




GROWING BEHIND BARBED-WIRE



Self-evaluation of the experience living
in the CCAC Samos

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Introduction

Since September 2021, the European Commission and the Greek government have employed a new model of reception premises for asylum-seekers and migrants in the EU. The Closed Controlled Access Center of Samos (Κλειστή Ελεγχόμενη Δομή Νήσων, KEDN) was the first of five new generation facilities to be operative in the Aegean Islands. Fully funded by the EU, it has established a “pilot project” for a “new chapter in migration management,” according to Beate Gminder, EU Task Force Chairwoman.

If the previous hotspot on Samos was constantly criticized and condemned for its overcrowding and the deplorable living conditions of its inhabitants, the new center has generated the same level of rejection for its isolation and prison-like living experience. Both provoke the same result, the deprivation of a sense of dignity and agency for the asylum-seekers locked up there.

By the time the camp’s blueprints began to materialize in the middle of a valley about nine kilometers away from the urban center of Vathy, NGOs and civil society have raised the alarm about the impact on mental health that the policy of containment and deterrence of the Greek government and the Eu-

ropean Commission¹ will have on camp residents.

This report provides a first insight into this aspect with a special focus on the experience of minors and alleged minors², now turned into adults, who have lived in both camps.

¹ Walling off Welcome. New reception facilities in Greece reinforce a policy of refugee containment and exclusion. Joint Policy Brief September 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/walling-welcome-new-reception-facilities-greece-reinforce-policy-refugee-containment>

² The term “alleged minor” in the text refers to cases of asylum seekers who were registered as adults by reception authorities despite their claims and available documentation or whose age could not be determined at the time of registration.

*Cover image by Sam Jubb.

Methodology

The Still I Rise team in Samos conducted eight interviews with minors and alleged minors for two weeks in January 2022. Participants, and when relevant their families, were properly informed about the content and method of the interview and provided their voluntary consent.

The interview was structured with a survey of closed and semi-closed questions, divided into five blocks: profile of the asylum-seeker, security mea-

asures/restriction of movement in the CCAC, access to adequate food, transportation and access to health care. The staff and the translator were trained beforehand and adequate measures were taken to create a safe and comfortable space for participants during the interview.

