

Event Report: Migration Network Meeting Inclusive Societies for Migrant Children 26 – 27 November 2019, Athens, Greece

On 26-27 November, a team from Eurodiaconia and representatives from member organisations met in Athens for the annual meeting on Migration, which was hosted by our Greek member Apostoli.

The theme of the meeting was the inclusion of migrant and refugee children in our societies. Once these children reach Europe, they continue to face challenges such as access to adequate housing, care services, schooling and non-formal education. Following the large influx of refugees in 2015, it has become a necessity to discuss the long-term integration needs of migrant and refugee children and youth. Presentations from high-level experts and local organizations, as well as two study visits helped to provide insight into the current situation of child migrants and refugees in Greece and other European countries. The network meeting aimed to develop a better understanding of how to support their integration needs and provide a space for member organisations to network and exchange on best practices.

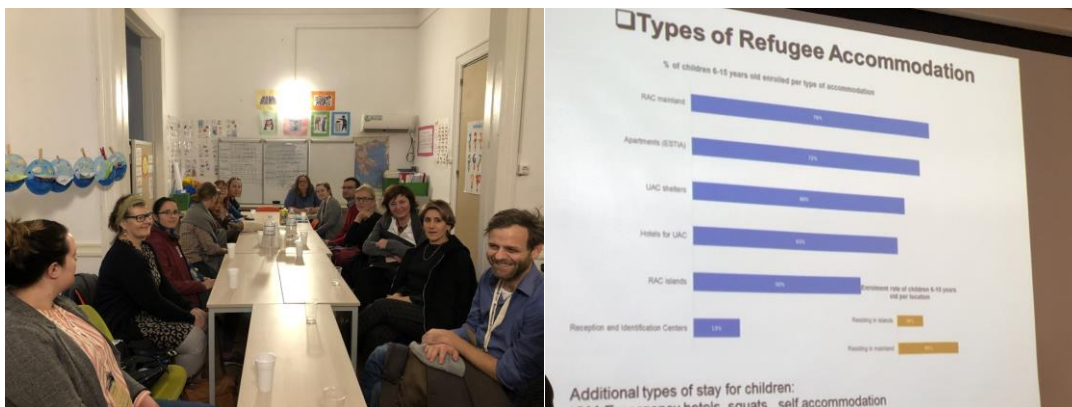
Tuesday, 26 November

Welcome and Introduction

The 2019 Migration Network Meeting commenced with a devotion led by **Vasileios Meichanetsidis**, who is responsible for International Cooperation of Apostoli.

Following the devotion, each participant introduced themselves and gave an expectation they had for the meeting. Participants wanted to learn more about Eurodiaconia, learn from other members' personal experiences, and gain a deeper understanding of the current situation in Greece in order to implement practical ways to help migrants in their own organization's context.

Eurodiaconia's Policy and Membership Development Officer, **Gabriela Agatiello**, gave a brief presentation on Eurodiaconia's work at the European level and advocacy initiatives. She discussed different ways that members can stay up to date with Eurodiaconia activities, such as the monthly newsletter, webinars, study visits and network meetings centered around the topic of migration. Gabriela explained that the Migration Network Meeting is on a different topic each year depending on the needs of members and what is going on at the European level.



Opening Panel: The Greek Context

Euthalia Pappa, Vice-moderator of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, presented on the main components of the current refugee situation in Greece, including data on the current migration situation in Greece. As of the 26th of November, the refugee population in Greece is almost 104,000. Of 104,000, 68,100 are in the mainland and 58,321 asylum applications have been submitted thus far. During 2019, sea arrivals in Greece are 64 percent higher than 2018 totals from this time. One-third of these arrivals are children. The "hot spot" approach and the accommodation facilities in the mainland continue to be critical issues. On the islands, refugees are forced to sleep in rickety tents with no access to proper sanitation. They are held there for prolonged periods of time waiting for their asylum claims to be processed or to be returned.

There are approximately 5,000 unaccompanied children in Greece currently. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in mid-November that children in migration will now be a priority. The "No Child Alone" initiative is aimed at relocating 4,000 refugee and migrant children living on the islands. Euthalia Pappa explained that some children are placed in foster homes, but there are not enough foster families available for the number of migrant and refugee children. For more information you can consult Euthalia's presentation.

