

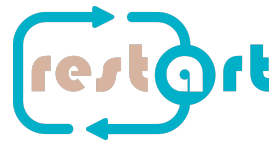
Humanitarian Aid and Environmental Sustainability: The Lesvos Solidarity Model

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LESVOS SOLIDARITY



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Overview

Since its inception in 2012, and formal registration in 2016, Lesvos Solidarity has embarked on a journey to assist refugees and migrants, while simultaneously addressing pressing environmental concerns. Through a unique blend of art, education, and environmental awareness, the organization has fostered a culture of solidarity, integration, and sustainable development on the island of Lesvos. This overview aims to encapsulate the essence of Lesvos Solidarity's multifaceted approach, highlighting its commitment to creating a more inclusive and environmentally conscious society.

Introduction

Lesvos Solidarity has a mission with dual objectives: providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants arriving on the Greek island of Lesvos, and championing environmental sustainability. This initiative distinguished itself through its innovative approach to repurpose an abandoned summer camp into a sanctuary for those seeking refuge, simultaneously addressing the immediate needs for shelter and medical aid, and advocating for environmental consciousness.

As it evolved, Lesvos Solidarity expanded its initiatives, illustrating a profound commitment to fostering community cohesion and environmental protection. The establishment of the Mosaik Support Centre and the inception of projects such as the Safe Passage Bags workshop exemplify the organization's holistic approach. These projects facilitate skill development and cultural exchange among refugees and locals and also emphasize upcycling and sustainable practices, thereby intertwining humanitarian aid with environmental preservation.

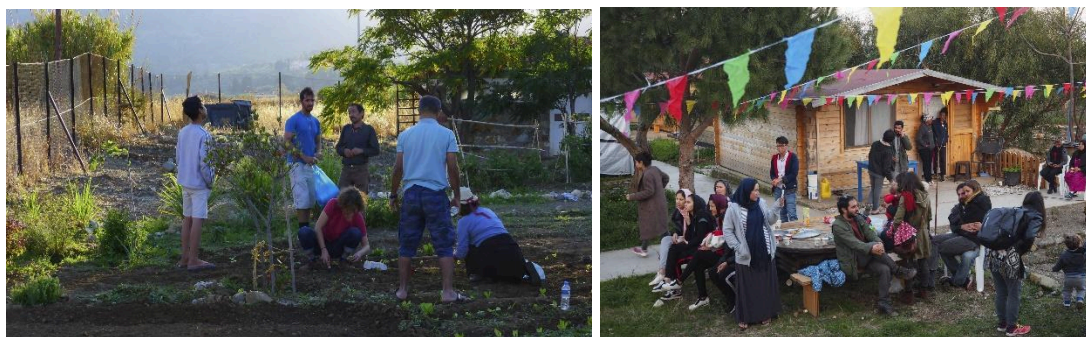
Lesvos Solidarity has become emblematic of the synergy between environmental sustainability and humanitarian support, demonstrating that effective aid encompasses more than immediate relief but also considers long-term ecological impact. Through its multifaceted programs, Lesvos Solidarity underscores the imperative of a unified approach in addressing the exigencies of migration while advocating for the environment, serving as a beacon of innovative, compassionate, and sustainable action in the face of global challenges.

The starting point- Village of Altogether

Lesvos Solidarity was formally registered as an NGO in April 2016 but the story started back in 2012. The solidarity network “The Village of Altogether” is formed. In response to the urgent need for shelter and basic support, the group took the initiative to start hosting refugees on the site of Pikpa camp. At that time, Pikpa camp was an abandoned children’s summer camp. It is situated near Mytilini airport and belongs to the state. The Municipality ceded Pikpa camp and soon “The Village of Altogether” was hosting hundreds of refugees on the site, offering basic medical and practical support. The response by the local society was unprecedented.

In 2014, Pikpa camp was hosting 600 refugees a day. The group supported members of the local community by providing food and economic assistance. Pikpa camp was truly unique as the first open refugee camp in Greece. It was intended as a clear political statement against the detention of refugees and migrants in Greece, which was the norm. Pikpa camp was a plea for inclusion and integration of refugees in local society and active participation.

