



## The Work of Calaid in Ioannina in Northern Greece - An Update from Becky Chapple and Prue Cauley

'Over the past year the refugee situation Greece has changed significantly. More and more people are processed and granted relocation to other EU countries. However, there is a never ending flow of new people being brought over from the horrendous conditions on the islands to take their places. Our region has seen the population of 3000 go down to 1500, but recently that flow has been reversed as hundreds of new people arrive to fill up empty or new sites. Often they arrive with nothing, as the conditions on the islands are dire. Many have been crammed into miserably basic tents or containers for over a year. The one thing that stays the same though is the number of kids - still more than half of the people we support are children.

One big change for our population has been the shift among the big organisations like the UNHCR, the Red Cross and Oxfam towards providing 'CASH cards' rather than providing food or physical items. These cards are like normal debit cards topped up each month with an allowance. In some ways this is great as it gives people the choice to buy what they want and to live more independently but, as is so often the case, the downside is that the amount of money is tiny (€150 for a single person per month; €510 for a family of 5) so people are really struggling to cover the bare essentials but the big organisations are not allowed to give out physical assistance any more (since in theory it is covered). We have been setting up to cover the gaps, especially in essential, but expensive, items like nappies and sanitary products, as well as clothing and shoes etc. We recently learned that the amount is set at the same level as Greek people on basic benefits would receive, but refugees are not able to access any of the other support (including food and clothing banks) that Greek people are offered.

The final huge event for us was the closure of one of the sites where we have been most involved. While it was sad to see the people from Fanaromeni go, we know that they are far happier in the apartments they have now in Athens than in a freezing and overcrowded camp. Sadly this means our school and the community we knew best have gone, but it does mean we can re-direct all of our energies into the most exciting change so far . . . our shop!

Greece –

It's unbelievable to think we've only been here a year. We arrived in Ioannina on the 27st July 2016. In that time we have driven hundreds of miles each week to deliver essential items out to people in 13 different sites across the region;

everything from socks and pants to nappes and baby grows. It gets extremely cold and wet in Epirus (that is why they call it 'the Scotland of Greece') so our services have been ever more essential as people had to be prepared for -14 degree days and knee deep snow. We have now established systems to reach all of the people in the whole region with the items they need. For 8 months we used a mobile distribution system but as more and more people were split across sites in the city we decided to try opening an actual shop space!

So far this is going really well. Much as we tried to make our mobile shop as close as possible to a normal shopping experience, we were always limited by space and time to try to reach everyone over a huge area. People could only see us once every three months for clothes and once a month for hygiene which made keeping up with the seasons almost impossible. With the permanent shop we can be open to people whenever they need us and families can come and shop pretty much as if we were normal store; paying with 'points' that are topped up each month, rather than money of course! We have sections for men, women and kids, a show area, a play area for children waiting for their parents and a counter for

water (and tea in winter). The shop is colourful and bright with a much bigger selection of items and storage so we can be sure we always have as much as people will need. We really like the element of personal choice and dignity that this brings and the feedback from the people we work with has been amazing.

To keep this system running we have opened a warehouse nearby where we sort and prepare stock (including the pants!) and keep the shop shelves full. We have a glorious new stock counting system (I know that this is super nerdy but it is so exciting to know exactly what we have and who has taken what!) that keeps us in check and lets us know what we are running low on. Our staff and volunteer team have been utterly amazing at getting the place built and set up with local contractors and we are now just putting the finishing touches on the shop floor – painting the walls in the kids' section and making the curtains for the changing rooms etc.

We have had some amazing moments as the first rounds of customers have come through the door – from the kids who are over the moon to be getting trainers that light up when they jump to the ladies who are genuinely emotional at being able to do something so easy and familiar again as go shopping with their kids.

In addition to general clothing we have started supplying the region with kits for Newborn babies. Whenever one of the ladies we support is going to give birth we help to ease the stress of having a newborn in a strange country and often far from family with very limited resources by providing a basket of the essentials for the first months. This is everything from a baby basket to nappies, bibs to baby shampoo, blankets to a new teddy. We have designed the contents working with some mums and some midwives and they have gone down really well!

On top of all this we have also been running the optics project – getting eye tests and glasses for all the kids in the area ahead of them going to school (and for any adults who need it). This takes up a lot of time and funding but is totally worth it. We were really surprised when the medical actors here told us that there was no budget for this anywhere so they could not do anything, even for cases where people were in extreme pain or had the potential to lose their sight entirely. It is a new area for us but so far the project is going well with hundreds of kids tested and given glasses by our amazing volunteer team. It is such a simple thing but makes a huge difference for people – especially as they are trying to start a new school or get to grips with a new home.

Our campaign for pants has gone on and has gone really well – as always we are astounded by how generous people are and how willing to help people out with these essentials. Our recent calls for nappies and sanitary items have also been incredible and every person who goes out of the shop now goes with two new pairs of pants which is just brilliant.

So now . . . ? Well, of course we have a heck of a lot to do! We are coming into summer, the shop is just getting going, we have two new sites opening and starting to be filled with capacity for 1200 new people, all fresh off the islands and experience tells us that means there will therefore be huge demand as people have had so little for so long. Of course this puts particular demand on the warehouse as people need all of the essentials and we have to try to keep up. We are really motivated now though in knowing that there is pretty much nobody else to do it!

The next few months are all about us settling into this new way of working – funding is really tight as the crisis is well out of the news now so far fewer people are donating online/aware that there is still such a huge need. We want to look for ways to make the shop and the warehouse more sustainable and to find out which items people are still struggling with so we know what to get on the scrounge for next!