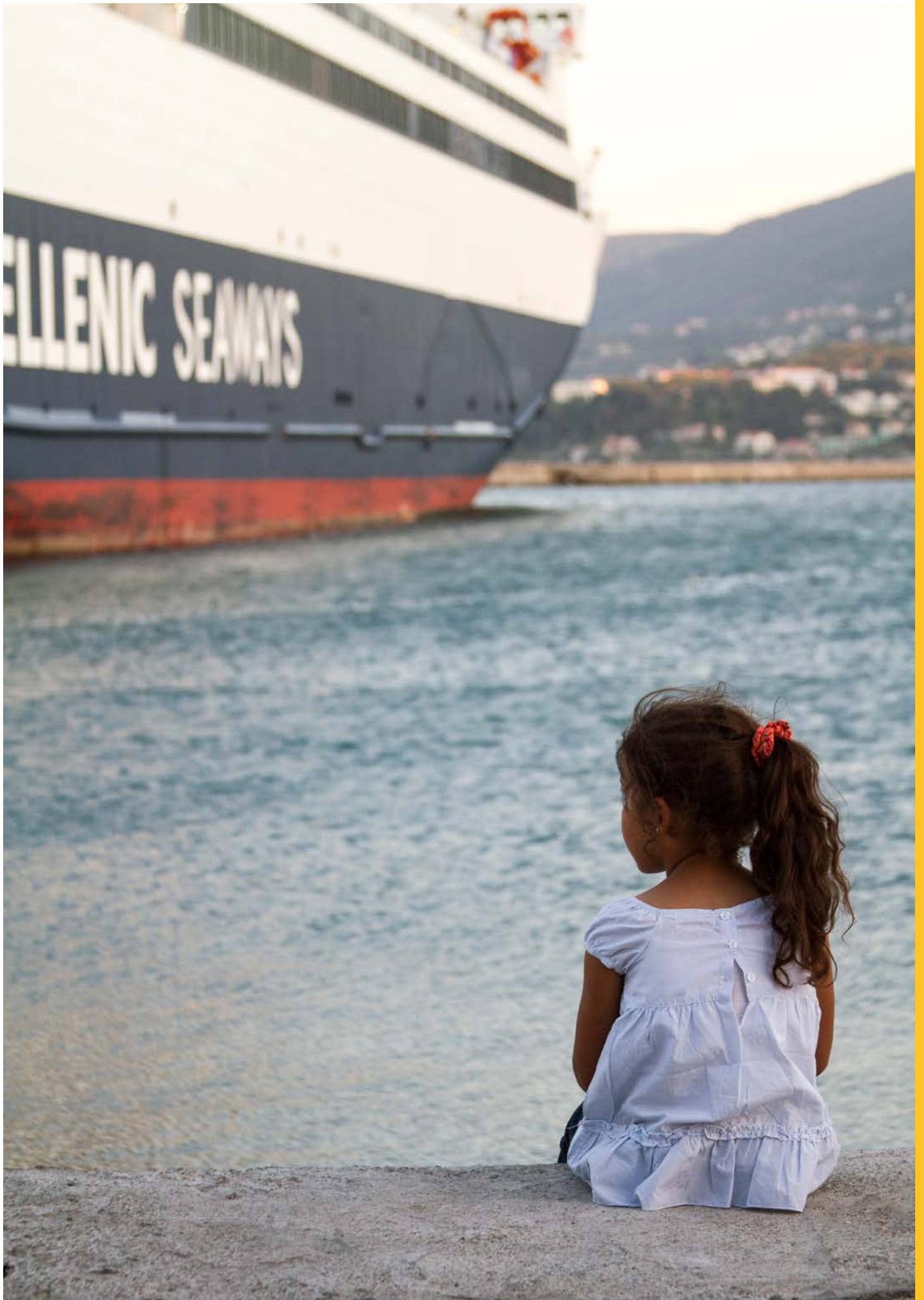# Learning from Lesbos

Lessons from the IRC's Early Emergency Response in the
Urban Areas of Lesbos between September 2015 and March 2016

International Rescue Committee | NOVEMBER 2016

Learning from Lesbos

Lessons from the IRC's Early Emergency Response in the
Urban Areas of Lesbos between September 2015 and March 2016

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FRONT COVER: In Mytilene, migrants and refugees set up tents near the pier where ferries to mainland Greece embark. *Tyler Jump/IRC*
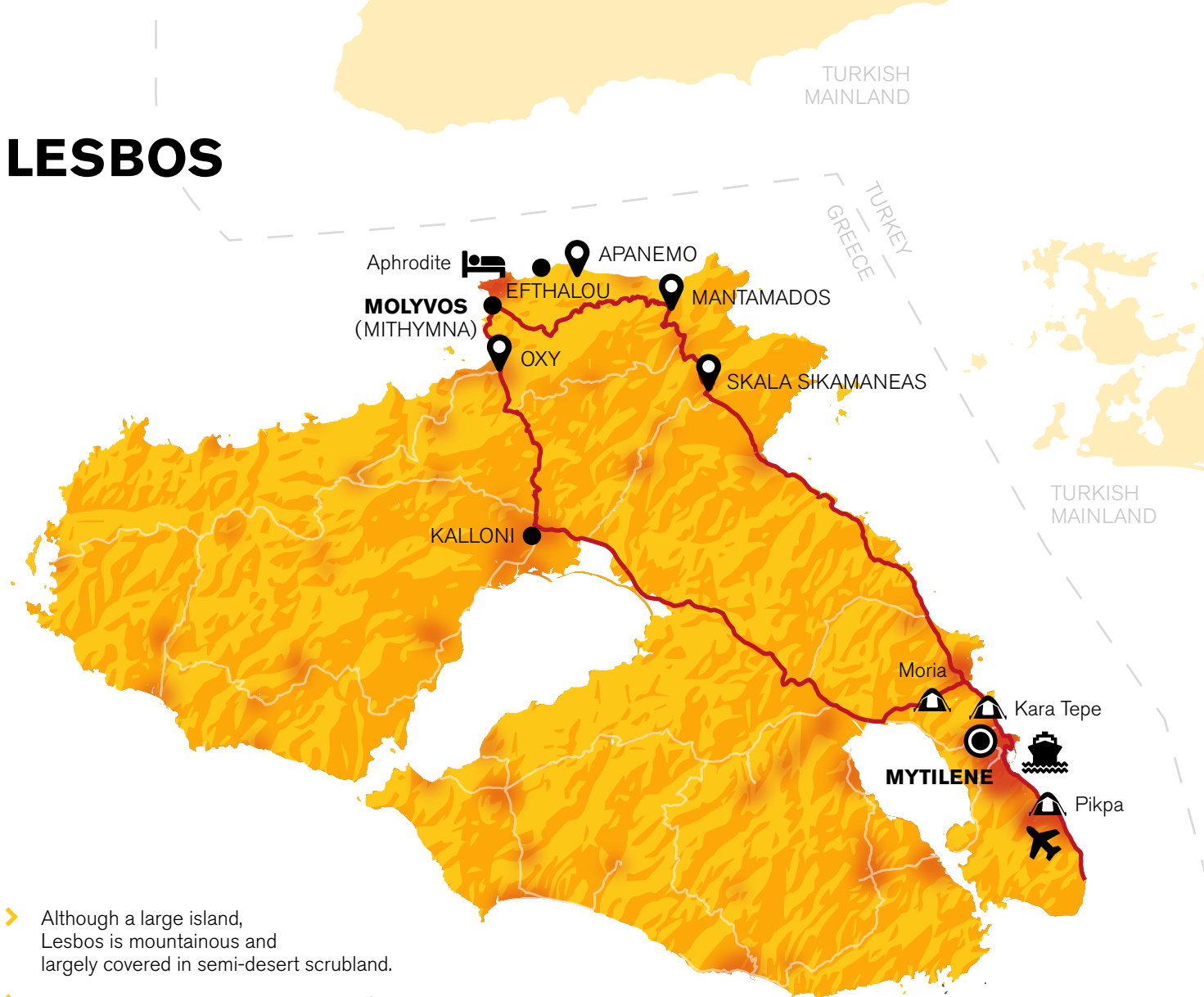
OPPOSITE PAGE: A young girl watches the ferry in Mytilene port. *Tyler Jump/IRC*

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

LESBOS

Aphrodite 🛏

MOLYVOS
(MITHYMNA)

EFTHALOU

📍 APANEMO

📍 MANTAMADOS

📍 OXY

📍 SKALA SIKAMANEAS

KALLONI ●

Moria ⛺

Kara Tepe ⛺

◉ **MYTILENE** ⚓

⛺ Pikpa

✈

TURKISH
MAINLAND

TURKEY
GREECE

TURKISH
MAINLAND

> Although a large island,
> Lesbos is mountainous and
> largely covered in semi-desert scrubland.

