



## The Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference 2018

### Final single paper submission

Full title of paper	<b>External drivers for domestic activism: The Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Greek Civil Society</b>
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Abstract for inclusion in the conference programme (150 words)	Several studies have identified variables that influence NGO objectives, organizational structures and activity. Among the most important are the availability of funding and the density of networks. The ongoing economic crisis in Greece, has motivated philanthropic institutions and funding mechanisms, to support NGOs' initiatives aiming at the relief of
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	vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, networking, and the systematic cultivation of synergies with big and experienced International NGOs (INGOS) was still largely missing. Yet, the refugee crisis has created a new, dynamic environment acting as a significant transformation driver. Available funding, mostly from European institutions, has increased while, as INGOs and international organizations (like UNHCR) expanded their operations to Greece, close cooperation and partnerships with local NGOs multiplied, and numerous new initiatives emerged. However, at the same time refugee-crisis related developments raised important issues on the autonomy of organized civil society in Greece such as the increasing dependence on big donors and a relatively new and widening cleavage between professionalised NGOs and grassroots movements.
Word count of full paper <b>(between 2,500-4,500 words</b> not including cover page and references)	4,500

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**Full paper: External drivers for domestic activism: The Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Greek Civil Society**

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**Introduction**

Over the last decade, Greek civil society (CS) has received much academic attention, mostly driven by the different and quite challenging conditions that Greece is facing, the latest development being the ongoing refugee crisis. A crisis that has re-established the NGOs’ position as an integral part and a cornerstone of emergency relief in a country that has been hardly hit by the economic crisis for more than 9 years now.

Yet, it is also this crisis that has raised concerns about the future of NGOs in Greece, on the ground that the need for humanitarian response was imminent and the available funding has skyrocketed, impacting on the nature, scope and operation of an important number of NGOs.

This paper is based on the preliminary findings of an extensive research project on the impact of the Refugee Crisis on the NGO ecosystem in Greece and attempts to assess the extent, of the transformation of the NGO ecosystem in Greece. The first part will present, in short, the research methodology and the corresponding theoretical framework. The second part will focus on the ongoing refugee crisis, presenting preliminary data, as well as, insights from professionals of the NGO sector on the repercussions of the crisis.

### **Theoretical and methodological context**

Skipping theoretical debates about what CS is or how to define NGOs, this paper will focus particularly on the existing discussion about the impact that European funding, and funding from international donors (such as the UNHCR) have on the NGO sector in Greece.

Salgado has paid attention on this issue, by attempting to unveil the contribution EU structural funds may have on the transformation of NGOs, their priorities and management patterns (Salgado 2009). Indeed, as Salgado argued, *'the more European funds are allocated to a specific issue, the more voluntary organizations (working on this topic) will be expected to use these funds and be transformed by this use'* (Salgado, 2009: 4). In addition, she also claimed European funds to be a driver of socialization for voluntary organizations, while the fact that these kind of funding opportunities are accompanied by specific provisions and rules, motivates organizations to adopt a more *'appropriate behavior'* (Salgado, 2009:4). Lastly, Salgado underlines the fact that European funds also foster the establishment of cooperation schemes where voluntary organization build up partnerships with public authorities leading to a professionalization process. Yet, as Stewart argues, *'professionalization cannot be treated in the nonprofit sector as a "one-size-fits-all" concept'*, since different variables should be taken into consideration such as the sector in which the organization focuses on or the age of the organization and its maturity and so on (Stewart, 2016).

Based upon these illustrating conclusions, we will attempt to examine whether they apply to the case of the Greek NGO ecosystem within the state of emergency that the refugee crisis has brought since 2015 in an already exhausted by the economic crisis Greek state and society. Our

first hypothesis is that the refugee crisis has led to a change of scope for many NGOs not only due to the urgent character of the crisis, but also due to the enormous funding made available by the European Commission through, mainly, the UNHCR. Our second hypothesis is that the level of competition among the NGOs targeting the available funding has gone uphill. The third hypothesis is correlated with the massive mobilization of INGOs that started operating or expanding their presence and operation in Greece as a consequence of the refugee crisis. This reality, we presume, has a positive outcome for the Greek NGO ecosystem, providing Greek NGOs with the chance to improve networking, socialize, create partnerships and exchange best practices. Our fourth hypothesis is related to the professionalization of those NGOs implicated with international donors such as the UNHCR. Finally, our last hypothesis is related to the expansion of the volunteer movement in Greece as a result of the crisis.

