

Just Action for Refugees and Locals: Green Shoots on Greece's Samos Island

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Recently, I had the opportunity to meet with Vasilis and Lene who have created Just Action, a new NGO on Samos. In the few months of its existence Just Action has more than lived up to its name distributing thousands of food parcels to both refugees and locals across the island and cleaning the jungle which is the home to thousands of refugees.

Below is what they say about themselves:

JUST ACTION for refugees and locals on Samos

For us action is everything

We formed Just Action during the COVID19 lock down and days of camp fires. We couldn't sit back and watch. It's time for action.

In Just Action, we're dedicated to changing the approach. We're here to create a more sustainable impact for both refugees and locals. We want more collaboration, engagement and understanding. We're deeply rooted in local knowledge, with one of us even being born and raised on Samos. We believe that you get further if you understand things from the perspective of the local communities.

That is also why we decided from the very beginning that we stand with everyone. Whether they live across the street, in the refugee camp or on the other side of the island. It's important for us to help wherever it's needed and to act from an understanding of how connected the struggles of the different communities are. While most of our project focus are on the refugee camp, we acknowledge that many locals are struggling as well.

The situation is getting more and more challenging

As a result of the refugee crisis, the island of Samos faces several challenges. The camp itself is way over capacity and the conditions are inhumane. Around 6400 people now live in the camp and the surrounding jungle. The majority of them are without real shelter, running water, electricity and sanitation facilities. The food provided in the camp is of questionable quality and requires hours of waiting in the packed food line every day. Garbage is everywhere and especially the two huge rivers of trash that are going through the camp are full, attracting a large number of rats and creating a huge health risk.



As we see it, some of the biggest problems are the lack of dignity in terms of quality food, clean living areas and suitable options for keeping good hygiene. On top of this, the consequences of the refugee crisis and COVID19 are also affecting the local community a lot. The absent tourism this year puts many families to the test in a society where many are already struggling to make ends meet.

Here's what we're doing about it

The last few months, we have been supporting the most vulnerable with food. We packed and distributed more than 4000 bags of food to the camp residents, while we supported local families through the social market, social workers and local initiatives. We want to continue this vital support to both communities. Our main goal is to open a free market where people can come and shop according to their needs of food and hygiene items. Those visiting us will be able to choose themselves directly from the shelves. We believe this creates room for a more dignified way of receiving support. By working closely with local producers and helping them developing their business, we also aim to boost the local economy in order to create a bigger impact.

Currently, we're also running a waste management project in the jungle part of the camp. Three times a week our team of volunteers are collecting trash and educating the camp residents on the issue. Each week we remove around 500 big trash bags out of the camp. In collaboration with partner organisations on the ground, we're planning a huge deep cleaning to substantially reduce the levels of trash inside the camp while continuing our weekly effort to ensure that the problem is kept under control.

We realised that most of the trash that lies around is plastic bottles. Therefore, we are about to start a plastic recycling project where we provide frozen water in exchange for collected plastic bottles. We're in contact with different companies who will be in the recycling end of things so the plastic can be recycled into new useful things.

At the moment these projects are our core focus. However, we know that there is much more to do here and we continue to be open for ways to help the different communities on the island. As more emergencies are likely to occur, we also need to be ready to act and support immediately.

You can help us to continue to act fast

With the COVID19 crisis, the communities on the island are struggling more and more. Support to the refugees has been decreasing vastly as a result of restrictions, while support to vulnerable local families strongly affected by the lack of tourism is very limited too. We want to make sure that none of them feels alone. But we cannot do this without your help.

[You can donate to Just Action through [this link](#)]

The Importance of Local

Vasilis has lived all his life on Samos, apart from some years gaining his degrees in the UK. He has lived and personally experienced the devastating impact of the ongoing recession on the people of Samos. It has brought over the past 12 years, unemployment (and lower wages for those 'lucky' enough to get a job) with deep and widespread poverty and all the anxieties and unhappiness that it brings. Survival for many on Samos relies on the food and animals kept and grown on their gardens (which often brings joy because it is delicious food !).

All of this is compounded by the continuous erosion of public services and benefits. It is little wonder that so many young people who could, have left Samos and Greece. This is Samos today. This is the context in which we live. *Just Action* believes that this context must inform and influence the interventions in managing/helping the refugee population here. Failure to do so will, they believe, further deepen divisions between the locals and the refugees and there will be no possibility in breaking the endless cycle of cruelties that impact on both locals and refugees alike. They share a massive common ground through their poverty, but to have any influence on bringing about a better world for themselves it must get rid of the forces which divide them.

Regrettably what we have witnessed here is that the exclusive focus on refugees with no acknowledgement of the similar plight of so many islanders has fueled deep resentments both towards the refugees and the NGOs themselves. Crazy stories abound about high allowances being given to the refugees (nothing like the actual figures of 100 - 150 euros a month) and endless other benefits from food to clothes and health care. All sadly not true. But what they **can see** in Samos town are many places run by NGOs exclusively for refugees. These include schools, cafes, social centres and medical clinics. There are few equivalent services for locals. Everyone here knows well that vast sums of money are spent 'on refugees' on Samos just as they know that they get absolutely nothing despite their hardships.

Unfortunately the resentments and divisions which tend to follow from the exclusive focus on refugees by so many NGOs were further deepened when the NGOs took over the efforts of the locals who until then were caring for the huge waves of refugees who came here in 2015. Local groups (mainly women) emerged across the island cooking meals and collecting clothes and shoes so desperately needed. A wide range of relationships between the locals and the refugees developed; an almost instinctive response of solidarity between two groups who shared deep poverty and daily struggles to survive.