> Extensive olive groves occupy much of the rest
> of the island and there are also large pine forests.

> **The resident population is
> concentrated on the coast in small urban areas;
> over a third of the island's population lives in Mytilene.**

Built-up areas

📍 **Assembly points**
where refugees gather after
disembarking their boats on their
journey to Mytilene to register

⛺ **Shelter sites**

🚌 **Bus route**

10 km

N

GREECE

LESBOS

TURKEY

● IZMIR

◉ ATHENS

100 km

> Less than 10 km from the Turkish mainland,
> a large island and an administrative centre,
> Lesbos is uniquely attractive as an unauthorised
> entry point into the European Union.

> Migrants and refugees typically gather in Izmir,
> where they connect with people smugglers.
> They are then bussed to a remote coastal location,
> where they are put on flimsy inflatable craft to make
> the sea journey to Lesbos.

> After landing on the north coast of Lesbos,
> refugees and migrants congregate for buses to
> Mytilene, where, eventually, they begin the registration
> process and wait in shelter sites for authorisation to
> make their way by ferry to Athens and beyond.

Executive Summary

As the European refugee crisis highlights, displaced people are increasingly travelling to or through towns and cities, rather than being accommodated in centralised camp settings. Today, more than half of the world's displaced people live in urban areas[1] and will, on average, continue to be displaced for over a decade.[2] The humanitarian sector must adapt to meet the challenges of an urbanising world and the increasing role of cities as places of refuge, as well as sites of heightened risk of crisis, marginalisation, and inequality. It is therefore critical that humanitarian actors take a coordinated and collaborative approach to supporting refugees and migrants, tailoring their response to suit the urban context and its various stakeholders.

Urban areas are characterised by the size, diversity and mobility of their populations, the density and diversity of the built environment, the number and diversity of government, civil society, private sector and academic organisations, and the reliance of urban populations on social, political, technical and economic systems rather than the natural environment for their livelihoods.[3] These characteristics create both opportunities and challenges for actors responding to urban crises. In particular, they create an imperative for the humanitarian sector to adapt to the complexity of urban environments, the diversity of their populations, and the large variety of stakeholders present within them.

The arrival of large numbers of people in an urban area brings challenges for both displaced and host populations. It also presents opportunities. Currently, however, both the challenges and opportunities are not adequately recognised or addressed in humanitarian response. The emergency response to an unexpected influx of asylum seekers and other migrants in a town or city sees "traditional" humanitarian actors sharing the field of operations with a broader range of stakeholders than they are used to cooperating and coordinating with. Additionally, this is an environment in which local and/ or national actors will often have an existing operational presence and where local authorities will expect to continue to exercise (and have respected) their mandate for oversight of the activities taking place in their constituencies.

This report underlines the importance of a coordinated and collaborative approach to emergency response in urban areas. **The recommendations, addressed primarily to humanitarian actors, reflect lessons learned from the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) initial emergency response programming on the island of Lesbos, Greece, between September 2015 and March 2016, while the crisis on Lesbos was at its peak. This report is not a reflection of the IRC's current programming on the island.** The findings recognise the complexity of urban areas and the need for greater coordination of response activities and better collaboration among responders, stakeholders, and local communities.

This report also contributes to the continuing discussion around how to improve urban humanitarian response. The findings and recommendations are intended to build on the growing knowledge base around good practice. It is not an evaluation, but rather a product to inform and influence operational practices and policies in ongoing and future responses to humanitarian crises in urban settings.

LESBOS MAP, OPPOSITE: Basic data © OpenStreetMap contributors, available under the Open Database License; Landsat and SRTM3 data, NASA; UNHCR, "Lesvos data snapshot," 30 March 2016; Alfred Thomas Grove, Oliver Rackham, *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History*, Yale University Press, 2003, pp325-327

AEGEAN LOCATION MAP, OPPOSITE: CC BY-SA 3.0, original by Wikimedia user Future Perfect at Sunrise, no endorsement implied

RIGHT: Refugees and migrants often arrive on the northern shores of Lesbos in overcrowded rafts and wearing inadequate life jackets.
Tyler Jump/IRC

Findings

The findings and recommendations in this report look for ways to overcome the challenges and leverage the opportunities arising from humanitarian operations in urban areas, bringing benefits for both displaced populations and the communities in which they reside. The main findings, in summary, are:

1. **The IRC's early engagement with the Municipality of Lesbos led to mutual benefits** in the immediate term, and was approached with a view to ensuring positive long-term impact as well.

2. **Working with the existing urban systems of Lesbos – both public and private – to deliver humanitarian programming proved particularly effective.** Where existing systems were inadequate or appeared to be operating in ways that were problematic, the IRC sought to engage in ways that addressed gaps and ameliorated or mitigated problematic practices.

3. **A more coordinated approach**, in which organisations and individuals engaged in the humanitarian response – including volunteers and civil society actors – were more willing to recognise one another, and to ensure complementarity in the diverse activities taking place, **would have improved the prioritisation of efforts and the effectiveness of the response**.

4. **Despite the fractured nature of the response, the IRC managed to build relationships with actors at all levels** of the response (from private individuals through to municipal authorities). **These relationships proved critical to efforts to magnify the impact of the IRC's activities.**

5. **Purposeful and ongoing engagement and advocacy with the local population, particularly in Molyvos, would have strengthened the IRC's response**.

6. **Tensions between host and hosted populations were exacerbated by a lack of reliable, accessible and relevant information.** Rumours and misinformation circulated unchecked, undermining social cohesion, and leading to suspicion, strained relationships, poor prioritisation and use of scarce resources and even unsafe decision-making.

BELOW: Discarded life jackets in northern Lesbos, each representing a refugee or migrant that arrived on the island's shores.

Tyler Jump/IRC

Recommendations

1 **Accountability to host populations needs to be strengthened.**
In order to better achieve this, humanitarian actors should engage with local authorities early in their emergency response and ensure that this engagement is ongoing throughout the operation.

2 Humanitarian actors responding to urban crises must strive to achieve effective coordination, which includes local authorities, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), communities, and volunteer groups. Establishing and maintaining meaningful partnerships between these various stakeholders will generate stronger and longer-lasting benefits for affected populations.

3 Meaningful participation of local communities is essential. In addition to the fact that affected communities – host as well as hosted – have the right to be consulted and to take part in activities that affect them, participation that leverages local capacities has been shown to increase the effectiveness and appropriateness of humanitarian response. Active engagement of local people can also be expected to contribute to improving social cohesion, not least between displaced and host populations. When interacting with the local community, humanitarian actors should provide timely information, manage expectations, and promote transparency on behalf of the NGO sectors.

4 Humanitarian actors should prioritise the use of existing urban service delivery mechanisms wherever possible and appropriate, rather than engaging in direct service delivery. Ideally, humanitarian organisations should look for ways to strengthen local systems where these are weak, to identify gaps and advocate for local solutions to address them, and to undertake direct service delivery only as a last resort, ideally while working to put in place a more sustainable, locally led solution.

