

## **NGOs raise alarm at growing hunger amongst refugees and asylum seekers in Greece**

25 November 2021 – A halt to cash assistance for asylum seekers, and the denial of food support to recognised refugees and rejected asylum seekers is creating a hunger crisis in Greece, 27 NGOs and civil society organisations warn today.

For nearly two months, up to 60 per cent of current residents of the Greek refugee camps on the mainland have not had access to sufficient food. Following the implementation in October 2021 of a law passed last year, the Greek Government stopped providing services to those whose asylum applications have been accepted. One in four residents in these facilities are women and two in five are children.

“The women in Eleonas camp keep telling us that their children are crying at night with hunger. Mothers now don’t have money for baby milk so they mush up biscuits in water instead.” said Emily Wilson of Project Elea.

One chronically ill father of three children from Afghanistan, said: “If I don’t eat it’s fine but I can’t leave my babies hungry”.

In addition, approximately 34,000 asylum seekers have gone for two months without cash assistance that had previously enabled them to buy food, clothing and other essential items.

The EU-funded cash assistance programme was previously administered by UNHCR but was interrupted after the Greek Government took over its management on 1 October 2021.

In response to calls by NGOs to urgently address the situation, the government made public assurances that distributions would resume by the end of October. One month later, the problem remains unresolved and its devastating impact on asylum seekers grows by the day.

Martha Roussou of the International Rescue Committee said: “Vulnerable and marginalised people are being pushed over the edge: children have to go to school hungry; sick people can’t get a bus to attend to their medical needs; and families have no resources to prepare for a cold winter.”

The halt to cash assistance is stripping asylum seekers’ of their dignity and depriving them of the lifeline many depended upon. Refugees and asylum seekers, who were already economically marginalised, are resorting to begging and other negative coping mechanisms to survive.

Ana Liz Chiban of Fenix – Humanitarian Legal Aid said: “Among those affected are rejected asylum seekers who cannot access accommodation or healthcare and have no right to work. This includes many Afghan and Syrian refugees whose applications were rejected on the basis that Turkey is a safe country, despite the fact Turkey is not accepting any returns from Greece.”

Some asylum seekers who live outside the camps as beneficiaries of the Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) program are particularly vulnerable. They have also been affected by the interruption in cash provision but, unlike people in the camps, do not receive prepared food distributions. Without even this alternative, they have been left completely dependent on local social services and organisations to receive food, where those are available.

Anita Bay, Director of Save the Children Europe, said: “Through both its actions and inaction, the Government of Greece is creating a hunger crisis amongst refugees and asylum seekers in the country. It is unlawful, unnecessary, and totally unacceptable for this to be happening in the EU.”

NGOs are calling for urgent action to address the growing crisis, including for the Government of Greece to:

- Make the resumption of cash distributions a political priority;
- Provide emergency assistance such as basic goods or vouchers to use in shops or for transport, to asylum seekers who were previously receiving cash assistance,
- Ensure cash assistance instalments that were not delivered to asylum seekers in the past months are delivered when the new system is put in place;
- Distribute adequate and nutritious food to all people residing in camps, regardless of whether they are recognised refugees, asylum seekers or have had their claims rejected.

### **Background**

- In October 2021, a press release and open letter were published by NGOs and organisations raising alarm over the disruptions to cash assistance for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece.

- In response to the press release, the Ministry of Asylum and Migration categorically stated that asylum seekers would have access to “financial assistance provided at the end of October.

- Under EU and Greek law (Article 17 of the Directive 2013/33/EU and Article 55 of the Law 4636/2019), Greece is responsible for ensuring minimum material reception conditions to asylum seekers.

- In 2020, the government of Greece enacted new legislation, under which beneficiaries of international protection, with few exceptions, have all material reception support discontinued within 30 days of receiving their positive decision (Article 114 of the Law 4636/2019 amended by Article 111 of the Law 4674/2020). In October 2021, the Greek government started excluding protection status holders from food and water distribution as a means of implementing this legislation. Exclusion from food and water distribution also affects asylum seekers with a final negative decision, despite the fact that many of them have the right to a re-examination of their asylum claim.

### **Signatory organisations:**

1. Action for Education
2. Arsis - Association for the Social Support of Youth
3. Babel Day Center
4. Better Days
5. Changemakers Lab

6. ECHO100PLUS
7. Equal Rights Beyond Borders
8. Europe Must Act
9. Fenix - Humanitarian Legal Aid
10. Greek Council for Refugees (GCR)
11. HIAS Greece
12. HumanRights360
13. INTERSOS
14. INTERSOS Hellas
15. I HAVE RIGHTS
16. International Rescue Committee
17. Jesuit Refugee Service Greece ( JRS Greece )
18. Lighthouse Relief (LHR)
19. Mobile Info Team (MIT)
20. Refugee Legal Support
21. Refugees International
22. Safe Passage International
23. Save the Children
24. Still I Rise
25. SolidarityNow
26. Symbiosis-School of Political Studies in Greece, Council of Europe Network
27. Terre des hommes Hellas