



Anastasios Perimenis: “We need real solidarity, tolerance and dignity”

Anastasios M. Perimenis, the manager of ETAL, the Lesbos local development agency, tells us about the dramatic situation on the Greek island, where around 180,000 asylum seekers have arrived since the beginning of 2015. His testimony is one of a local development practitioner but also a concerned citizen, on the frontline of an unfolding human tragedy.



- **From what we see on television, a terrible paradox exists on Lesbos: you have a beautiful Greek island with lots of tourists, but at the same time there are thousands of desperate refugees arriving – if lucky – on the island every day... Greece itself is also in a difficult economic situation. How would you describe the atmosphere on Lesbos?**

Different, strange, difficult! We could never have foreseen such a situation and the people living on the island were really surprised when in May of this year hundreds, and then thousands, of people suddenly started arriving every day. People that were clearly from a different culture, with obvious signs of fatigue, but they seemed so "relieved", and many were walking along the pier acting like everyone else, as if it was completely normal.

That was at the beginning, and then the situation suddenly got out of control. By August, there were about 29 000 refugees on the island – mainly in the capital, Mytilene, where the ferry leaves from. They were everywhere, walking all over the island, along the roads, in the parks, in the streets, at the harbour and along the pier.

There were people here from Afghanistan and the surrounding countries with almost nothing, sometimes without shoes.

This summer we did not have many windy days and this probably made the crossing to Lesbos – and Europe - easier (and more lucrative for some).

At one stage the whole town took on that strange scent you sometimes get when there are lots of people in a room together for many hours..., we could see people showering using public water supplies, or in the yards of houses, washing and hanging clothes out to dry everywhere. I was afraid of how the local people would react to this sudden invasion of their space, but there have only been minor incidents. A few times there was tension but in most cases it was caused by delays in the processing of papers so that these people could continue on their way.

- **How do you personally live with this situation?**

I was also surprised. For many years we have had the occasional 'illegal immigrant' situation but this is beyond anything previously imaginable. Every morning as I drive to my office I see people walking on the road by the beach – having just arrived in those horrible black rubber boats. I usually pick up families or people with young children and take them to the centre of town.

I know there is a law prohibiting this but I never felt unsafe or wrong doing it. My wife was worried in case of diseases but I haven't heard of any incidents. There are many people doing this, feeling compelled to try and help. Of course there is also some criminal behaviour, people who try to take advantage of refugees, but these are only isolated incidents and it annoys me that the media prefers to report on this rather than the many stories of people who try to help.

Almost every day there are at least 3-5 people sleeping in the doorway of our office. I pass over them and then I go to work on local development. This is a huge contradiction that confuses you. You have to be very cynical in order to go on, and this community is not cynical. Many people here are descendants of refugees who came here from Asia Minor in 1922, and the local community remembers this terrible situation.

There are so many stories and facts that we see or hear about every day that it is impossible to give you the whole picture. You have to live in it to really understand it.

Another very important issue is the pollution of the environment: tons of plastic, rubber and other material from boats washing up on our shores, and not enough resources to collect and deal with it.

- **How many refugees arrive on the island every day? Is the flow increasing, decreasing or stable?**

It's difficult to say. I am sure the authorities have official numbers but it all depends on the weather, and on when people go to the authorities in order to get their papers. On average, they say that during October (2015), there has been about 3,000 people arriving every day. In the summer we had an average of 7,000-8,000 per day.

A couple of days ago our Prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, and the Chancellor of Austria, Werner Faymann, visited the island for a few hours in the morning. The whole day there had been no boats arriving, and the town looked almost empty, apart from the two shelter camps. It was shown on TV as well. Then, at around 22.00, about 50 boats arrived in Sikaminia, and the whole village and the official support systems were completely overwhelmed. If we want to talk about numbers, I read in the local newspaper that since January about 179,000 people have arrived in Lesbos.

- **Are local fishermen involved in rescuing refugees? What is their feeling?**

They are involved, and I have heard some harrowing stories of fishermen going out to sea and finding bodies, or they often drag boats without fuel to shore or get messages from the coastguard to go to certain spots to help. One of our colleagues told us that the situation is going to get really bad because

parts of the channel between Lesbos and Turkey experiences very strange and unpredictable weather, and that those trafficking people from Turkey don't care.

A fisherman told me, and I quote: "We are not allowed by law to get close to the refugees boats, but I know the sea, and I know that when they cry out for help, a boat with 50 people that is designed for 20, that they will sink. How can I go away? I inform the port authorities, despite what they say, and I take them to shore. Once they step on dry land they cry and express such gratitude, they look at me as if I am God who saved them. I have children, like many of those at sea, and when I go back home I do not want to go to sea anymore...I am a wreck..."