LEFT: A Syrian boy in the Kara Tepe refugee transit site on Lesbos.
Kulsoom Rizvi/IRC

Monthly Refugee Arrivals on Lesbos

September 2015

October

November

December

January 2016

February

March

Resident population of **Molyvos**
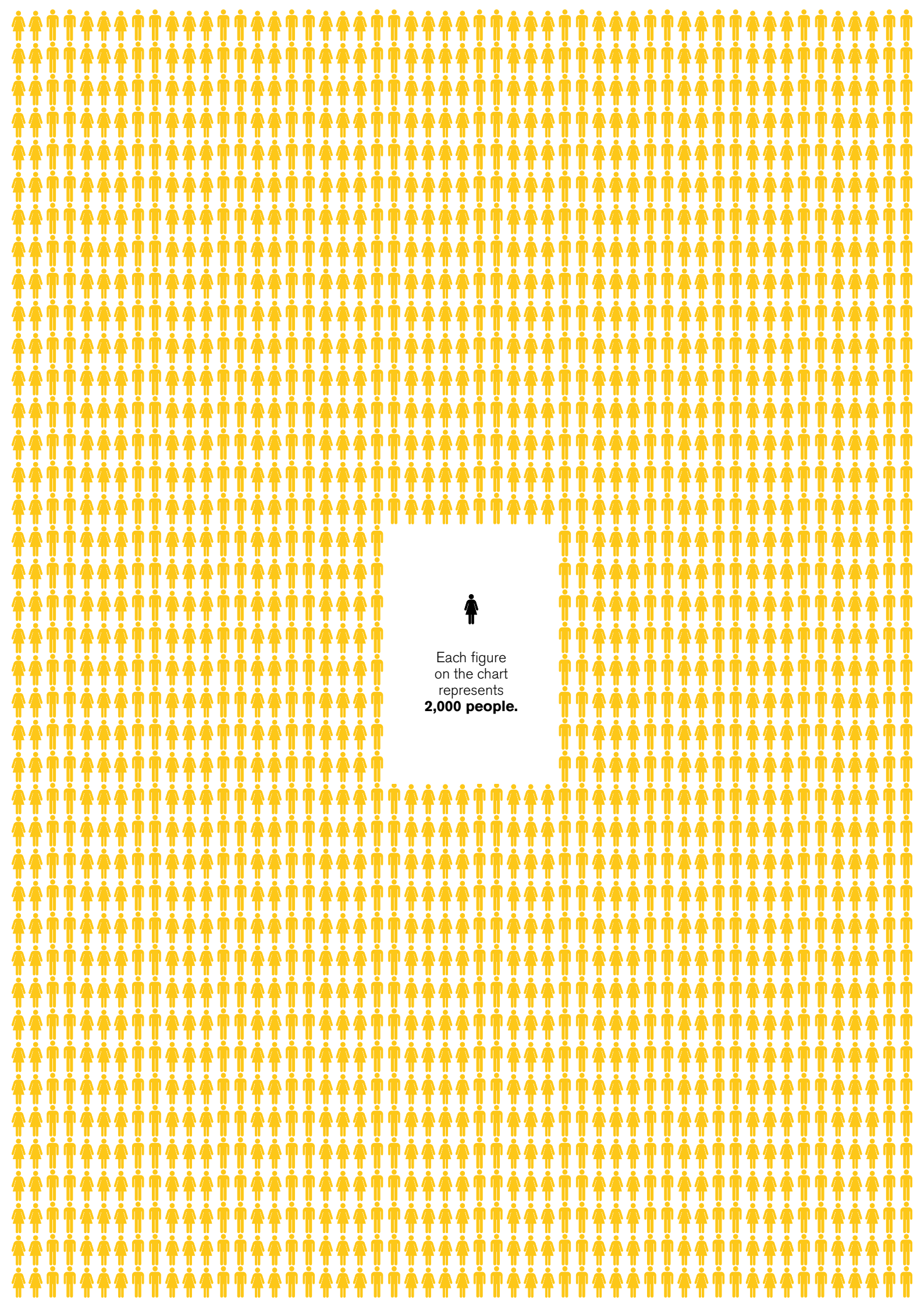(Mithymnia) municipal community

Resident population of **Mytilene**
municipal community

Each figure
on the chart
represents
2,000 people.

The IRC's Principles of Urban Humanitarian Response

The IRC has been working in cities and towns impacted by humanitarian crises for decades and our experience shows that urban settings require new approaches to delivering assistance. We are currently exploring innovative ways to support the displaced and host communities in urban contexts to survive, recover and rebuild their lives. We are dedicated to not only meeting the immediate needs of affected populations, but to also fostering recovery, resilience, and self-reliance in the aftermath of a crisis, so that affected populations are safer and healthier, with less disruption to their education, economic wellbeing, and ability to influence decisions that affect them, and the city is able to better cope with future shocks and stresses. We are committed to improving our response to urban crises and sharing our experience and evidence with the wider humanitarian community.

While there is no effective one-size-fits-all approach, the following principles can guide an effective response to humanitarian crises in urban contexts.

WORKING WITHIN A COMPLEX CONTEXT

As no two cities are alike, no two cities in crisis are alike. Effective urban humanitarian response requires a full understanding of the scale and complexities of the local context, its interconnected systems and stakeholders, and the way in which diverse urban communities live within it and alongside one another. To be most effective, humanitarian actors working in an urban context should take into account local power dynamics, social networks, existing structures, systems and geography in order to identify suitable entry points and opportunities to leverage the distinct characteristics of the city or town.

SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

Building long-term recovery and resilience must be considered from the outset of a crisis, as the transition from emergency response to recovery can be rapid and normally involves a period in which the two phases overlap. Cities operate on longstanding and interconnected networks of service provision channels (such as education, health, and legal services), markets, governance structures and social systems. Humanitarians should strive to work within these systems, to avoid their duplication or disruption, and to work in ways that leaves them stronger and better able to ensure long-term recovery and resilience.

URBAN PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATION AND INCLUSION

Cities are shaped by a multitude of international, national and local actors from multiple sectors, including government, civil society organisations (CSOs), the academic community, the private sector and development practitioners. These diverse actors, who possess valuable knowledge of and influence over how the city functions, form networks that humanitarians can leverage to inform effective and inclusive responses. Their understanding of how the city operates and provides services, as well as how legal and social frameworks affect the lives of urban residents and communities is a critical, but often overlooked, resource. Humanitarians should support local authorities and service providers to coordinate responses while leveraging the emergence of national and locally led response networks to ensure that activities and advocacy are well coordinated. Such an approach will help build local and sustainable capacity for preparedness and response while striving for the inclusion and empowerment of marginalised groups, such as women and minority groups.

RIGHT: Mytilene is home to over a third of the population of Lesbos It is the administrative centre for the single municipality which covers the whole island, as well as a regional capital.   *Samer Saliba/IRC*

Introduction

Overview

This report is an output of the International Rescue Committee's advocacy and learning partnership with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) on urban humanitarian crises.

Using a combination of desk-based research and primary qualitative data, this report aims to shed light on the following questions in relation to the IRC's activities on Lesbos from September 2015 to March 2016:

> Were the IRC's programming models designed to take into account the urban environment and its stakeholders?

> In what capacity is the IRC supporting the municipal government in Lesbos in its operations to respond to an influx of refugees and other migrants, and how effective is this collaboration?

> Are the IRC's programmes addressing social tensions between refugees and migrant populations and their host communities?

> What key lessons does the Lesbos case study provide for humanitarian practitioners in relation to improving emergency response in urban settings?

Seeking to analyse urban emergency response from both humanitarian and local government perspectives, the process began with a desk review, followed by a series of observational visits and semi-structured key informant interviews with humanitarian aid workers and local community-based actors in two locations where the IRC has programmes – the city of Mytilene and the town of Molyvos on the Greek island of Lesbos (the whole of which comes under one municipal authority). The interviews focused on collaboration between humanitarians, the government sector and civil society as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with the emergency response to the arrival of unprecedented numbers of refugees and other migrants on Lesbos. The IRC's Urban Response Learning Manager conducted all research for this report and relied on internal research conducted previously by IRC colleagues.