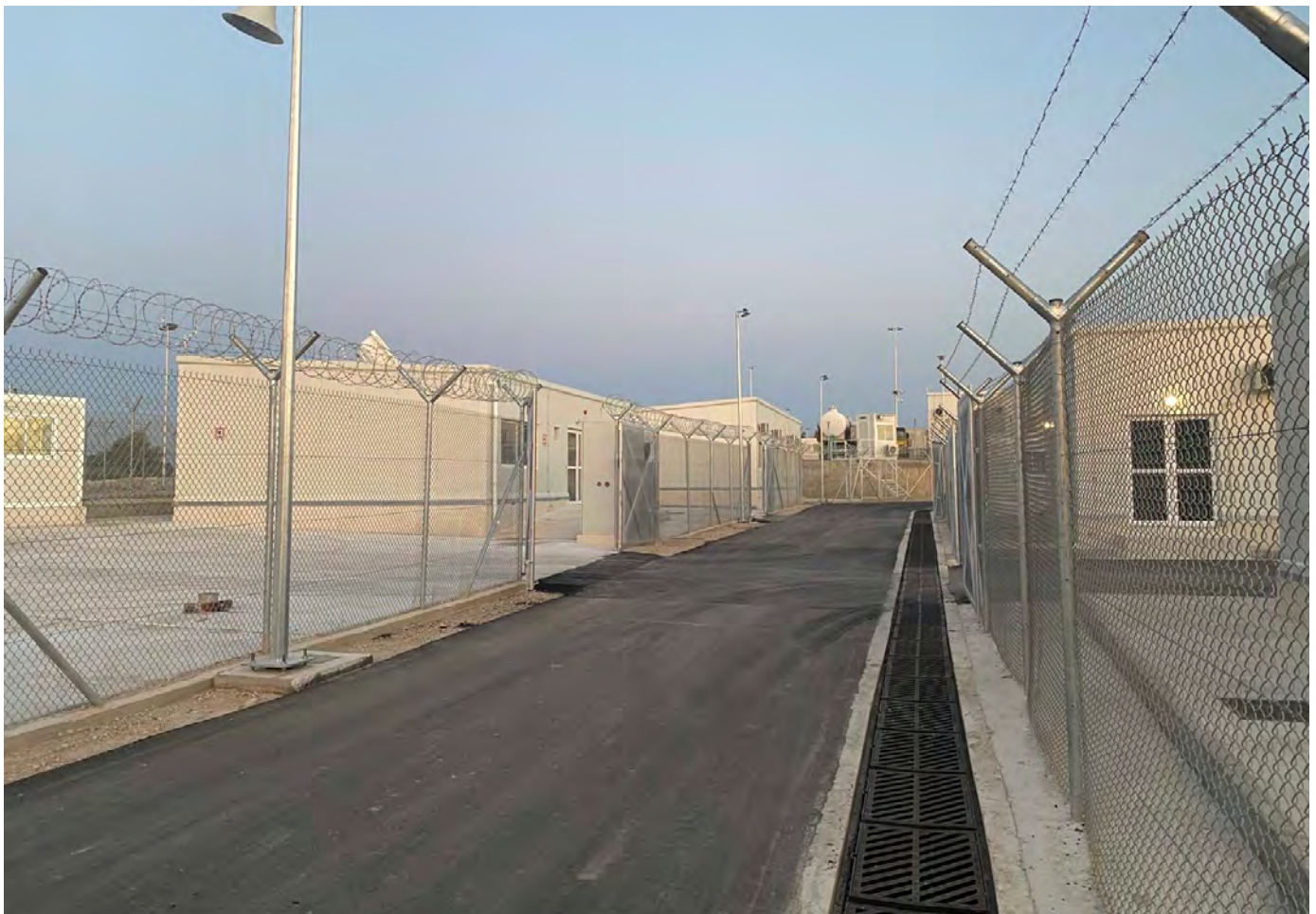


Image by Giorgos Christides via Twitter.

Expired vulnerability: overdue age assessments

It is paramount to understand the impediments and setbacks in the asylum procedure that respondents have had to cope with, as these have contributed to undermining their self-esteem and increasing psychological pressure, with the ultimate result of depriving them of their right to a fair and equal treatment.

All the compiled testimonies correspond to “long-term” asylum-seekers who have found themselves trapped in the system for more than 2 years. Out of 8 participants, only one was recognized as minor by the authorities upon arrival between late 2019 and early 2020. All the rest were registered as adults despite their claims when lodging their asylum application. In fact, since the reception authority did not recognize their allegations or documents, they were registered as adults and referred to the **age assessment**³ procedure.

On top of that, most of them arrived alone on Samos. In other words, **when these respondents submitted their**

asylum application more than two years ago, they claimed to be unaccompanied minors.

In accordance with the law in force at the time of their application and the principle of the benefit of the doubt, they should have been assigned a legal guardian who would have looked after the best interest of the child. However, once registered as adults, they were denied the treatment, services and accommodation options available to vulnerable groups and specifically unaccompanied children⁴.

Despite the current legal framework allowing for a correction of erroneous age registration even after the conclusion of the procedure, several factors render the guarantees provided by the legislation meaningless. In practice these respondents had to face the absence of an effective guardianship system, the lack of qualified staff within the reception and identification procedure, and structural flaws in the age assessment procedure.

Indeed, specialized organizations have

³ Since August 2020 (JMD 9889/2020) the age assessment procedure takes place in three stages: 1) assessment of macroscopic features following a clinical examination from properly trained healthcare professionals; 2) in the case the age cannot be adequately determined through the previous examination, a psychosocial assessment is carried out by a psychologist and a social worker to evaluate the cognitive, behavioral and psychological development of the individual; and 3) in the case it is not possible to reach a conclusion, the person will be subjected to an additional medical examination in the form of either left wrist and hand X-rays for the assessment of the skeletal mass, or dental examination or panoramic dental X-rays or any other appropriate means.

