



EUROPEAN LAWYERS IN LESVOS

Annual Report 2020

Foreword

A message from Managing Director Phil Worthington

In common with all other organisations, European Lawyers in Lesvos faced a number of challenges in 2020.

Thanks to the remarkable resilience, flexibility and creativity of our teams and the support of numerous partners and donors, we were able to keep our operations running every day of the year, increase our capacity and even expand and improve our services. As well as opening a new office in Samos, we began providing legal assistance with a remote element and explored innovative use of legal tech. I am delighted that the work of our staff and volunteers was recognised in the form of five prestigious awards.

As ELIL approaches its five-year anniversary in June 2021, I reflect on the erosion of legal safeguards for asylum seekers since 2016 and the multiple threats to the rule of law and the integrity of the asylum procedure, particularly in light of the proposals included in the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. In this context, I remain convinced that guaranteeing meaningful access to legal assistance is more important than ever.

I look forward to continuing our work on Lesvos and Samos and opening a new office in Athens in 2021 and thank all of our staff, volunteers and supporters for ensuring that we were able to respond and adapt to the challenges of 2020.



Right: Lesvos Statue of Liberty
CC-BY-SA Elisa Turtschi

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Summary

The context and our work

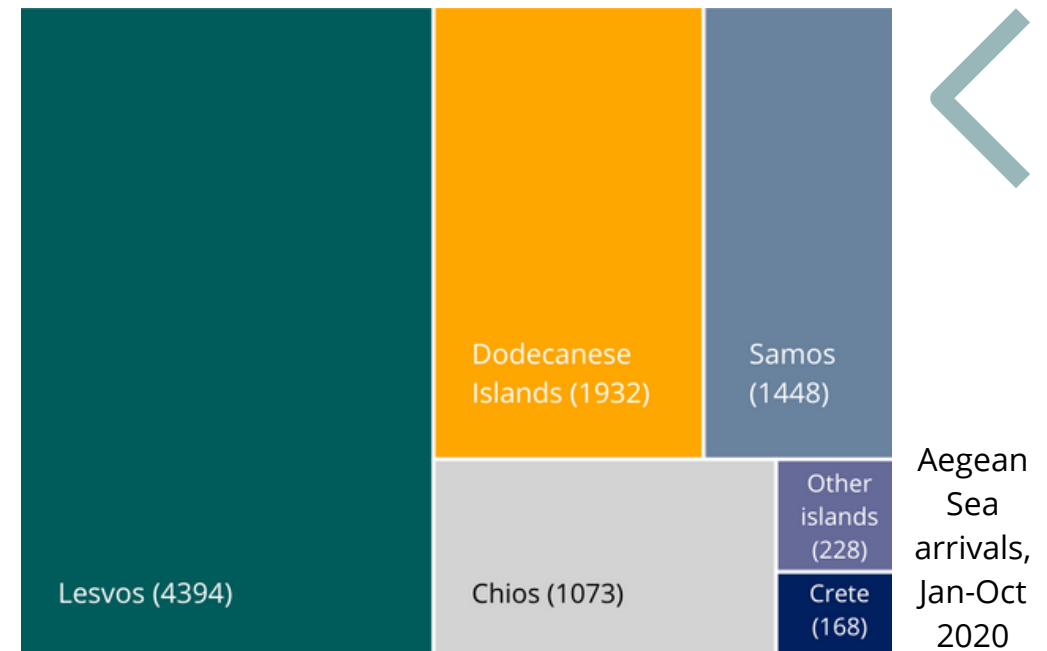
Although arrival numbers dropped in the course of 2020, thousands of asylum seekers remain stranded on the Greek islands.

In the first half of 2020, as countries around the world enacted measures to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, refugees on the islands found themselves increasingly cut off, without the resources to protect themselves and unable to access many critical services.

To compound this situation, in September a series of devastating fires destroyed Moria camp on Lesbos (including ELIL's field offices), displacing almost 13,000 people. These individuals were moved to a new camp, where conditions remain dire. Since September, thousands of people have been transferred to mainland Greece.