The Lesbos Case Study

The ongoing refugee crisis on Lesbos highlights the need for a more contextually appropriate approach to responding to humanitarian crises in urban areas. Lesbos, the main landing point for refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco and Somalia (among other places of origin), has a population of just over 86,000. In the nine months between July 2015 and March 2016, Lesbos received a total of 559,659 arrivals, an average of over 2,000 arrivals per day. The height of the crisis was October 2016, when the island received over 135,000 arrivals.[4] The sheer volume of people arriving on this small European island, the economy of which is based largely on tourism, posed a significant challenge to the humanitarian emergency response: how do we meet the needs of refugees and migrants while respecting the urban dynamics of the island? This is the question that up to 81 international and local NGOs (of which only 30 were locally registered) and countless volunteers should have been asking themselves.[5]

Country of Origin of Arrivals on Lesbos, February 2016
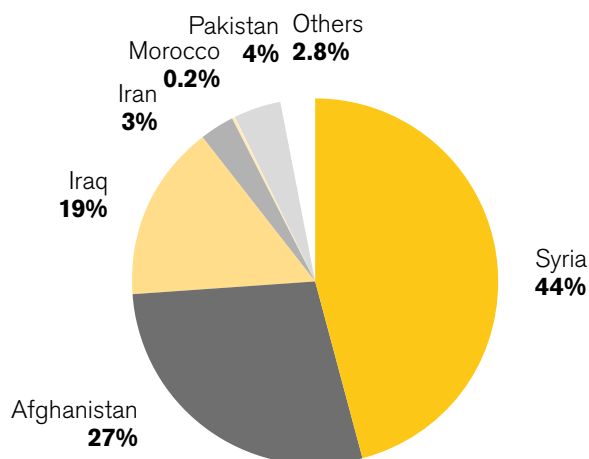
SOURCE: Figures from Hellenic Police and Hellenic Coastguard, quoted in UNHCR, "Lesvos data snapshot," 30 March, 2016

The largest city on Lesbos, Mytilene, has a population of nearly 30,000 and is home to the Lesbos municipal office, a university, and a diverse range of businesses and service providers. The rapid influx of large numbers of refugees and migrants to the island in a nine-month period has created an urgent need to provide assistance to people who are extremely vulnerable and often in severe need. At the same time, this situation has had a significant impact on the lives of local residents, government agencies, and businesses, all of whom had already been struggling to adapt to the effects of the Greek economic crisis. While working to meet the needs of those who have been forced to flee their homes, and those who find themselves housing thousands of unexpected new arrivals, humanitarian actors cannot afford to neglect the opportunities and challenges that are presented by operating in a complex urban setting.

At the start of the crisis, people arriving by boat to the northern shores of Lesbos faced safety concerns, primarily within the town of Molyvos. They were unable to legally access services in Molyvos without their presence first being registered by the police, which meant making a 70-kilometre journey south, to Mytilene. Commercial transport operators and private individuals were initially prohibited from transporting new arrivals who had not yet registered with police (who provided a "police note" to this effect) and the municipality did not have the resources to move such large numbers of people. Until agreements were struck for collaborations between municipal authorities and organisations such as the IRC to provide transport for this journey, many people had no option other than to set out on foot.

Upon reaching Mytilene, refugees and migrants were housed in one of three primary sites within the city: Kara Tepe, Moria or Pikpa. Facilities at these sites ranged from temporary housing (at Kara Tepe) to a disused prison (Moria) and simple allotment near the beach (Pikpa). Kara Tepe, a site managed by the municipality, and with services provided by a number of NGOs, was initially meant to provide shelter primarily for Syrian families but has since opened to vulnerable families and individuals of other nationalities as well. Moria is managed entirely by the Greek Ministry of Migration. Pikpa, meanwhile, is a more informal site, managed by self-organised volunteers and reserved for vulnerable refugees and migrants who are referred by protection actors (such as the IRC or UNHCR) after arriving on the island.

At the height of the crisis, all who arrived on Lesbos from Turkey were supposed to stay only in these three sites in Mytilene. However, they simply were not big enough to accommodate all who came. At one point in November 2015, a strike by the operators of the ferries that would normally transport refugees and migrants onward to mainland Greece from Mytilene left tens of thousands of people stranded on Lesbos. Forced to wait for days in and around the main port of Mytilene, many resorted to setting up tents near the main road.[6] As numbers of refugees and migrants swelled, the daily routine of the port city ground to a standstill.

Too often in the case of Lesbos, people and organisations working to address the needs of new arrivals failed to pay adequate attention to the impacts of the influx on the host population. Mistrust and discontent among the host population resulted, and at one point, the Mayor of Lesbos was reported as saying: "I have seen many NGOs and individuals coming without official registration and showing no cooperation with our municipality. This causes everyone upset and these NGOs arouse doubt and mistrust among the residents of Lesbos. I would say their presence is disruptive rather than useful."[7] A long-term resident of Lesbos underlined the fact that the host community was also affected by this mass movement of people: "It is not only a crisis for the refugees, it is a crisis for every local community that the refugee crisis passes through."[8]

The IRC's Response on Lesbos

When planning its involvement in the humanitarian operation on Lesbos, the IRC took care to ensure that its work addressed identified needs while respecting and leveraging the support of the governmental, economic, and social systems that exist on Lesbos. The IRC therefore sought to:

> Gain the trust of local government by utilising and supporting the service-provision systems of the Municipality of Lesbos and fully recognising its authority;

> Take steps to achieve a more coordinated response among the various actors (proactive coordination was largely lacking on Lesbos until the second half of 2015);

> Leverage the resources of the island – municipal, commercial and social – while striving to ensure continuity of services for the host community; and,

> Consult with local communities regarding ongoing humanitarian programming.

Many challenges remained, however. For example, the lengthy procedure for an organisation to be registered to operate on Lesbos, and to gain approval for specific programmes caused significant delays for the IRC. Without an effective mechanism for coordination, the IRC, like many other international NGOs struggled to ensure that host and refugee/migrant populations were well informed about its programmes (this was particularly the case in Molyvos).

Given the constantly changing nature of the crisis, the IRC placed extra emphasis on ensuring there was continuous monitoring, evaluation and adaptation of its response to better suit the urban context of Lesbos. From summer 2015 until March 2016, the IRC's programmes therefore adapted to shifts in European and Greek policy, the temperament and politics of the island and its population, and the changing needs of refugees/migrants and the communities hosting them.

OPPOSITE: Newly arrived refugees in Molyvos make their way down from the coast to catch a bus to Oxy. *Kulsoom Rizvi/IRC*

BELOW: People wait for ferries to take them to mainland Greece. Once a refugee arrives in Lesbos they must register as an asylum seeker; after their paperwork is completed they can continue on their journey north. *Epaminondas/IRC*

Key Findings

Finding 1: The IRC's early engagement with the Municipality of Lesbos led to mutual benefits in the immediate term, and was approached with a view to ensuring positive long-term impact as well.

Early in its response, the IRC explicitly acknowledged the authority of the Lesbos Municipality and sought to work within its parameters. Both as a principle, in recognition of the mandate of the local authority, and as a means to facilitating future cooperation, this step was considered critically important.

As a result of this acknowledgement the municipality, in turn, came to regard the IRC as an appropriate partner for jointly conducted programming, and as an actor that had an awareness of the needs of both refugees/migrants and of the broader population of the island.

One example of this joint programming is the provision of sanitation services to the Kara Tepe site at the start of the IRC's activity on Lesbos. Because the Kara Tepe site had been vacant prior to the crisis, certain public services (such as solid waste management) provided by semi-private contractors elsewhere on Lesbos were not available there. The municipality was not prepared to devote resources to having the existing contractors service the site. In order to preserve as much as possible the existing service-provision structures on Lesbos, the IRC sought the municipality's approval to contract the existing providers to service Kara Tepe. Taking this approach avoided the creation of a parallel service-provision system, with the possibility of differing standards of service.

By having the IRC serve as the contractor, the municipality and the service providers also avoided legal constraints to the provision of such services to unregistered migrants.

Legal and procedural protocols required by the municipality and the Greek government at the national level were not at all geared to the urgency of a humanitarian response, and caused serious delays in programming.

Although a process of adaptation was taking place, and the situation is now significantly improved, in one instance, it took two months of negotiations to finalise an memorandum of understanding (MoU) with government to pave a roadway leading to the IRC's transit site in Molyvos.

It is important to recognise that the strength of the IRC's relationship with local authorities on Lesbos was a key factor enabling the successful navigation of these obstacles so that programme delays did not blow out to become programme failures.

