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Refugee crisis 2015-2016: Standing by the side of the displaced



"This is not a fantasy or horror story. This is a truly bitter story. It speaks about strength, not weakness; it speaks about a goal we will never stop trying to attain: that of a brighter future."

**Mahdie Hosseini,
Afghanistan**

Introduction

The year 2015 was tainted by the biggest refugee crisis faced by humanity after World War II. To date, 1,362,807¹ refugees and immigrants have crossed the Aegean Sea in dinghies in an attempt to get to Europe, hoping for a better life.

Greece has experienced the biggest number of arrivals. From January 2015 to this date² 1,028,508³ persons have arrived in total, with Lesbos, just 8 nautical miles from Turkey and a resident population of 85,000, receiving in 2015 alone 504,407⁴ refugees and immigrants. The Mediterranean turned into a watery grave, where 8,425 persons, amongst whom hundreds of children, lost their lives in shipwrecks and capsized boats.

On a global scale, in 2015 “the nation of the displaced”, i.e. people who are forced to leave their homes, exceeded for the first time⁵ 60 million people, rising to 65.3 million⁶.

In March 2016, the closed borders, aiming to prevent the further movement of people towards Europe, the EU – Turkey agreement and other policies left more than 60,000 people stranded in Greece. They now stay in camps, detention centres, abandoned buildings and makeshift camps all over Greece.



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¹ The figure refers to the period from 01.01.2015 to 30.11.2016 inclusive, and is in line with the UNHCR data on Refugees.
² This report was drafted in early December 2016.
³ The figure refers to the period from 01.01.2015 to 30.11.2016 inclusive, and is in line with the UNHCR data on Refugees.
⁴ This figure refers to the period from 01.01.2015 to 04.01.2016 inclusive, and is in line with the UNHCR data on Refugees.
⁵ UNHCR Recorded History data
⁶ According to UNHCR’s report on Refugees, “Global Trends”.

Our action in figures

ActionAid has been responding to the refugee crisis since September 2015. More specifically:



82,000

refugees received information in their own language from our interpreters and cultural mediators.



12,778

women visited the Day Centres



10,749

dignity kits with essential items were distributed to women refugees.



11,205

winter core relief items were distributed to refugees.



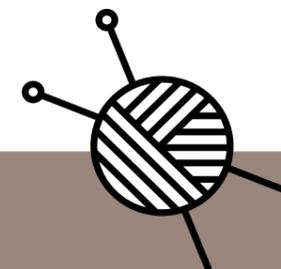
3,803

psychosocial support sessions were provided to refugees by ActionAid’s psychologists and social workers.



3,841

cases, including 2,929 vulnerable ones, were referred to other organizations and agencies.



2,096

women participated in our empowerment activities at the Day Centres.



104,431

people watched our video entitled “A surprising refugee story” on YouTube.



4,362

people responded to the two emergency appeals in September 2015 and May 2016.



5,308

people signed our campaign on family reunification.

Our programme

ActionAid, an organization fighting poverty and injustice, with long-term experience in handling the worst disasters and humanitarian crises on the planet, had no other choice but to stand by the displaced.

Already as of 2013, we had started programme work in Lebanon and Jordan, with more than 90,000 refugees. There, we provided families with vital items, and women and children with psycho-social support.

In September 2015, supported by the international Emergency team of ActionAid International, ActionAid Hellas started a humanitarian assistance programme on Lesbos and more specifically at the camps of Moria, Kara Tepe and later on Caritas Shelter. In March 2016, things changed as a result of the EU – Turkey agreement, and our action was

adjusted accordingly: from that point onwards, it was not about covering the needs of a transit population, but those of a vulnerable, yet static population, that would remain in Greece for a very long time.

Reflecting this new reality, in June 2016 we extended our programme work to Attica, at the camps of Schisto and Skaramagas, where it is estimated that there are still approximately 5,000 persons.