From 2015 onwards, Pikpa camp started hosting the most vulnerable refugees on the island. At the time of the huge numbers of boats arriving to the island, the group tried to assist wherever help was needed. Pikpa camp was a place of transit where people arrived from the boats, received some basic and urgent support as needed, and moved on.



The EU-Turkey statement came into force in March 2016¹, led to an influx of refugees. To respond to this changed reality and in order to effectively manage the significant influx of financial and human resources

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, EU-Turkey Statement – The Commission’s contribution to the leaders’ agenda, Publications Office, 2018, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/43>



from around the world, a subgroup within "The Village of All Together" took the initiative to establish Lesvos Solidarity as a formal NGO. Since then, Lesvos Solidarity has continued to develop initiatives to support refugees and locals, inside and outside Pikpa camp, such as Mosaik Support Centre. The group also continues to be a hub for political actions and mobilization, denouncing the impact of the EU–Turkey deal.

In October 2020, following a year of an unprecedented attack against civil society solidarity initiatives, Pikpa camp was forcibly evacuated by the Hellenic authorities, after 8 years of operation. The extremely vulnerable residents of the camp were relocated despite the absence of an alternative policy for special reception conditions for vulnerable people. After that, Lesvos Solidarity undertakes all its operations in Mosaik Support Center.

[The Mosaik Support Centre](#)

The Mosaik Support Centre is a place where refugees and locals meet every day either by participating in free Greek, English, German, Arabic and computer classes or by participating in the workshops. In addition to adult students, underage students also participate in the classes, with written consent or accompanied by their parents. At the end of the course, the students receive two bus tickets. The Mosaik Support Center is a space of interaction between cultures from different continents where they have a common point: the willing to progress and develop existing skills. So, Lesvos Solidarity gives this opportunity of integration in a beautiful space in the center of the town to achieve this goal. By participating in the free language courses, workshops and vocational rehabilitation seminars that take place regularly, refugees and locals alike are motivated to self-improvement.



Housing Program

Another program of the organization that operates as a good practice of integration is the Housing Program because it gives to the guests the opportunity to escape the living conditions of the camp, while providing psychosocial and medical support from a multidisciplinary team and making efforts to link them to the labor market. The housing program offers decent shelter and solidarity spaces to vulnerable single adult women from the refugee/migrant population. The organization accommodates pregnant women or women with or without children. Currently, one secure building with more than 17 accommodation places is provided. As the number of vulnerable cases is increasing rapidly, the aim of the organization is to accommodate more people in the future. For this reason, a bigger-scale renovation of an old mansion which is expected to be ready at the end of March, is being processed. This is also a good integration practice by the organization because a) a community-based solidarity space will be created and b) integration by developing skills and knowledge, creating job opportunities, and connection with the local society is promoted. After the completion of the renovation, this building will be part of the Housing program giving shelter to 25 vulnerable refugees.



Since 2016, Lesvos Solidarity has demonstrated that a dignified response is possible, and that locals, migrants and refugees can work together for a humane reception system, promote integration and a sustainable development on Lesvos. Lesvos Solidarity has witnessed and firmly positioned itself against the pain and human suffering generated by the application of restrictive migration policies coupled by the often-irreparable harm caused by the deliberate neglect of the dignity, safety and health of the people seeking protection at its shores. It has witnessed the absolute absence of a tailored response to integration on the island. Lesvos Solidarity has first-hand experience on the complete absence of an integration policy that incorporates sustainable development objectives with environmentally friendly aspects and the obstacles set out for those wanting to integrate in the Lesvian society. Through its constant presence, public positioning and proximity to the population affected is in a unique position to expose and chip away the most harmful aspects of this policy by forming synergies and partnerships with refugees and other actors. Through its constant presence and activities Lesvos Solidarity has demonstrated that a dignified response is possible, and that locals' migrants and refugees can work together for a humane reception system, promote integration and a sustainable development on Lesvos.

Advocacy

Lesvos Solidarity also speak up public about racist violence. Racist violence consists of crimes perpetrated against individuals and their communities because of a real or perceived difference based on national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. Not only refugees are subjected to racist violence or discrimination but also locals that either suffer from some form of disability or because of their sexual orientation or ethnic origin. Racist violence remains a

constant threat to our societies to our social cohesion and democracy. It is imperative that racist violence incidents are recorded promptly, and victims are encouraged and supported to seek restitution and justice.