⁴ Unaccompanied children at the gates of Europe. Voices from Samos, Refugees Right Europe and Still I Rise (April 2021).

repeatedly raised concerns about the **shortcomings of the age assessment process for unaccompanied minors**⁵. The claims from vulnerable individuals such as the respondents in this report fall through the **cracks in the system**, including: language barriers, lack of appropriate information, defiant authorities, uncommunicated decisions, restriction of movement that hinder the compilation of additional support documents, recurrent mistakes in the registration of personal and affiliation data, or even skipping steps in the age assessment procedure itself.

At present, two years after their first application, **the lengthy and inefficient age determination process has resulted in the respondents reaching legal adulthood even according to the age they first claimed**. At least three were subsequently recognized as minors, one has not even been assessed yet and one has withdrawn his application as minor due to frustration and stress of having the resolution of the legal status pending on an undated examination. Paradoxically, considering that 6 of the respondents are Afghan or Syrian nationals, their nationality has even



Image by Romy Van Baarsen.

⁵ AIDA: Greece Country Update 2020, Greek Council of Refugees. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AIDA-GR_2020update.pdf



Image by Romy Van Baarsen.

contributed to prevent them from accessing the asylum system with full guarantees, as their claims have been only evaluated on admissibility criteria, but never on the merits of their personal history.

Therefore, the profile of the respondents is particularly sensitive because of the reported psychological impact of the restrictions coupled with their own legal situation. These people have been kept in a legal limbo due to the combined effect of the age determination procedure and the Joint Ministerial

Decision⁶ that deems Turkey as a safe third country based on nationality without tangible proof.

⁶ Joint Press Release by NGOs in response to the Joint Ministerial Decision.
[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PR_JMD%20Turkey_EN%20\(final\).pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PR_JMD%20Turkey_EN%20(final).pdf)

New camp, further restrictions & more isolation

The nature of the camp raises additional concerns for local and international civil society, as the purpose of the facility has changed with the official given name. In fact, the inception MOU between the Greek government and the European Commission referred to a Multi-Purpose Registration and Identification Center (MPRIC), which was in line with the original purpose of expanding Greece's reception capacity to leave behind the shameful images of Lesbos and the "Jungle" of Samos. However, the official banner at the door of Zervou camp states **"Closed Controlled Access Center", without an official definition of the rules governing the structure.**

The Ministry of Migration and Asylum describes the center with the following words:

[The whole new closed controlled center is surrounded by a double NATO-type security fence, which in combination with the installation at the entrance of the necessary control systems, such as turnstiles, magnetic gates, x-rays, two-factor access con-

trol system (identity and fingerprint), ensures secure and controlled entry and exit from the access center to whoever is entitled to it. [...] Additionally, the installation of a Closed Surveillance System (CCTV) is provided throughout the [CCAC], with the use of "smart" software, in order to alert in time of any emergencies, while it is capable of giving notifications and images to the Local Event Center, to the Center for Management of Events & Emergencies (KERANIS building) and to the Control Centers of other involved bodies (for instance the Hellenic Police). Also, fencing along with tourniquets using card readers have been placed in the separate sections of the new [CCAC], for the protection of their personnel but also for the protection of the vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied children and single-parent families.] English translation of the Ministry of Migration & Asylum official webpage⁷.

