



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Informal volunteering in Greece's discriminatory migrant regime: Practices in inclusivity

Witcher, A.L.

Publication date
2022

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Witcher, A. L. (2022). *Informal volunteering in Greece's discriminatory migrant regime: Practices in inclusivity*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Universitat de Barcelona].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 3: Ethical Quandaries in Volunteering



PUBLISHED IN

Forced Migration Review

Volume 61, June 2019, Pages 41-44

<https://www.fmreview.org/ethics/witcher>

ADDITIONAL NOTES

This chapter was published for a special issue of *Forced Migration Review* (FMR) that explored ethical questions that confront those working in the humanitarian landscape, especially informal volunteers. A mission of the TransGlobal Health doctoral program through which I pursued my PhD is to reach a diverse audience and to effect change. FRM is published in English, Arabic, Spanish, and French, and aims to be a platform in which practical information and experiences can be exchanged between aid workers/volunteers, researchers, and border crossers. Publishing with FRM was therefore an important element of bringing the research out of academia and back to the field, where, hopefully, it can be utilized in a practical manner. This type of writing necessitated simplicity and an absence of academic jargon. Therefore, there is no theoretical analysis, literature review, or discussion. Instead I utilize narratives and auto-ethnography to describe the types of ethical challenges I observed and experienced as an informal volunteer. The published article was cut down to fit the word count of the journal, while this chapter comprises my original longer version.

The Humanitarian Landscape

Since 2015, Greece has been an entrance country and transit point into Europe for hundreds of thousands of border crossers.¹⁰ The EU-Turkey Agreement¹¹ (2016) transformed the country into a place of limbo, where asylum seekers are forced into precarious living conditions for up to two years before either being returned to Turkey, given refugee status in Greece, or, in rare circumstances, resettled in another European country. At present, hundreds of new arrivals continue to land in Greece every week. Tens of thousands of border crossers are now crowded in under-resourced camps, shelters, hotels, squats, and even the streets. Given these circumstances, an array of national and international organizations, informal volunteer associations, and solidarity networks have entered the scene to aid this population.

Largely in response to nationalist/populist political sentiments, the European Union (EU) has embarked on a containment policy to keep would-be refugees at arm's length. A hostile political climate and dearth of material resources, coherent humanitarian governance, and political will await those fleeing persecution, unrest, and structural insecurity in their home countries. For example, in October 2018, UNICEF reported that over 500 unaccompanied alien children (UAC) were homeless in Greece,¹² although a more accurate figure was likely double that, according to protection groups on the ground. Unpaid volunteers, many of whom have little (or no) previous experience in humanitarian settings and arrive for only short-term missions, fill systemic gaps in services. These volunteers can find themselves in ethically confusing situations, in which they and the border crossers they try to serve encounter—and deal with—harm. This piece, based on ethnographic observations and interviews collected among aid workers and informal volunteers in Greece, reveals how their work is replete with ethical quandaries arising from the varying and sometimes contradictory ways in which they put their humanitarian ideals into practice.

Between June 2017 and August 2018, I was both a researcher and an informal volunteer. In Athens, I volunteered with an informal legal aid team mainly composed of volunteers from the Global North. On Lesbos, I volunteered at a camp that housed, fed, gave classes to, and assisted asylum seekers in entrepreneurial projects. Both organizations required a minimum two-month commitment—longer than the average term of service. In addition, I visited multiple camps, organizations, and informal spaces on mainland Greece

¹⁰ I call all types of migrants “border crossers” unless I specifically want to speak of those who have applied for asylum, in which case I refer to them as “asylum seekers.”

¹¹ Under the EU-Turkey Agreement, Turkey agreed to receive asylum seekers back from Greece (as it is thought of as a “safe third country”) in return for billions of euros and other concessions (European Commission 2016b).

¹² UNICEF 2018.

and Lesbos, and completed seventy semi-structured interviews among a cross-section of paid aid workers, government employees, and volunteers.

