



Relocation from Greece

Lessons learned and looking
ahead

Since 2015, over 25,000 vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, including unaccompanied children, have been relocated from Greece to other European countries. These relocation programmes – the result of Decisions of the Council of the EU establishing an emergency mandatory relocation scheme, bilateral agreements between EU Member States and Greece, and a voluntary EU scheme established in 2020 – have transformed the lives and prospects of these people.

“ I felt I could [finally] have a safe life and that I could build my future.

Y., an unaccompanied child who arrived in Greece from Afghanistan when he was 15 years old and subsequently relocated to Portugal.

Despite a significant decrease in arrivals in 2020 and 2021, there is still a compelling need for continued relocation from Greece. Reception conditions, and access to essential services and asylum procedures still fall short of international standards¹. A lack of adequate support means that those who do receive refugee status or subsidiary protection are at risk of homelessness, remain trapped in the camps or do not have access to education or financial support². As of August 2021, there remain an estimated 2,738 unaccompanied children in Greece³ and more may arrive in the future.

European countries and the European Commission have the resources and ability to offer these vulnerable individuals a brighter future, offering a demonstration of solidarity both with asylum seekers and the government of Greece. This solidarity should not be considered solely humanitarian or a gesture of political support, but the respect of core legal principle of the EU.⁴

As the voluntary EU scheme is scheduled to come to an end, 27 civil society organizations call for the continuation of relocation from the country. This briefing paper, based on the organizations’ experiences both in Greece and in destination countries, offers their perspective on how to improve the process and outcomes for those being relocated, particularly for unaccompanied children.

1 See for example European Court of Human Rights decisions in cases A.A., M.A. and M.N.A. v Greece

2 See for example, *Back to School? Refugee children in Greece denied right to education*, Greek Council for Refugees/Save the Children, September 2021 <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/back-school-refugee-children-greece-denied-right-education>

3 Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children (UAC) in Greece, 30 September 2021, EKKA https://www.ekka.org.gr/images/STATISTIKA/EN_EKKA_Dashboard_20210930.pdf

4 Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, considered primary law in the EU, “The policies of the Union set out in this Chapter [on border checks, asylum and immigration] and their implementation shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States.” <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT>

1.

Background on relocation

In 2015 the Council adopted two Decisions related to the relocation of asylum seekers from Italy and Greece. This was a compulsory system, establishing a “temporary and exceptional relocation mechanism” with the aim of relocating 66,400 people from Greece out of a total of 160,000.⁵ The Decisions caused considerable political acrimony, non-compliance and were amongst the reasons for long standing and persistent divisions within the Union on asylum and refugee issues ever since.

A report to the European Parliament evaluating the implementation of the Council’s Decisions concludes that “by any measure, [the] failure to make relocation work effectively and swiftly from the outset is striking”⁶. Nevertheless, over 21,000 individuals were relocated from Greece between 2015 and 2017 and given the opportunity to start a new life in a new country.

Despite the discontinuation of EU wide compulsory relocation schemes, some EU member states and the European Commission have continued to make efforts to ensure refugees and asylum seekers, particularly vulnerable people and unaccompanied children, are relocated from the country.⁷ Some countries, like France, Portugal, Luxembourg and Germany, reached bilateral agreements with Greece to relocate asylum seekers⁸.

In March 2020, the EU established a voluntary scheme for the relocation of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children and children with disabilities/illnesses and their families⁹. Its scope was extended in September 2020, following the fires in Moria camp, to also include vulnerable beneficiaries of international protection present on Lesbos.

⁵ Council Decision (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1601>

⁶ Implementation of the 2015 Council Decisions establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and of Greece, Study for the LIBE Committee, March 2017 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/583132/IPOL_STU%282017%29583132_EN.pdf

⁷ There are also EU coordinated relocation schemes from Italy and Malta. Although the SOPs are similar to those used in Greece (which were adapted from the Italian SOPs), the eligibility pool for relocation from those countries are smaller, are calculated when boats arrive and take a longer time

⁸ See for example, Portugal/Greece: Bilateral Agreement for Relocation of Asylum Seekers, ECRE 26 October 2018 <https://reliefweb.int/report/portugal/portugalgreece-bilateral-agreement-relocation-asylum-seekers>

⁹ Migration: Commission takes action to find solutions for unaccompanied migrant children on Greek islands, European Commission, 6 March 2020 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_406

Under the EU voluntary scheme, children and families who did not have the possibility to reunite with family for reunification through a Dublin application and who had arrived before 1 March 2020 were eligible.¹⁰

A coordination mechanism was established by the European Commission that included Greek authorities under the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (Special Secretary for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors, Greek Asylum Service, the Reception and Identification Service), international actors (EASO, IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, FRA and UNHCR partners), and the involved Member States. The first step was the establishment and the agreement of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for relocations from Greece, and then the development of the tools and methodology for the relocations. The SSPUAM was responsible for establishing the pool of children and family members eligible for the relocation.