These physical security measures are complemented by the constant presence of at least 50 police and security guards, with fixed posts in various

⁷ Text published by the Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration & Asylum webpage. Reception and Identification Service, CCAC Samos. <https://migration.gov.gr/en/ked-samoy-kleisti-elegchomeni-domi-samoy/> (accessed 12/04/2022)



The results of the survey show that **all respondents reported having faced issues in leaving and accessing the CCAC.**

All respondents describe the process with negative words and explain that the behavior of the guards is a determining factor for their discomfort. In general, they report feeling treated rudely and with contempt by most of the guards, and their claims being disregarded, even if it means missing the bus or having to wait long outdoors. Moreover, part of the survey required respondents to use a key word to describe their feeling, and the most repeated one was **“stressed”**; other terms used to express how they feel include **“frustrated”**, **“annoyed”** and **“relieved when leaving”**. Indeed, on a scale from 1 to 7, all respondents declared to suffer a high-level of stress by going through this process. The distressing experience of pas-

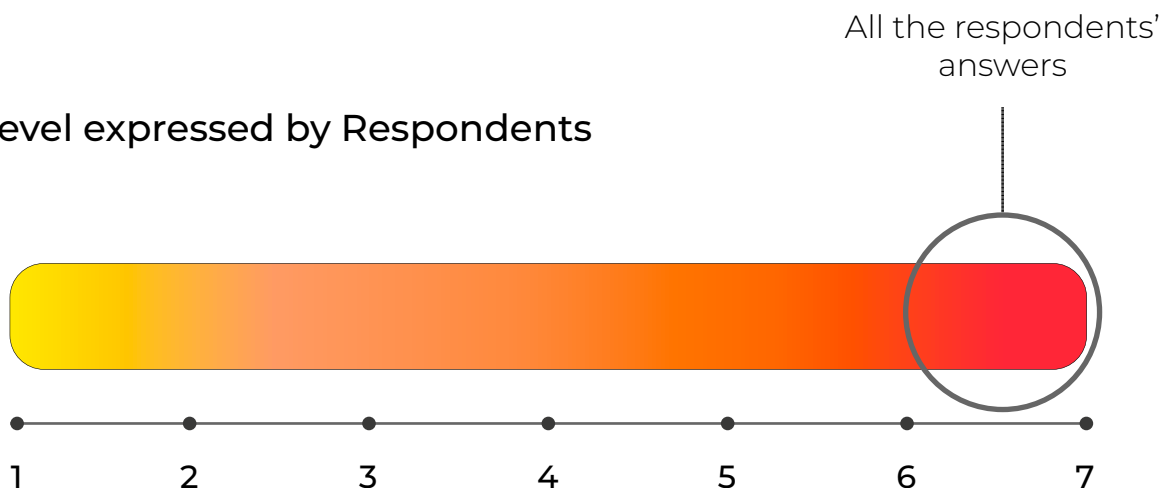
sing through the gates continues on the public bus line that connects the CCAC to the town of Vathy.

Almost all the respondents reported incidents with some drivers and regular situations of tension to get on the bus, as the vehicle is sometimes not large enough to accommodate all the people waiting at the stop.

Same as described above about the guards, the attitude and approach of the bus drivers is generally aggressive towards camp residents. Respondents report that some bus drivers abuse their position when dealing with camp residents and use abusive language and manners that make the respondents feel uncomfortable and reportedly unsafe.

The bus is the only means of transportation to Vathy. The roundtrip costs EUR 3.20 per person, an amount that actually exceeds the daily financial aid of EUR 2.50 for each refugee, or

