Ethical quandaries in volunteering

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Volunteers in Greece who are filling gaps in service provision can encounter complex ethical situations for which they may be insufficiently trained and supported.

Since 2015, Greece has been an entrance country and transit point into Europe for hundreds of thousands of 'border crossers'.[1] The EU–Turkey Agreement of 2016 transformed the country into a place of limbo, where asylum seekers are forced into precarious living conditions for up to two years before either being returned to Turkey, given refugee status in Greece or, far rarer, resettled in another European country. Hundreds of new arrivals continue to land every week and tens of thousands of people are now crowded into under-resourced camps, shelters, hotels and squats or are living on the streets. Unpaid volunteers, many of whom have little or

no previous experience in humanitarian settings and arrive for only short-term missions, fill systemic gaps in services.

Between June 2017 and August 2018, I volunteered in Athens with an informal legal aid team and at a camp on the island of Lesvos where people were housed, fed, offered classes and assisted in carrying out entrepreneurial activities. Both organisations required a minimum of two months' commitment, longer than the average term of service. During this time I also visited multiple camps, organisations and informal spaces in mainland Greece and on Lesvos, interviewing paid aid workers, government employees and volunteers.

Filling gaps in services

In January 2017, a Syrian man died in his tent during the first week that Georgia,[2] an unpaid volunteer from northern Europe, was volunteering with a loosely associated group of activists on Lesvos. No contact details for his extended family could be found among his personal effects, so his body lay in the morgue for days. She and fellow volunteers liaised with Syrian community leaders in the camp and then published a photo of the deceased man on Facebook, and within a few days she was speaking with his family. According to Georgia, the organisations and governing bodies being paid to house and protect this man did not have the capacity to contact his family, whereas she, a recently arrived, unpaid activist with little previous experience with this population, was able to do so in a matter of days. When the man's brother (a resettled refugee in northern Europe) came to identify the body, the volunteers accompanied him to the morgue and aided the transfer of his brother's body back to Syria. Georgia and the other volunteers had done what was needed, yet it was problematic that this small group of unpaid volunteers had assumed the responsibilities of paid protection agency staff. The most glaring consequence of this was that the deceased man's family members learned of his death through social media.

In Athens, even 'official' protection agencies are unable to fulfil their roles adequately. Hundreds (probably thousands) of unaccompanied children sleep in the streets or in informal squatter sites. A few volunteers within the legal assistance team decided to find respite for two young boys (16 and 17 years old), who had been living on the streets for months. The volunteers began with the usual channels – calling UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), meeting with other organisations, and even inquiring at informal squats. Finding no accommodation, they paid for the two boys to stay in a hotel for some nights in order to gain strength, shower and get a few good nights' sleep.

On their first evening in the hotel the boys drank alcohol and sexually assaulted a female tourist staying in another room. The shocked volunteers tried to locate the tourist, who had already left the city. They contacted a youth service organisation whose leadership met with the legal team that spoke at length with the boys. I noticed that much of the conversation between the volunteers about this incident centred on the ethical dilemmas with which they had suddenly found themselves confronted. They asked themselves to what degree they were culpable, how they could have mitigated this kind of experience without leaving the boys on the street, and whether it was even their responsibility to house the boys. They could not adequately answer these questions, feeling in part responsible but also confused about the 'right' course of action. It dawned on them that these boys could be simultaneously understood as both 'at risk' and 'a risk'.[3]

Some volunteers went so far as to house border crossers themselves. One aid worker on Lesvos described a volunteer who had seen a 15-year-old boy sleeping on the ground in Moria camp and "instinctively brought him to her house". She bought him a phone and clothes but after some days began to complain about him, citing his constant desire for more things. She grew tired of his presence, as "it didn't align with her image of what would actually happen". When the organisation discovered these circumstances, she was dismissed because her actions violated their code of conduct. Rather than help move the boy to another housing project, she left the island, leaving him to fend for himself.

One volunteer in Athens avoided socialising with the families she helped because she didn't want them to form a bond with her, as she knew that she would leave once her contract was over. Here, critical self-awareness of possible outcomes may enable good practice, yet in this case it was the volunteer rather than the association she worked for that led to this action. In other contexts, people's social networks and resilience, even in dire situations, may be overlooked.

Responsibility and relationship boundaries
Having heard positive things about an informal organisation, I began volunteering there within a few days of my arrival in Athens. I had a crash course in legal asylum practices and quickly learned what aid was offered by other organisations in the city. The legal team (mainly composed of volunteers from the Global North) volunteered in a large building to which – on a first-come, first-served basis – border crossers came for help relating to: accessing the asylum service, practice for their asylum interviews, information about housing, access to a doctor or reunification with family in another European country. The issues were many and complex and required different skills and, often, inter-sectoral cooperation with other organisations. It was difficult to maintain communication channels with clients, so we often relied on texting them with our personal phones.

On one occasion, a man to whom I was texting information about asylum disclosed that he was contemplating suicide. As it was after 18:00 most of the aid organisations were closed and I didn't know how to respond. I chose to meet him in a busy restaurant, and we spoke for hours using Google Translate. He told me about his severe health issues, his isolation in Greece while his family remained in peril in his home country, and how he still had no housing. We met again the next morning and I was able to get him an emergency meeting with a psychologist at a local aid organisation. The session went well and during the next few weeks we texted sporadically, yet he was angry that I didn't keep in better contact with him and repeated his plans to take his own life. I felt responsible because of the severity of this man's case, while at the same time hesitant to keep in daily contact for fear of creating dependency, and being unequipped to deal with suicidal thoughts.

I returned with him once more to the same organisation but this time they were unable to help because the translator was on holiday. We called every organisation that we knew could handle acute psychiatric emergencies, but none was able to see him.

An Afghan family outside their prefabricated container at Moria reception and identification centre on the Greek island of Lesvos.

The only option was the public hospital, which did not have translators and would probably involve committing him to a psychiatric ward. A staff member at the aid organisation explained that he had done everything he could but that there were too many people and not enough resources. He asked me to do what I could for this man. I later reached out to my own family member who was a psychologist and asked for advice on how to respond to suicidal behaviour.

It is common for aid workers from various organisations to ask things of volunteers, and for volunteers to feel responsible despite being untrained and unpaid. The gaps in services meant that volunteers are often the last resort for desperate border crossers but also the last resort among those officially tasked with responding to the crisis. Volunteers do what they can and use personal and collective moral compasses to help guide them to the 'right' action, which can be far from clear, but dangers arise when untrained volunteers become involved in complicated situations without sufficient support or continuity.

From my experience of volunteering and after speaking with aid workers, volunteers and government employees, I recommend that even informal associations should create strict codes of conduct, avoid using personal phones and spend time training volunteers – training that focuses on psychiatric issues, relationship boundaries and critical thinking. Furthermore, organisations should work towards more coherent collaboration, focusing on closing the gaps in services, and encouraging pathways for volunteers and aid workers to create solutions together.

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1. I refer to all types of migrants as 'border crossers' unless specifically discussing those who have applied for asylum.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. Pallister-Wilkins P (2015) 'The Humanitarian Politics of European Border Policing: Frontex and Border Police in Evros', *International Political Sociology* 9: 53–69
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