As in all emergencies, we focused on the most vulnerable segments of the population, i.e. pregnant women, persons with special needs, patients and the injured. Our main concern was to support and empower women, hence mobilizing them to improve their own life and consequently the life of their families. Moreover, as always, our programmes were designed with full respect towards the people we work for, responding to the priority issues identified by the refugees themselves. Thus, we focused on six basic pillars, presented in further detail below.



After the agreement between the European Union and Turkey, our role and the nature of our job somehow changed. We outdid ourselves, trying to become even more useful. Within a week, we managed to cover the new needs that had emerged. We identified the gaps and assumed our new role. We worked on the ground and the results of our work were visible. "You are a stone from Moria," that's what people tell us."

Alshekh Issa Sekhni,
Cultural Mediator - ActionAid, Moria Camp, Lesbos



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1. Provision of information in the refugees' language

© Anna Pantelia/ActionAid

The refugees arriving on Lesbos had no idea as to where they were, what they had to do to get on with their journey or what rights they had.

The conditions at the two refugee registration centres were extremely difficult. This is why we set up teams of people who spoke the refugees' language (Arabic, Farsi, Pashto) and provided information, support and guidance at the refugee registration sites.

We also provided information to women refugees in particular, informing them about their rights in Greece and the European Union.

Together with Internews, we laid emphasis on providing the correct information, as quite often there was unverified information spreading in the camps. Every week, Internews published a two-pager and distributed it at the registration sites: this contained information on what was true and what was false.



I left Syria with my three children, with the aim to get to Germany. When we arrived in Greece, we did not know anything about the process: what to do and where to go. I saw ActionAid's people in Moria. They came and talked to us; we discussed. They explained what we had to do and they helped us register, filling in the correct date. I felt safe with them. We will never forget what ActionAid did for us. You trusted us, as if we were one of you."

Hanan, 23, Syrian,
Caritas Shelter, Lesbos

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Yesterday, there was a sick man, with his arm cut-off, who had difficulty walking. He was from Afghanistan and had a problem with the police. I helped him resolve the issue and he was extremely grateful. He said: "Thanks to you, I believe in humanity again."

Ditte Bloch Noer,
Cultural Mediator - ActionAid, Moria Camp, Lesbos

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2. Psychosocial support at the Day Centres

True to our principle to support the most vulnerable population, we created Day Centres at the camps of Kara Tepe and Moria on Lesbos, as well as at the camps of Schisto and Skaramagas in Attica, i.e. safe places dedicated to women and their babies.

This is where women refugees would come every day to find some privacy, breastfeed their babies, change clothes, feel safe and share their stories.



When women get through the door of our centre and hear me speak Arabic, they calm down. I tell them I'm from Syria and I can see their joy. Then bit-by-bit, we start to talk about their journey at sea, the life they left behind, what happened to their city. They want to talk about their life in Syria. Sometimes I see they find it hard to leave the Centre, although they are in a hurry to get registered. When they arrive, they are tired and run down, and I think they are calmer and stronger when they leave."

Jannete Karabet, Cultural Mediator - ActionAid, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos

At the Day Centres they were welcomed by professional mediators who spoke their language, knew about their culture and could make them feel comfortable. They received psychosocial support from professional psychologists and social workers either in one-to-one sessions or in groups. They saw other women who had been through the same things, and by sharing their pain, they grew stronger.



When you are not ok and someone comes to help you, you can never forget about it. We will never forget any of the things we did here together with the people working for ActionAid."

Lama, 43, Syrian, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos



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A special moment for us was when we managed to locate the lost seven-year-old daughter of a Congolese woman we met at the Kara Tepe camp:

The first few days here I was crying all the time, I did not eat or talk to anyone. My daughter was in France, I didn't know where exactly. I got to know about ActionAid through Stella⁷ whom I had started seeing at the beginning of September. She helped me find my daughter. When she told me she knew where she was, I was so relieved! It had been such a long time I had no idea where she was. At first, I didn't really trust them, because I had asked other organizations to help me, yet unsuccessfully. Now, whenever I have a problem, I come and talk to Stella. I feel at ease and I can express myself freely. We are like family."