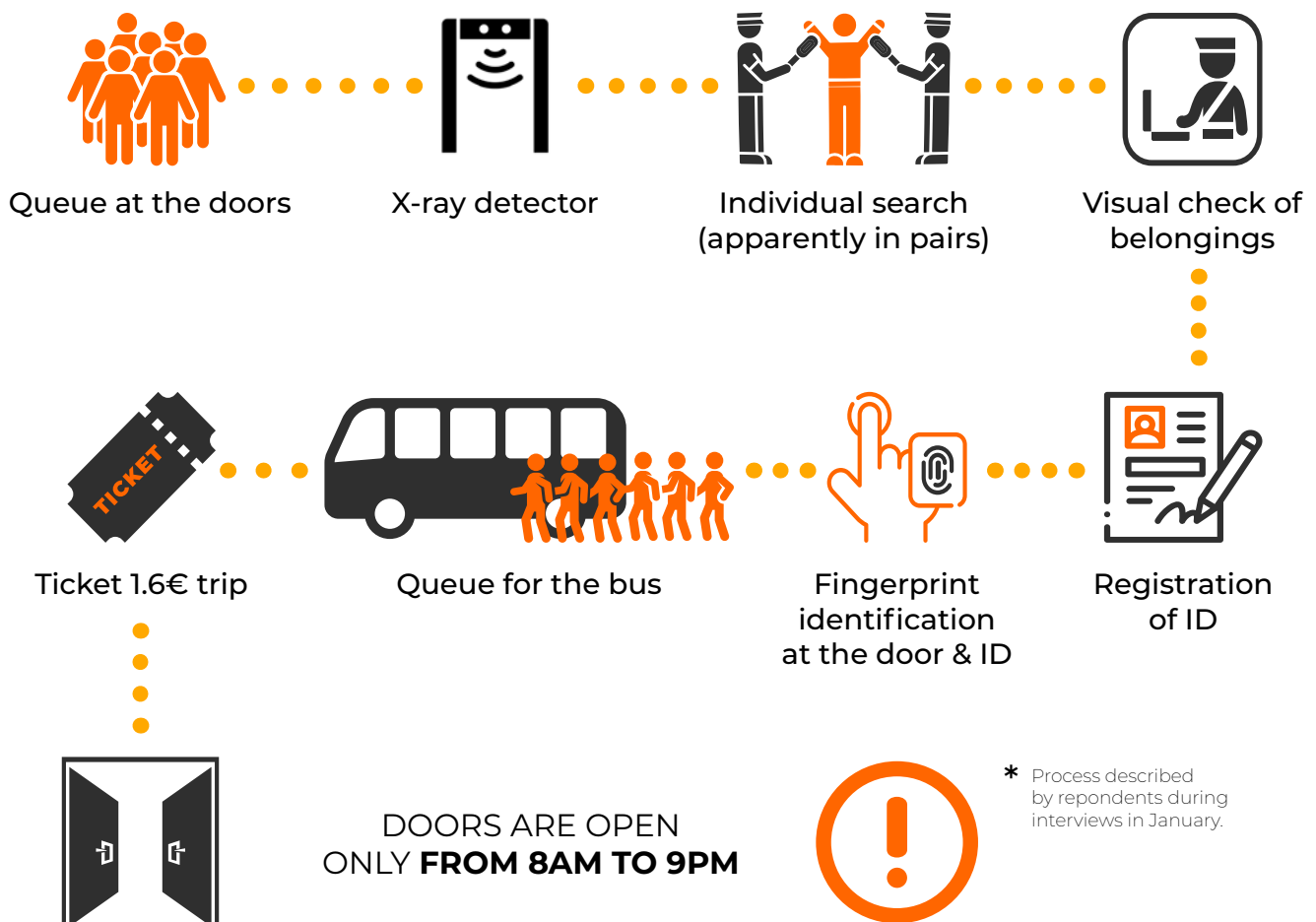
Stress level expressed by Respondents



EUR 1.75 for the members of a family of four⁸. In fact, **the cost of the bus constitutes a major barrier for several of the respondents to leaving the camp and contributes to people coming to the city less often.** The alternative is an eight to nine kilometers walk along the road through the forest, exposed to weather conditions and other risks. The combination of a hostile environment and the behavior of gate guards and bus drivers act as

a deterrent for residents to actually leave the camp. At least one person related to a respondent reports not leaving the camp because of these measures, despite holding an asylum seeker card and therefore being allowed out of the camp.

Moreover, half of the respondents never leave the camp unless they attend school and/or Mazí, Still I Rise center in Samos, and the other half only leaves to volunteer for other organizations.