The IRC's early engagement with the Lesbos Municipality facilitated a strong relationship built on mutual trust and transparency. The Lesbos Municipality has indicated that it views the IRC as an exceptional example of an international NGO willing to respect local jurisdiction, and as a result, the IRC has been able to overcome legal and procedural constraints and to ensure that programming fits well within existing systems and structures.

OPPOSITE: A refugee family walks through the port of Mytilene.
Tyler Jump/IRC

LEFT: Water points at Kara Tepe camp are often filled with rubbish and surrounded by dirty pooling water. These taps are used for everything – from collecting drinking water to washing clothes and showering.
Tyler Jump/IRC

Finding 2: **Working with the existing urban systems of Lesbos – both public and private – to deliver humanitarian programming proved particularly effective. Where existing systems were inadequate or appeared to be operating in ways that were problematic, the IRC sought to engage in ways that addressed gaps and ameliorated or mitigated problematic practices.**

Throughout its work on Lesbos, the IRC has sought to work with the island's existing urban service delivery systems, either directly or indirectly. An example of indirect service provision using existing systems has been the IRC's partnership with independent businesses on the island, particularly money transfer companies such as Western Union.

Access to currency exchange and transfer services has been critically important to refugees and migrants arriving on Lesbos, as they require access to cash in order to continue their journey westward through mainland Europe. Those who carried cash with them to Greece faced the constant threat of robbery, potentially with serious violence. People who managed to arrive with their money untouched faced difficulty finding somewhere to legally exchange currencies. Those who relied on accessing funds held overseas, their own or those of relatives, needed a way to safely transfer money.

Legally operating currency exchange services on Lesbos only existed in towns that were largely inaccessible to refugees and migrants, however. This was particularly the case in the south of the island, where reaching currency exchange services meant a journey of at least an hour on foot from the nearest site. There was only site at which transfer services were available, but it was small, and did not post the current fees or exchange rates.

ABOVE: Newly arrived refugees walk along the coast of Molyvos.
Kulsoom Rizvi/IRC

As a result of this lack of safe, legally accessible services, many of the new arrivals were in a situation of significant financial vulnerability, and at severe risk of exploitation or outright robbery. IRC staff reported that, at the height of the crisis, when sites were overflowing and people were spilling out onto the streets of Mytilene, robbery and exploitation in the context of informal money exchanges were, in fact, common.

Recognising this fact, and recognising also that private-sector money transfer services already existed on the island, the IRC engaged in partnerships with these providers, allowing them to establish "pop-up" money transfer stations at sites like Kara Tepe. The locations of money exchange and transfer services were also mapped, and this information transmitted to refugees and migrants. Additionally, the IRC established a line of communication with these providers, informing them whenever a new bus had arrived at the site (particularly when this happened outside regular business hours). Importantly, the commercial operators agreed to ongoing monitoring and support (for example, translation) by the IRC, which provided an important guarantee that refugees and migrants using the services would receive respectful treatment.

As a result of the IRC's intervention, newly arriving refugees and other migrants were able to transfer or exchange money in a safe, timely manner. At the same time, local service providers benefited from increased business and a safer, more controlled environment in which to operate.

LEFT: Businesses run by local residents were vital in providing essential services to the Kara Tepe site and elsewhere.

Samer Saliba/IRC

The Role of Civil Society in an Emergency Response:
The Aphrodite Hotel in Molyvos

It was on April 27, 2016 that the first boat came ashore amid diners stretched along the beachfront at the Aphrodite Hotel, unloading 11 adults, four children, and a man paralysed from the waist down, all overwhelmed with relief to have survived the perilous voyage.

At the height of the crisis, in the middle of the tourist season, the hotel would see as many as seven boats a day arrive on its small stretch of shoreline and hotel staff worked around the clock to take care of their guests as well as to provide support – food and water, access to hotel facilities to shelter and get clean, first aid and logistical help, just to mention a few of their activities – to the new arrivals, often using the hotel's van to transport them to the centre of town, where they could either find someone willing to drive them to Mytilene, or set out to make the journey on foot.

The majority of international NGOs and foreign volunteers began arriving on the island in September four months after the arrival of that first boat at the Aphrodite Hotel. The response that followed was characterised by a serious lack of coordination, with a multitude of organisations and individuals working independently, without cooperation or collaboration. In the chaos that ensued, the management and staff of the Aphrodite Hotel felt that they were left to deal with the situation without any assistance from Greek authorities, their efforts neither recognised nor respected.

Even the normal considerations that would be expected were often being neglected, with people – refugees, migrants, volunteers and professional humanitarian actors alike – simply coming and going from the hotel without consultation or permission.

Unsurprisingly, this situation generated resentment on the part of the management and staff of the hotel towards the local government and other responders. Delays in taking concrete steps to provide assistance to refugees and migrants and support to the local community, who were trying to help new arrivals at the same time as they watched the crisis negatively impact their own livelihoods. As Aphrodite Vati Mariola, whose family owns the hotel, states, "It's like I invite you to my home and cook for you and then you tell me how to manage my household… I can't begin to stress how frustrating it is when the local community is bypassed, ignored, or looked down upon, even."

BELOW: The beachfront at the Aphrodite Hotel – new arrivals, along with their dinghies and life jackets, can be seen by the shoreline.
Aphrodite Vati Mariola/Aphrodite Hotel
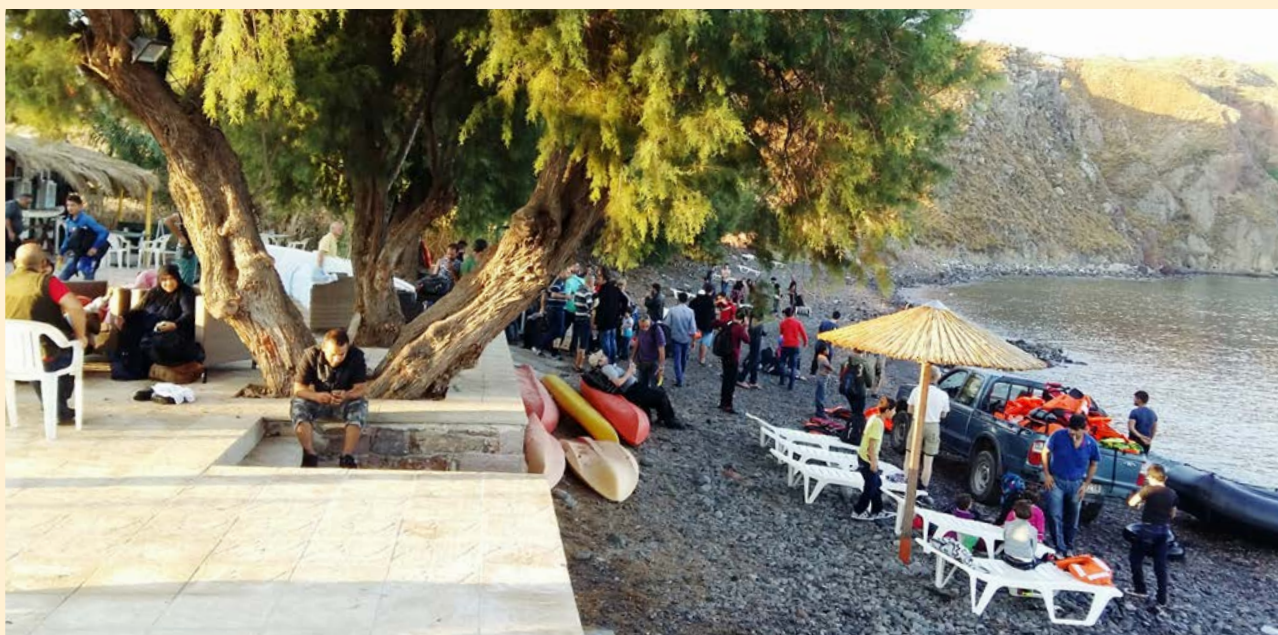
ABOVE: The Aphrodite Hotel made both its staff and services available to new arrivals on Molyvos, greatly aiding them on their way to Mytilene for registration.   *Aphrodite Vati Mariola/Aphrodite Hotel*

In light of these tensions, the IRC, in partnership with the hotel's owners, worked to establish a safer and more orderly process of transporting new arrivals to the hotel. An IRC staff member was also available on call to help the hotel to manage the process. The hotel's owners welcomed this partnership and acknowledged the IRC as one of the few international NGOs in Molyvos that had recognised and shown appreciation for the hotel's efforts as a civil society stakeholder in the response. More importantly, the IRC ensured there was genuine consultation with the local community. It was essential to understand their perspectives and challenges so that interventions met the immediate needs of refugees and migrants as well as benefiting local people, who were also facing this new reality. "When someone comes along and shows genuine interest in working together with the local community, it can make all the difference in the world," said Aphrodite Vati Mariola.