Alexandra Nikolara, Executive Board Member of Perichoresis, presented on the projects of her organization. There are currently 55 people on Perichoresis' staff. Alexandra showed a short video on the role of Christianity in her organization, as well as an overview of Perichoresis' work in the area of migration. Currently, Perichoresis is running an accommodation project, "ESTIA," which hosts refugees in apartments. The project has hosted 605 refugees in 126 rented apartments. RefuAid is another project which focuses on accommodating and integrating refugees. The aim of this project is to help refugees become self-sufficient within a 5-year framework. An interesting project hosted by Perichoresis is the "Peace Pastries" project. Forty women, both local and from a refugee background gather to prepare pastries by using a different recipe each week. For more information on perichoresis and their work, you can take a look at Alexandra's presentation.



Practical Ways to Ensure the Inclusion of Migrant Children

Apostoli's **Marina Frangiadaki** explained the effect migration can have on children. Marina stressed the importance of empathy when working with migrants and refugee children and understanding their reasons for wanting to migrate to Europe. Providing mental health support can help them focus on the joy in life, despite their personal traumatic experiences. In order to socially integrate, refugees must be able to handle these experiences which must be done through personalized support for each individual person.

After showing an informative video about Apostoli, **Panagiotis Bouras**, a social worker from the organization, presented on the vision of Apostoli, as well as outlined the programs offered for migrants and refugees. The Hostel of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (Hestia) hosts 20 teenage boys, who are between 12 and 17 years old. The hostel is open 24 hours every day and offers counselling and legal and psychosocial support to the boys. The hostel provides personal hygiene items as well as language learning and life and social skills classes to help the boys prepare for higher education. The boys learn how to coexist with other people and to respect others' personal space. Boys who live in the hostel must be registered in a Greek public school. This is extremely important to help the boys learn the local language and soft skills.

A few of the challenges the Hostel faces are:

- Delayed decisions on asylum applications and applications for family reunification
- Management of negative decision to the asylum request
- Access to education
- The short stay in the hostel (about 9 months)
- Children leaving the country before being integrated
- Pressure for the boys to work in the informal sector

On a more positive note, the hostel has successfully enrolled 360 boys in the national education system. More than 410 children have been accommodated and approximately 80 children have been reunified with their families. Overall, the hostel is providing a successful and personalized way to integrate children into society. Panagiotis stressed the importance of providing a structured environment for the boys that is rules-based so that the boys are prepared to live in the society.

Following Panagiotis' presentation, the question was asked: "Are children placed into a class in school based on their age or their knowledge level?". Panagiotis responded saying it depends on each individual case. It is, however, hard to register an older child in a lower age class because the child is too old to make friends. Absences are also a problem for students because they do not see the point of attending class every day.



Marija Vranesevic and **Dragana Levicanin** from Philanthropy Serbia presented on the Serbian migrant situation and on their organization's programs for refugee and migrant integration. The majority of people arriving in Serbia are from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran or are Kurdish. In September of 2019, Serbia saw the highest number of people arriving irregularly since February 2016, with 150 to 200 people coming each day. The people arriving are in survival mode and are not in the state of mind to cope with what is happening. She also spoke about the alarming situation at the Bosnian border with Serbia as well as the border between Bosnia and Croatia where migrants have experienced violent and unlawful pushbacks from border police and are forced to live in overcrowded, makeshift camps in very bad conditions.



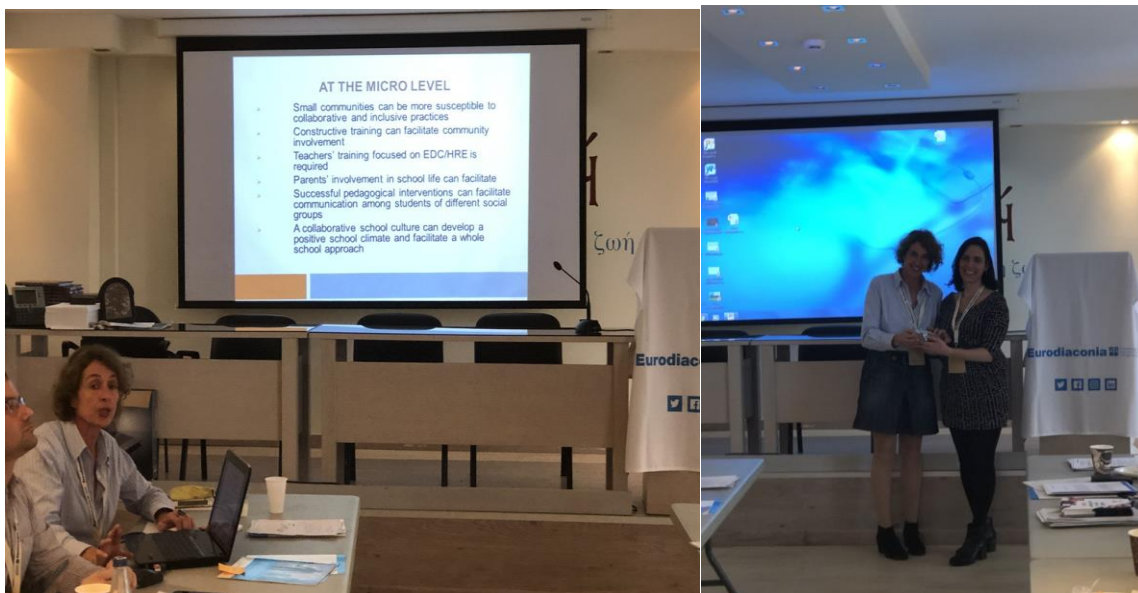
Within Serbia, Marija mentioned that its citizens are generally proud of the government's help when the crisis began. Refugees have free access to education and health care and enjoy the same rights as Serbian citizens. The current asylum process is longer in Serbia than in Greece and funding is extremely limited because the country is not a member of the European Union.