For the purpose of this research, semi-structured interviews were used in order to test the hypotheses set. As part of a wider research project on the impact of the refugee crisis on the Greek NGO ecosystem, this paper represents only some preliminary findings that need to be elaborated further with more interviews and a survey that we plan to conduct the months to come.

### **The pre-crisis status**

During the previous years, a significant growth of the civil society sector has been observed. The main reason for this can be traced to the welfare state's inability to provide certain social services, shifting the responsibility towards the traditional institution of the family, philanthropic institutions, private initiatives and civil society organizations (Huliaras, 2015). New forms of social mobilization initiatives were born (Simiti, 2015), activities were strengthened, while people started devoting more time and money to social activism (Clarke et al., 2016). Two were the main results from this development. On the one hand, the lack of state funding pushed NGOs to disengage from state influence, and on the other it has forced NGOs towards professionalization and competition with each other (Tzifakis et al., 2017).

### **The refugee Crisis as a tipping point**

Greece has found itself as the gateway to the largest movement of people across Europe since the end of World War II. From 2015, over one million refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Greece aiming at fleeing later on towards central and north Europe.

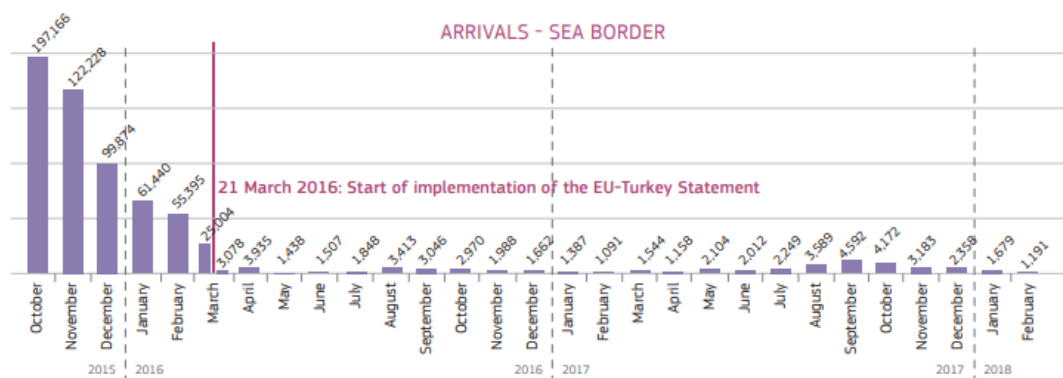
According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees/migrants arriving in Greece by sea reached 856,723 in 2015 (Table 1), while according to the Hellenic Police, the number of individuals who illegally crossed the Greek borders was 797,370 in the first eleven months of 2015, compared to only 72,632 in 2014 (Hellenic Police, 2015).



Table 1 Number of Sea Arrivals

The massive flows of refugees and migrants continued uninterrupted until February 2016, when the borders between Greece and FYROM closed down. This year (2016) marked a notable decrease (over 90%) in the influx of refugees (European Commission, April 2018a) as an outcome of the agreement between EU and Turkey also known as “EU and Turkey Statement”.

Table 2



Resource: European Commission, April 2018a

The situation was significantly better in 2017 and 2018 in terms of living conditions for the refugees/migrants. The number of sea arrivals decreased and amounted to 29,431 for 2017 and to 12,824 for the first half of 2018 (see Table 2), while attempts were made to improve

conditions in the camps, securing better access to healthcare, sanitation, and education services.