- **How are the refugees received by the authorities when they arrive? Are they treated well?**

It all comes back to the element of surprise and the limited capacity of the authorities. There has been huge pressure on the system. The coastguards are real heroes, and the police officers, doctors, and the municipality, I am sure they try their best, but they are not adequately resourced or properly organised.

The numbers are huge and it is very difficult to manage the flow. It is understandable that they would not be organised in such a situation, and I feel bad when I hear criticism from people who are in their comfort zones in the EU or Greece. I have seen the vice-mayor of the municipality holding a water hose and cleaning the pavements early in the morning.

No doubt there have been many mistakes, but the authorities are better organised now. We have to bear in mind also that not all people are good people and 'fear' is a very powerful emotion. There was a story on the news about graffiti in Arabic on the statue of liberty at the port, something about the glory of ISIL... nobody knows who is coming in... so people get scared. This could, potentially, be dangerous in the future.

There has been a lot of assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC), and good coordination with the municipality of Lesbos. However, I had a discussion with somebody from UNHRC who expressed disappointment at the absence of help from the EU in addressing needs on the ground - "...it is all talk and TV. Visits and promises and then they go away...", he said.

- **Is there any accommodation for the newcomers or are they left to fend for themselves?**

There was an old shelter built to house previous, smaller, inflows of immigrants, with a capacity of about 100-150. Now there are two shelters which, temporarily, can meet the basic needs of about 3,000, but some days they have to cope with up to 7,000 people.

During the summer, many refugees preferred to be in the city, close to the harbour, and they refused to go to the shelters. Many are afraid that the authorities will make them sign for asylum here in Greece, and then they will not be able to get registered in the country where they have relatives or where they want to go, so this causes friction sometimes.

There are also some people who can afford hotels or room rental but this is only a few. In August there were tents everywhere, the town was like a huge campsite.

I spoke to a friend from the municipality who assists UNHCR and he told me that there has been no EU money at all for the shelters and that everything has been paid for by the UNHRC and local and international NGOs. Having some experience of the red tape, I can understand the delays and even excuse the local or governmental authorities for not being able to get any funds. They don't have the necessary staff for this, and as a country we are in the middle of a huge financial crisis.

- **How do refugees spend their time on the island while waiting for a ferry?**

They all want to go to the mainland, so generally they just wait, hoping that they will not have to wait for long. It all depends on legal issues about nationalities, papers, etc. There are some people who do not stay here more than 12-24 hours, while others might have to stay for up to a week.

- **How does the local population react to this massive flow?**

My personal feeling is that the local community is stretched to the limits. I am surprised by how much tolerance there is and the amount of volunteer work being undertaken. With this massive inflow I would have expected some bad situations, but I haven't seen that, and I dare to say I feel proud of how the local community has responded. After many years, Lesbos has once again become the location of a major refugee crisis. The island has a history of such crises and the reaction is instinctively humanitarian.

- **Have there been violent or racist reactions? The latest election showed that Golden Dawn won many votes on the Greek islands...**

I will not talk politically. I have heard of a couple minor incidents but I assure you that in Lesbos the Golden Dawn phenomenon is just an easy way, with no cost (people mistakenly think!) to register a protest vote. I am not sure about this party, if they will try to get into provocative acts by bringing in their people. The local community as a whole is totally against racism and violence.

I know this for a fact, when I see old ladies cooking food in their houses and giving it out, when I see the boy scouts cleaning the harbour, or people opening their houses to strangers, giving away their clothes, or giving milk and toys to children. The vast majority of people are like this and no isolated incidents of racism can ever change that.

- **What do local people do for refugees? What can they do concretely? Are there citizen-led initiatives that help? What do they do? Can you name or present a few?**

As I mentioned earlier, the coordination of the official EU and national authorities was poor. But there are many NGOs who responded quickly and sent in human and material resources. They got connected quickly with the local community and set up an informal system that provided quite a lot of relief, and maybe that is one of the reasons why there has been so little tension. Imagine a town where the population doubles and the new arrivals are all hungry and destitute... that could spark a much worse scenario.

I am not going to mention names but I have seen local people getting together and cooking in the street for thousands of people. I have seen people on an idyllic beach, enjoying our nice Greek summer, seeing boats arriving and giving away even the clothes they are wearing - that includes tourist as well. Friends of mine were here on vacation from Scotland and their teenage daughters volunteered to help and even raised money back home. There are so many active citizens who are prepared to help, at the expense of their work, financial situation and time. They offer so much... that makes you proud of the community you live in.

Sadly there are also those who prioritise their own well being, but doesn't that exist in all communities? I am glad at least that such people are very much in the minority here on Lesbos.

I could mention just some of the organisations I have seen doing so much work. Informal groups of people such as in Molyvos, the UNHRC, the International Rescue Committee, the Samaritans, Action Aid, Iliaktida, and especially Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde - they seem to be everywhere.