Philanthropy Serbia offers many programs and activities for migrant and refugee children. They have organized murals with local and refugee children, have outdoor gyms in and outside of the camps and refurbished local schools. There is a cash distribution program using ECHO money as well as civic and

intercultural sessions. The organization is struggling due to being understaffed because to scarce funding.

Inclusion of Migrant Children Through Education

Dr. Angeliki Aroni, Head of the Independent Department for the Coordination and Monitoring of Refugee Education, in the Ministry of Education of Greece, gave a presentation on the current migrant situation, including the challenges her office has faced recently. The department works to ensure the right to education for refugee children through appropriate education schemes, despite the time pressure many migrants and refugees face. Currently, there is a plan working towards a solution for the unstable population of refugees. A scientific committee for the support of the education of refugee children—a working group on the management, coordination and monitoring of refugee education in the ministry and the Institute of Education Policy—have been created as part of the ministry’s plan.



Some of the persistent challenges faced by the Greek government include: post-trauma in children which results in specific educational needs, language obstacles, lack of interpretation services, illiterate children with too little schooling and long absences from the school environment, and limited or non-existent academic records. Dr. Aroni stressed that the common perception that refugee students are the ones causing the problems in the education system is incorrect. The education system was already broken, “refugee students just put the light on the problem.”

In order to move forward and continue to help migrant and refugee children integrate into society, we need local and national government cooperation, constructive training to facilitate community involvement and we must work to get migrant parents involved in their child’s schooling.

Moderated Group Discussion – “Our Priorities”

For our moderated group discussion, the entire group was split into three working groups. The following questions were posed to each working group to discuss:

- What are the needs of children in migration that must be taken into account?
- What are the challenges faced by children who have migrated to Europe?
- What is your organization doing to help children in migration? (Best practices)

Each group was asked to discuss the questions and write down their answers on a poster. Each group presented their findings in the final session of day 2.



Study Visit 1: Faros

The participants visited Faros, a non-profit Christian organization which provides humanitarian care and individualized support for unaccompanied children and refugee youth. **Mr. Dan Biswas** shared an overview of the current work and challenges for Faros. Before Faros was created, **Patricia Kirk** interviewed an Afghan boy sleeping alone in a public park and determined a shelter was needed. The Faros shelter opened in 2016 and works with children and unaccompanied minors. The staff of Faros is made up of 40 people who represent 7 different nationalities. The diversity of staff is meant to mirror the diversity of the boys they host. Currently, 22 boys live in the shelter and receive help adjusting to life in Greece from social workers, teachers and psychologists. The relationships made in the shelter are meant to help the boys navigate the Greek system. The shelter focuses heavily on education training and offers summer school for refugees, a program that has 80 students enrolled and over 100 on the waiting list.



Faros is currently working on implementing a foster care program, as well as additional supports the shelter can offer to help the boys more fluidly integrate into society. A question Faros continues to ask

is what to do with the boys when they turn 18. Searching for more long-term job or internship opportunities continues to be a focus of the shelter. Finally, the shelter is working to build better connections with the community, especially in terms of finding funding for higher education.