In summer 2020, ELIL launched a new project to help meet the critical need for legal assistance on Samos, significantly increasing the legal capacity on the island. In the latter half of the year, Vathy camp went into lockdown and an earthquake caused widespread damage.

These events have played out against the backdrop of an increasingly strict asylum framework in Greece and political challenges at European level. We have worked to adapt to each change and, thanks to our incredible team and community of volunteers, were able to continue to provide our vital services throughout the year.



Aegean Sea arrivals, Jan-Oct 2020

Project Overview: Lesvos

Fresh challenges include Covid-19, the fire in Moria and a more restrictive asylum framework. ELIL adapts its programmes in response.

The Context

For the first few months of 2020, ELIL's work on Lesvos took place in the three dedicated consultation rooms in our two containers in the Olive Grove (next to Moria camp), in Kara Tepe and in our office in Mytilene.

In March, local resistance to the proposal to build a new camp on Lesvos and tense relations with Turkey caused widespread unrest on Lesvos and attacks against NGO workers. During this time, and with the arrival of Covid-19, we provided assistance in our office in Mytilene and remotely, in order to ensure that we could continue to operate.

During the summer, the on-going restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19 meant that it was not possible for us to resume a full-scale programme in Moria, but our office in Mytilene remained open and our activities continued as normal.

In September 2020, a series of devastating fires broke out in Moria. The official camp and the surrounding informal settlement were destroyed, including ELIL's containers. After spending some days on the streets, the camp's almost 13,000 residents were resettled in a new facility. The conditions in the temporary camp are dire - all residents live in tents, with limited access to electricity, hot showers and adequate toilets and washing facilities. Following the fires, we re-focused our work in our Mytilene office and increased our capacity for remote support, particularly in light of the increasingly expedited asylum procedure.



LEFT: CC-BY-SA
Yousif Al Shewailii

The Asylum Procedure

A new, stricter asylum law came into force on 1 January 2020. This law emphasises speed, erodes legal safeguards and focuses on increasing returns of people to Turkey. The asylum procedure in the first nine months of the year was considerably quicker than in previous years, with interviews often scheduled at short notice.

The asylum procedure on Lesbos was suspended following the fire in Moria, resuming in early October. ELIL and other legal organisations raised repeated concerns about access to justice (see September press release), the asylum procedure and interview conditions (see December press release) since the resumption. Key issues included people being called for interview at very short notice, often only one or two days in advance, and a high number of interviews being conducted on the same day. This emphasis on speed, coupled with concerns about the quality of interviews, undermines the integrity of the asylum process and the rule of law.

We continue to be very concerned about these changes, particularly as they make it extremely difficult for asylum seekers to access legal assistance in the short time between being notified of their interview and the interview taking place. In response to this, we adapted our model to allow people to access assistance in a timely manner.



Press Releases

ELIL and other legal organisations on the island have raised their concerns through several press releases:

17/09/2020

ELIL and other legal organisations call for the suspension of asylum interviews following the fire in Moria.

08/12/2020

ELIL and other legal organisations highlight obstacles to accessing legal assistance during asylum interviews.

Project Overview: Samos

ELIL opens a new office in Samos, considerably increasing the capacity for legal support on the island.

The Context

In 2020, after four years of successful work on Lesbos, ELIL extended its operations to the Greek island of Samos.

When our project launched in summer 2020, there were 7,000 asylum seekers on the island, almost all of whom were in Vathy camp, with an official capacity of just 700. At this time, there was less than one lawyer for every 1,000 asylum seekers on the island, which effectively meant that many people did not have access to legal advice before their asylum interview. Through our new project, ELIL has significantly increased the legal capacity on the island.

In early autumn, a few weeks after ELIL's office opened, the first Covid-19 cases were detected on Samos and Vathy camp went into full lockdown. We continued to provide assistance remotely but, on 30 October, whilst the lockdown was still in force, a strong earthquake hit the island, causing widespread damage, and a few days later a fire displaced 300 residents of the camp.