Skleparis and Armakolas (2016) focusing on the humanitarian response, have identified three main phases; 1) The first phase from May to late August 2015, during which volunteer presence is dominant; 2) The second phase from September 2015 to mid-January 2016, during which a gradual professionalization of the humanitarian response was observed, with national and international NGOs increasing their presence and involvement; 3) The third phase from mid-January to August 2016, when the EU- Turkey statement was signed, while the Greek state, along with major international and national NGOs, assumed the overall control of the response to the refugee crisis and small-sized civil society actors were sidelined (Skleparis, 2015: p.173-174).

Further, a fourth phase can be added, covering the period from August 2016 and onwards, during which municipalities (Athens, Thessaloniki, Livadia, Trikala, Karditsa, Larissa, Nea Philadelphia-Nea Chalkidona, Tripoli and a consortium of municipalities in Crete) gradually became more active playing a critical role in implementing accommodation programmes along with major local and international NGOs (e.g. Praxis, Iliaktida, CRS, ARSIS, Solidarity Now, Nostos, Intersos and TDH). Since August 2017, the humanitarian response is downsizing, with several local and international NGOs minimizing or shutting down their programs entirely (e.g. Norwegian Refugee Council), while the funding structure is also being reshaped with the Greek state gradually undertaking almost complete control (Joint agency briefing paper, 2017).

In the first phase of the humanitarian response, both the Greek state and professional (I)NGOs were accused of failing responding effectively to the crisis (Skleparis & Armakolas, 2016). The new Greek Government elected in January 2015, underestimated the hazard of the humanitarian crisis, failing, also, to develop a coherent migration policy (Skleparis & Armakolas, 2016). Concurrently, major Greek NGOs were already implementing aid programs for those affected by the economic crisis in mainland of Greece, making it difficult to immediately boost their operations in the islands (Skleparis, 2015).

Apart from that, for many donors, Greece was not a country in need. This was confirmed by a representative from the NGO 'Oxfam', who argued that "*while we understand that many in Greece are in difficulty, the sort of financial support these people need is not within Oxfam's remit. Therefore, we do not currently have plans to operate in Greece*" (Devaney, 2015).

Nevertheless, Oxfam would initiate operations in Western Greece a few months after.

However, from September 2015, civil society actors in many different forms (e.g. professional NGOs, volunteers, ad hoc groups and collectives) landed in Greece, trying address the humanitarian crisis (Evangelinidis, 2016). National NGOs such as Doctors without Borders (DwB-MsF), the Hellenic Red Cross, and more local ones such as Agkalia and Starfish along with volunteers from all over the world, played a key role in dealing with the large flows of refugees/migrants (Skleparis, 2015). But, since a coordinating body was missing, especially in the very first stages of the crisis, ‘total chaos’ prevailed in the islands (Meaker, 2015). Maria Galinou, one of the co-founders of the Salvation Army’s Greek branch argued that *‘with Greek culture, it’s all or nothing. Everybody has brought so many clothes and so much food but there has been waste’* (Meaker, 2015). As a result, without an official coordinator, an overlap in the activities and services provided to refugees/migrants was more the rule than the exception.

In mid-January 2016, the Greek state along with professional national and international humanitarian NGOs, took the role of addressing the humanitarian crisis. As the NGOs presence was expanding, there was limited information regarding their emerging number particularly in the first year of the refugee crisis (Kitching et al., 2016). According to the media, local people testimonies and the local authorities, tens of new organizations have emerged since the outburst of the crisis, exceeding all expectations. The Greek state was unprepared for the arrival of such a number of actors, being unable to regulate and coordinate them, which was confirmed by statements made by the then Minister of Migration Policy, Mr. Giannis Mouzalas (Mpourdaras, 2016). The Greek Ombudsman (2017) underlined the absence of coordination between several humanitarian actors. On the onset of the refugee crisis, UNHCR, was the only agency having a relatively general overview of the number and services provided by NGOs, across Greece. From August 2015, UNHCR has been constantly publishing an updated map, entitled the 3 Ws, Who’s Doing What Where?.<sup>1</sup>