Wednesday, 27 November

Study Visit 2: Educational Centre for Refugees and Migrants, Apostoli

We visited Apostoli's Educational Centre for Refugees and Migrants, which provides educational opportunities to ensure every child's right to education. **Efstathia Chatzi** and other teachers at the centre shared the current courses offered to migrants and refugees. The center offers Greek and English classes, as well as teaching important life skills to help attendees prepare for employment. The Educational Centre now teaches more adults than children. More than 110 people have attended classes in the past year. Basic career skills are taught through job counselling, practice interviews and working on their CVs. The Centre is now steering people towards higher standards and continues to encourage adults to earn a government regulated certificate which would increase potential job opportunities. One challenge the Educational Centre faces is the difficulty of teaching illiterate students, especially if they are in classes with students who are performing at a higher level.



Workshop Policy and Practice – Looking Forward

We began the final section of the network meeting discussing the needs and challenges of children in migration and by exchanging ideas on the ways we can meet these challenges at the local, national and European level. Each group presented the poster presentation they worked on during the two days. Below are the points highlighted in the groups:

What are the needs of children in migration that must be taken into account?

- Family-like relationships or stable relationships
- Transitional support; especially for children who have turned 18 and are no longer considered minors.
- Stability in their life
- To work on the administration system, which will help to build trust in the system
- Support in finding new roles as parents, students, etc.
- The need for parents/ foster parents, a stable home environment
- Proper treatment for traumatized children
- More financial support
- Support for teachers
- More cultural education

What are the challenges faced by children who have migrated to Europe?

- They are unaware of their location
- Children having to take on adult responsibilities
- The family dynamics change significantly
- Learning new social expectations
- The new environment can restrict their own cultural habits
- They face racism and discrimination in Europe

- Creating moments of success
- Having the cooperation of parents, especially when it comes to schooling
- Children are moved/relocated frequently, hard to build stability
- Working with local actors to discover new solutions to migration problems

Best Practice Examples:

- The Finnish church hosts children's groups for children in migration to discuss their hardships with other children.
- EHO, in Serbia, offers non-formal and formal education, as well as teaches life skills to children and fieldtrips and excursions for children. EHO also offers intercultural training for teachers who deal with migrants. Now these teachers are networking and sharing results.
- Diakonia Austria offers non-formal education and German classes to prepare them for the job market
- The Swedish and Finnish churches are located everywhere, in and out of urban centers and have meeting points where migrants can go for legal help, to socialize with others, to engage with other children, and get support in various areas of their lives.
- Diakonia Czech Republic offers board games in the city library and summer camps for children as well as joint social activities with locals.
- The Roundtable, in Armenia, offers vocational training for people between the ages of 17 and 35 as well as English language classes and non-formal education
- Perichoresis helps enroll children into the local school system, along with non-formal education for migrants and refugees and works from a community-based approach
- The organisations represented in Group 2 talked about some common best practices including: (i) offering access to services that like the locals, (ii) engaging beneficiaries like volunteers, (iii) outreaching to families and engaging them in the activities (not just the children but working with the entire family), (iii) organizing public events in the schools where locals can also be engaged with the migrants, (iv) providing opportunities for Swedish families and churches to offer alternative residence arrangements like volunteer fostering, (v) offering open kindergartens where migrant children can also attend, (vi) organizing common cultural events with the local community.

What can be done at the local level to address these challenges?

- Partnering with social youth services
- Work with the whole family to find solutions to problems
- Organise a platform where NGOs, local authorities from the municipalities, churches and migrants can come together and work on the challenges that need to be addressed
- Engage native speakers and the host population to work with migrants and refugee families and children
- Raise awareness at the local level about the issues confronting migrants and refugees and work on challenging false populist narratives and news
- Communicate and work with local authorities
- Engage refugee families at the local level
- Offer psycho-social support for families
- Offer non-formal education opportunities
- Meet with local politicians to discuss needs and challenges
- Do advocacy at the local level

What can be done at the national level to address these challenges?