Em, 39, Congolese, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos

Moreover, our teams were always in touch with other agencies and organizations, e.g. the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Caritas Hellas, Save the Children and International Rescue Committee, and with the authorities, aiming at a better and faster resolution of the issues faced by vulnerable people, e.g. injured persons, women who were heavily pregnant or who were travelling alone, and persons who could by no means afford to continue their journey.

In one word, all the support I received from the organization was a comfort. They helped me and they made me feel safe. I appreciate them helping anyone in need, without asking a lot of questions. They don't care who you are or where you come from. If you need help, they will be there."

Akifa, 29, Afghan, Caritas Shelter, Lesbos

The first days on the island, only ActionAid helped me. They supported me psychologically and gave me the information I needed. For about a month and a half, I went to the Day Centre in Moria every single day. My daughter had suffered injuries from a bomb in Aleppo and they helped me take her daughter to the doctors. The people working for ActionAid were by my side the whole time. Tina, Sotiria, Issa and Nadya became my family. Even today when I booked my tickets to Germany, they were next to me. All this time you've been listening to us, you understood our needs and you stood by our side. You made us feel safe and gave us hope for life."



Walaa, 23, Syrian, Athens

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⁷ Stella Dermosoniadi was ActionAid's psychologist on Lesbos



3. Provision of essential items and winter equipment

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The refugees arriving in thousands at the remote coasts of Lesbos had few or no belongings at all for, many of them, during their journey, had lost even the few things they had been carrying with them from home. Therefore, there was a huge need for access to personal hygiene items.

With our supporters' help, we prepared dignity kits for women and babies, with items described as essential by the refugees themselves: soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, sanitary napkins, wet wipes, women's underwear and baby diapers.

Over the Christmas period (December 2015) we asked our supporters to build a solidarity bridge and make the refugees a gift, by buying a kit with some vital items from our e-shop. These kits were distributed to ActionAid's Day Centres on Lesbos.

We also distributed winter core relief equipment, such as blankets, beanies and gloves.



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I am grateful to God for you looking after us. I want to thank you for the diapers for the baby and for helping me take my baby to the doctor."

Faima, 25, Afghan,
about her son appeared in the photograph,
Moria Camp, Lesbos



4. Preparing skill development activities

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After the EU – Turkey Agreement, there arose a need for setting up new tools and approaches for skill development, along with the provision of further training to the refugees who had been and would stay in Greece for a very long time.

So, going over the refugees' own wishes, we set up a series of activities that were useful both for their stay and for their future dreams. We organized sewing, knitting and art classes that helped them fill up the hours they spent at the camps every day, reminding them somehow of the life they had left behind in their home countries, and allowing them to forget, even briefly, the harsh conditions they experienced.

We held Greek and English language courses that would help them in their future integration in Greece or in any other country. We even talked to them about the geography of Europe and Greece, about the banking system and women's rights in Europe. Small, yet useful lessons for a new life.



© Sissy Gkourmelou/ActionAid

We've been in Kara Tepe 3 months now. The first month was very difficult for me here. I come to ActionAid's painting class. When I paint, I forget about my problems and time just flies. When you are at the camp, all hours are alike. With painting, they become a little more pleasant."



Souzan, 35, Syrian,
Kara Tepe Camp, Lesbos

© Waleisa Porcellato/ActionAid

All these months I have been attending ActionAid's activities and I have very good memories. When I come to the Day Centre in Kara Tepe, I feel better. We have our lesson and this is very important for all refugees, since English is a global language, very important to Europe. Then, people speaking different languages and having lessons together... it is truly funny! Hannah, our teacher, is very good and she's made us love the course."

Farahnaz, 13, Afghan, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesvos

After the agreement, we realized that we needed more programmes for integration, along with activities in which people would get engaged both for reasons of psychological defusing and for acquiring skills that would help them afterwards, regardless of whether they would stay in Greece or go to another destination. This practically changed the nature of the work. Instead of talking about primary psychological support and people in transit, all of a sudden we found ourselves next to people who would stay here for long periods of time."