Gaps in Services

A dire situation persists on Lesbos Island. In 2018, between 5,000 and 8,500 people were living in Moria camp, which was originally intended to house around 3,000 residents. That year, a third of the residents comprised children, some of whom attempted suicide. In gross violation of standard humanitarian practice, there were seventy-two people per toilet and eighty-four people per shower.¹³ In January 2017, during a particularly cold winter, Georgia,¹⁴ an unpaid volunteer from Northern Europe, arrived to Lesbos. During her first week as a volunteer for a loosely knit group of activists, a Syrian man died in his tent. No contact details for extended family could be found among his personal effects, so his body lay in the morgue for days. According to Georgia, larger well-known organizations and the camp governance structure had done little to find his family members. She, with fellow volunteers, liaised with Syrian community leaders in the camp. Then, she and others published a photo of the deceased man on Facebook. Within a few days she was speaking with his family. For Georgia, these events were outrageous. She felt the gaps in services were manifestations of structural violence and mismanagement. The organizations and governing bodies being paid to house and protect this man did not have the capacity to contact his family, while she, a recently arrived unpaid activist with little previous experience with this population, was able to do so in a matter of days. The solidarity organization for which Georgia volunteered also hosted the man's brother, himself a resettled refugee in Northern Europe, who had come to identify the body. The volunteers accompanied him to the morgue, housed him, and aided the transfer of the body back to Syria. In this example, Georgia and the other volunteers pooled their skills and expertise to affect change. Yet it was problematic that this small group of unpaid volunteers, most without any official role, had self-tasked the responsibilities of paid protection agencies. The most glaring side effect of their actions was that the deceased man's family members came to learn about the death of their loved one through social media.

In Athens, even “official” protection agencies are also unable to fulfill their role adequately. Hundreds (or likely tens of hundreds) of unaccompanied children sleep in the streets or informal squatter sites. In response—and on their own—a few volunteers within the

¹³ MSF 2018.

¹⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

legal assistance team decided to find respite for two boys (sixteen and seventeen years old) who had been living on the streets for months. The volunteers began with the usual channels—calling the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), meeting with other organizations, and even inquiring at informal squats. Finding no accommodation possibilities, they settled on paying for the two boys to stay in a hotel for some nights in order to gain strength, shower, and finally get a few good nights’ sleep. Their first evening there, the boys drank alcohol and sexually assaulted a female tourist in another room. The volunteers, shocked at these events, tried to locate the tourist, who had already left the city. They contacted a youth service organization whose volunteers included people from the Global North and nearby displaced communities. This organization’s leadership met with the entire legal team and spoke at length with the boys about their actions. Present for many discussions among the volunteers, I noticed how much of the conversations centered on the ethical dilemmas in which they had suddenly found themselves. They asked themselves to what degree they were culpable. How could they have mitigated this kind of experience without leaving the boys on the street? Was it even their responsibility to house the boys? On a more fundamental level: how were the volunteers expected to weigh the risks of leaving the boys on the streets—where theft and violence were commonplace—versus finding stable housing? The volunteers could not adequately answer these questions. They felt in part responsible but also confused about the right course of action. It dawned on them that these boys could be simultaneously understood as both “‘at risk’ and ‘a risk.’”¹⁵

Some volunteers went so far as to house border crossers in their own living quarters. In these situations, the ethical considerations go far beyond any physical risk to the volunteer. One aid worker on Lesbos described a woman who volunteered for his organization. The woman saw a fifteen-year-old boy sleeping on the ground in Moria camp and, according to the aid worker, “instinctively brought him to her house.” She bought him a phone and clothes, but after some days began to complain about him, citing his constant desire for more things—she grew tired of this boy’s presence, as “it didn’t align with her image of what would actually happen.” When the organization discovered these circumstances, she was let go because her actions violated their code of conduct. Rather than help transition the boy to another housing project, she left the island, leaving him to fend for himself. In this example, the volunteer may have caused harm by creating a dependency and then leaving.

¹⁵ Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 60.

In many cases there were volunteers who were critical of their own roles within the humanitarian landscape, and were hesitant to create bonds with border crossers for precisely this reason. One volunteer in Athens avoided seeing children of the families she helped, even refusing dinner invites, because she did not want them to form a bond with her when she would only desert them once her contract was over. Here, critical self-awareness of possible outcomes may enable good practice. Yet in this case, it was the volunteer's own critique, rather than the informal association she worked for, that led to this action. Thus, while some volunteer organizations do have strict codes of conduct (or while some volunteers work with such an ethos on their own), many informal associations do not, potentially leading to harm.