It should be noted, too, that local actors – even those actively working to contribute to the emergency response – are themselves impacted by the crisis. While some of the Aphrodite's guests were understanding of the difficult situation the hotel was in, on the front-line of the crisis, as it were, many bookings were cancelled. The hotel experienced a 65 per cent drop in visitor numbers for the summer of 2016 while reservations from the town's tour operators overall were 80 per cent down from the prior year. Many tourism-based businesses have since closed and the unemployment rate in Molyvos is high.

> **When someone comes along and shows genuine interest in working together with the local community, it can make all the difference in the world.**

What's more, social tensions among locals have increased, with extreme right and extreme left voices frequently engaging in verbal altercations. Given the pre-existing economic crisis in Greece, this is a financial and social setback that the town can ill afford, and it remains to be seen how it will cope. Many tourism operators in Molyvos have been similarly impacted, and it is vital that humanitarian actors are alert to the vulnerabilities of the host population as well as the new arrivals.

BELOW: The beachfront at the Aphrodite Hotel in quieter times
Samer Saliba/IRC

Finding 3: A more coordinated approach, in which organisations and individuals engaged in the humanitarian response – including volunteers and civil society actors – were more willing to recognise one another, and to ensure complementarity in the diverse activities taking place would have improved the prioritisation of efforts and the effectiveness of the response.

One of the biggest challenges to efficiently responding to the refugee crisis on Lesbos has been the number and diversity of actors present. In the earliest stage of the crisis, the response was predominantly orchestrated by civil society actors and volunteers, self-organised and, in the majority of cases, without previous experience or training in emergency response or humanitarian action. Even as the crisis endured and the ranks of specialist humanitarian organisations swelled, the "non-traditional" responders represented the majority of people providing immediate assistance to refugees and other migrants landing on the Lesbos shoreline.

In Molyvos (and other places) this lack of coordination led to refugees and migrants being given inaccurate information and bad advice. In one instance volunteers, not knowing that the IRC, through an agreement with the municipality, had arranged for bus transport, told people who had recently arrived that they would have to make their way to the centre of town on foot. Exhausted men, women and children therefore began a humiliating parade through the town, a spectacle that was demeaning for them, and exacerbated anxieties among local people.

When boat arrivals on Lesbos were at their peak, responders endeavoured to establish coordination mechanisms – primarily information sharing via a phone messaging application. Although these efforts were better than nothing, their ad hoc nature was symptomatic of the underlying coordination issues. Information sharing improved, but meaningful coordination - with the establishment of a shared approach to identification and prioritisation of needs, and the mobilisation of resources – continued to be a serious gap.

Under the auspices of the Greek authorities, UNHCR now organises weekly general coordination meetings open to all active responders. Participating organisations are included in an Inter-Agency Consultation Forum (the Forum), as chaired by the Lesbos Municipality and co-chaired by UNCHR with the support of the General Secretariat of the Ministry for the Aegean and Island Policy and involvement of the Ministry of Migration. Responding organisations are continuously encouraged to register with the Ministry for the Aegean and Island Policy in order to participate in the Forum and legally operate on the island. The Forum maps the active programmes of all of its members and categorises them as either protection, health, shelter, or non-food items.

Finding 4: Despite the fractured nature of the response, the IRC managed to build relationships with actors at all levels of the response (from private individuals through to municipal authorities). These relationships proved critical to efforts to magnify the impact of the IRC's activities.

From the outset, the IRC has made great efforts to engage with the broadest possible range of actors involved in the response on Lesbos. In addition to its collaboration with municipal authorities (discussed above), the IRC invested time and resources in establishing relationships with the local private sector, civil society actors and NGOs, national and international. The criticality of these relationships varies, of course, depending on the degree to which aims and activities were shared or at least directly complementary, but overall, these efforts resulted in more effective and sustainable programming.

In the initial stage of its work on Lesbos, the IRC endeavoured to map the multitude of groups and individuals engaged in responding either to the needs of newly arrived refugees and migrants or to the strains being felt by the local population as numbers of people on the island burgeoned. Given the large number of people active in the response and the general lack of coordination among them, it was not possible to identify everyone, but it was important to know at least who the key actors were, and to have an understanding of their activities, interests and capacities. As previously mentioned, however, the existing political and economic actors, systems and structures also represent important actors in an urban crisis response, and the lack of a mapping and analysis of these stakeholders by the humanitarian community represents a significant gap which undoubtedly had a negative impact on the effectiveness of the response.

Engagement across the Spectrum of Actors Involved in the Lesbos Response

The IRC's engagement with the various groups and individuals active in the Lesbos response generally involved one or more of the following goals or functions.

COMMUNICATION

This relationship is based on sharing information that will inform and facilitate good programming. The needs and priorities of affected people are best understood by establishing a solid channel of communication, which will also serve to ensure that an organisation's activities and aims are well understood and accepted. On Lesbos, the IRC held focus group discussions with members of the local Molyvos community. The relationship that developed through these discussions led to a reported reduction in tensions between the host community and NGOs. Better-planned, more transparent programming also contributed to a reduction in social tensions between the host and refugee populations.

ABOVE: A facility at the IRC's Apanemo transit site, painted by local families.   *Samer Saliba/IRC*

COORDINATION

Humanitarian coordination seeks to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater predictability, accountability and partnership.[9] Good coordination ensures that various actors' work will be complementary, rather than duplicative or competitive. In the Kara Tepe site, in Mytilene, the IRC has been proactive in pursuing strong coordination with other NGOs and the municipality-let management of the site to ensure that it is delivering services that are correctly prioritised and which leverage the services and resources available from other actors. For example, by introducing a referral system directing people with healthcare needs to Médecins du Monde and Human Appeal, the IRC meets an important need by leveraging the services provided by others, not duplicating them. Coordination in an urban environment can be challenging, as evidenced by the response on Lesbos, but its importance is crucial to ensuring the greatest possible positive impact.

PARTNERSHIP

During an emergency in an urban setting, where we typically find a proliferation of non-specialist actors becoming involved in humanitarian response, partnerships (formalised through a memorandum of understanding or other contract or agreement) can be particularly useful in clarifying and delineating activities. In addition to spelling out the parameters of cooperation, partnerships can establish predictable lines of communication and frameworks for accountability. In the context of the Lesbos response, the IRC has entered into partnerships with one or more other parties to work together to implement programmes, to ensure coordination in service provision and other activities, and to enhance communication.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Supporting local organisations with a more permanent presence to develop their capacity in emergency response and recovery has long been recognised as good practice. Direct service delivery by international and other "outside" actors in an emergency should generally be undertaken as a last resort, and with a view to facilitating a transition of responsibilities to local actors once they are in a position to take over (capacity building support from international organisations often being a key factor in reaching that state of readiness). In Molyvos, the IRC engaged in organisational development with one civil society actor who worked to strengthen their structure, legitimacy, programme quality, and knowledge of humanitarian principles. While the relationship had its challenges, the organisation in question maintained a presence and active role in support of the IRC's Apanemo transit site while it was operational.

Finding 5: Purposeful and ongoing engagement and advocacy with the local population, particularly in Molyvos, would have strengthened the IRC's response.

A frequent criticism levelled by local residents of Lesbos was that they were not adequately consulted or informed about the activities of international NGOs, volunteers, and other responders.[10] While some international NGOs did register with the municipality, local people on Lesbos often complained about those who did not, (particularly independent volunteers, not affiliated with an NGO or governmental organisation), and who acted without the consultation or involvement of local authorities or the community. (In one example, independent volunteers began staging their shoreline response activities on a popular beach despite requests from the local community that they move to another location.) Humanitarian actors on the whole (and particularly independent volunteers) were slow to acknowledge and address these concerns.