Under a strong criticism by the media for the absence of coordination and oversight the State, through the ministry of interior, attempted to create an official registry of the organizations. On January 28, 2016, a joint Ministerial Decision banned all independent, unregistered volunteer activities in the islands and put NGOs and other civil society actors under the

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR. (2015). Who’s Doing What Where?, Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/46328>

supervision of the Greek state both at organizational and individual level (Skleparis & Armatolas, 2016). The same Ministerial Decision created a Committee to be responsible for registering, certifying and coordinating civil society actors operating in the islands (Skleparis, 2016). Moreover, it has estimated, combining records from local authorities and ministries, that the number of (I)NGOs engaged in the refugee crisis from its birth was approximately 170 (Huffington post, 16/9/2016)<sup>2</sup>. Yet, only 48 organizations have been registered to the ministerial registry<sup>3</sup>.

Since August 2017, most local and international NGOs have gradually started phasing out, with the Greek state slowly taking over total responsibility of the camps in the islands and in the mainland. However, in the absence of an organised exit strategy, NGOs (e.g. Caritas Hellas, ActionAid, Danish Refugee Council, Oxfam, Solidarity Now) argued that *'there is no actor to hand over our work, lessons learned and our experience in the refugee crisis'* (Joint agency briefing paper, 2017). As a result, the significant experience and knowledge acquired by (I)NGOs during the refugee crisis seems not to have been capitalised to the maximum level by other national actors. Nevertheless, several attempts to pass on relevant know-how have been recorded with IRC seemingly playing the more active role in this field (Emirza, 2018).

### **Some first findings regarding the impact of the Refugee Crisis on the Greek NGO ecosystem – what NGOs think**

NGOs have played a catalytic role as service providers during the refugee crisis so far. They have acted as the primary UNHCR partners receiving the majority of the available funding from EU and UNHCR, mostly through the accommodation and the cash programmes. In total, since November 2015, 49,077 individuals have been benefitted by the programme. By the end of 2017 and within the context of the accommodation scheme programme, part of the ESTIA programme funded by DG ECHO, UNHCR has created 25,119 places, either in apartments (4,172 apartments), or in buildings (27 buildings), hosting at that time (June 2018) 21,048 asylum seekers and refugees. In parallel, DG ECHO also funded a separate accommodation scheme for the most vulnerable cases of refugees, operated by NRC and covering Northern Greece.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/2016/09/16/koinwnia-mko-ethniko-mitroo- n\\_12044464.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.gr/2016/09/16/koinwnia-mko-ethniko-mitroo- n_12044464.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://mko.ypes.gr/home\\_in\\_mitroo\\_report](https://mko.ypes.gr/home_in_mitroo_report)



UNHCR has reached these numbers through partnerships, which initially included only National and International NGOs with the exception of the Municipality of Athens which has participated in the programme almost from its birth. But, even now, more than two years from the programme's kick off non-governmental actors remain as major partners. according to UNHCR's June 2018 Factsheet, the Agency is implementing the accommodation scheme programme through 17 partnerships with 8 national and international NGOs and 9 municipalities. the vast majority of places is still being provided by NGOs, with PRAKSIS, a Greek NGO having the lead (23.9% of the ongoing places).