Responsibility and Relationship Boundaries

Samantha, an international aid worker at a youth organization, described a difficult experience of disappointing a young girl who had been sexually assaulted and had no housing. The girl had come to the organization seeking shelter, yet none was available. Samantha explained their conversation:

[The girl] was saying, "You're my friends now [. . .]," and I was like, "I want to be really clear that we do actually come from an organization and we won't be friends outside of here and we won't be available all through the night" [. . .]. And the next day she had found herself a house.

In this case, Samantha helped the girl to organize things for herself, remedying her housing issue and furthering her self-reliance. Many volunteers—including myself—felt personally responsible for people whose situations were incredibly dire. Yet often overlooked were the social networks and high levels of resilience among these border crossers, unaccompanied minors included, who had traversed varying land and seascapes and evaded border guards, ending up in Greece. Feelings of responsibility and self-importance were thus sometimes misplaced. What follows is my own experience in grappling with this feeling.

Having heard positive things about an informal organization from volunteers and border crossers, I began volunteering there within a few days of my arrival in Athens. I had a crash course in legal asylum practices and quickly learned what other aid organizations in the city offered. On the legal team we volunteered in a large building that offered various services to border crossers and locals alike. On a first-come-first-serve basis, border crossers came for help—some were undocumented and wanted help in accessing the asylum service,

which consisted of a hotline reached via Skype,¹⁶ while others were already registered as asylum seekers and wanted practice for their asylum interviews. Some needed information about housing, access to a doctor, or to be reunified with family in another European country. The issues were many and complex, and required different skills and often the inter-sectoral cooperation between this legal team and other organizations. It was difficult to maintain communication channels with clients, so we often relied on texting them with our own personal phones, which sometimes led to challenging ethical situations.

After a long day of volunteering, my last daily task was to text a man with information about asylum. He promptly replied back to me, disclosing that he was contemplating suicide. As it was after six in the evening, most of the aid organizations were closed and I did not know how to respond. I chose to meet him in a busy restaurant, and we spoke for hours using Google Translate. He told me about his severe health issues, his isolation in Greece while his family remained in peril in his home country, and how he had yet to receive housing. We met the next morning and I was able to get him an emergency meeting with a psychologist at a local aid organization. The session went well, and during the next few weeks we texted sporadically, yet he was angry that I had not kept in better contact with him, again, urgently telling me his plans to take his own life. I felt responsible because of the severity of this man's case while at the same time hesitant to keep daily contact via text messaging for fear of creating dependency and being unprepared to deal with suicidal ideation.

I again returned with him to the same organization. This time they were unable to help because the interpreter was on holiday. My colleagues on the legal team and I called every organization that we knew was capable of handling acute psychiatric emergencies, but none was able to see him. The only option was the public hospital, which did not have interpreters and would likely involve committing him to a psychiatric ward. The aid worker explained that he had done everything in his power to help the man secure a home and access the asylum service, but that there were too many people and not enough resources. He asked me to do what I could for this man. I later reached out to my own family member who was a psychologist and asked for advice on how to respond to suicidal behavior.

It was common for aid workers from various organizations to ask things of volunteers, and for volunteers to feel responsible despite being untrained and unpaid. The

¹⁶ Those seeking asylum on mainland Greece must do so via a call using a line set up through Skype (unless considered vulnerable enough to access the office), and it can take many months to get through to someone (see Asylum Service | Ministry Of Migration Policy 2018).

gaps in services meant that volunteers were often the last resort for desperate border crossers, but also the last resort among those officially tasked with responding to the crisis. Volunteers do what they can and use personal and collective moral compasses to help guide them to the 'right' action, which can be far from clear. The unofficial and often egalitarian type of aid rendered by informal volunteers meant that solidarity and friendships form between them and border crossers, blurring the lines between work and private life. Clear dangers arise when untrained volunteers become embroiled in complicated situations without sufficient support or continuity.

Through my experiences volunteering and speaking with aid workers, volunteers, and government employees, I recommend that even informal associations create strict codes of conduct, avoid using personal phones, and spend time training volunteers. Trainings should focus on psychiatric issues, relationship boundaries, and critical thinking. Organizations should work towards more coherent collaboration, focusing on closing the gaps in services, and encouraging pathways for informal volunteers and aid workers to create solutions together.