes and form are often viewed as children (often insulting children in the process); immature, lacking in judgement and prone to unreasonable and irresponsible behaviour and so on. There is more than a hint of these perspectives thriving in Samos where refugees are not valued and their voices are rarely heard. This in turn contributes to an almost total disdain which sees refugees as having nothing to offer. For months the clothing store managed by 'volunteers' (mainly short stay visitors from the USA and Europe who come to 'help' the refugees) refused to allow refugees to either help in or even visit the store. What made this worse was refugees are clamouring with frustration and want to do something. The store offered one such opportunity for meaningful activity. The reasons given for this refusal was that the refugees could not be trusted not to steal and/or to take more than they needed. Reasons that had added irony given that everything in the store was donated for the refugees. It was their stuff! And this was not an isolated example. Workers in one of the more respected NGOs even ran a 'book' betting on how long another smaller clothing store would stay open because it was managed by one of their workers who believed in working with the refugees. It was a joint initiative in which she gave refugees control over its organisation, access and distribution. In fact the store flourished and was more effective precisely because the refugees were involved.

The disdain of the refugees also characterised the NGOs' relationships with the activists on the island whose core work they now took over. Of course this was an enormous relief but it also led to a significant withdrawal of islanders from working with refugees. In the main the NGOs referred to the local activists as volunteers and through their behaviour indicated that the time had come for the 'experts' to run the show. It was a process which not only discarded a valuable resource for the refugees but had profound consequences in widening the distance between the islanders and the refugees which is currently being exploited by the authorities on Samos. Diminishing numbers of islanders are now involved with the refugees and like them they are not routinely included in determining the activities of the NGOs. That wide web of relationships which had emerged in 2015 which connected so many local people to the realities of the refugees has largely disappeared. This disconnection between the locals and the refugees is now being relentlessly exploited by the island authorities. In the past six months for example, the authorities have found it easier to claim

that the island has to be rid of all refugees because they have made life almost intolerable for the locals. Although tourism on Samos was declining long before the numbers of refugee arrivals exploded in 2015, it is now the common sense here that refugees are exclusively to blame for its current dire state. But as a consequence of the arrival of the NGOs and their style of expertise they have marginalised an important countervailing voice. All kinds of resentments are now being actively promoted as islanders read about resources supposedly being devoted to refugees whilst they get nothing. At the same time nothing is heard of the refugees resentment that these very same resources rarely get to them and simply support an ever growing number of people who do nothing for them.

### **A Different Way of Working**

Again and again the interventions most valued by the refugees were the ones in which they had involvement and shared responsibility. And none of these came from the official system whether an NGO or state agency. There were two outstanding examples and both involved anarchist groups, one from Germany and the other from Switzerland who set up kitchens on the island and provided the best food that Samos refugees have had in their history here. The key to their success was linked with what they did and how they did it. It is never a matter of just what you do but how you do it.

The 2 Open kitchens were brilliant for the refugees and it was a sad time in early 2016 when the army took control of food provision for the camp. Understandably the kitchens decided to leave and go on to where they were most needed. These kitchens were much more than just about providing fresh cooked nutritious meals. From the outset they involved the refugees in shopping, storage, cooking, food preparation and menus. The volunteer workers stood side by side with the refugees in all these activities, working and talking, laughing and joking. Unlike so many of the NGO workers as well as many of the newly arriving 'volunteers' the core staff did not stand apart from the refugees.

The kitchens were happy places. A characteristic that can be rarely applied to the NGOs and state agencies here on Samos, or even within many if any contemporary organised social work settings. It was in the refugee camps of the West Bank in Palestine that I first understood the importance of jokes and laughter as one of the means of surviving the intolerable oppression of the Israeli occupation. Alongside deep hurts the Palestinians had great jokes. I still don't fully understand how this all hangs together but I do know that laughter draws people together in a myriad of ways and is a source of great strength.

Both kitchens created seating areas around an ever ready supply of tea. Noticeboards were created for sharing information and the kitchens rapidly became the most important centres for the refugees to meet, relax and to do something. The importance of activity cannot be under-estimated and it is no exaggeration to say that the enforced idleness of being detained on Samos for months, with no idea when they will have their asylum claims assessed drives them crazy with frustration. And guess what? The refugees had talent. Refugees came forward who had worked in kitchens and restaurants, who knew how and what to cook to satisfy their compatriots; others had skills in IT and were experts at trawling the net for information especially concerning the routes to follow once released from the island, others organised backgammon competitions, all of which made the kitchens places where you wanted to spend time.

The 'politics' of the Open kitchens were critical to their success which saturated everything they did. They knew that the 'system' was inhumane and had no care for the well being of

the refugees. They were explicit in seeing borders and papers as cruel and unnecessary. They knew much about the ways in which our world creates refugees through wars and exploitation. They were angry at the hurts and injustices and the pain of the refugees. They felt this pain. They did not pity but were full of empathy and rage at the inhumanities before their eyes. They stood shoulder to shoulder with refugees as human beings.

### **And Then Came the Volunteers**

The media spotlight on the Greek frontier islands such as Samos in 2015 drew individuals who wanted 'to help' the refugees. They have come to be termed the volunteers. At any one time there can be up to 50 volunteers here. They are overwhelming middle class and tend to be either young people from Europe or the USA and Australia with many having just completed a university course, or newly retired. They stay from anything from 2 or 3 days to a month, and a few even longer. They are a mixed group with different motivations for their interventions.