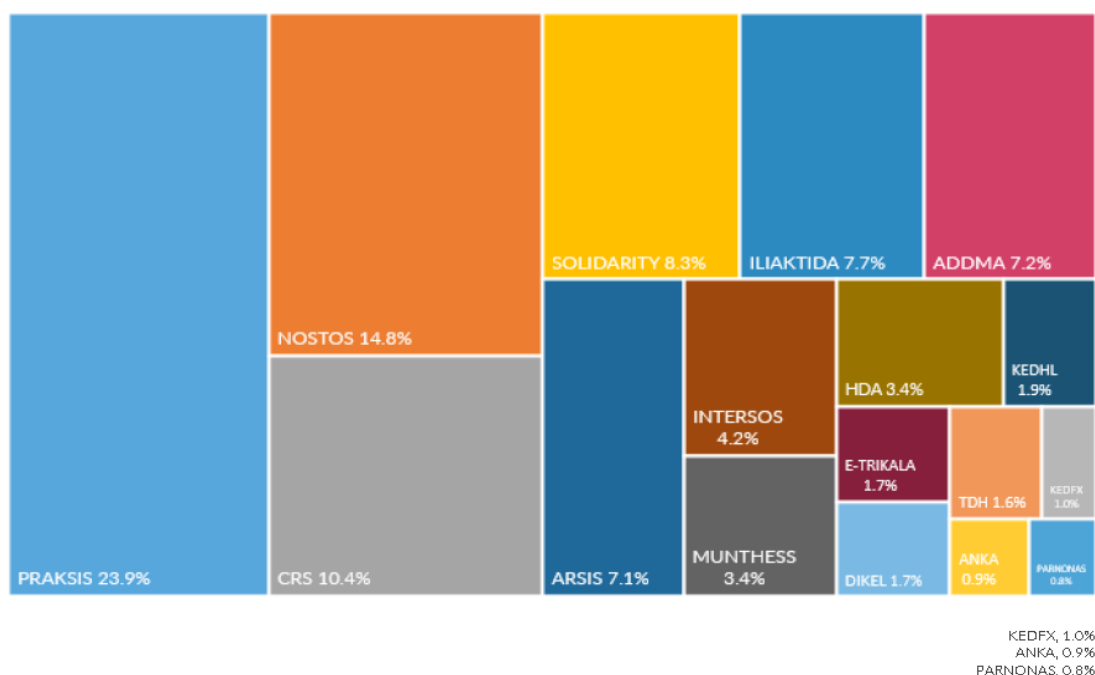


Table 3 Percentage of places by each partner

To this very interesting mosaic we should also add other NGOs providing specialized support, most acting as UNHCR partners as well, such as METAdrasi (providing interpretation services), Greek Council for Refugees (GRC – providing legal support), and so on.

A very obvious repercussion of the crisis was the available funding that skyrocketed, working as a *deus ex machina* for the Greek NGOs which during the economic crisis faced severe financial constraints and budget cutoffs. The European Commission (2018b) has allocated over €393 million in emergency assistance since the beginning of 2015 to support the Greek authorities as well as international and local NGOs in order to contain the refugee and humanitarian crisis. The emergency funding comes on top of the €561 million, already

allocated to Greece in terms of national programs for 2014-2020 (€322.8 million from AMIF and €238.2 million from ISF)<sup>4</sup>. While, in terms of the Emergency Support Instrument, the Commission released €650 million for the period from 2016 to 2018, from which €605.3 million have already been distributed. For the period of 2015-mid 2018, the Commission has allocated the majority of its funds (49%) to UNHCR, while surprisingly the Greek state and (I)NGOs seem to have been granted the same amount (20%) (see Table 4). However, it is worth noting that most of the UNHCR funding was allocated to (I)NGOs as well, through two programmes, the Accommodation Scheme programme and the Cash Based Intervention (CBI) programme.

