

CASE STUDY

# GREECE 2016–2018 / REFUGEE CRISIS

**KEYWORDS:** Urban accommodation, Rental support, Housing rehabilitation

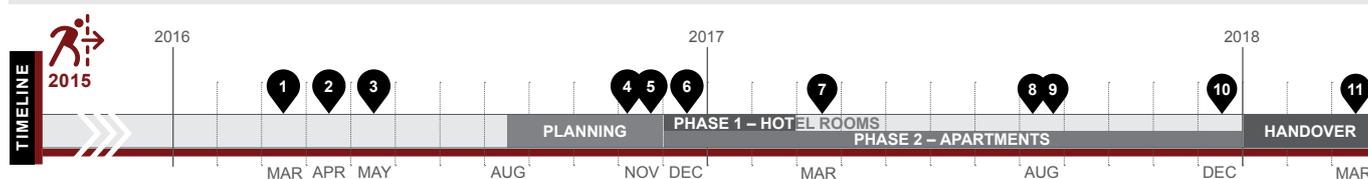
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| <b>CRISIS</b>                               | Europe Refugee and Migrant Crisis, 2015–2016  |
| <b>TOTAL ARRIVALS IN GREECE<sup>1</sup></b> | 1,125,685 by land and sea between 2015–2018   |
| <b>SHELTER NEEDS<sup>2</sup></b>            | 67,000 refugees and migrants in Greece estimated by December 2017   |
| <b>TOTAL PEOPLE TARGETED<sup>3</sup></b>    | 45,000 individuals (55,755 achieved by Dec 2018)  |
| <b>PROJECT LOCATION</b>                     | Thessaloniki Metropolitan Area  |
| <b>PROJECT BENEFICIARIES</b>                | 527 households (1,471 individuals)  |
| <b>PROJECT OUTPUTS</b>                      | 334 apartments rented<br>350 NFI kits distributed<br>3 information centres established<br>1,737 people attending education programmes                                   |
| <b>SHELTER SIZE</b>                         | 22–120m <sup>2</sup> (varied from studios to apartments, with 1 up to 11 beds)  |
| <b>SHELTER DENSITY</b>                      | 8–20m <sup>2</sup> per person   |
| <b>MATERIALS COST</b>                       | USD 451 for refurbishment and furnishing of a flat (USD 1.7 /m <sup>2</sup> /month) on average<br>USD 507 for NFI kit<br>USD 316 for rent per month per flat on average |
| <b>PROJECT COST</b>                         | USD 2,832 per household on average (USD 1,015 per individual)   |



**PROJECT SUMMARY**

This project was implemented in Thessaloniki as part of a larger urban accommodation programme in Greece that aimed at decongesting camps for refugees and migrants. It rehabilitated 334 apartments and provided rental support and access to basic services to 1,471 individuals in transit to other parts of Europe, whilst supporting the integration of those willing to remain in Greece. It also set up three information centres providing educational and vocational activities. The integrated programming approach responded to shelter, WASH, education and basic needs, with the support of other organizations providing additional services such as legal support, protection case management and health assistance.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Operational Portal, <https://bit.ly/2roctD6>.  
<sup>2</sup> Refugee and Migrant Response Plan 2017.  
<sup>3</sup> Targets and achievements for the Urban Accommodation Programme across Greece.



- 1 Mar 2016: Closure of borders along the Balkans route and EU-Turkey Statement.
- 2 Apr 2016: Start of the urban accommodation programme in Greece.
- 3 May 2016: Informal camps are closed.
- 4 Nov 2016: Emergency hotel rental to transfer refugees and migrants from camps before the winter.
- 5 Nov 2016: Identification of first properties and signature of lease agreements.
- 6 Dec 2016: Initial transfer of individuals to flats.
- 7 Mar 2017: First information centre opens.
- 8 Aug 2017: First major refugee transfers from islands to mainland by the government.
- 9 Aug 2017: Initial discussion on exit process.
- 10 Dec 2017: Decision to close the project and hand over to national partners.

- 11 Mar 2018: Close-down of country operation.

**STRENGTHS**

- + Beneficiary targets were largely met with high satisfaction rate.
- + The information centres and feedback mechanism were effective.
- + The project had a positive impact on the local economy.
- + Harmonized response and good internal coordination.
- + Integrated programming and referrals.
- + The project adapted to changing needs.