I am not sure I know all of them. Once I was in a supermarket close to one of the refuge camps and some young students wearing the same t-shirts, I suspect from the UK or the USA, came in and purchased all of the fruit, biscuits and bottled water on the selves...It is difficult to count and keep track.

But despite all of this, I still have the feeling that it is not enough, given the scale of the problem at hand... We need to use a familiar terminology "sustainable solutions". All of these people, do you think they want to leave their lands and homes and lives...?

- **As the Manager of ETAL, the Lesbos local development agency, how can you cope with the situation? Can your organisation help?**

We are not a local authority so we do not get directly involved. I would prefer not to talk about it. I feel it is not fair to use the opportunity of this interview to talk about the organisation. I will only say that we are here and we know and we act, without public exposure, and it is so frustrating not to be able to do what really needs to be done. In our work, we live a total contrast: working for local development and sustainability in this new environment is a complete contradiction.

- **What about the cooperation project that 11 Greek island LEADER Local Action Groups are involved in. Is it linked with refugees?**

The Axis 4–LEADER trans-regional cooperation involving the 11 island LAGs in Greece is exploring the role of culture and the expression of civilization as a means of promoting sustainability. We drew up a detailed plan in June 2014. In early May and June 2015 we had a very big event in Lesbos with many artists from all over the islands of Greece, and they arrived right at the beginning of the intensification of the refugee crisis, so there were people here from islands such as Corfu and Evia, which don't have such a big problem, who were very shocked.

To make a long story short, the outcome was artwork produced during several workshops, which was very influenced by the refugee crisis, war and social issues. This is depicted in a series of fine art paintings and comic pieces that only artists can do. We are currently trying to diffuse this work through art catalogues and a book, but we were not prepared for this and the immense sensitivity these works of art invoke.

On the side of this event there have been numerous stories. For example, you know when you host a meeting like this and you organise a dinner, well, there were many people who asked for their lunch or dinner to be packed and they gave it to people who needed it more. There were also artists and colleagues, guests at this event, who went to the supermarket and were distributing food to refugees.

The most important lesson learned was about the importance of networking in times of crisis such as this. It generates new ideas and it gives comfort and hope because, as we all say, there is strength in numbers.

I am grateful for the sensitivity of several colleagues in the EAFRD and FARNET networks, and at AEIDL, who are assisting us in trying to organise an exhibition of the artwork in Europe, and even if we don't succeed in showing this work to the world at least I will know we all tried.

- **What is your personal feeling about this issue? What could be the best solution for Lesbos and the future of the island?**

There is a lot of contrast in my life right now. On the one hand I have to deal with three major programmes for local development, funded by the EAFRD, the EMFF, and Axis-3 of the EAFRD. At the same time, as a country, we are in the middle of a huge financial and social crisis. We are under huge personal economic pressure and we have to act fast in order to assist many of the beneficiaries of this EU, who have to have their projects complete by the end of November. I feel a lot of pressure

because there have been many insuperable problems. Every day we have to deal with stressful situations concerning our line of work...

At the same time, we are working on sustainable development in an environment that is changing so rapidly that we are extremely worried about the future. We have a local development vision for a community we know, or rather, we knew... but what is this community going to look like next year? How can we tell? Tourism on our island has been badly affected. It seems that tourists prefer to cancel rather than visit an area where they will be 'disturbed' by the sight of refugees. So there has been a big economic impact and there is worse to come.

I assure you that it makes me sad to see our community going down like this; I don't think it is fair. Lesbos as a destination has not changed but still tour operators are cynically cancelling. We're taking on a huge burden, which is not fair for such a small island, and many other islands in Greece are similarly affected.

I am not in a position to propose solutions, because for now my colleagues and I have chosen to work as hard as we can to keep our programmes on track and achieve results.

I expect solidarity, and a fair distribution of the burden of this crisis, but I am not very confident that this will happen. In a way I can understand it - unless the problem lands on your own doorstep you cannot really appreciate it and react accordingly.

I am always confident that hard work delivers results and I hope that my country and my community will overcome the problems at hand.

- **What is your message to citizens living elsewhere in Europe?**

In this interview I might sound egoistic, talking only about my community, and probably in an idealistic way, whereas there are many problems and issues in the world and I expect that sooner or later we will all have to deal with such issues. But, I just wanted to describe what is happening in this small part of the European Union - "the pin that holds the right corner of the EU map", as we say!

The message is, we need to act fast; we need to have the kind of reflexes that allow solutions to prevail. We need real solidarity, tolerance and dignity.

I expect that other local development agencies reading this article will not take pity on us, and we don't want that - Greeks are really proud people. But we all need to get more involved in global solutions for the European Union, and the people in need in the surrounding countries. Just offering temporary relief is not the solution.

It is good to work for your own community but sometimes it is even more rewarding to work for the wider community and a bigger cause.

(Interview conducted in English by Jean-Luc Janot on 8 October 2015)