Overall, 16 EU Member States have participated in the scheme, which had the ambition to relocate 5,200 vulnerable asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, including 1,600 unaccompanied children and children with medical conditions and their families.¹¹ In total, 4,401 individuals, including 1,028 unaccompanied children, have been relocated by October 2021, when the scheme was due to end. Careful and forward-looking planning is essential to ensure the process of relocating children and families avoids causing distress and enables them to have a positive start in their new country.

Relocation in numbers:

16

EU Member States participating
in the relocation scheme

21,000

individuals were relocated from
Greece between 2015 and 2017

Expected targets:

5,200

vulnerable
asylum seekers

1,600

unaccompanied
children

Actual results:

4,401

vulnerable
asylum seekers

1,028

unaccompanied
children

¹⁰ In the event an unaccompanied child's application for Dublin Family Reunion is rejected, they become eligible for relocation.

¹¹ Factsheet: Voluntary Scheme for the Relocation from Greece to other European Countries, International Organisation for Migration <https://greece.iom.int/sites/greece/files/211007.pdf>

2.

Strengthening the relocation process in Greece

Based on NGO experiences of the voluntary EU scheme in Greece, standardizing practices for the various countries involved and enhanced coordination and communication would significantly improve the overall process.

2.1 Standardize selection/ eligibility criteria and processes

After the formal launch of the voluntary relocation scheme, Member States were requested to confirm their pledges indicating the preference criteria, and reception and integration constraints. Later, some participating Member States further narrowed down their selection criteria, introducing new age, nationality and gender conditions, for unclear reasons.

This significantly complicated the process of matching, particularly as some states stipulated that unaccompanied children under 14 or only girls would be the focus on their relocation efforts, despite the well-known fact that most unaccompanied children in Greece are boys over 16 years old. Furthermore, despite the fact the SOPs state that unaccompanied children eligible at the time of selection remain eligible for relocation even if they subsequently turned 18, some states refused to relocate children who had “aged out”, a particular problem given the often-lengthy relocation process.

2.2. Standardize interviews by Member States

After an interview by EASO, UNHCR and UNHCR partners and the submission of the proposed redistribution list, some Member States requested an additional interview with the children and/or family members, conducted either remotely or in person. While some receiving states conducted security interviews, others conducted asylum-like interviews. Some, like Switzerland, did not ask any security questions, instead checking whether these persons were listed in the relevant databases before giving its consent. In some cases – especially in the beginning of EU voluntary relocation scheme – METAdrasi guardians¹² did not have any information on the country for which the child was selected and received very short notice to represent unaccompanied children in security interviews, which meant they could not inform and prepare the children.

¹² METAdrasi is the NGO tasked with providing guardians to unaccompanied children under the EU voluntary relocation scheme. For further details of METAdrasi's work see <https://metadrasi.org/en/our-activities/>

Case study

M. fled the conflict in Syria and arrived in Samos in 2019 when he was 16 years old.

“I spent almost a year in Samos. Life in the camp was terrible. I ended up in Athens with one of my cousins. The shelter was not great, but shortly after I was chosen for the relocation program to Ireland.

Relocation took a long time...when we were ready, Covid-19 hit so we had to wait until summer 2020 to actually travel.

Arriving in Ireland was great. In Samos I attended Still I Rise’s youth centre, so when I arrived to Ireland, I took an online test and my English was good enough to go to a public school directly.

I’ve been in school ever since and I’m taking exams next week. After I turned 18, I stayed in the shelter a little longer and then I was offered to move to an apartment. I decided instead to go live with a family.

I’ve always wanted to be a nurse, but if that doesn’t work out, I’m also taking workshops in school on photography and videomaking and I would love to make that my career in the future.