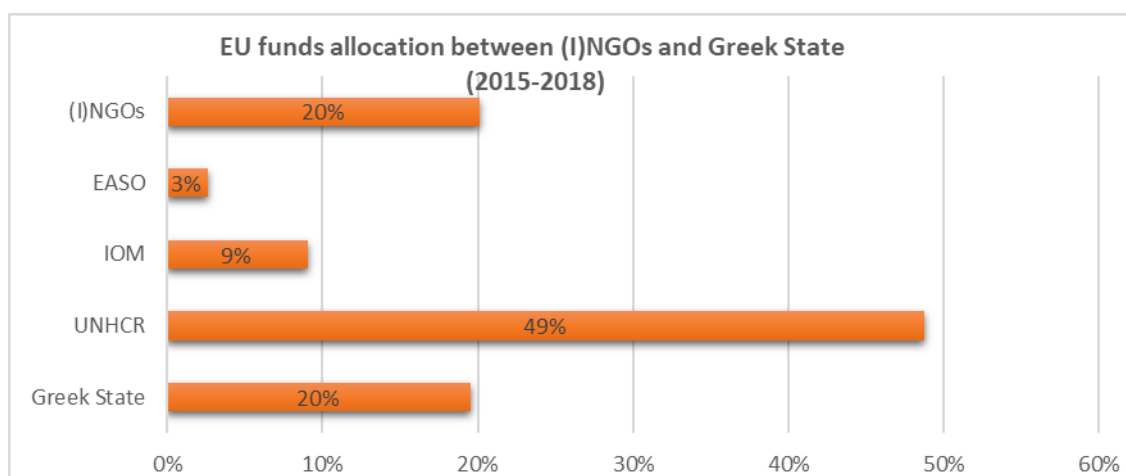


Table 4 European Commission April 2018b

Further, although the funding was made available mostly to well-established Greek NGOs, such as PRAKSIS which already has had a remarkable turnover of approximately €10 million, yet, other not so well-known NGOs benefited as well. A striking example is Iliaktida, a local NGO operating before the crisis almost exclusively in Lesbos. Iliaktida, prior the refugee crisis has had an annual turnover of 200,000-300,000€ being a small size NGO. Yet, under the new circumstances, Iliaktida reached an annual turnover of approximately €13 million (Dimitriou, 2018).

Nevertheless, the available funding was earmarked exclusively for the refugee crisis, pushing several NGOs towards shifting their scope, to some extent in order to compete for it (Kouvaras, 2018). Yet, the shift of their interest was not dramatic, given that most of them

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (April, 2018). Managing Migration-EU Financial Support to Greece. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180404-managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-greece\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20180404-managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-greece_en.pdf)

had in the past experience dealing with migrants and refugees, or with the provision of assistance to vulnerable groups. Again, Iliaktida is a striking example, since it has in the past implemented programmes related to refugees/migrants, but its general focus was on vulnerable population. Even in the area of child protection, where Iliaktida currently operates a guest house for unaccompanied minors in the framework of the accommodation scheme programme, it has in the past implemented a similar programme for the local population of Lesbos (Dimitriou, 2018). The same applies for NGO PRAKSIS, the number one partner of UNHCR since the beginning of the crisis. PRAKSIS has been specializing on the provision of social and medical services, as well as shelter to vulnerable populations including migrants.

In addition, the refugee crisis brought about also a series of, rather intense, funding from private sources. Companies, philanthropic foundations but increasingly also wealthy individuals have supported financially initiatives tackling the crisis. Being less bureaucratic and not excluding local population as potential beneficiaries *per se*, new organizations such as Zaatar (Orange House), Starfish Foundation or Chora were created while informal groups once supporting Greeks affected by the economic crisis reshaped themselves as to also support the thousands of refugees found trapped in Greece.

The second hypothesis is correlated to the first one. As could be presumed, the increase in available funding for the relief of refugees has multiplied the competition among NGOs. NGOs with specific expertise areas, found themselves competing with other non-expert organizations for funding on similar projects. This brought another disturbance in the ecosystem, given that the non-expert NGOs couldn't offer practically the quality of services the experienced NGOs could. On the opposite, they increased the workload of the most experienced NGOs through referrals. Striking example is the "Greek Council for Refugees" (GCR). GCR focuses on the provision of legal services to the refugees. Yet, similar services have been provided also from other NGOs. Although this could have a positive effect to refugees, given that more NGOs were dealing with legal issues, in reality the inefficiency and lack of experience of NGOs resulted to an excessive workload for GCR through referrals (Konstantinou, 2018). The corresponding budget's fragmentation, because of more NGOs chasing funding for similar projects, also worked inhibitory for GCR to appoint more personnel in order to meet the mounting needs.

Our third hypothesis lies on the noteworthy engagement of INGOs from the beginning of the crisis. The presence of INGOs could have worked positively for national NGOs in terms of

networking, training and future collaboration.