The volunteers do not come here as part of an organised intervention. They travel often on their own or as a couple. Few if any questions are asked of their competence. The very fact that they have volunteered seems to be enough to allow them to intervene. Some are excellent and stand full square with the refugees. Others are not. Some for example seem to be trophy hunters such as the young German couple who spent just under one hour with refugee children getting them to paint pictures of their experiences which were then gathered together to be taken back to Germany to show to their friends. Fortunately these volunteers were prevented by activists who asked whether they had sought the permission of the kids to keep their paintings. Of course they hadn't. For most however it was their endless photographs/selfies of posing with refugees as they handed out bottles of water or snacks which are then posted on their Facebook pages which were most prized. Not only did these photographs elicit effusive responses as to their heroic actions but they also helped the volunteers raise funds for their stay.

Driven by their desire to do something, anything when they arrive also led to the volunteers falling into the embrace of the authorities on the island. For the system, the volunteers were rapidly seized upon as being useful as form of bottom tier labour that could undertake some of the dirty work such as cleaning rubbish in and around the camp. As the numbers increased the authorities made available a warehouse and entrusted the distribution of clothes, shoes, tents, sleeping bags and the like to the volunteers. (It was the local authority which insisted that the refugees should not be allowed in the store either as casual visitors or to help in its work. This injunction was not challenged by the volunteers.)

As with the NGOs the arrival of the volunteers has been a mixed blessing. As they themselves are now realising their contributions allow the funded agencies to evade some of their core responsibilities. This coupled with the experience of only being allowed to undertake work sanctioned by the authorities has pushed the volunteers into a fundamental review of their purpose which at the time of writing is yet to be resolved.

But as with the NGOs the volunteers have inadvertently contributed to the distancing of the islanders from the refugees. For a variety of reasons there are virtually no locals working with the volunteers and similarly little interaction between the islanders and the volunteers who tend to stick together even when socialising. Furthermore the island authorities have now created a system whereby all those who wish to work with refugees and are not employed by an appropriate agency are expected to register and be approved. Few local

activists are prepared to seek permission to engage with refugees from the very authorities which are so patently part of the problem.

### **Some Final Reflections**

There can be no conclusion as the inhumane treatment and management of refugees on Samos is still ongoing and the situation here continues to unfold according to the shifting policies of the EU and the other power brokers involved. As for the refugees it remains a tortuous time in which their humanity is routinely denied. Nobody denies any more that the conditions for the refugees on the Greek frontier islands are deplorable. Refugees are dying every week from these conditions. Detained for months, never knowing when they will be either deported to Turkey or allowed asylum is torture for them. Their lives in a sense have stopped.

There is still no evidence of any compassion in the ever shifting policies towards refugees. As ever so called security concerns always trump refugee welfare. So this winter we see hundreds of refugees living in tents during freezing weather but at the same time no hesitation in deploying additional police. Samos is awash with police. At the same time we have the authorities on all the Greek frontier islands insisting that their populations can take no more of the refugees and are trying to drive new wedges between the refugees and the islanders. On places such as neighbouring Chios we are seeing clear collusion with the fascist Golden Dawn who have been organising attacks on the refugees and their camps. These crimes are taken as a sign of the islanders' frustration and anger at the presence of the refugees who have apparently destroyed their crucial tourist economy. It is scapegoating of a classic form channelling the desperation and misery of seven years of austerity on to the shoulders of refugees.

We are also witnessing a renewed focus on the so-called 'economic migrants' from Pakistan and north Africa who, without papers and authorisation, are a significant part of the refugee population on Samos. That poverty and hopelessness of any possibility for a reasonable life in their home places drives them on to the dangerous and expensive clandestine routes to Samos counts for nothing. Who would risk such a journey if they could flourish at home? Instead, they are dismissed as selfish vermin with no right at all to seek sanctuary in Europe. At this time, international law still allows all refugees to make a claim for asylum. One wonders how much longer this right will remain. Even so, the EU and its constituent governments have made it clear that those who are not basically fleeing war will have their asylum claims dismissed and be subject to deportation.

At the same time over 200,000 young people have left Greece in the past 5 years in search of work and a better life. It is a cause of sadness but never a cause for their demonisation as selfish free loaders. But it also illustrates in part the huge commonalities which are shared by both the islanders and the refugees both in terms of the causes and the consequences of their ongoing misery.

Today the 'European Refugee Crisis' has moved down the mainstream media's agenda as the numbers of new arrivals has dropped, especially via the 'Eastern Route' across the Aegean to places like Samos. There is still considerable movement, mostly clandestine, but there has also emerged, especially in the borderlands of Greece and the Balkans places where refugees are detained, fenced and stopped. These peripheral places, unlike the squares and railway stations of Germany, Austria, Sweden and the rest of the more prosperous north are easier to ignore and easier to manage. They are dark places and they

need to be illuminated.

We have come to expect nothing of value and benefit to the refugees coming from the top whether it be an NGO or governmental welfare agency. They are part of the problem and certainly not the solution, On the other hand we have seen the power and effectiveness of interventions which work with and alongside the refugees as people 'just like ourselves'. But if it is to be more compelling we must recognise that we must also shed light on these darkest of places. It is a huge challenge. But it is necessary if the barbarism of the system is to be halted.

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