

Working with a Refugee Community in Kos

This summer, for my Leadership-in-Action project, I went to Kos, a small Greek island located only four kilometres from the Turkish coast. The island has two very different faces. It is a popular destination for young European tourists, known for its sandy beaches, but it is also one of the main entry points for migration into Europe and hosts one of the largest closed refugee camps in the Dodecanese.



It was in this context that I joined The Hub, run by the NGO Glocal Roots. The Hub is the only safe space on the island and is a small structure that welcomes refugees from the camp on a daily basis.



My project had several objectives. First, I helped the centre operate on a day-to-day basis by answering questions, talking and interacting with people visiting the Hub, and supervising the free shop. Second, I worked on improving the logistics and organisation of the centre in order to facilitate access and develop new possibilities by working with local partners. Finally, I developed DIY and recycling workshops, with the aim of creating connections within the refugee community as well as with local actors.

Because we were a small team, I really felt that I was able to participate actively in the daily life of the centre and contribute at my own level. The days were very different and constantly required us to adapt. Some days, we welcomed more than one hundred people. On those days, we had to focus on keeping the free shop running, answering questions, helping people prepare CVs when needed, and simply taking the time to talk and exchange with people.

On quieter days, we had more time to develop the activities and workshops I had planned. We reorganised the workshop to make it easier to access and use, and by talking and working with local actors, I was able to collect materials that could be used for the activities.

We also developed several activities during my six weeks at the Hub: daily English classes, volleyball games, DIY and painting workshops to bring the centre to life, and a small herb garden that everyone could use for tea and cooking. I also created low-tech DIY guides showing how to make toys for children using simple materials such as elastic bands, ice-cream sticks and bottle caps.



Overall, I felt that I had a concrete impact during my internship. Even though my contribution was on a small scale, I felt that I was genuinely useful in the daily life of the centre. The experience showed me that leadership does not necessarily mean leading a large project or making major decisions. In a small team, it can also mean being able to adapt, take initiative and contribute wherever needed.



What I remember most from this experience is the richness of the cultural interactions. I discovered Greek culture, but more importantly, I had the opportunity to discover cultures from all over the world. Every day, I talked and exchanged with people from around ten different nationalities. We talked about music, languages, travelling and many other things.

The strength of this community lies above all in its resilience and its search for a better future. This community cannot be reduced to one ethnicity, one language, one gender or one age group. It is a community of people moving forward together. These are people who have gone through, and in many cases are still going through, extremely difficult situations, but who show incredible resilience and strength.

They are people looking for a better life for themselves and their families. Some have fled war, left their homes, their studies and their families behind. Yet they continue to move forward. Among the people I met were aspiring doctors, biochemists, engineers, hair stylists, businesspeople.



Being immersed in an environment very different from the one I am used to was also challenging in several ways. First, during the six weeks, no two days were the same. New people arrived at the Hub every day, some of whom had just arrived at the camp, while we would also regularly see people we already knew from previous weeks. Over time, we gradually got to know many of the people who came to the Hub.

The number of people visiting the centre could also change considerably from one day to another. On some days, more than one hundred people came to the Hub, while on others, we saw only around twenty. This meant that we constantly had to adapt the way we worked depending on the situation.

There was also a cultural and linguistic challenge. Language was obviously a limitation, but I did not experience it as a barrier. At the Hub, many languages were spoken and mixed together: Arabic, Farsi, English and others. Not everyone spoke English, which sometimes made communication difficult, even with translators.

However, what could have been a limiting factor became something that brought people together. Communication through gestures, the help of people who spoke some English and could translate, and simply trying to understand one another meant that everyone was learning together. Through games and conversations, people shared their language and culture. By going beyond what we already knew, remaining open and wanting to learn about others, we were able to communicate despite the language barrier.