Yet, those that appeared driven exclusively by the urgent of the humanitarian crisis seem to avoid creating bonds with national NGOs. In any case, the interviewees believe that INGOs presence has had generally a positive impact. Some national NGOs, such as ActionAid Hellas, were ‘forced’ to develop relations (for instance with Caritas and Oxfam) in order to tackle collectively specific needs (Kouvaras, 2018). Other INGOs assisted national NGOs in terms of capacity building in the field. Characteristically, the organization Save the Children supported the professional development of GCR, providing, also, psychological support to the field personnel. Yet, there was also a negative impact, as again Ms. Konstantinou describes, other INGOs worked in an opportunistic way, providing their services as long as the available funding was satisfying. Another important point, regarding the impact of INGOs was made by Mr. Dimitriou from Iliaktida. He pointed out that the arrival of INGOs has created a disturbance in the NGO sector since they were capable in offering better salaries to experts than national NGOs. However, he also underlined that with the INGOs’ phaseout professionals have moved to national NGOs carrying with them the knowhow acquired during their previous posts. Although this was quite positive, creating dynamics of professionalization and modernization of national NGOs, it took time for them to blend in with the old-fashioned conceptualization and organizational structure of local NGOs (Dimitriou, 2018).

The fourth hypothesis, correlated to the source of funding which is the European Commission, indicates that this has led NGOs to become more professional. From the interviews so far, it appears that for those organizations with a previous experience in dealing with public funding and international donors, the change was not dramatic. In fact, we may speak most probably for adaptation in the new circumstances and an expansion in administrative personnel for better coordination in the field. For example, PRAKSIS had to significantly expand their accounting department from 3 to more than 18 (Chalaka, 2018). On the contrary, for other not so developed NGOs, like Iliaktida, this resulted in a drastic change in organizational structure. Not only the personnel increased, but also external consultants were appointed to facilitate the process.

In addition, some capacity building leading to more professionalized local NGOs was achieved through the sub-contracting scheme. Local NGOs were sub-contracted by INGOS or UNHCR and thus had to follow very specific contractual rules: utilizing specific forms and

tools for reporting, maintaining records in a professional way, undergoing regular inspections etc were part of the new environment under which they required to operate. To this end, some INGOS, such as IRC, have implemented, small-scale, training seminars towards their sub-contractors. Likewise, other organizations, even large and more professional ones such as MsF and Caritas, have embarked in a process of enhancing the skills of their personnel because of the immense needs for efficiency due to the refugee crisis. Yet, again, for some it is debatable whether professionalization is always positive for the voluntary sector given that it might have transformed it from its origins (Stewart, 2016: 2).

Lastly, the refugee crisis has mobilized a greater number of volunteers. People outside and inside Greece enthusiastically took the initiative to support refugees. Many people in Molyvos, Lesbos, for example, supported incoming people landing on the shores of the island. This image, massively disseminated through social media, mobilized numerous people that went to Lesbos to help. Although an important volunteers' movement has been recorded, this has taken a looser form mostly outside the official camps. Besides, the available funding has worked as deterrent factor since within the camps only official personnel from NGOs could operate (Kouvaras, 2018). In addition, after the initial period one could find two tiers of people working on the field: the unpaid volunteer mobilized by a sentiment of solidarity and the very well-paid NGO personnel. This contradiction created obstacles of further increasing the wave of, at least local, volunteers. Furthermore, it heightened the debate between organized and un-organized responses to the crisis: at times NGOs would become part of the "system" that does not really support refugees, contrary to what volunteers' groups can achieve.

In general, NGOs retained their regular volunteers, but since the number of personnel increased dramatically, the impact of the volunteers has sharply decreased (Dimitriou, 2018). Another characteristic of the "new" volunteers was that they had specific objectives and motivation for offering their time and effort, rather than to follow the needs of organizations. After all, the refugee crisis images promised for real action thus being asked to support the organization of resources in a warehouse seemed to many unfulfilling (Chalaka, 2018).