What I like about the system in Ireland is that it is personalised: depending on your situation there is a different plan. When you turn 18, you may live alone, or they might find you a place with a family or a shared apartment with other people from your country.”

2.3 Improve coordination, transparency and communication

The coordination needed to relocate unaccompanied children is resource-intensive and complex, given the need for appointment and involvement of guardians, the completion of an assessment of the best interests of the child, (Best Interest Assessment or BIA), the need for special accommodation in Greece, and commitments and preparation in the destination country. The unclear criteria highlighted above made the coordination of the numerous actors involved more cumbersome and led to delays. For example, Switzerland agreed

to voluntarily accept 20 unaccompanied children from Greece, but it took a long time before a list was submitted to Switzerland¹³.

Data management and maintenance of up-to-date databases have been challenging, especially because the situation of vulnerable children is dynamic and changeable. One significant difficulty was tracing children living in camps or in a homeless situation, which led to delays in the relocation procedure.

13 Response to email request for information, Embassy of Switzerland in Greece, 16 June 2021

The unclear and changing eligibility criteria and a lack of transparency, including on possible future relocations made communication efforts towards civil society organisations, and more importantly to the asylum seekers and refugees themselves, more complicated. In addition, those who were not selected were left in considerable distress, as it could not be properly explained by organisations taking care of children in camps and shelters why some were selected for relocation and many were not. Even the guardians, whose role is to inform the children on the reasons of rejection, in some cases did not receive information on the rejection grounds.

The lack of immediate and transparent exchange of information on destination countries for children also meant that in most cases, organisations could not help prepare children for life in their new countries, for example by giving language lessons.

While the balance between sharing information and raising expectations of relocation for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection is delicate, establishing clearer and more transparent procedures and enhancing communication with civil society organisations would help alleviate anxiety in the children, their families and those who support them.

2.4. Establish realistic timeframes and expand the role of guardians

On the one hand, the time between the matching of individuals for relocation and their actual arrival in their destination country is often long, and a source of worry and uncertainty for those going through the process. On the other hand, some

relocations were decided at the last minute and implementation was often considered urgent, leaving little time to prepare the children or the guardians for the imminent transfer to the destination country. The time pressure made it hard to meet child protection and process safeguards standards, and this had an impact on the physical and psychological well-being of some of the children being relocated.

According to METAdrasi, 50 best interest assessments (BIAs) took place in one day in Lesbos, creating numerous practical challenges¹⁴. In many cases, requests for the presence of the guardians at BIAs or security interviews was made with only one day's notice in advance, making it difficult to obtain the necessary authorization from the Public Prosecutor¹⁵.

Moreover, some guardians saw the children for the first – and only – time during the relocation/security interview and did not have time in advance to meet, to inform and to get to know the children.

Children (and their guardians) did not always have access to legal assistance during the relocation process and this appears to have impacted outcomes for some of the children concerned, for example, because they did not receive sufficient support on family reunion procedures that might have been prioritised over relocation or were not sufficiently prepared for the status determination procedures that would take place in the country of relocation.

14 METAdrasi, 15 June 2021

15 In total, the guardians of METAdrasi participated in 1,587 best interest assessments and 860 security interviews. For further detail on issues surrounding guardianship of unaccompanied children in Greece see Thousands of unaccompanied children left without representation, METAdrasi, 15 September 2021 <https://metadrasi.org/en/thousands-of-unaccompanied-children-left-without-representation/>

Challenges due to COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for authorities and had a direct impact on relocations. Flights were cancelled and movement restrictions applied, making it more difficult for Member States to organize missions to Greece. In some cases, children could not be transferred and had to be put in quarantine because they tested positive for COVID -19.

The pandemic also caused delays in destination countries, as governments sought to adapt relocation procedures to new public health measures, in particular following outbreaks in initial reception centres, as authorities introduced social distancing, measures to reduce crowding, sought alternative accommodation or halted new arrivals entirely.¹⁶ Although for understandable reasons, COVID-19 related delays meant that many children had to wait for months in desperate conditions, especially those in camps on the Aegean islands, before being relocated.

COVID-19 posed challenges beyond initial reception, with lockdowns, school closures and suspension of extracurricular activities negatively impacting the well-being and integration of relocated children, while preventing on-site support visits to them.