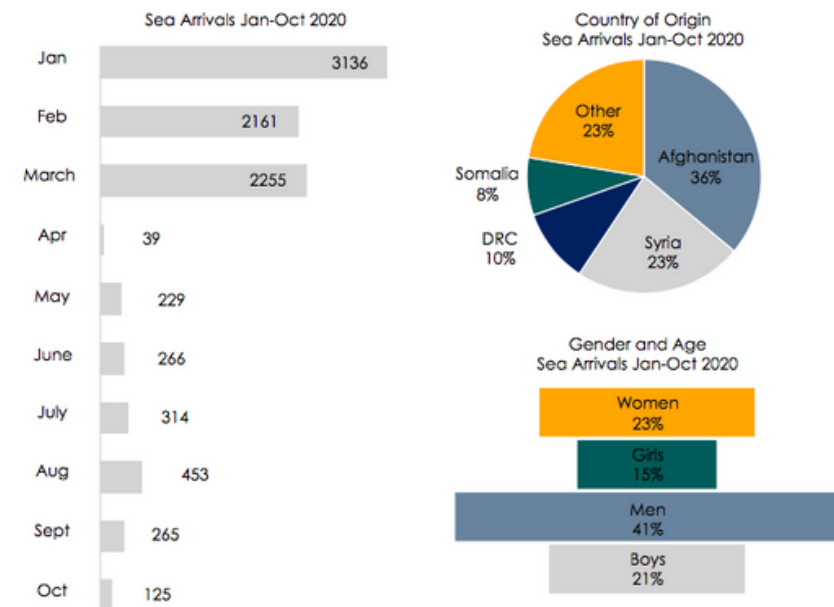
ELIL's office was badly damaged in the earthquake and we were forced to briefly suspend our programme. Shortly after, we were fortunate to be able to find a temporary alternative space to work from, pending repairs.

The Asylum Process

The asylum procedure on Samos was paused for over two months, from the beginning of the lockdown to after the earthquake. Since restarting in early November, the asylum procedure, like in Lesbos, has been characterised by an emphasis on speed and high volume of interviews.



Aegean Sea arrivals, Jan-Oct 2020



Covid-19 and Remote Working

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, ELIL has continued to provide free legal assistance, both remotely and in-person.

From March onwards, we worked to adapt to challenging circumstances, primarily through the implementation of a remote legal consultation system. In this system, experienced volunteer asylum lawyers who have previously assisted ELIL on the ground provided consultations from home. This allowed us to assist people even when in-person meetings were not possible and bolstered our capacity, despite the travel restrictions across Europe that have meant we were not able to welcome as many in-person volunteers as expected.

By the end of the year, we were able to build a team of around 15 volunteer asylum lawyers who regularly provide remote consultations, all of whom are supervised by our Greek asylum lawyers and received regular updates and training.

In order to ensure confidentiality and a suitable space for the consultations, the asylum seekers come to our offices in Lesvos or Samos and meet with the interpreter, with the asylum lawyer dialling in remotely. This hybrid model – part in-person, part remote – has proven effective and helps build a personal rapport and trust with those we are assisting



The Team

ELIL was able to expand its team in 2020, from 13 to 17 permanent employees. This allowed us to help meet the enduring need for legal assistance in Lesvos, with the addition of a new team to implement our project on Samos.

In addition, our team is supported by volunteer European asylum lawyers, pro bono lawyers from the Greece Pro Bono Collaborative and volunteer legal assistants. Due to constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we were only able to welcome 12 volunteer asylum lawyers, 15 pro bono lawyers and 8 volunteer legal assistants in person in 2020. However, a further 15 volunteer asylum lawyers and 18 pro bono lawyers provided invaluable remote support to our programmes