Sotiria Kyriakopoulou, Protection Manager – ActionAid, Lesvos



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© Studio Kominis/ActionAid

In Athens, together with 15 women refugees from Afghanistan, who participate in ActionAid's empowerment and psychosocial support programmes at the camp in Schisto, we presented a theatre play. The play, which was written and staged by the women refugees, was full of strong pictures and feelings that moved deeply the audience that had crowded the foyer of the Piraeus Municipal Theatre.

Through the play, the women attempted to speak about their journey to the safe haven of Europe.

You, the spectators, listened to the story of an Afghan woman. It's not a fantasy or horror story. It doesn't mean to make you sad either. This is a truly bitter story. It speaks about strength, not weakness; it speaks about the value of attaining our goals for which we have worked hard and we got tired and risked our lives... A goal we will never stop trying to attain: that of a brighter future."

From the text written by one of the lead actors, Mahdie Hosseini

On Lesvos, we helped the women who came to the Day Centres organize their own open-air exhibition at the main square of Mytilene, with embroidery and knitwear they had made themselves. Women refugees wanted their creations to form a bridge that would allow them to communicate with the inhabitants of the island, and they actually made it!



In my house in Syria I had my own sewing machine, so I was pleased to find one here. Learning to sew, knit and embroider is good for the other women who are in Kara Tepe, as well. Not to mention that through these lessons, we feel valued as women. We are not just refugees. The people working for ActionAid have a nice way when they talk to people. We don't feel like employees and refugees. We feel like we are all a family. There is trust."

Sihaam, 55, Syrian, Kara Tepe Camp, Lesvos

Sewing and knitting filled up our days and changed the atmosphere within the camp. I already knew how to knit myself. Every time I walked into the Day Centre in Kara Tepe, it felt like home. ActionAid is the only organization that says women are a priority and they truly mean it. When we were back in Syria, my husband used to tell me I needed to show people my knitwear, sell the items I made. The exhibition we held with ActionAid at the main square of Mytilene was very important to me. When the exhibition was over, I went to the cemetery where my husband is buried and I talked to him about this experience. It was as if somehow I had made his wish come true."

Amina, 48, Syrian, Athens⁸



© Irene Koutoula/ActionAid

However, men refugees too were part of our programme. In the context of empowering them, we held seminars touching upon gender issues in a direct and indirect way, e.g. women's position in Europe. Grown up men and minor boys attended these seminars.

Apart from the activities taking place within our Day Centres, we also organized walks and visits to archaeological sites and museums on Lesvos. The purpose of those visits and excursions was for the refugees to see another aspect of the island, besides the camps, the way they had asked for. More specifically, we organized a mountaineering expedition to Asomatos village, Lesvos, and visits to the archaeological museum and the castle of Mytilene.



ActionAid is the only NGO that took us out of the camps, and we went on excursions on the island. They played a major role for us. They were by our side from the very first day until now."

Kouidad, Syrian, Caritas Shelter, Lesvos

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⁸ Amina survived a shipwreck. Her husband was on the same boat, but he didn't make it. He is buried in one of the cemeteries on the island.



5. Lobbying

Our work on the field was complemented by lobbying. The institutional pressure we exert through campaigns is the most effective way to bring about permanent changes, by changing laws and practices that keep people prisoners of poverty and injustice.



In this context, we launched our campaign entitled **“Protect the Refugees”**, asking Greece and the European governments to do the following:

- Create safe and legal routes to Europe.
- Ensure that people of all nationalities have access to asylum procedures and more particularly to the ability for relocation, and to respect the international and European law.
- Respect the right to family reunification, taking into account the necessary measures, supporting the reunification of extended and adult family members.
- Convert the Preliminary Reception Centres on the islands into open accommodation structures, without detaining asylum-seekers.



Within the framework of our campaign, we published an emergency appeal, asking people to sign the petition, thereby supporting thousands of refugees to be reunited with their families who are in other European countries. In total, we collected 5,308 signatures. The family reunification process is excruciatingly slow, with the legal framework giving “family” a strict definition, thereby separating adult children from their parents or siblings in various European countries.