There was also a cultural challenge. Most of the people visiting the Hub were young men between 18 and 30 years old. I really enjoy DIY activities, and sometimes some of them were surprised to see me doing them. It was not in a negative way; rather, they were worried that I might hurt myself and wanted to do things for me. Instead of reacting negatively, I chose to share the activity with them. I talked to them, asked them to show me how they would do it and explained that I also wanted to participate. Eventually, we ended up doing it together and it was an amazing afternoon.

This taught me that adapting to cultural differences does not mean giving up on what I want to do, but rather finding a way to share and work together. I also learned that sometimes you have to know how to assert yourself.

This experience also made me realise how many privileges we have and how biased our understanding of these issues can be. Things that seem obvious to us can be completely different in this context: basic access to healthcare, food, shelter, or even the ability to move freely can no longer be taken for granted.

Another difficulty was learning how to say no. We had a limited number of products in the free shop and, in order to be fair to everyone, we had to give the same amount to everyone. It was very difficult to tell someone no when they asked for an extra shampoo, for example, especially when you could see that they genuinely needed it.

What I also take away from this experience is that there are no small actions. During my six weeks in Kos, I genuinely felt useful at my own level. I was able to help people in their daily lives, but also to share stories, laugh together, watch football matches and share meals. I felt that I could bring a little bit of joy and hope to the people I met.

Even when a situation seems much bigger than us and we cannot solve everything on our own, there is no point in feeling helpless or discouraged. We have to act at our own level.

My experience at the Hub did not take place in isolation. In the refugee context, the limits of the system quickly became apparent. On a daily basis, this did not prevent me from doing my work, but it made me realise how many different actors are involved.

Even just on the island of Kos, there is the camp and its staff, while outside the camp there are Glocal Roots, MSI for medical support, Equal rights beyond borders for legal support, as

well as UNHCR. Coordinating all these organisations is already very complicated, especially because the system is often opaque.

It was very difficult to know exactly what was happening or not happening inside the camp. Things could change very quickly, often without real communication. As a result, refugees were sometimes left without information and in situations of uncertainty.

For example, we encountered situations where refugees had been permanently released from the camp and wanted to look for work, while the document they had received was actually an expulsion document. This showed me how difficult it can be to understand the system when information is unclear and communication between different actors is limited.

At an even broader level, decisions taken at national or European level made the situation even more complicated. On 12 June, a new European migration pact came into force, and we could feel the effects of its implementation during July.

During the first weeks of my internship, we saw many people from Bangladesh at the Hub. From the third week onwards, we suddenly saw none. There was no communication or explanation, and we eventually realised that, because of the implementation of the pact and Bangladesh being considered a safe country, Bangladeshi people were being kept in the closed part of the camp because their asylum applications would not even be processed.

Two weeks later, they were allowed to leave, but only for three hours a day and at times that did not correspond to the bus schedules needed to leave the camp area and access places such as the Hub.

Another issue was that as soon as refugees received their residence permits, they were required to leave the camp. They could therefore find themselves without accommodation from one day to the next, on an island where housing is very expensive. This raised a very simple but difficult question: how can someone find housing without an income, and how can they find a job without housing?

What shocked me was how little these decisions were discussed publicly. Very few newspapers reported on them, even though they affected thousands of people.

This experience made me realise how disconnected the different levels of the system can be, from the daily reality of the people we met at the Hub to the decisions made at European level. It also made me realise how much ignorance there is around these issues.

At the same time, the experience helped me understand the limits of a system that can seem theoretically organised through different institutions and organisations, but that can be extremely difficult to navigate in practice.

Despite these limitations, I had the feeling that I could still make a concrete contribution. I also stayed in contact with many of the people I met during my internship, and I want to continue engaging with the association and, more generally, with the issue of migration.

The main lesson I take away from this experience is therefore that even when we cannot change the whole system, we can still act at our own level. During these six weeks, I saw that small, everyday actions can have a real meaning for the people concerned.

Thank you to the amazing team at the Hub, and thank you to all the wonderful people I met during this internship.