Greece was one of the first countries worldwide to endorse a framework law on the protection of the environment (Law 1650/1986)², and the principles of environmental protection are embedded in the constitution. While the basis for social well-being to safeguard human health and access high-quality environmental and ecosystem services for citizens (Hellenic Republic, 2018) is a pronounced policy goal, it has systematically refused to incorporate the human capital of refugees towards such a direction. One of the basic principles of the organization is environmental awareness, through daily activities and projects.

NaN Solidarity Kitchen

One of these projects is the NaN Solidarity Kitchen that is operated in the city center. Until recently, NaN has been an independent AMKE (non- profit company) created by four women who were active members of Pikpa camp and later founded Lesvos Solidarity (2016). The creation of NaN based on ideas and values such as economy of solidarity and cooperation, good quality and healthy food for all at fair prices, no waste of food, promotion of local products, respect of natural resources, upcycling and minimize use of plastic. While Lesvos is suffering for more than 20 years from cruel border policies implemented against refugees, the opening of NaN is a positive example of living and working together. So, cuisine is a vehicle for NaN to fight racism and discrimination providing a model of integration, inclusivity and coexistence. As food is an excellent way to create connections, and discover each other, NaN Solidarity Kitchen is that meeting space where social exchange is happening through the cultural and social dimension of sharing food. Sharing a meal is a way of connection and understanding a new story. This is even truer in a country like Greece where cuisine is so important for the population, and a “privileged” space to communicate.

² **Greece. (1986). Law No. 1650 on the protection for the environment. FAO. [Online]. Available at:** <https://www.ecolex.org/details/legislation/law-no-1650-on-the-protection-for-the-environment-lex-faoc051736/>



With these basic principles in mind, NaN opened its doors by employing refugees without necessarily being skilled. It made sure to educate them, acquiring vocational training by giving them important skills for their carriers. NaN has managed to become a location of reference for the locals, the visitors, refugees and vulnerable people, intellectuals and free-spirited ones. NaN has actually succeeded into creating a community on its own, of radically different profiles of people. Our objective is to safeguard that and adjusting to the needs, to offer the best we can to people in need, but to the wider community as well, through environmental practices.

In 2018-2019 NaN was not able to cover its expenses. Although there were financial problems, in 2019, Lesvos Solidarity paid off the debts and by saving donations from its supporters managed in February 2024 to reopen NaN to the public as a solidarity kitchen and in the future as a capacity building hub. The main goal of the organization is to offer as many healthy meals as it can, respecting the environment. In NaN Solidarity Kitchen, plastics are not widely used and food is not thrown away. Each preparation is left over is given to refugees living in the camp and locals who are in a difficult financial situation.



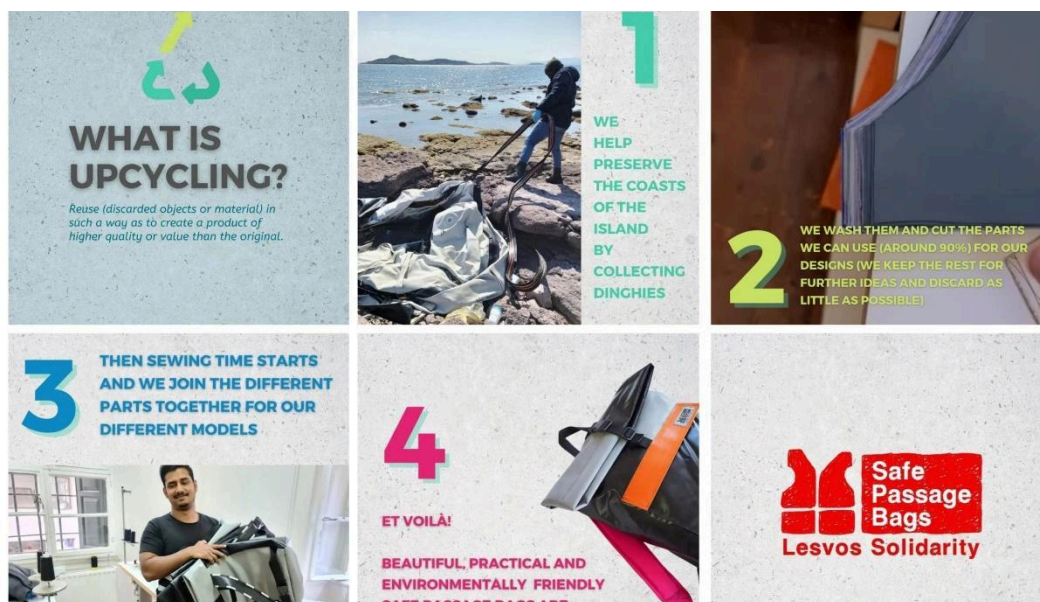
Therefore, a new community space will be introduced and integration of refugees will be facilitated. Moreover, the space could be also used for open discussions or/and events to raise awareness on issues concerning refugee rights, environmental issues, etc. Collaborations with local women's groups and associations will be favored, in an effort to empower women on the island originating from both populations.