Invest in reception and support services

Photo: Mazzi students/ Still I Rise



16 See for example Guidance on infection prevention and control of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in migrant and refugee reception and detention centres in the EU/EEA and the United Kingdom, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 15 June 2020, pages 9-10 <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-guidance-refugee-asylum-seekers-migrants-EU.pdf>

3.

Adopt best practice in destination countries

Relocation is also a complex process in the country of destination. As long as children are afforded adequate support and assistance, the different approaches of various countries are not necessarily problematic and there is no one-size-fits all approach. There are, however, opportunities to learn from best practice.

3.1 Invest in reception and support services

Some Member States made pledges as part of the voluntary EU scheme but were unaware of the preparation needed to appropriately receive and host relocated refugees and asylum seekers. In one instance, a Member State was unable to find accommodation to host the substantial numbers of unaccompanied children they pledged.¹⁷

In contrast, Finland expanded and strengthened its reception capacity for unaccompanied children to meet the individual needs of even very young children, a positive example that other countries should emulate¹⁸. All children are placed in group homes across four different units, where an individual care plan is prepared by health care professionals, guardians and social workers, and the need for medical care, psychological support and other needs is assessed.

¹⁷ Interview with DG HOME official, 18 May 2021.

¹⁸ As part of the EU relocation scheme, as of 31 August 2021, 111 individuals have been relocated from Greece to Finland.

Each child is assigned two caregivers and access to hobbies and other social activities to help ensure the integration of the children in the local community. All relocated unaccompanied children have access to education in Finland. Each child's education level is individually assessed, and a majority of the relocated children take preparatory classes for the first year before moving to regular classes with Finnish children.

3.2 Ensure transparent information flows

Ensuring a transparent information flow during every step of the relocation process is crucial. It can increase the preparedness of authorities in the host country to handle a large number of arrivals with different needs at the same time. It can also contribute to the readiness of families and children to leave Greece and accept the country of their relocation. Transparency can also aid acceptance of the admission process amongst receiving communities, including by informing local authorities/administrators in advance about the

Case study

Y. from Afghanistan arrived in Greece at the age of 15. He stayed for more than 3 months in Moria, before leaving the island on his own. He was apprehended on the mainland and transferred to a closed facility, where he remained for close to 2 months. After this, he was transferred to a Safe Zone, before being relocated to Portugal. He told the Greek Council for Refugees that:

“When I started my journey to reach Europe, I was dreaming of becoming a doctor. After staying in Greece for 2.5 years, this dream evaporated.”

“We were just left inside the camp. I was 15, without anyone - no family, no mother- and they just threw me in [Moria] and left me there.” In his time in Greece, he “only managed to attend school for 2 weeks, through online courses.”

Y. was relocated to Portugal in 2021. “There were no difficulties. Within 4 months, we managed to issue my papers, to start school”, adding that “my guardian follows everything and supports me with everything I need”.

He appealed for European governments to continue relocating unaccompanied children from Greece. “I have friends who have remained in Greece. They all had dreams. But as time passed by, they lost those dreams and their future. Europe could give a solution, so that [people like me] can also go to school, to a gym, to follow their hobbies and their dreams.”

details of the process and people being relocated, so that criticism from the local population can be responded to and misinformation can be cleared up.

During the first bilateral transfer from the Greek islands to Germany, civil society organizations found that there was a gap in the exchange of information between the authorities, relevant actors in Greece and in Germany and the affected children and families, in advance of departures from Greece. These concerns were taken up by the German authorities and significant efforts were made to improve in subsequent transfers.

3.3 Finding a permanent home: best interests of children first, and coordination with local authorities and civil society

In considering the placement of relocated unaccompanied children and families, social ties and family relationships should be given priority over other considerations, such as quotas for distribution. Unaccompanied children, for example, often establish close relationships in the camps or during the intensive time of the transfer and quarantine. After German civil society provided advice on ways to improve the relocation process from a child-rights perspective,

German authorities prioritized keeping unaccompanied children with pre-existing social ties together as much as possible and children with family links in Germany were distributed to the federal states where their family was located.¹⁹

Additional caution should be taken to ensure that unaccompanied children do not have to move again once they have been placed in care or with a foster family. In Finland, upon completion of the asylum process, unaccompanied children are subsequently permanently placed in municipalities across Finland. As their initial reception is in four group homes, in municipalities which may not have the capacity to host them all permanently, the process risks leading to secondary relocation of unaccompanied children, a disruption in education and likely also a change of the child's guardian.