Activities

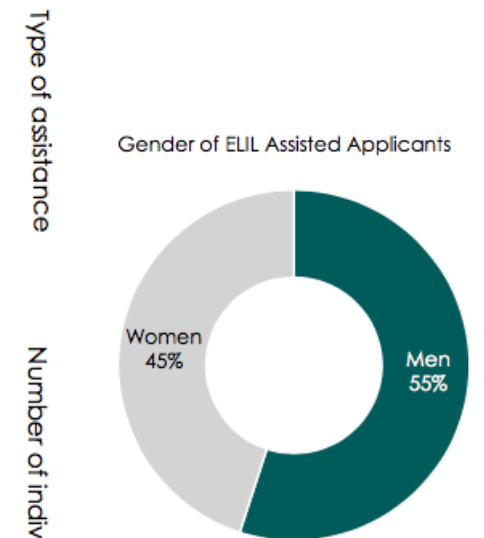
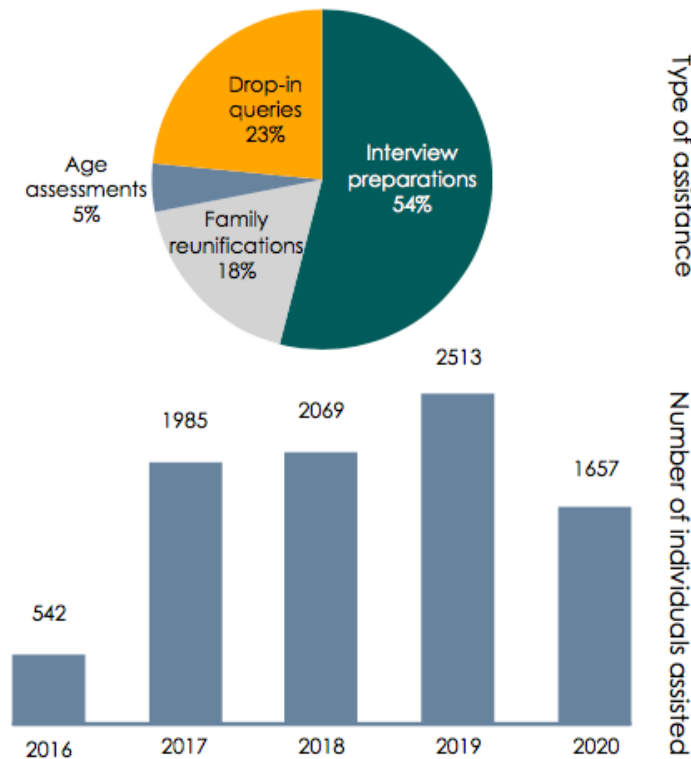
ELIL assisted 1,657 people during 2020, working on 679 cases. ELIL's work in 2020 was comprised of the following activities, all of which were conducted from our offices, in order to preserve privacy and confidentiality, and in compliance with Covid-19 protocols:

Interview preparation

Our primary activity in 2020 was providing legal advice to asylum seekers to help them prepare for their first instance asylum interview. In total, we assisted 878 individuals (404 cases in total). In each case, we aimed to provide at least two one-on-one consultations, unless the case was an emergency with a very short deadline, and where relevant we also represented the asylum seeker at interview and/or submitted a supporting legal memorandum.

Family reunification

We supported 201 individuals in filing applications for reunification with family members in other EU member states (86 cases in total). In general, this involved liaising with the asylum seeker and family members, collecting relevant documents and preparing the application, preparing a supporting legal memorandum (where relevant) and following up with the Dublin Unit in Greece and other country.





Unaccompanied minors

We provided legal assistance, through one-on-one consultations, to unaccompanied minors (particularly unaccompanied minors registered as adults). This included, where relevant, working to overturn the original age registration (collecting relevant documents, securing referrals for age assessment), providing information and advice regarding the legal procedure and assisting with family reunification applications. In total, we provided assistance to 189 unaccompanied minors. Of these, in 76 cases we assisted with regard to age assessment, in 96 we assisted with family reunification applications and in 17 with assisted with first instance interview preparation.

Drop-in queries

Due to the restrictions related to Covid-19 and the fires in Moria, we were generally not able to provide a drop-in service in either Vathy or Moria. However, for much of the year it was still possible for asylum seekers to come to our offices in Mytilene and Samos with “drop-in” questions and see a lawyer without an appointment. In total, we assisted 389 asylum seekers with such queries.

Further activities

As well as providing legal assistance to those still on Lesbos and Samos, we also followed up and remotely supported those individuals, including unaccompanied minors, who were transferred to the mainland following the fire in Moria.



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Partnerships

In 2020, we were honoured to start new partnerships with Comic Relief and SolidariTee, who were instrumental in helping us launch our Samos project.