**WEAKNESSES**

- Low sense of ownership and care over the apartments.
- Affected people were not sufficiently involved in project design.
- The total target of apartments was not met.
- The project staff and support costs were high.
- Work overload and limited psychosocial support led to staff burnout.
- The wider programme lacked an exit strategy.

**ARRIVALS IN GREECE BY LAND AND SEA**

| Year | Sea arrivals | Land arrivals |
|------|--------------|---------------|
| 2015 | 856,723      | 4,907         |
| 2016 | 173,450      | 3,784         |
| 2017 | 29,718       | 6,592         |
| 2018 | 32,497       | 18,014        |

Source: UNHCR Operational Portal, <https://bit.ly/2roctD6>.

**BACKGROUND**

For more information on the crisis and the situation in Greece, see overview A.41 in Shelter Projects 2015-2016.

Greece is one of the main migration entry points into Europe due to its geographical position. In 2015, the number of arrivals significantly increased. Refugees and migrants were mainly coming from Syria (47%), Afghanistan (24%) and Iraq (15%). In the second half of 2015, over 1 million people arrived into the European Union (84% in Greece).

In March 2016, the EU-Turkey agreement and the closure of the borders across the Balkan route led to a significant reduction in the number of arrivals. Greece went from being a country of transit to a longer-term hosting country for refugees and migrants waiting to be relocated to other European countries.

The ongoing economic crisis made the response even more challenging. Camps went over capacity and informal camps started growing, resulting in sub-standard accommodation, inadequate WASH facilities and limited access to basic goods and services, including food, health and education.

In May 2016, after an advocacy campaign, several informal camps were closed by the authorities, some of which were kept as a contingency measure for future arrivals. The government moved people to formal camps run by the army closer to the urban centres.

**URBAN ACCOMMODATION PROGRAMME**

The urban accommodation programme was set up jointly by the Greek government, local authorities, one major donor, NGOs and the Shelter Working Group in April 2016. The programme aimed at providing short-term rent for refugees and migrants in transit in Greece, by transferring vulnerable families voluntarily from the camps on the islands and mainland to apartments in urban centres.

The overall sector target was to host 45,000 vulnerable people in need of shelter by providing 27,000 beds in apartments, whilst ensuring access to basic services through information centres and cash grants. By the end of 2018, 27,088 places were created and 55,755 individuals benefited from the programme. Although the living conditions in many camps improved – thanks to the decongestion and infrastructure upgrades – the situation in some remained critical, especially on the islands, despite the decrease in arrivals in 2017.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

The programme was coordinated by the sector lead agency and implemented by several international and national organizations. It included Shelter, WASH, UDOC (urban displacement outside camps) and Education components and was coordinated with other agencies providing complementary assistance.

Agencies conducted multi-sectoral needs assessments looking at housing, access to services and education needs of

the families living in camps, whilst assessing the capacity of the urban centres. A specific housing market assessment was carried out by the organization in November 2016 in collaboration with the main stakeholders of the Shelter Working Group in the area of Thessaloniki.<sup>1</sup> Even though many buildings were vacant due to the construction crisis, many of them required extensive renovations and change of use.

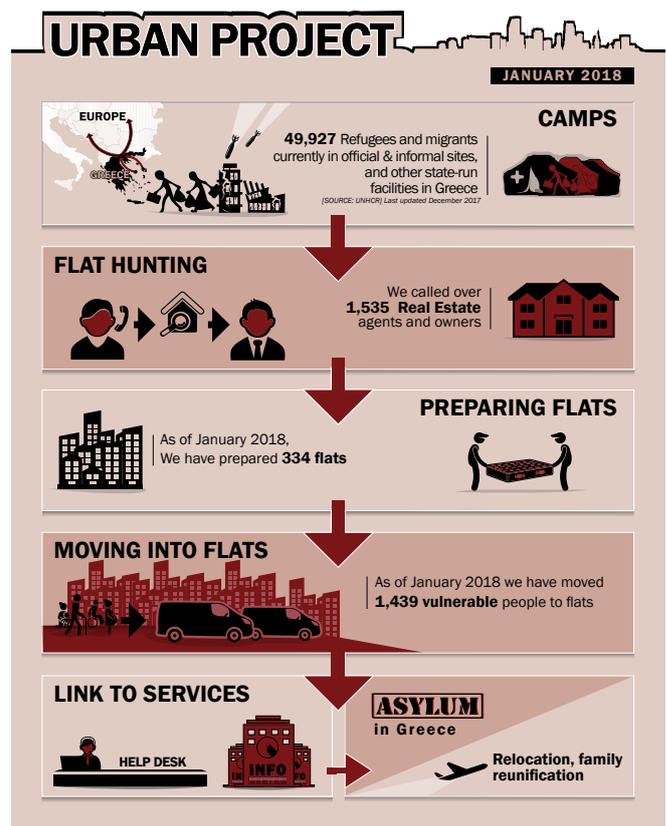
Due to the extreme winter conditions in the camps in December 2016, the organization first transferred 480 vulnerable refugees to hotels.