8 "Conditions at Samos camp 'tragic', says Greek Refugee Council" by ANSA (30th of November 2021). <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/36826/conditions-at-samos-camp-tragic-says-greek-refugee-council>

New gates, old food

Access to adequate food and health care service were highly criticized in the previous camp. The overcrowding and lack of enough resources created long waiting queues in the past and complaints about the quality of the service provided.

The results of the interviews show that the situation has improved in terms of distribution times: respondents claim food distribution is faster and more organized in the CCAC, but that might be due to the considerable decrease in camp residents compared to the “old” hotspot in Vathy. However, food remains of poor quality and respondents report that meals are often expired and even distributed again the next day if they are left over. Only a bottle of water per person is distributed daily along with the food. Distributions are scheduled at fixed times each day (8am to 10am and 12pm to 2pm), so if they are not present at either of these two times, camp residents will not have access to food and

water until the following day.

None of the respondents consider the food distributed in camp to be good enough to maintain an adequate diet, and some reported to be afraid of falling ill because of the food. However, respondents had to fully rely on it for several months due to the interruption of the cash assistance⁹ since October 2021¹⁰. As of March 2022, the program has officially restarted through a new agreement between the Greek government and the Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Nevertheless, NGOs and asylum-seekers themselves report payments are irregular, and overdue payments¹¹ are not restituted. Given the new “cash cards” were only distributed in December, people who have received either positive or negative decisions for their applications since October have been automatically excluded, losing the assistance they were entitled to. As a matter of fact, the inconsistency of the payments contributes to the

9 The cash assistance program is currently managed by the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum and only provides coverage to asylum-seekers. The monthly amount varies depending on the family status of the individuals and if they also receive food assistance of some sort. An adult alone is entitled to EUR 75/month if meals are provided, and EUR 150 if they are not.

Link: <https://help.unhcr.org/greece/living-in-greece/access-to-cash-assistance/>

10 NGOs raise alarm at growing hunger among refugees and asylum-seekers in Greece. 25th of November 2021. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/ngos-raise-alarm-growing-hunger-among-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-greece>

11 Joint Statement, NGOs welcome the resumption of cash assistance for asylum seekers in Greece, call for gaps to be urgently filled.

Link: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/8/ngos-welcome-the-resumption-of-cash-assistance-for-asylum-seekers-in-greece-call-for-gaps-to-be-urgently-filled>

respondents being dependent on the additional support of NGOs to complete their daily meals, as they cannot afford to buy fresh vegetables and/or meat on their own terms.

In fact, **all respondents answered that they would prefer to receive the equivalent in cash of the food provided in the camp, so they could cook for themselves**, since containers in the camp are equipped with a hot plate and a small fridge.

When it comes to healthcare, according to our survey, the abrupt decrease in the number of the people living in the camp has contributed to reducing the waiting time for accessing health services. However, all respondents expressed mistrust of the treatment received, highlighting their preference to go to the hospital for diagnosis, which in all cases was hindered by language barriers and unfa-

miliarity with the administrative procedures. In fact, those who attended the hospital could only grant proper assistance thanks to the support and intermediation of a Greek national.

Additionally, since the interviews took place, the presence of a doctor in the field is no longer guaranteed due to the termination of the contract. At the time of writing, camp authorities have not provided any official explanation or proposed an alternative or timetable for action.