Acknowledging the importance of broad stakeholder consultation and participation, and in recognition of the degree to which early efforts fell short on this front, the IRC set out in 2016 with a strengthened commitment to improving its performance. The planning and management of the IRC's transit site in Molyvos, Apanemo (no longer operational),

embodies this renewed commitment. Selection of the site was informed by community meetings and local residents were regularly invited to visit the site to see the work taking shape. Local children even took part in decorating some of the structures around the site with their paintings.

The IRC has also instituted more regular community focus group discussions to ensure local people are better informed about the organisation's activities, and to ensure they have the opportunity to make their concerns heard. These efforts have helped to improve the IRC's relationship with residents of Molyvos, who have since reported that they feel their needs are considered as important as those of refugees and migrants. IRC staff working in Molyvos report that the improved relationship has made it easier to implement programmes, and to deliver effective assistance to people affected by the crisis.

BELOW: Planning the IRC's Apanemo transit site was done in coordination with the municipality and the local community. *Samer Saliba/IRC*

Effective Stakeholder Consultation in Urban Humanitarian Response

The process of building political and community acceptance of the IRC's transit site in Molyvos, Apanemo, is an example of how effective stakeholder consultation and participation mitigates potential risks and amplifies positive impacts. Critically, in an urban environment, municipal authorities must be part of those consultations, as the following example illustrates.

In planning for the establishment of a transit site, the IRC undertook extensive community engagement, and established a partnership with the municipal authorities, participating in consultations on site selection and even engineering assessments.

To build consensus and community approval of the transit site, the IRC partnered with the municipality to host several public consultation meetings where information about the project was shared with residents and feedback sought regarding where the site should be located.

Several locations within the town were proposed, but each met with opposition from residents. Ultimately, in response to local people's concerns, the IRC and Lesbos Municipality settled on a less central site. Likewise, when residents pushed to have the (English-language) working title of the nascent site replaced with something Greek, this preference was also accommodated, and the site came to be officially named Apanemo.

By the time it was completed, the site had been shaped by both operational and social imperatives, being close to the shore, where people would arrive, large enough to accommodate the anticipated caseload of hundreds of new arrivals, and positioned so that it was unlikely to cause excessive disruption to the lives and livelihoods of local people. Programmes anticipated for the site would be jointly managed by international NGOs and local civil society actors.

Finding 6: **Tensions between host and hosted populations were exacerbated by a lack of reliable, accessible and relevant information. Rumours and misinformation circulated unchecked, undermining social cohesion, and leading to suspicion, strained relationships, poor prioritisation and use of scarce resources and even unsafe decision-making.**

A lack of effective communication with affected communities allowed distrust and misunderstanding to grow between local residents, the refugee and migrant population, and humanitarian actors. For example, a rumour spread at one point throughout Molyvos that the drowned bodies of refugees and other migrants crossing the Aegean were contaminating fish stocks. The fear this rumour generated led a number of people to avoid buying or consuming fish, which in turn directly impacted the livelihoods of local fishermen and seafood retailers.

Harmful misinformation such as this could have been dispelled by effective public information and education campaigns. While international NGOs have engaged in extensive advocacy efforts around the refugee crisis across Europe and beyond, relatively few have given adequate attention to the need for information and advocacy targeting the residents of Lesbos, who are sometimes a forgotten "affected population" in this crisis.

In recognition of this gap, the IRC has worked to ensure that relevant information is made available in ways that delivers key messages to the target audience (information cards distributed on the buses used to transport new arrivals from Molyvos to Mytilene for registration, for example).

One particularly useful information tool developed by the IRC and its international NGO partners is the website *www.refugeeinfo.eu*. Designed for viewing on mobile devices (in recognition of the widespread ownership and use of mobile phones by refugees and migrants for everything from maintaining a connection to family to international funds transfers), the website aims to connect refugees to existing services along their route – details of reliable taxi services or pharmacies, for example – and to provide critical information that can help to protect against protection threats such as trafficking or exploitation.

BELOW: Newly arrived refugees wait at Oxy, an informal assembly point along a main road in northern Lesbos, to catch a bus to Mytilene.

Kulsoom Rizvi/IRC

Recommendations

While the Lesbos refugee crisis is unique, lessons learned from the IRC's emergency response on the island do offer insights and recommendations that are likely to be relevant for humanitarian operations in urban environments elsewhere.

The following recommendations are meant to serve as guiding principles rather than as specific formulas to be rigidly applied, and they aim to balance the need to ensure an effective and timely response in the short term with a view to early recovery and the aim of ensuring positive outcomes in the longer term.

Recommendation 1

In light of the need to ensure accountability towards local authorities and host populations, as well as to people forced to flee armed conflict and persecution, humanitarians should engage local actors such as municipal authorities early in an emergency response.

RELATED URBAN PRINCIPLES

Working within context

Partnerships and collaboration

Recommendation 2

Humanitarians responding to urban crises must strive to achieve effective coordination across the entire spectrum of actors engaged in an emergency response, including local authorities, NGOs, affected communities (displaced and host), and volunteer individuals and groups. Formal partnerships can be a productive way to engage stakeholders less experienced in humanitarian response.

RELATED URBAN PRINCIPLES

Working within context

Partnerships and collaboration

OPPOSITE: Ali, 4, and his father at the Kara Tepe site. Ali lost his hearing when a bomb was dropped close to his home in Aleppo when he was only five months old. He is unable to speak or hear and requires surgery. After the bombing his mother moved him and his siblings to Lebanon where they have been for the past three years, saving until they could make the journey onward to Europe.
Tyler Jump/IRC

RIGHT: Some of the many shelters erected at Kara Tepe once INGOs intervened in the site. *Samer Saliba/IRC*

Recommendations (continued)

Recommendation 3

While the complexity of the urban environment presents many challenges, humanitarians nonetheless need to ensure the meaningful participation of the local community in planning and implementing the emergency response. Doing so can reduce the risk of social tensions, and even has the potential to strengthen social cohesion between displaced and host populations. Moreover, fully engaging the capacity of civil society can improve the reach and appropriateness of humanitarian programming, promote the dissemination of reliable information and counter misinformation and rumours, and increase transparency and accountability.

RELATED URBAN PRINCIPLES

Recovery and resilience

Recommendation 4

Humanitarians should strive to deliver emergency assistance via existing urban systems wherever possible, rather than making direct service provision their default mode of operation. At the same time, they should endeavour to identify gaps and weaknesses in existing systems in order to support local actors to strengthen their capacity and to ensure an effective and sustainable response.

RELATED URBAN PRINCIPLES

Working within context

Partnerships and collaboration

ABOVE: In the summer of 2015, as the arrivals crisis on Lesbos began to peak, many refused to stay at Kara Tepe; they bought tents and pitched them at the port in Mytilene instead. Those who chose to stay outside the camp still had to return every day to hear if their number was read in order for them to continue their journey to mainland Europe.
Tyler Jump/IRC

Annex A: Detailed Methodology

Terms of Reference

With a focus on the urban dynamics of the Lesbos refugee crisis, specific research questions included:

1   In what capacity is the IRC supporting the municipal government of Lesbos and how effective is this collaboration?

2   Are the IRC's actions reducing social tensions between host and refugee populations? Is this an intended outcome of its programming?

3   Have adjustments to emergency programming approaches been made in recognition of the urban operating environment? As the IRC expands its programming, are programming models being adjusted further to take into account the urban environment and associated stakeholders?

Approach

The research for this report sought to gain insight from multiple perspectives of those affected by or responding to the refugee crisis on Lesbos. It combines primary qualitative data (gathered via observational field visits and semi-structured interviews on Lesbos) with desk-based research on the Lesbos response.

The resulting findings prioritise evidence specific to the Lesbos response. It is not, therefore assumed that the findings and recommendations made here would apply equally in other regions. Rather, they are meant to serve as a case study, and to contribute to the ongoing conversation around improving urban humanitarian response.

The IRC's Urban Response Learning Manager conducted all research for this report.

Process

Desk-based Research

The IRC conducted a desk review of:

> Media reports: Focusing on the refugee crisis between June 2015 and March 2016. These articles provide background on the crisis before international NGOs became heavily involved beginning in August 2015.