The appeal was based on ActionAid’s report **“Separated: The challenges of relocation and family reunification for refugees arriving in Greece”**. To draft the report, more than 50 testimonials of asylum-seekers were used; people of various nationalities residing at the refugee camps in Lesvos, Schisto and Skaramagas, who had either applied or had expressed their intention to apply for family reunification, according to the EU legislation in force, or who had applied for relocation in the context of existing programmes.

© Sissy Gkournelou/ActionAid

I am tired. I am here seven months with my two daughters, 21 and 11 years old. My husband, my 16-year-old son and my 10-year-old daughter are in Germany. We left Aleppo for a better future, but we haven't found it yet. We have the asylum-seeker card and we have applied for family reunification. We've been to two appointments. The last one was 3 months ago. I don't know how long this will take, but I cannot take it anymore. Two days ago I was thinking of drowning into the sea."

50-year-old woman from Syria, Skaramagas Camp, Attica



In June, on occasion of the World Refugee Day (20/6), in collaboration with Oxfam, we published the study **“Europe, don't let us down”**, stemming from the testimonials of more than 250 refugees and migrants at the various camps in Lesvos, Attica and Epirus.

© ActionAid

My husband passed away two days ago. He was diabetic. He had to take insulin. But here we couldn't find any. He suffered from kidney failure. The authorities took him to hospital, but it was too late. I had to find €2,000 to send his dead body back to Kabul. I borrowed money from anyone I could, and now I have to give it back."