But much of this disappeared when the NGOs arrived. There was no sustained attempt to nourish these emerging connections. They simply took over. They thought they were doing the locals a favour by taking over. It was further compounded by modes of organisation which privileged their professionals as the experts who knew best. Bound in this framework it was inevitable that the vast majority of NGO interventions were top down. Sadly this model is all too common in state welfare regimes which have squashed and squeezed out the vast network of mutual help systems that had developed amongst the poor. These organisations and networks because they were based on solidarity and compassion – qualities which have no central place in driving state welfare were both popular and effective and so much better than what the state came to provide. On Samos we sadly witnessed countless points of contact between the islanders and the refugees disappear at great speed following the arrival of the NGOs. And with it a network of grass roots initiatives which were connecting refugees with locals on a shared experience of poverty and neglect. Such forms of solidarity do not allow, unless for specific reasons, for the kinds of exclusive and segregating interventions which leave out so many struggling with the same problems. As we have seen it results in damage to them all.

In hindsight the refugee activists on Samos might have pushed harder for involvement in the local management of the NGOs. Instead what we have now is that the majority of locals who are involved with the NGOs are in junior and relatively low paid jobs in these organisations with little or no influence on policies and priorities.

The creation of *Just Action* is an attempt to set out a new direction that seeks to bring the locals and refugees together and to provide opportunities for new relationships of solidarity to form and flourish. It is no accident that it should emerge at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. Humanity now confronts a virus which does not carve up the world's people into categories which reflect their supposed value in a world which has grotesquely enriched a few at the expense of the majority; a world which epitomises the stark warning of Adam Smith that without regulation the rich and the powerful would take all for themselves leaving only crumbs for the rest. The virus however behaves differently and sweeps through human populations caring not a jot for your status, wealth, poverty, gender, race, disability, age, sexuality, place of birth. It confronts humanity as a whole, whether or not you have papers and passports: borders, barbed wire fences, walled enclosed housing and sophisticated security systems are as of nothing to a virulent virus. As with all toxic viruses, the weakest and the vulnerable suffer most but even so it is now self evident that no one is safe unless everyone is safe.

On Samos, the threat of the pandemic confronts us all. The virus has yet to reach the island. But we all know should it come we will face danger. The most obvious is that the virus could devastate the refugees. But they are not alone in their vulnerability. The island not only has an ageing population- elderly people are the majority in many of the villages here – but a population which has been weakened physically and psychologically by years of poverty. Tourism which is a major element of the island's economy is non-existent at the moment. Bars and restaurants are empty. There is a profound anxiety about how many can survive the winter when they have no income in the summer. And for all the people on the island there is an acute awareness that the medical resources here would be rapidly overwhelmed should the virus take hold. The pandemic is forcing us to recognise fundamental challenges which affect us all and to look for new ways which bring us together. Many are beginning to realise the truth of the old adage 'United, we stand a chance: Divided we will suffer'.

Such an awareness is also clear in the global mobilisations against racism and state

violence. The dying words of George Floyd “I can’t breathe” are echoing across the world, even in Samos because they capture the experience of so many irrespective of race. Where all this will lead to who knows, but it is clear that the anger and frustrations of many is exploding in various ways. And whether it connects to the pandemic or to state violence it is encouraging people to recognise their inter-connectedness and need for solidarity.

Established power has always feared the capacities of the many to make a better and fairer world which is why so much effort is made to divide us and humiliate us. But through the pandemic and now with the Black Lives Matter movement we are seeing countless and inspiring mobilisations of people helping and supporting one another. And so much of what they do is so better than anything coming from the state, because it is driven by love and compassion.

Just Action comes from that tradition of mutual support:

“we decided from the very beginning that we stand with everyone. Whether they live across the street, in the refugee camp or on the other side of the island. It’s important for us to help wherever it’s needed and to act from an understanding of how connected the struggles of the different communities are. While most of our project focus are on the refugee camp, we acknowledge that many locals are struggling as well.”

Without standing together the future looks bleak here. To give just one example. There is still every intent by the state to close the camp in Samos town and to move it to a closed camp on a remote hillside away from any village or town. Should this be attempted one fears for the consequences. Only sufficient solidarity between the locals and refugees will avert a disaster.

Vasilis and Lene told me that they chose the name *Just Action* partly due to their frustrations of being involved in NGO meetings which often led nowhere. The priorities for action are self-evident and basic especially concerning hygiene and food. But at the point of action there is a major divergence between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches. The former are mired in endless bureaucracy as they seek to manage the action whereas bottom up organisations draw on a huge reservoir of energy and talent where people are ready to work shoulder to shoulder to achieve their objectives. This was brilliantly illustrated by *Just Action’s* amazing clean up job following the fire which destroyed over 500 homes earlier this year. They were able to bring together both refugees and locals who together cleaned the area in hours.



Just Action Cleaning



Just Action in the Jungle

Of course *Just Action* needs money to survive and flourish. But they also value the talents and skills of the people around them, both locals on the island and the refugees in the camp. They have access and contact with a priceless resource which is all too often ignored. But its transformational potential is still injured by years of division where the poor have been pushed and persuaded to fight one another for the crumbs on the floor and where relations are soured by jealousies and resentments. This is what makes *Just Action* and

thousands of similar initiatives across the world so important for they embody a faith in the people who given a chance to realise their potential would love nothing more than to work for us all rather than a few. For us on Samos, *Just Action* is a small green shoot. But one that must be nourished as must all those which follow.

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