

Shelter for refugees arriving in Greece, 2015-17

John F Wain

Mass arrivals in Greece since 2015 have far exceeded the supply of acceptable shelter. The attempts to provide solutions continues.

Over one million refugees and migrants undertook the perilous journey into Europe from early 2015. At the start of this emergency the enormous number of arrivals on the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos overwhelmed local municipality accommodation capacity and their stocks of appropriate shelter solutions. The Greek government requested assistance with establishing 'hotspots' through which all new arrivals were required to pass for registration. In an ideal world, with registration systems adequately functioning, shelter space capacity maximised and regular ferries taking people off the islands, services should have been able to cope. However, the numbers were unmanageable.

The Moria hotspot on Lesbos occupies a challenging site, originally designed in 2013 as a detention centre. The site had accommodation capacity in dormitories for around 700 persons whereas the need at this time was closer to 2,300 and no amount of temporary accommodation solutions was going to bridge the gap. Unfortunately, in the absence of a new site, the shelter conditions were and still are well below standard.

In addition to a limited number of standard family tents – the backbone of global emergency shelter response – over 300 refugee housing units (RHUs) were installed on Lesbos and proved very effective as temporary shelter or for use as service support space at the various landing points, Moria registration centre and an overflow site at Kara Tepe. The RHU is a pre-packaged kit, composed of several basic elements, including a lightweight steel frame, roof and wall panels, door and windows, floor covering, solar energy system (lamp and phone charger) and an innovative anchoring system. Deployment is generally accompanied by on-site training.

RHUs are essentially emergency shelter accommodation, used here primarily for people in transit, so ownership and a sense of home, even temporarily, were sadly absent. This led to the shelters being heavily used and often mis-treated. The understandable frustrations felt by people on the move due to frequent bureaucratic delays and unclear procedures contributed to the heavy wear and tear. It became necessary to develop detailed care and maintenance check lists, enhance design modifications and create a comprehensive spare parts package to keep the RHU units functioning and in good order.

It became clear that there was a need for large-capacity 'waiting areas' for people waiting significant periods to have their



June 2017

www.fmreview.org/shelter

arrival formalities addressed. In practically all the bigger sites in Greece, large tents originally designed as mobile warehouses were used to provide covered areas for waiting, temporary registration or transit. These are simply not developed and fitted out for human habitation, however, and are not fit to be used as overnight accommodation. Many innovative solutions were developed to make these spaces more suitable as a day shelter at least.

Types and standards

There were challenges in applying appropriate national and international shelter standards. Humanitarian minimum standards in shelter, settlement and non-food items could not always be met in the only available locations, nor were there suitable Greek national guidelines to refer to for the emergency phase. In addition, the European Union legal framework is generally devoid of clear technical guidelines. As the situation stabilised, there were attempts

through the Shelter Working Group in Athens to achieve consensus on minimum standards; in the initial phases, however, general direction to achieve a consistent level of response and to develop indicators against which to measure performance was needed from relevant technical units.

A typology was developed to assist field-based technical and programme staff in planning and implementing solutions. The different categories were defined as:

- waiting areas, intended for a stay of up to 24 hours and without formal facilities for overnight stay
- transit accommodation, intended for a stay of up to five days, with facilities for overnight sleeping
- mid- and long-term accommodation, intended for periods longer than five days (which may include collective centres, pre-fabricated structures, purpose-built accommodation, RHUs and winterised emergency tents).



Refugee Housing Unit, Kare Tepe, Lesbos, Greece.

Winterisation presented another challenge requiring guidance. It was clear that none of the shelter types deployed would provide sufficient protection from the European winter's cold weather without modifications and the inclusion of a heating source. The use of existing buildings was the preferred solution as solid structures provide a greater level of insulation than temporary shelter options and can be more efficiently heated. Existing structures are also designed for the prevailing local climate including resistance to wind and snow loads. Unfortunately, in Greece during the winter of 2015-16 there were limited existing structures available in the locations where refugees were present and the refugees wanted to keep moving north, often in the direction of more extreme weather conditions.

Solutions to winterise both the family tents and the RHUs were required. A winterisation kit for the family tent was developed which included insulated sleeping mats, an insulation liner and partition, a heat-resistant floor panel (for positioning a stove) and a heat-resistant sleeve (for the stove chimney to pass through the tent wall). The RHUs required a bespoke solution consisting of an elevated insulated floor, roof covering to prevent leaking, and an internal heat source. As the majority of sites did not have appropriate mains electrical connections, the identification of an appropriate and acceptable heat source was the biggest challenge. Safety of occupants as well as tamper-proof solutions led to gas heaters being chosen as the preferred solution; however, wide acceptability of this solution took considerable time to achieve, leading to periods of distress for shelter residents and often to refugees resorting to unsafe and environmentally degrading practices in order to keep warm.

The transition to longer-term solutions

Although the operating environment in Greece has changed significantly since the end of 2015, thousands of people are still accommodated in sites which are only now beginning to offer sufficient protection from the elements and to be equipped with proper access to water, sanitation

and cooking facilities. The winterisation strategy for the winter of 2016-17 focused on replacing emergency shelters with durable pre-fabricated solutions coupled with infrastructure upgrades (water, sanitation and electricity) and has had positive results.

Large cities in Greece have been severely affected by the economic crisis, with reduced infrastructural development. The country's public housing agency was forced to close in 2012 and the housing and construction market has been almost paralysed. It is time that shelter initiatives move on to benefit the urban and suburban economies, focusing on sustainability issues by using, for example, the existing housing stock and unused buildings, and supporting the construction sector through rehabilitation and reconversion projects.

As of February 2017, there were an estimated 62,500 refugees in Greece spread across the mainland and the islands and consistently low levels of new arrivals. There still remains considerable work to be done and decisions to be made which will affect finalisation of a revised shelter and settlement strategy which is evolving from transitional to longer-term solutions. It is certain that some sites will remain, to cater for existing and contingency needs, and many sites will require decommissioning.

In addition to refugees accommodated in the 'hosting sites' on the mainland and the islands, there are numerous organisations providing spaces in apartments, hotels, host families and renovated buildings. It is likely that this accommodation scheme will be expanded by the European Commission to ensure all refugees in Greece are given access to standards of shelter appropriate to the European context while they await a decision on their fate. Any such expanded scheme presents significant opportunities for incorporation of solutions which benefit both the refugees and the host communities in which they reside.

John F Wain wain@unhcr.org
Senior Emergency Shelter Officer, UNHCR
www.unhcr.org