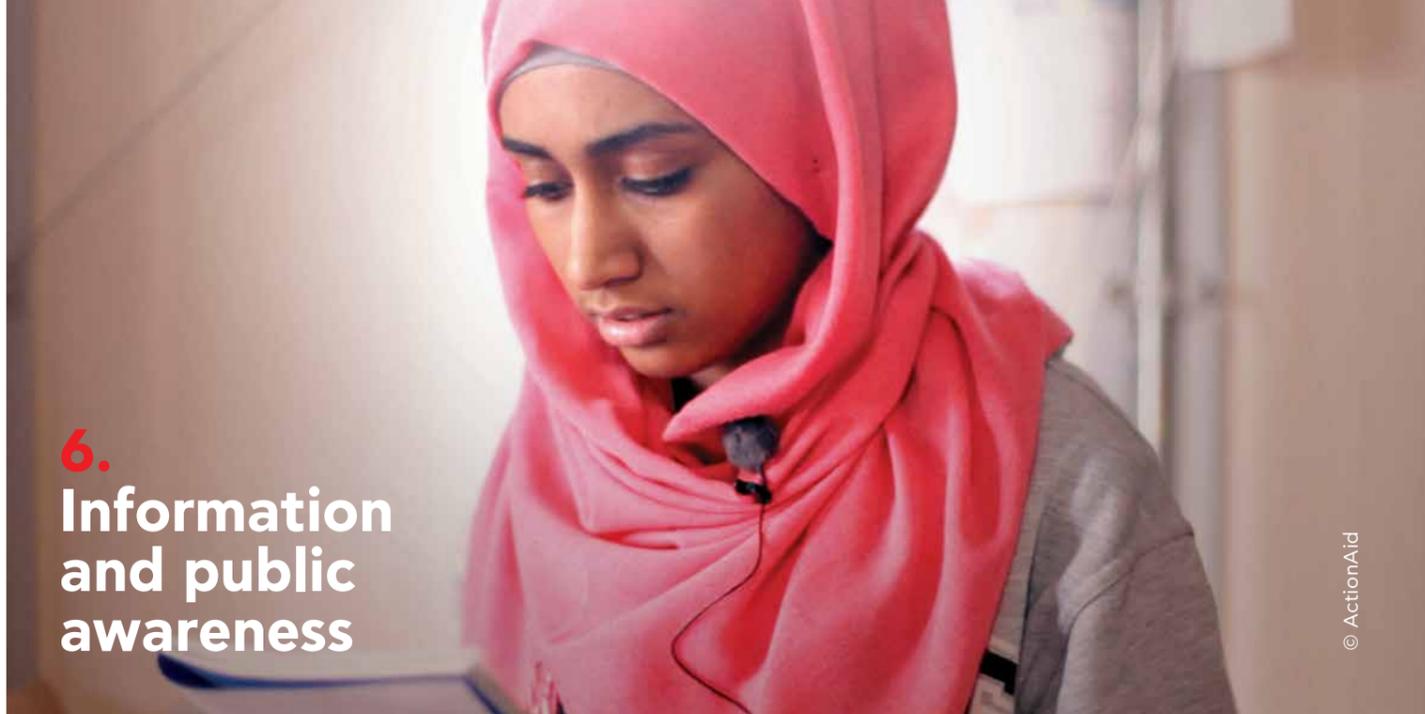
Naime, 38, Afghan, Schisto Camp, Attica



On March 8th, on occasion of the Summit Meeting and the EU – Turkey Agreement on the refugee issue, we published a joint Press Release with twenty-six NGOs from Greece, FYROM, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, condemning the European governments’ violations of the national, European and international law by closing their doors to people who are entitled to international protection.

In October 2016, together with 11 national and international organizations we signed a joint policy brief, entitled **“More than Six Months Stranded – What Now?”**, which presents our joint views on the refugees in Greece.

6. Information and public awareness



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The more we raise public awareness, the more citizens take sides against injustice. ActionAid's biggest strength lies in the thousands of our supporters who have been by our side during the refugee crisis, the way they are with us in all our actions!

Along with starting our programme in Lesvos and Attica, we made an emergency appeal for financial support and people's response was touching, reaching 4,362 donations. We are grateful and proud of this great assistance provided by our supporters.

They are refugees, just like we were once. The video that spoke to the hearts of thousands of people.

Five years after the first conflicts in Syria, we published the video "A surprising story", in which we asked the refugees to read out the story of a refugee, written in their language.

Then we asked them whose story they think it was. Their reactions when they found out it was not the story of someone from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, as they answered, but of an unknown Greek woman, named Maria Leondaridou, who had lost everything in Smyrni in 1922 and arrived at Lesvos were unexpected and deeply touching.

The message was and remains crystal clear: They are refugees, just like we were once. Any of us could be a refugee.

The video got 104,431 views on YouTube. It was broadcast by 4 tv channels and there was reference made to it, as well as interviews from 4 radio channels. It was posted by 207 websites.

In total, 8 Press Releases were sent to the Media, giving rise to 18 articles in the Press, 13 radio and 8 tv interviews and references, as well as 630 articles on the web.

Once again, we would like to say a huge thank you to the thousands of our supporters, who have stood by our side and, most of all, by the refugees' side, by supporting financially our emergency appeals, signing our campaign on family reunification, spreading our messages on the social media and offering volunteering work at our offices in Athens and Lesvos.

What others said about us

In terms of the programmes we launched and implemented, we cooperated with groups of volunteers, local and international organizations, and with the competent authorities. We have been continuously in touch with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with the authorities of the camps in Lesvos and Attica, and with big Greek and international organizations carrying out valuable tasks. We asked them what they thought of our cooperation:



© Waleisa Porcellato/ActionAid

We shared a common field of work with ActionAid. I believe they are a truly remarkable organization. They have been there for years, I think in Greece too for quite a while. The programme met the needs of the population. They were also the first NGO to set up a Day Centre for women in Kara Tepe and I believe this was very important.

Aggeliki Panagoulia, Protection Manager – International Rescue Committee, Lesvos



At ActionAid I met people who were devoted and attentive to women. What has come out of the work we did together mainly at the Kara Tepe Camp is important for the people staying there. We actually never heard anything bad about ActionAid and their staff.

Francesco Fedi, Field Manager – Save the Children, Lesvos



Our cooperation was very good, especially when it came to psychosocial support. We found a common ground to help the people in need as much as possible. I think this is why we are here. To cater to the needs of the people who happen to be here. Personally, I believe that ActionAid is "female" and they set the bar real high. A lot of people will miss them.

