

MODULE 7. NEW COMMONS. CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Capsule 1. New commons & communities of solidarity in Lesvos: the examples of Pikpa camp

In the new emerging spaces of Lesvos island, everyday practices and actions are met, shared and created collectively. People with various origins, routes, stories and identities -locals and migrants come closer, discover new ways of communication, connection and sharing, creating in such a way the 'new communities'. In the everyday (re)production of life, in the common actions and, above all, in the relations that are created within these processes, is where the creation of 'the commons' lies. An outstanding example of 'the commons' and 'new communities' in Lesvos is Lesvos Solidarity and Pikpa Camp.

LESVOS SOLIDARITY – PIKPA CAMP

Lesvos Solidarity formally registered as an NGO in April 2016 but the story started back in 2012 when a group of volunteers and local NGOs started hosting refugees in the site of “PIKPA” alternatively called “The village of all together”, an abandoned summer camp for children in Mytilini belonging to the state. Since then, Pikpa camp has continued to respond to the needs of the island. From 2012 to its

eviction in 2020, over 30.000 refugees had been hosted in Pikpa camp. Moreover, the actions had extended beyond Pikpa camp's gates, both for locals in need and for refugees. Distribution of food and non-food items was not only available for the residents of Pikpa but also for local people in need, and refugees living outside Pikpa camp. The team was active on the shore to support boat landings and continues until today, to develop actions of solidarity and public awareness raising with and for refugees and locals.

The text that follows is articulated in two parts. The first part is a presentation of how Pikpa camp was organized and operating in 2018, after the EU-Turkey deal, as an example of civil society initiative, including the organization of daily needs, educational activities, as well as medical, legal and psychosocial support. The second part is dedicated to the eviction of the camp in October 2020 and the events that followed.

Part n.1 “Life in Pikpa camp, March 2018.”

Lesvos Solidarity – Pikpa camp has developed into an independent, open refugee camp for the most vulnerable refugees in Lesvos. It is a community-based space, built on the principles of solidarity, empowerment and active participation. In Pikpa camp we are building a new way of being together, embedded in local society. Before everything else, we want to create an environment where people can find dignity, love, safety and respect. Our residents include people who suffer from serious medical conditions, victims of torture and violence, unaccompanied minors, large families with children, pregnant women, newborns, LGBTI, lone women and men, and victims of shipwrecks who lost loved ones at sea. The capacity of Pikpa camp is 100-120 people, though we have hosted hundreds more during times of emergency. The number of people staying in the camp changes all the time. Since the start of the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, refugees are trapped in the islands for longer periods of time.

To respond to this changing reality, we have extended our integration, education and vocational activities, including with the creation of our Mosaik Support Centre in the centre of Mytilini. At Pikpa camp we offer: shelter (including furniture, electrical goods and homeware), on site medical care, psychosocial and legal support, transportation, food items to cook meals independently or daily cooked meals for those who need it, seasonal clothes, onsite laundry service, cleaning and hygiene products and other NFIs. With the help of long-term volunteers, we also run daily activities for children and adults including language support classes, sport activities and arts and crafts.

Medical Support

The onsite medical team consists of a full-time senior nurse and a full-time junior nurse. We also have a volunteer doctor in the team who works in the local health care system and who regularly visits the camp. All residents receive a medical screening upon arrival, daily follow-up and an adapted nutrition program. We provide children's vaccinations in the camp and we support in accessing medical care from the local hospital and clinics. We cover the costs of medicines, medical tests, examinations and visits to clinics or the hospital, including transportation.

Shelter and Population

There currently are 16 wooden houses (four of which were more recently constructed, in March 2017), 3 rooms in the main building, 6 emergency shelters and 5 Domo tents. It is our dream to be able to replace all emergency shelters and Domo tents by wooden houses in the future. A team of volunteers, residents and staff work daily to ensure all shelters are fully equipped and prepared for the season. Pikpa is currently hosting 102 people, (97% of them are asylum seekers and 3% under the procedure of reunification, 32% are Syrians, 19% are from African countries, 30% are Iraqis, 3% Iranians and 11% Afghans), amongst them, there are 16 families.

Food and clothes.

To give back a feeling of dignity, control and family life, residents cook food in their shelters or in the camp's communal kitchen. We distribute 25-30 food baskets three times a week and 300 to 360 a month. We aim to have locally produced goods, using olive oil and dairy products from local cooperatives and vegetables grown by the island's farmers. For residents who cannot cook for themselves and for our volunteers and team a cooked lunch is available, prepared by residents, volunteers and staff (40 to 50 meals per day and 960 to 1200 per month). Residents take turns in making bread in the kitchen, which is then freshly distributed (100 to 150 pieces of bread are made daily and 2400 to 3600 per month). If they are in need of clothes, residents can visit our "Pikpa boutique", run by volunteers. We also distribute hygienic items on a weekly basis.

School and educational activities

We are proud that the children in Pikpa camp were the first refugee children in Lesvos to get access to Greek schools, back in 2013. For the children below school age, or who are not able to go to school, we run a daily educational programme on camp, based on the principles of "learn by play". Since the summer of 2017 we also collaborate with Mikros Dounias, a joint venture with educators in Lesvos, which offers preschool activities to refugee children and local children, inside our Pikpa camp. Mikros Dounias is built on the values of equality and integration, respect, freedom of choice, care for the natural environment and solidarity. For adults we run language support classes, taught by volunteers and residents, and ad hoc workshops. Residents also have access to the classes at our Mosaik Support Centre.