19 Nach Quarantäne: Von den griechischen Inseln ausgeflogene Kinder aus Flüchtlingslagern werden auf Bundesländer verteilt, BMI, 29 April 2020 <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2020/04/verteilung-kinder-nach-quarantaene.html>

In preparation for relocation national authorities should appraise the local availability of appropriate accommodation and healthcare (particularly where children have serious illnesses or need dedicated psychological support, including in their mother tongue), prior to children or families arriving in destination countries. In addition, receiving states should consider the willingness and capacity of municipalities to welcome relocated unaccompanied children and families, and in particular, encourage the fuller involvement of local authorities that are eager to do so.²⁰

20 A Local Turn for European Refugee Politics: Recommendations for Strengthening Municipalities and Local Communities in refugee and asylum policy of the EU, Heinrich Böll Foundation, March 2019 https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/e-paper_a_local_turn_for_european_refugee_politics.pdf



Photo: Mazzi students/ Still I Rise

4.

Recommendations

The commitments to relocation from Greece shown by the European Commission and some EU Member States in the recent past is welcome. The successes in helping children and families to establish a new life should inspire renewed political will to improve the process and institutionalise the practice.

The government of Greece, European Commission and EU Member States should:

Complete the current relocation scheme, fulfilling all the pledges made;

Continue relocations, with pledges by individual states coordinated and structured through an extended EU scheme, until a permanent relocation mechanism as proposed in the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is established;

Standardize relocation criteria centrally, as well as procedures for follow up interviews and security screening;

Base relocation eligibility criteria on vulnerability, personal ties and willingness to relocate, rather than age or gender

To achieve this, an EU coordinator should be appointed to coordinate relocations centrally, while each Member State should appoint a national relocation coordinator or focal point who has adequate resources and decision-making authority to coordinate and operationalize relocation procedures.

In Greece, government authorities and other actors involved in relocation should:

Ensure adequate time is allocated for proper preparation for relocation candidates and individualized best interest assessments for children, where the child's views are taken into account, ahead of the transfer;

Increase transparency through clear communication of eligibility criteria, overall process and timeframe;

Include guardians, local authorities, NGOs and legal representatives throughout the process, from selection to ongoing support in destination countries. This should include the involvement of civil society who work with the target population on a daily basis, and can assess vulnerability and identify who is most in need of relocation;

Establish an effective permanent guardianship system and appoint guardians for unaccompanied children as soon as possible upon arrival in Greece, tasked with supporting them in all aspects of their lives, including throughout the relocation process;



Ensure that families and children have sufficient information on their proposed destination country and are adequately informed about their legal status in the destination country, including information about asylum proceedings and family reunification, prior to agreeing to relocation;

Ensure children can access free legal assistance to navigate what can prove to be complex legal procedural pathways.

In destination countries authorities should:

Ensure that appropriate reception conditions are established and an individual care plan set up prior to departure, especially for children or the most vulnerable among those relocated, in order to assess whether relocation is in their best interest;

Minimize the number of moves asylum-seekers undergo in destination countries after arrival to facilitate integration and improve well-being;

Prioritize family unity and social ties, including by not separating families (unless this is in the best interest of the child) and when making determinations on permanent placement;

Ensure family members of relocated unaccompanied children, whether in Greece or other countries, can apply to be reunited under an expedited process;

Involve civil society actors with expertise in the relevant fields, such as experts on children's rights, on resettlement and medical experts, when planning for and implementing relocations.

Signatory organisations

Centre Diotima

Changemakers Lab

Child Circle

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

ECHO100PLUS

European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)

Fenix - Humanitarian Legal Aid

Greek Council for Refugees

Greek Forum of Migrants

HumanRights360

I Have Rights (Previously RLCB)

International Rescue Committee

Irida Women's Center

Leave NOne Behind

Legal Centre Lesvos

Lesvos Solidarity

The HOME Project

Médecins Du Monde - Greece

METAdrasi- Action for Migration and Development

Mobile Info Team (MIT)

Network for Children's Rights

Refugee Legal Support (RLS)

Samos Volunteers

Safe Passage International

Save the Children

SolidarityNow

Still I Rise