Since 2015 Lesvos Island has been one of the central points of an unprecedented flow of population movement towards Europe. Especially after the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, thousands of refugees and migrants were trapped on the island of Lesvos experiencing different forms of exclusion and inhumane living conditions.

The research for more and more substantial ways of supporting this population, together with the constant need to manage and exploit the massive amount of seemingly useless materials (life jackets, boats, plastic-glass bottles, etc.) piled on the coasts of the island, gave birth to the Lesvos Solidarity workshops: Safe Passage Bags and Humade Crafts both of them housed in Mosaik Support Center in Mytilini, Lesvos.

The Safe Passage Bags Workshop

The Safe Passage Bags Workshop was created in the summer of 2015 in Lesvos, as one of the key integration and educational projects of Lesvos Solidarity. It is an upcycling project where bags are being created by refugees, together with locals living on the island. They are made with the lifejackets and dinghies left on the shorelines of Lesvos, used by refugees as they cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey, as well as other migration-related material such as tents and superfluous donated clothes. The bags are symbols of hope, despite the unsafe passage millions are forced to undertake as a result of inhumane European border policies.



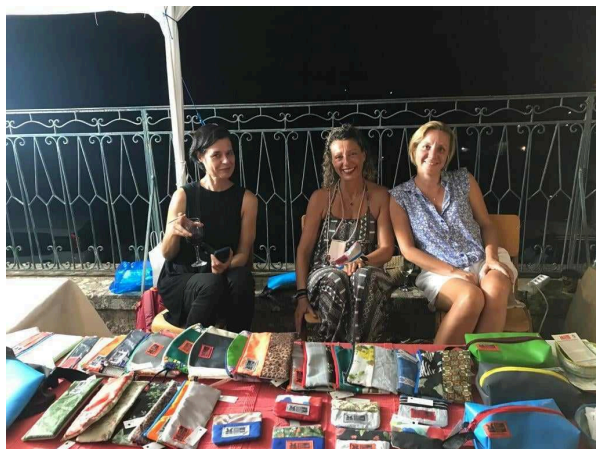
The Safe Passage Bags workshop is therefore the legacy of the refugees to the society. Each bag carries with it the history of forced travel, and a reminder that: “No one puts their child on a boat, unless the sea is safer than the land” (Warsan Shire).

A challenge that the Workshop has to face often is the lack of primary recyclable materials necessary for product manufacturing, due to reduced arrivals in Aegean and arrivals in remote areas. A network with local NGOs and locals was established who informs about places where the staff of the workshop can find these materials. The staff of the organization has to collect these materials many times in remote and isolated areas that are difficult to approach by car.



The workshop collaborated with the Chamber of Commerce of Lesvos, the University of the Aegean (Department of Environment), local and national Social Economy initiatives, exploring the possibilities of expanding its activities in waste recycling, clothing, and fabric recycling on a larger scale, as well as waste from the sea and beaches.

The products of Safe Passage were also showcased at a booth at the Anemotia Social Cooperative Festival, where our actions were discussed, like expansion and the consolidation of the economic sustainability of the workshop.



The workshop receives tents that are so damaged they can no longer serve their purpose at the Mavrovouni camp. In order to prevent them from being discarded in a landfill, the material is reused.