> Research, assessment, or evaluation products internal to the IRC, including:

» A real-time evaluation of the emergency response in Greece (conducted in November 2015) which consulted 28 IRC staff, seven UN and peer agencies, and six local partners and municipal authorities.

» Records of focus group discussions with Greek residents and community groups conducted in Molyvos in November 2015. The IRC conducted seven focus groups with a total of 49 participants.

» The report of an Economic Recovery and Development Assessment conducted to inform future economic programming on Lesbos. The assessment included focus group discussions and household-level surveys of the refugee population, focus group discussions with participants from the host population and local business owners, and key informant interviews with representatives of the local municipality and NGOs active on the island. The data was collected during October 2015.

BELOW: The surge of refugees to Lesbos coincided with the height of the tourist season. This meant the ferries to the mainland were overfilled with a mix of refugees and tourists. *Tyler Jump/IRC*
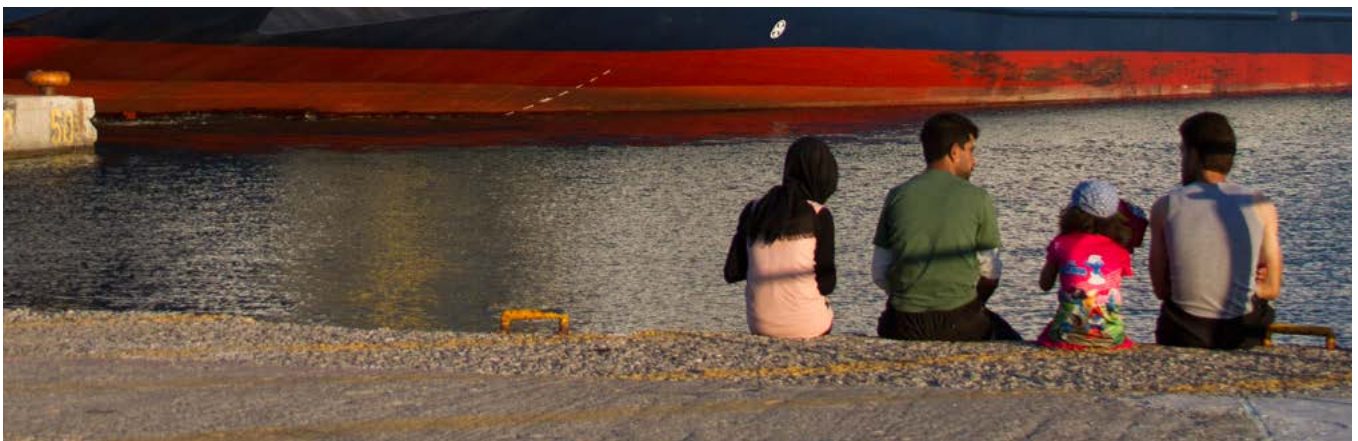
Field Visits

The field visit took place in January 2016 and focused on close observation of the IRC's activities in both Molyvos and Mytilene. Informal interviews were conducted with field staff implementing programmes. This close observation of the IRC's programmes on Lesbos significantly informed the development of the case studies found in this report.

The IRC Learning Manager consulted the Municipality of Lesbos, and conducted more formal semi-structured interviews with:

> IRC staff based on Lesbos for all or part of the period between September 2015 and March 2016, and

> Greek residents of the island, including business owners.

Key questions included in the semi-structured interviews are provided in Annex B.

During all semi-structured interviews, the purpose of the research was fully explained and verbal consent obtained from interviewees. Respondents were invited to skip questions or stop the interview at any time. In light of the informality of the interviews, the names of interviewees are not usually provided. Where comments are attributed, this is done with the permission of those quoted.

Annex B: Interviews

Key Interview Questions

Interviews with Humanitarian Actors

1 What challenges and opportunities does the urban context present in achieving your desired outcomes, particularly when it comes to ensuring those outcomes do not impact and/or support wherever possible existing urban systems?

2 What are the challenges and opportunities associated with programming for a transitory refugee population?

3 What are the impacts of operating camps within urban host settings?

4 How closely, if at all, do you collaborate with municipal actors and other public service providers to achieve your desired outcomes in urban areas? Where they exist, why are there gaps in collaboration and public sector engagement?

5 In your view, what is the role of the governmental sector in addressing the refugee crisis on Lesbos?

6 In your view, what is the role of volunteers and smaller charity groups in addressing the refugee crisis on Lesbos?

7 How, if at all, do you empower the local community – particularly business owners – in their response to the refugee crisis?

8 How important is it for refugees/migrants to have access to existing services on the island? How do you facilitate this access, particularly given that refugees/migrants are physically separated from them while in the camps?

9 In your view, what is needed to ensure a coordinated response from all parties (government, INGO, volunteers) that addresses the needs of refugees/migrants while respecting the daily goings-on of the island?

10 In your view, what role does local advocacy play in your response on the island?

11 To your knowledge, what impact is humanitarian intervention having on social cohesion on the island?

12 Do you work to align humanitarian and city planning efforts? Can you provide examples?

13 How important is flexibility on the island? What impacts does flexibility have on efficacy?

14 What would you do differently the next time you work in an urban setting?

BELOW: Kara Tepe before any intervention: there were two showers for 2,000 refugees, long queues for the toilets, rubbish everywhere and a tense atmosphere predominating.
Tyler Jump/Stichting Vluchteling/IRC

Annex C: Monthly Refugee Arrivals on Lesbos

September 2015	89,690
October	135,063
November	103,409
December	65,838
January 2016	42,601
February	31,416
March	13,996

Local Population Figures Used for Comparison

Resident population of **Molyvos** (Mithymnia) municipal community	1,570
Resident population of **Mytilene** municipal community	29,656
Total resident population of the island of **Lesbos**	86,436

SOURCES: Refugee arrival figures from Hellenic Police
and Hellenic Coastguard, quoted in UNHCR,
"Lesvos data snapshot," 30 March, 2016

Resident population figures from
Hellenic Statistical Authority,
"Population census:
permanent residential population," 2011
*http://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/1210503/
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Defining Urban

Given their interdependency and the fluidity between them, distinguishing between urban and rural areas is an imperfect – and sometimes unhelpful – endeavour.

Moreover, categorising our world as either urban or rural risks painting a false picture of human settlements today. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight they key differences between the megacity and the remote village, understanding that the majority of people live in places that would fall somewhere along a spectrum between these two extremes. Urban areas differ from rural ones in terms of the number, density, and diversity of stakeholders, residents and the communities they represent. Their political, social, and service provision structures and systems are also more complex and interconnected. The concentration of resources, a reliance on cash-based economies, and the scale and density of their physical environments sets urban areas apart from rural ones. Displaced populations in urban areas are often hidden from view and can be further marginalised from

society as they face legal and social barriers to accessing local services, particularly healthcare and education, employment and means of supporting themselves.

In the ongoing conversation about good practice in urban humanitarian response, there is not yet agreement on a definition for the term "urban area". This reflects the fact that governments use varying operational definitions.

RIGHT: Mytilene is the political and commercial centre of Lesbos and the one true city on the island. It is a working port and a tourism hub. Mytilene and the surrounding urban area bore the brunt of the brunt of the disruption caused by the wave of arrivals from Turkey.

Samer Saliba/IRC

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New York

International Rescue Committee
122 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10168-1289
USA

Washington, DC

International Rescue Committee
1730 M Street, NW
Suite 505
Washington, DC 20036
USA

London

International Rescue Committee–UK
3 Bloomsbury Place
London WC1A 2QL
United Kingdom

Brussels

International Rescue Committee–Belgium
Place de la Vieille
Halle aux Blés 16
Oud Korenhuis 16
1000 Brussels
Belgium

Geneva

International Rescue Committee
7, rue J.-A Gautier
CH-1201
Geneva
Switzerland

Bangkok

International Rescue Committee
888/210–212 Mahatun
Plaza Bldg., 2nd Floor
Ploenchit Road
Lumpini, Pathumwan
Bangkok 10330
Thailand

Nairobi

International Rescue Committee
IKM Place
5th Ngong Avenue
Upper Hill
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