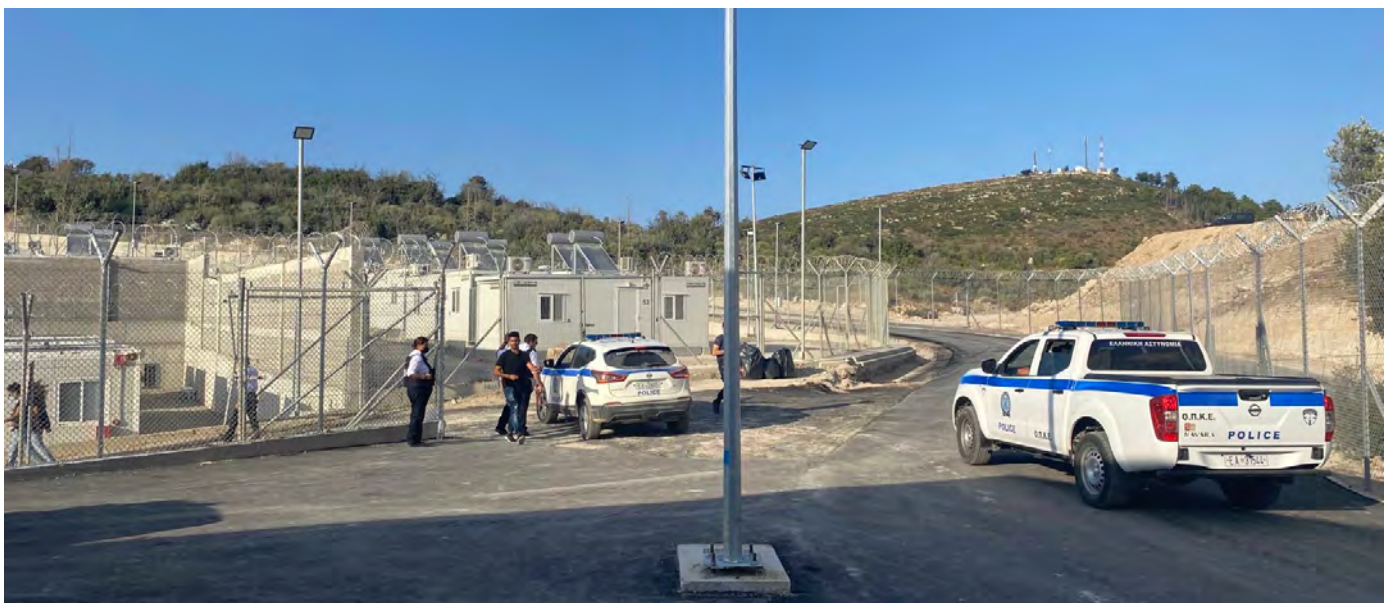


Image by Sam Jubb, courtesy of I Have Rights.

Conclusion

One of the most revealing aspects of the interviews is the state of confusion of the inhabitants of the camp about their situation and prospects. Starting from the experience at the gates and continuing on the bus, language still imposes a major barrier that leads to tense situations and contributes to the defenselessness of people in the camp, which increases their sense of frustration. Beyond this particular, the isolation of the new camp, together with the prison-like experience and surveillance of the new structure, have contributed to a sense of bewilderment. Respondents have been on the island for more than two years and, although the new camp was intended to improve reception conditions, the EUR 276 million in European funds¹² invested in the Aegean islands seem only to alienate asylum-seekers socially and psychologically.

A clear example is defined through the preference for cash assistance over the passive reception of food packs expressed by respondents. Indeed, this attitude shows a willingness to recover ownership and autonomy over their lives and would increase the opportunity for interacting with local population in different sce-

narios. However, the isolated location of the new camp creates the opposite condition, preventing them from developing a role within local society and hampering the opportunity to socialize on equal terms with the national population. The alternative of leaving the camp is not easy for many asylum seekers either, as it would mean losing the right to receive any kind of cash assistance under the current Greek law, which requires beneficiaries to live in state-run facilities in order to be eligible. In summary, the aim of this report is to raise awareness of a structural mental health problem that the new camp and the implicit policy of alienation implemented within it may generate for the population residing there with such restricted freedom of movement. **Further, specialized evaluation efforts are needed to determine the full impact of these measures and, in particular, their compliance with the principles of proportionality and best interests of the child.** Nevertheless, seven months after the opening of the CCAC, its residents are expressing clear signs of distress and sadness over their current and future situation.

¹² The Commission announced an award of EUR 121 million in November 2020 for the construction of reception centers on Samos, Kos, and Leros, and an additional EUR 155 million for new centers on Lesbos and Chios. Link: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2284

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