At the same time, unskilled, vulnerable refugees are assisted by our professionals, with no job prospects. The series of workshops which are offered provide many refugees with skills that can aid in their professional development by connecting their vocational training with learning best environmental practices.



Through the program, a welcoming space is created, that inspire the exchange of knowledge and skills. Most importantly, education fosters a therapeutic safe space through learning, creativity, and social interaction. In addition, the workshop organizes open awareness events. All discussions, open events, and workshops encourage active participation. Participants receive information and creative tools for better communication and implementation of waste reduction ideas.

Finally, Lesvos Solidarity, through this project tries to achieve the main goal of providing sustainable solutions to ecological problems mainly related to the consumption and disposal of textile products. The organization managed to create a sustainable example of reducing the use of plastic bags. Introducing the use of fabric bags and reducing plastic consumption sets a positive example for the refugee community. Many refugees and humanitarian workers through this environmentally friendly practice revised their habits of using plastic bags and shared these practices in their community. Some of the refugees who participated in the workshops were introduced for the first time to ideas for waste reduction.



Safe Passage's connection to the struggle for environmentally sustainable solutions, integration, access to employment, protection of human rights, and anti-racism work provides us with the opportunity to work in a more holistic and effective manner, creating new possibilities and opportunities for our work.

The Safe Passage Workshop maintains an online store: <https://lesvossolidarityshop.org/>

The Humade Crafts Workshop

The Humade Crafts Workshop was established in June 2017, as an innovative idea that aims at education, vocational training, and social inclusion with a focus on re-use and recycling artistically. The project helps people develop their creativity and ingenuity, facilitating the reduction of waste volume, cultivation of environmental responsibility, strengthening of the economy, limitation of over-consumption, and is a venue for unique pieces of art.



The Humade Workshop offers art classes in the backyard, at Mosaik, 5 hours per day, 3 days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday). Schools can visit the workshop to create new products with recycled materials. Apart from thematic workshops (Christmas crafts, carnival masks, games, candles, mosaics, etc.), people always come to Humade to learn whatever they want according to their needs. The Workshop conducts recycling workshops with refugees, vulnerable groups, the local population. Additionally, recycling workshops in kindergartens, schools, universities, libraries, public squares, solidarity and environmental cooperatives, single women, local women's cooperation, families, people with disabilities, educators, and volunteers are conducted.



Anyone can participate in the workshops. Inside the workshop there are recyclable materials that can be used to create new products. The main objectives of the workshop are: to recycle waste materials and



transform them into artistic creations and to raise awareness on issues of inclusion and respect for diversity and the lived refugee experience through specific activities.

These workshops are scheduled on a weekly basis and take place every month. Individuals are encouraged to participate at least once a week for a two-hour session, and they acquire new skills after 4 months of participation. Participants come from diverse backgrounds, including children, single women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ community members, among others.

Some of the important workshops that are held include:

- Recycling Workshops: During these workshops, participants learn techniques and practices for recycling materials and creating new objects from recycled materials.
- Construction Workshops: These workshops focus on creating handmade objects such as art pieces, decorative items, and traditional crafts.
- Mosaic Workshops: In these workshops, participants learn the art of mosaic and create art pieces from various materials.
- Candle Making Workshops: In these workshops, participants learn the art of candle making and create various items from wax.

These workshops provide participants with the opportunity to develop new skills, express their creativity, and connect with other members of the community.



Interesting to watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwLKPGBATQw&t=4s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boC0u7yW5lo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmtjWcBePzc&t=12s>



Conclusions

Lesvos Solidarity's initiatives, particularly the Safe Passage Bags and Humade Crafts Workshop, illustrate a successful model for integrating environmental sustainability with humanitarian efforts. Their programs not only offer practical support to refugees but also engage the community in sustainable practices, highlighting the importance of environmental consciousness alongside social assistance.

Their approach exemplifies the potential for collaborative efforts to achieve significant impacts in both human welfare and environmental conservation. By fostering a culture of innovation and inclusivity, Lesvos Solidarity spreads out how communities can work together to address global challenges, emphasizing the synergy between aiding individuals and preserving our planet.

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