## **Conclusions**

The refugee crisis has affected the Greek NGO ecosystem. Yet the impact varied extensively depending on the type of organization under focus. The findings so far indicate that in general terms the impact was not universal. Quite the opposite. Those NGOs affected the most in

various ways, were small-medium size ones with local reach. Below are the findings so far:

- **Scope:** The refugee crisis and the subsequent availability of unexpected funding has led small-medium size NGOs to a shift of scope. This change was not widespread, since most of them have already dealt with the provision of support to vulnerable groups in the past, including migrants and refugees. Bigger NGOs had already a culture of multifaceted activities and a portfolio with projects related to migrants/refugees. Yet, even those have redirected part of their resources towards the refugee crisis, empowering their corresponding departments with human resources.
- **Competition:** Many NGOs faced existential crisis due to the lack of funding during previous years. Therefore, the new circumstances the refugee crisis has brought, coupled with the long-lasting shortages that NGOs have faced in the previous years have triggered a noteworthy competition. Again, this competition targeted funding exclusively available for the containment of the refugee crisis, fostering, as already mentioned, a slight or even extended change of scope for several NGOs.
- **Networking:** Greek NGOs were given the chance to team up with INGOs in various projects. This has provided them with the potential of creating ties with INGOs targeting to other sources of funding. At the same time, INGOs brought with them a long experience responding to similar crises. Yet, in terms of networking, the findings indicate that progress was not as one would have expected. In fact, well-established Greek NGOs had already been engaged with some INGOs in the implementation of projects in the past, thus, the refugee crisis helped only to reestablish these bonds. In addition, a number of INGOs didn't pursue such a direction having a short presence in the country, particularly during the pick of the crisis, and thus not allowing for significant interaction to take place and strong ties to be formed.
- **Changes in the organizational structure of the NGOs:** Again, these were more obvious in small-medium size organizations which, in order to meet the needs of the projects and the criteria of specific international donors, proceeded to drastic changes including appointing experts (outsourcing) with proven experience in project management and development of operating procedures. Specific departments have grown, while in some cases the multiplication of their activities in different geographic areas required subcontracting with other local NGOs.
- **Networking of professionals:** The presence of INGOs and the international staff transferred to Greece has given a great opportunity for Greek professionals to exchange information and best practices. INGOs have appointed Greek professionals, who with the departure of these

organizations were transferred to Greek NGOs bringing with them new experiences and an expertise invaluable for the future.

- Mobilization of volunteers: A massive movement of ordinary people seeking to offer either in kind or with personal work has been recorded especially during the pick of the crisis with the daily disembarkation of refugees in the islands, particularly in Lesvos. The shocking images presented by the media has assisted towards this direction. Yet, as soon as the official channels of humanitarian assistance started pushing funding towards (I)NGOs and the official state decided to take over the management of the sites/camps, the number of volunteers decreased, while some of them have been appointed as NGOs' personnel. A development that questioned the sentiment of pure solidarity putting barriers to a future increase of volunteerism and un-organized response in times of crisis.

In general, there were significant changes for especially small-medium size organizations of local reach, while for well-established ones, the impact was not so dramatic in organizational terms and as far as the number of volunteers, their professionalization and the internationalization are concerned. Nevertheless, even in these cases of better equipped CSOs the refugee crisis did pose a significant challenge, shaping certainly their way of doing business but also even their mission for some – “we could not stay idle as the crisis evolved, we are people of taking a stand irrespective in the very end of the cause” most would state.

Perhaps the most remarkable challenge the NGOs will face has not arrived yet and is related with the new dependency culture that has been constructed due to the generally easy access to funding the refugee crisis has brought. This situation will not last forever. Quite the opposite. It has already started to fade and NGOs, especially those that have expanded the most, need to find alternative ways to retain their projects and activities. If, however, the positive effects of the refugee crisis, such as professionalization, networking, and organizational modernization are used wisely, perhaps a new promising era for the Greek NGO ecosystem will emerge. If not, many small-medium size NGOs will be brought again in front of an existential crisis similar to the one they have faced a few years later due to the lack of funding.

*This research has been co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) through the Operational Program "Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020"*

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