Legal and Psychosocial Support

We are not part of the official registration process, which falls under the responsibility of the state. However, we support our residents during their registration process and during their asylum procedure with our reception service and with transportation. We collaborate with one lawyer who supports a limited number of cases of Pikpa camp residents and people who participate in activities at Mosaik. We have limited funds to cover the costs of a certain number of court cases and legal actions. We host the Lesvos Legal Centre at our Mosaik Support Centre which offers free legal aid.

We have a full-time, onsite psychologist, and offsite specialists in trauma, mental health issues, torture, trafficking and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) cases. To try and ease the trauma residents might carry, we also offer soft intervention psychosocial support by developing daily routine, giving purpose and distraction and offering opportunities to integrate into camp life and broader Greek society. Activities in our camp (like construction or carpentry, bread making and the garden project) and in our Mosaik Support Centre give opportunities to learn and share skills and expertise, work alongside volunteers and other residents and actively take part in the community.

Team and structure

After the EU – Turkey statement, Lesvos Solidarity came to realize the need to set up a small team of paid staff in order to cope with the growing needs of refugees and locals. The founders - all volunteers - along with the small group of paid staff make up the core team of Lesvos Solidarity. In addition to the core team, Lesvos Solidarity depends on a large group of international and local volunteers.

In Lesvos Solidarity – Pikpa camp, an average number of 20 volunteers help with the day-to-day work in the camp, along with the

residents. Active participation by residents, volunteers and team in the daily life in the camp is at the heart of what Pikpa is about. Every week the core team, the volunteers and Pikpa camp's residents participate in different meetings to discuss and share ideas.

Part n.2 “The eviction, October 2020.”

On Wednesday 23 September 2020, everything changed: Minister Notis Mitarakis announced in the media that he would close down Pikpa camp by the end of October.

We mobilized all our energies, resources and our committed network to organise our strategy to challenge this decision and resist in any possible way. We reached out to the authorities and politicians at the local, regional, national and EU level. We collaborated with legal actors RSA and GCR engaged in legal measures at the European Court of Human Rights to protect our residents. We mobilised through our Save Dignity - Save Pikpa Facebook group, we trended on Twitter with our #savepikpa twitterstorm, we organised a press conference, we were talking to local, national and international media every day. We looked into every creative way to campaign against this decision. At the same time, we were going through the stress together with the residents of the camp, sharing their fears and hopes, making strategies and discussing future options, to maintain the feeling of community we had been building over the years. They knew all about the living conditions in the new camp and could not understand why they were asked to leave a place where they finally felt safe. This time of resistance has been extremely difficult for all the community, but we received a lot of empowering support from people-supporters. We advocated for all the residents to be informed in a timely manner, to be given time to say goodbye to a space where they had lived in sometimes for years, to pack their belongings in peace, and to be transferred to accommodation appropriate to their individual condition.

In October 30th 2020 a massive and unannounced Police operation took place to evict Pikpa camp. Riot police and police forces, accompanied by the Public Prosecutor invaded and encircled Pikpa camp at 6:30 am in order to move the residents to the “old” Kara Tepe camp. Additionally, the day before, the first case of COVID-19 was found in the old Kara Tepe camp, exposing Pikpa’s residents to unnecessary and avoidable risk. Residents were woken up in their houses by police. No official written order was presented at any point, despite lawyers’ repeated requests for individualized decisions for transfer to a new place, in respect of national, European and international law. The public prosecutor, who was on site during the eviction, repeated she was only present to monitor the situation. The following day, the European Court of Human Rights was about to judge on the applications for interim measures of two vulnerable residents who had asked for the suspension of their removal; and more cases were pending.

The few team members of Lesvos Solidarity who were present in the camp were not allowed to move around to observe the situation or support the residents, and were kept under supervision of police. Even when the vulnerabilities of the residents were flagged again, nobody else was allowed in Police forces surrounded the camp denying access to the residents’ lawyers, psychosocial and medical workers, volunteers, Lesvos Solidarity staff members. Press was also denied access to the premises. The extensive police operation put huge, and unnecessary stress and anxiety on residents, even if in the past days, it was communicated to the authorities that the transfer should happen without the presence of the police and that the community had no intention to resist the eviction. Among residents with vulnerabilities, including people with mental health issues who are extremely sensitive to stress under these situations, 32 were children. The team members inside the camp were trying to calm distressed people and anxious children who approached them, as police went from house to house. The residents, had to face the

cruelty of this eviction; an eviction from a safe place that was their home exposing them to a potential traumatization by forcing them to leave their home surrounded by armed police. One resident became unwell due to stress and was transferred to hospital by ambulance to receive treatment.

Lesvos Solidarity has been asking since the first announcement of Pikpa's closure in September, for the transfer of vulnerable refugees in safe and humane conditions, for people to be treated like people, with respect, and have their rights respected. Instead, people again have been met with brutality. People are moved around like objects, without any justification. As had been publicly announced, Kara Tepe the municipal camp where they were to be transferred, was supposed to close by the end of December 2020.

It is unacceptable and absurd that a place like Pikpa was forced to close, while Greek and European governments supporting and promoting the new inhumane, degrading camp Moria 2.0 (Kara Tepe RIC). In the meantime, the government keeps presenting Pikpa as an illegal occupation, while the Ministry of Labor, who owns the place, by its decision since 2015 has provided the space and licensed the use of it as an accommodation structure for vulnerable refugees. The same ministry, along with the Ministry of Migration and UNHCR were referring people to PIKPA for accommodation until then.

We, volunteers, supporters, employees of Lesvos Solidarity, maintain that the Pikpa community was an example and that the overcrowded, inhumane camps across the Aegean, like Moria 2.0, are a disgrace for Europe. "We remain strong in our convictions and we will only get stronger as the struggle continues for a Europe where everybody can be welcomed and live in safety and dignity, with equal chances for all."
"Efi Latsoudi (co-founder).