The second phase consisted of renting apartments to move families from hotels and camps into the urban areas. The procedures and standards of the response were agreed among the different implementing actors to ensure consistency of the response.

Agencies identified apartments of specific standards and close to services, rehabilitated and furnished them, and then signed a rental agreement with the owners. The identification was challenging, as most units did not meet accessibility standards. In some cases, when rehabilitation costs were high, a rent-free agreement was negotiated in exchange of construction costs. Rent and utility bills were covered and the agreement ensured that refugees and migrants could live in these apartments whilst waiting for permission to relocate to other parts of Europe.

Information centres were set up to provide information on how and where to access services, combined with education activities, vocational and language training.

Initially, entering in the rental market as an international organization was a challenge, both for being new in the context and because of the short tenancy agreements. Once trust was established, the entire accommodation scheme expanded very quickly and more property owners were interested in renting out their apartments.



## PROJECT TEAM STRUCTURE

The organization had three teams:

- **The technical team** included architects, engineers, technicians and lawyers. They focused on finding the apartments, carrying out technical assessments, managing the rehabilitation, furnishing, care and maintenance, the rental agreement and utility bill payment.
- **The outreach team** included social workers and translators. It was responsible for managing the referrals, transfers, monitoring visits, providing information to the families on accessing services, running the information centres, developing cultural/recreational activities and following-up on referrals to other agencies when required.
- **The education team** was responsible for providing vocational and language courses, teachers trainings, leading community meetings and other related trainings.

A **joint internal database** was developed to facilitate coordination between teams and increase effectiveness of referrals and transfers of beneficiaries from the camps.

## BENEFICIARY TARGETING

The initial target was to provide accommodation to 652 vulnerable refugee and migrant households living in camps, by renting 500 apartments in Thessaloniki, assuming a turnover of tenants with households eventually relocating to other countries in Europe. Vulnerability criteria were agreed among implementing agencies with some variations, such as considering single men. Beneficiaries were mostly referred through Site Management Support agencies working in the camps and through the information centres. They were then consulted for voluntary relocation to urban apartments and verified against agreed vulnerability criteria.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Families were consulted in the camps prior to their relocation to the urban accommodations. Once they moved, the information centres became the hubs for community engagement, since people were dispersed in different neighbourhoods. These were designed for the local population, refugee and migrants to connect. Activities were offered including: vocational and language classes, recreational activities for adults and children, skill development classes and regular awareness sessions. A help desk was set up in these hubs to allow individuals to participate, suggest activities or changes, express their concerns and request for support. Regular meetings with the local community, volunteer groups, refugees and migrants supported the development of social links. The information centres were located according to the number of refugees living in the area and their accessibility. Transportation vouchers were distributed to the ones living in more dispersed areas. Also, every building block rented had a common space providing different kind of activities. There were several hurdles to set up these information centres, including timing, location and approval from the authorities.



Outreach teams disseminated information and ran the information centres.



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## COORDINATION

To facilitate coordination with the relevant government authorities and support a harmonized response, the lead coordination agency set up two working groups (WG): The Accommodation WG in charge of the apartments in the urban settings; and the Urban Response WG responsible for the outreach component and referrals. By the end of 2017, these merged into the Urban WG. The objective was to develop minimum standards for accommodation, rehabilitation, furnishing, NFIs, establishing agreed rent prices, technical guidelines for care and maintenance, relocation procedures, feedback mechanisms, standard information and dissemination documents and warning systems. Lessons learned, tools and materials were shared and discussed to develop one common approach. Although the coordination was effective, there were slight variations between agencies specifically on furnishing, apartment finishing and target population.

