

CASE STUDY: GREECE

Majority of refugee children on Greek Islands are out of school

Greek islands are struggling to provide schooling for thousands of asylum-seeking children.

More than three quarters of the 4,656 school-aged children on the Greek islands who are asylum seekers and live in reception centres do not attend school.

It is a situation UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, wants to improve.

“Every child should have real access to formal education as early as possible. More should be done if they are to avoid falling behind,” said Philippe Leclerc, UNHCR Representative in Greece.

Around 1,800 asylum seekers live in the reception centre on the Greek island of Kos in the southeastern Aegean Sea, and conditions there are difficult, in part because it was set up for a temporary stay and for just 800 people.

Samir, 11, is a refugee from Afghanistan in the Pyli Reception and Identification Centre on the island of Kos, Greece. He takes Greek lessons at the KEDU non-formal education centre. ©UNHCR/SOCRATES BALTAGIANNIS



Many of the refugees say they are angry about the poor conditions and overcrowding at the centre, which does not even have enough toilets. Accommodation includes makeshift shelters held together with sticks, while some recent arrivals said they did not have mattresses. Several people said overcrowding and lack of facilities meant the centre was not safe. For the children this is a particularly stressful situation.

“The camp is awful,” said Samir, 11, who is concerned about growing frustration among people at the reception centre.

Like most other refugee children, Samir and his friends want to get back into school as soon as possible and make up lost time before the gap becomes too large to bridge.

However, Samir, who arrived on Kos from the Afghan capital Kabul, knows he is one of the lucky ones.

Even though his overall education was disrupted because of the security situation in Afghanistan and he again missed school during his journey overland to Turkey and on to Greece by boat, he is back at school.

He has started to learn Greek by gaining access to KEDU, a non-formal school on Kos that is run by a Greek NGO, the Association for the Social Support of Youth, and supported by UNHCR.

Asylum-seekers are expected to stay only temporarily in island facilities and those who complete procedures or are particularly vulnerable are authorized to move to the mainland. But in reality the process can take many months. Priority is given to competing humanitarian needs. The low population of local children on tiny islands means that often the schools are too small to cope with this sudden new demand.

Around 112 children attend KEDU daily. There are no exams or homework, but the school uses

projects and fun to introduce young asylum seekers to Greek. As an informal school, there are no certificates to show the progress.

According to UNHCR, a certified school that is based on the national curriculum should be accessible for all refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece.

School routine helps restore normality after the trauma many young refugees have endured and starting quickly helps them return to a form of normality. Beyond that, young refugees - just like any other child - need school to achieve their potential.

But unfortunately it is not that easy.

The language barrier makes integration hard. The Greek government provides some afternoon classes to help asylum seekers cope with the transition to a new system and local non-governmental organizations have stepped in with support for homework.

UNHCR says more is needed. The government has tried to include all asylum-seeker and refugee children in formal education, but the islands face particular challenges. Even those asylum-seekers on the Greek islands who are eligible for the move to the mainland are often unable to leave because there is not enough accommodation ready for them, while new arrivals outpace the rate of transfers, exacerbating the overcrowding issue.

“Most refugee children on the Greek mainland are enrolled in formal education as the school year begins. Greece has made important progress in granting access to kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools. Now the Government must expand and consolidate its efforts, with the continued support and funds from the EU, so that all refugee children can enter a classroom,” Leclerc said.