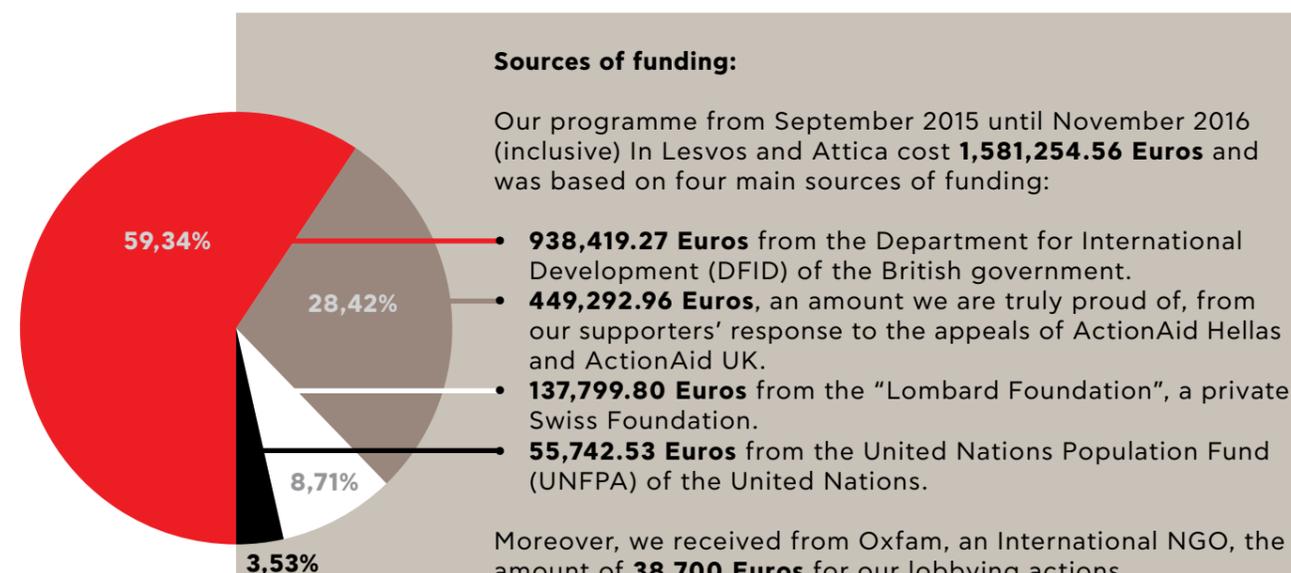
Maritina Koraki, Field Coordinator Emergency Appeal – Caritas Hellas, Lesvos



© Imelda Phadtare/ActionAid

First of all, being a local here on Lesvos, I feel it is my moral duty to say that NGOs like ActionAid have been by the side of the local people and authorities right from the start. As a local, I can only thank ActionAid for the great and serious work they have done here. My cooperation with ActionAid was impeccable at all levels. I can't help speaking about the staff: about how human they were. Because above all, all the people I met who worked for ActionAid were human first and then professionals or specialized. After all this time and fully aware of my words, I believe that ActionAid will be irreplaceable. Finally, a huge "thank you" to all ActionAid staff, on Lesvos, in Athens and all over the world for their great contribution to the human race in general.

Stavros Myrogiannis, Director of Open Accommodation Centre in Kara Tepe, Lesvos



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ActionAid is an **independent, international organization, changing for good**, since 1972, the **lives** of the poorest and most underprivileged people. Today, we work with more than **15 million people** in over **45 countries** to build a better, fairer world for all.

Not content with simply providing aid, **we give people a prospect**. We fight the causes of poverty and injustice through projects, empowerment programmes and campaigns that bring about **permanent changes in terms of infrastructure, mindsets and the law**. Knowing we can only succeed if we do this with you, we **create solidarity links** between ourselves and those who need us.

ActionAid Hellas was founded in 1998 and has been building **bridges of solidarity** ever since between our Greek supporters and the most marginalized people in Africa, Asia and South America. **Today, more than 200,000 Greeks** like you have supported our work as Child Sponsors, donors and volunteers, signing our campaigns and/or sending your children to our educational centre. **Thank you**. We couldn't have done this without you.

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