## PROCUREMENT AND SUPPLY

The project required a continuous assessment of the rental market to mitigate the risk of inflation. Rent prices were agreed in coordination with the working groups based on the square metres, location, quality and local prices. To avoid competition with existing actors, real estate agents and local communities were involved in the process. Architects and technicians were hired locally to boost the depressed construction market.

NFI packages included basic furniture, domestic appliances and safety kits. Most items were procured on the local markets, especially for maintenance, repairs and refurbishments. Partnerships with larger EU companies were set up for items requiring more reliable supply chain. Due to the dispersed nature of the programme, distributions in apartments were time consuming, especially when deliveries required the presence of beneficiaries. Information centres were occasionally used as distribution centres for donations and extra supplies.

## MAIN CHALLENGES

**FINDING APARTMENTS.** The initial challenge was to find property owners willing to rent their apartments to refugees and migrants for short periods. Most lease agreements were less than 12 months, with an average of four-month occupancy and rotating tenants. For this reason, the organization decided to act as a guarantor, which built trust and allowed for a speedier process. Many property owners were able to reintroduce their apartments on the market thanks to the refurbishments and some were able to pay off some debts. Positive feedback from real estate agents and a radio advertising campaign also helped. In July 2017, there were more interested property owners and apartments offered than agencies could process.



Flats in urban areas were rehabilitated and rental support provided to refugees.

**CARE AND MAINTENANCE.** One of the consequences of signing contracts without the beneficiaries' name was the resulting low sense of ownership which caused inadequate care and maintenance and, in some cases, serious damages by the tenants. Additionally, some excesses on utility bills was observed in 15 per cent of the apartments. To address this, monitoring and maintenance visits were initially increased and a warning system established. However, the number of cases really dropped when agencies agreed to stop visits for basic maintenance and, instead, provided trainings and information sessions on care and maintenance, introduced individual metering and established an incentive system providing tenants with cash to pay their own bills.

**DIFFERING BACKGROUNDS.** As refugees and migrants were from various countries and had diverse cultural backgrounds and living practices, the organization struggled to find a balance for minimum shelter standards in the apartments. The diversity of nationalities also caused communication issues, since this required interpreters for six languages, which were difficult to find and recruit.

**COMMUNITY LINKS.** As living conditions in camps improved, the sense of community there was higher and many families refused to move to urban areas, in fear of losing touch with their camp community. Although the information centres aimed at connecting those living in urban areas, it took several months to set them up. Despite the fact that living in apartments improved privacy, security and fostered mental well-being, providing access to recreational activities and livelihood opportunities remained a challenge.

**FROM TRANSIT TO LONG-TERM STAY.** The changing political context meant that most refugees and migrants initially in transit in Greece had to stay for longer. While the arrivals on the islands dropped, those by land increased. The urban accommodation programme was designed for short-term rents and expected to mainly host families in transit. **The project had to change and adapt** to a more sedentary group and an increased number of smaller households and single men. This impacted the typology of housing required, resulting in lower occupancy rate of larger apartments and a higher need for small apartments.

**SLOW TRANSFERS FROM THE CAMPS.** Delays in transfers highly affected the referral process, which resulted in agencies having to adjust their programme decisions.

### SECURITY OF TENURE

Beneficiaries signed a consent form, housing rules and a code of conduct when moving into the apartments, whilst property owners signed lease agreements with the organization, accepting refugees and migrants as tenants. This ensured their security of tenure – which resulted in zero evictions – and considered dispute resolution measures with neighbours.



Rental agreements were signed by the organization with owners to protect tenants from evictions (above-left). Information centres provided educational activities for children (a child-friendly space above-right) as well as adults (right).



### CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Compared to the camps, urban accommodation reduced exposure to violence and unrest and reduced protection and GBV risks, providing adequate space and privacy, including access to private WASH facilities. It allowed better access to services and local markets and reduced segregation, fostering integration in the local community. The project also improved health conditions, especially for the elderly and individuals suffering from chronic diseases.

### HANDOVER AND EXIT

In December 2017, the organization decided to hand over to local and international organizations, which since the second half of 2017 had expanded their scope and were conducting the same projects across the country. This was because of the limited available funding and other agencies' ability to cover the needs, and meant that a smaller number of actors would have to plan a handover to the authorities. Thanks to the harmonized response approach between agencies, all beneficiaries were taken over by new partners. Due to some differences in housing standards, furnishing, unpaid utility bills and low care and maintenance, these often had to bear additional costs. As the project was part of the same programme and was funded by the same donor, many local staff also transferred organizations during the handover.