- Write shadow reports to the committee on the rights of the child and go to Geneva to do advocacy on children on the move (children in migration). Advocate via the national board and kids delegation.
- Team up with other NGOs nationally to create agreements, action statements that can be used in advocacy at regional and local levels
- Offer more integration courses for children
- Provide training for service providers and authorities at the municipal level so they may better understand how to work with migrants and refugees who have experienced trauma
- Provide trainings in cultural competence to teachers
- Communicate with the various ministries dealing with migrant's integration and advocate for better communication between the different ministries responsible
- Network with different organisations and NGOs working on the topic of children in migration and supporting refugees and asylum seekers at the national level

Gabriela then asked each group to write down an advocacy ask: **what would they like the European union and its institutions to do to address some of the challenges identified.** Member's suggestions will help to inform Eurodiaconia's work on migration at the European level. The following are the issues participants want the EU institutions to focus on:

- Speed up the family reunification process and make it less restrictive
- Provide more funding for organisations working with migrants and refugees and make funding more accessible
- Enforce the implementation of existing frameworks concerning the rights of children on the move (e.g. the right to translation, the right to legal counsel, the right to a fair legal process)
- The gap for children between 18-22 years old needs to be addressed. The European Union needs to develop a legal framework to address youth that fall within this gap.
- Common European asylum procedures – create unified procedures in each member state
- Create unified systems in European countries on matters relating to migration
- More cooperation between European countries – solidarity in practice, not just in words
- Advocate for countries to act in solidarity and ease the burden of arrival countries hosting large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees. Push for more intra-state transfers (relocation of asylum seekers/refugees between member states)
- Facilitate legal procedures for child adoption and provide alternatives to detention for children in migration
- Encourage more politicians to visit migrant camps - this will help them understand the conditions refugees are forced to live in
- Policies for countries are sometimes too general. Develop policies that take into account the national context in different countries
- The local, national and EU level governments should work together to address the challenges facing migrants and refugees
- Encourage member states to develop trauma treatment in their public health systems that is independent of EU funding

- Encourage European countries to develop more housing options for asylum seekers and refugees
- Support Armenia to find alternative funding for housing. Shelters don't exist and rental apartments are normally paid by NGOs.
- Currently, too much pressure is on the child. The system needs to be reformed into a child-centered approach, designed to address the needs and potential of each child.
- Shorten the asylum process for children. It is too long and leads to further emotional instability.
- The institutionalization of children needs to stop, alternative care options for children in migration need to be developed.



Gabriela then asked each group to discuss how Eurodiaconia can better support members' work in the area of migration. The suggestions included:

- To prepare a common position paper/statement signed by all Eurodiaconia members advocating for countries to open their borders to ease the burden on Greece.
- A network meeting where participants working at the same level and on the same theme are invited to attend
- Opportunities to learn more about the needs and challenges in the different local contexts and less time spent on best practices. Participants could come prepared to talk about the local context and allow time for reflections during the meeting after hearing from different member organisations.
- Focus the meeting either on social service provision or advocacy work at the European level or have longer network meetings where the disconnect between the two could be addressed more deeply.
- More capacity building but with more of a focus on practical examples
- Sharing of programs and practices that have been evaluated and proven to be effective
- Training on cultural sensitivity for member organisations
- More advocacy on children's rights
- Providing more channels for all European countries (including those outside the EU) to communicate/advocate at the EU level.
- Develop a platform where tools member organisations develop can be shared and further developed
- More access to funding opportunities

Conclusion and End of Meeting



Gabriela closed the Migration Network Meeting with a pipe-cleaner activity in which participants were asked to bend the pipe-cleaner into the shape of an object that resembles what they will take away from the meeting. The following are some of the participants comments and reflections at the closing of the meeting:

- Lots of emotions, have developed new relationships and experiences.
- Knowledge and inspiration that there is a large community confronted with the same challenges and engaged in supporting migrants and refugees.
- New, creative ideas for ways to engage migrant and refugee children during summer programs.
- The fact that Greece has amazing hospitality.
- Our mission should be to resist unhelpful practices and policies. Together our voices are powerful and we can, and should, resist some common policies.
- The visit to Faros reminds us that it is possible to work with the whole person from a holistic approach. We should put this into practice.
- Greece's continuing energy and enthusiasm is inspirational.
- We should work practically with children and recognize each person's age and emotional capacity.
- Faros's inspirational mission is refreshing, especially for someone who has been involved in migration for some time. Hearing and seeing other passionate people gives others energy.
- The network meeting provided useful, whole-picture ideas of the migration situation from different contexts.
- Asking God to help us will give us the strength and promote change in other's lives.
- Lots of information was shared and it gives us the energy and strength to go back to Brussels and advocate on specific issues that are important to each participating organization.

This concluded the 2019 Migration Network Meeting. Thanks to our talented and involved member organizations, strong recommendations were given to the Eurodiaconia staff which will help improve our advocacy work for children in migration. Please contact Gabriela Agatiello with any further questions or comments surrounding our work with refugee youth and migrant children.