On the other hand, the wider programme **did not have a handover strategy to local authorities**. This was further exacerbated by the crisis in Greece, limited job opportunities and capacity of the government subsidy system. For example, some of the information centres were handed over to local authorities who had to discontinue some of the services.

At the time of writing, **it was still unclear if the project could be sustained by local authorities**. Local NGOs were worried that once the humanitarian funding was transferred to bilateral government support, local authorities or NGOs would struggle to get paid by the national government. A potential negative impact of the lack of an exit strategy was that, once agencies pulled out, the rent would have to be borne by the tenants, who on top of that could not be registered back in the camps.

### WIDER IMPACTS

Initially, the government was reluctant to support the programme, considering camps faster to set up, more cost effective and far away from local communities. However, **authorities changed their policy and supported NGOs** once they observed the successes of the projects, their speed and potential positive impact on the local economy.

Being able to adapt after the border closures and the EU-Turkey agreement, this project **represented a model that could be adopted by the authorities** to enhance the provision of adequate housing for migration programmes in Greece.



## STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED



The project transitioned from short transit to long-term stay due to changes in the political context, and had to adapt accordingly.



The lack of an exit strategy could expose some refugees to negative impacts as they might have to pay the rent once all organizations pull out.

### STRENGTHS

- + **The project assisted 90 per cent of the target** refugees and migrants and had an overall 77 per cent satisfaction rate.
- + **The information centres and help desk** were effective in enabling the continuous connection with beneficiaries and between them, facilitating a sense of community, providing additional support to access services, recreational and educational activities (which had high attendance and 86% satisfactory rate).
- + **Positive impact on the local economy**, providing employment and increasing the number of available apartments on the rental market.
- + **Good coordination** amongst agencies, with a harmonized response and allowing for effective handover, as well as between teams (once the joint database was in place), which increased communication and efficiency of referrals.
- + **Integrated programme** providing access to numerous services and linking with other actors providing complementary services.
- + **The project adjusted to the changing context**, adapting the typology of housing to the family size and including vulnerable beneficiaries such as single men.

### LEARNINGS

- **Distributions to occupied apartments were complex and time consuming.** These were simplified using the community centres as distribution points.
- **The joint database allowed effective and efficient referrals and coordination across teams.** Data collection and messaging applications should have been used from the outset, to allow faster and more effective response for stock management, communication with communities, etc.
- **Getting beneficiaries to sign a free-rent contract** with landlords may have strengthened their sense of responsibility towards the property.
- **Increased inclusion of property owners and real estate agents** at the outset and during the assessment phase, would have helped ensure availability of apartments earlier on.
- The success of this response relied on the capacity to mobilize the resources and funding to set up the programme and support the capacity of the community and authorities. For the future, its success would depend on the capacity to maintain these resources and ensure that local actors can become self-reliant. **Coordination with local authorities should have been promoted** to enhance the project's sustainability and provide alternatives for handover. **Other longer-term solutions could have been considered**, such as supporting the construction of a spin-off local organization with national staff and supporting the transition by establishing partnerships with development agencies and donors.

### WEAKNESSES

- **The lack of a sense of ownership** over the apartments resulted in **low care and maintenance** and, in some cases, damage to the property. Over-consumption of utilities was also an issue, first addressed using warning systems and then replaced with incentive systems to make the tenants responsible to pay their own bills.
- **Better inclusion of the affected community in the needs assessment analysis and project design**, would have allowed to better define the minimum shelter and furnishing standard, and allow for some flexibility depending on cultural practice.
- **The total target of apartments to rent was not met**, mainly because the organization did not anticipate the issues of trust from property owners and real estate agents.
- **The project was expensive** in terms of staff and support costs required to achieve quality programming, compared to other countries.
- The work overload on outreach teams and their exposure to difficult life stories, combined with limited psychosocial support from the organization, resulted in **staff burnout**.
- **Lack of overall exit strategy** of the urban accommodation programme. This should have been designed from the outset in collaboration with implementing agencies, government authorities and beneficiaries, to ensure expectations were managed and a smooth exit possible.