We are extremely grateful to Defence for Children International (DCI), Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), the Fred Foundation and the Fondation Abbé Pierre, all of which supported ELIL during 2020 and have committed to continue their support in 2021. We successfully concluded our partnerships with Oxfam and Stichting Vluchteling, with our final reports approved by each organisation.

We are indebted to the 19 Bar Associations and Law Societies across Europe who supported ELIL and the hundreds of individuals who made donations.

We continued our cooperation with six major international law firms - Orrick, Dentons, Ashurst, White & Case, Allen & Overy and Charles Russell Speechlys (together, the Greece Pro Bono Collaborative). Until March, lawyers from these firms volunteered with us in-person on Lesvos. Due to Covid-19, we had to adapt this collaboration: now, a total of two lawyers from these firms assist through remote secondments at all times. Over the past 16 months, the partnership has supported ELIL with 60 volunteers.

ELIL continued its partnership with the legal tech company BRYTER and began a new partnership with HighQ. Together, ELIL, BRYTER and HighQ have designed a case management system/collaboration platform, specifically tailored to ELIL's needs, which was successfully rolled out. One of our staff, Serena Ariello, was selected as a recipient of the 2020 Women in Legal Tech awards for her work on this project.

2020 Donor Bar Associations

Austrian Bar Association
Avocats.be
Liege Bar Association
West Vlaanderen Bar Association
Bulgarian Bar Association
Czech Bar
Finnish Bar Association
Icelandic Bar Association
Law Society of Ireland
Liechtenstein Bar
Norwegian Bar
The Polish National Bar Council of Attorneys at-Law
Slovenian Bar Association
Swiss Bar
Ordine degli avvocati del Canton Ticino
Ordre des avocats vaudois
The Bar of Geneva
Law Society of Northern Ireland
Scottish Faculty of Advocates



We were deeply honoured to see the hard work of our staff and volunteers recognised in the form of various prestigious prizes:

2020 UIA/LexisNexis Rule of Law Award
2020 LawWorks Best International Pro Bono Award
2020 PILnet Pro Bono Publico Award
2020 Financial Times Social Innovation Award
2020 Legal Week Social Innovation Award

Beyond the Numbers

Case Study

In 2020, ELIL assisted an unaccompanied child from Syria in his family reunification case with a family member in the United Kingdom.

The family reunification request was accepted, but before the young boy was able to travel on from Moria, the fire destroyed the camp, leaving him homeless and temporarily without papers. With the scheduled departure date approaching and no documents, the child was at risk of missing his flight to the UK and remaining stranded in a precarious situation on Lesbos.

ELIL liaised with the police and the Asylum Service to secure new documents and safe accommodation as quickly as possible. With our assistance, the boy was ultimately able to join his family in the UK.



Case Study

Ahmed, from Syria, spent over a year on Lesbos. With ELIL's help, his family reunification request was approved, allowing him to join his wife in France. They were apart for almost two years.



Guardian Podcasts

[ELIL Managing Director Philip Worthington speaks to Today in Focus about the situation on Lesbos](#)

Finances

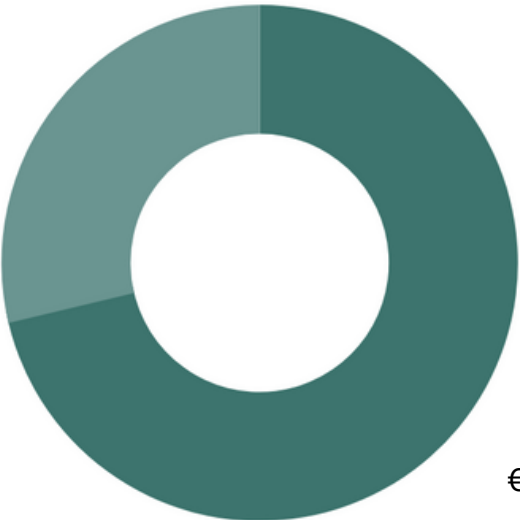
Over the past two years, we have successfully diversified our funding sources in order to ensure the sustainability of our programmes and are actively working to engage the support of additional European partners, Bar Associations and Law Societies.

2020 Income

€766,233.16

Sources of Income

Donations
€220,158.03

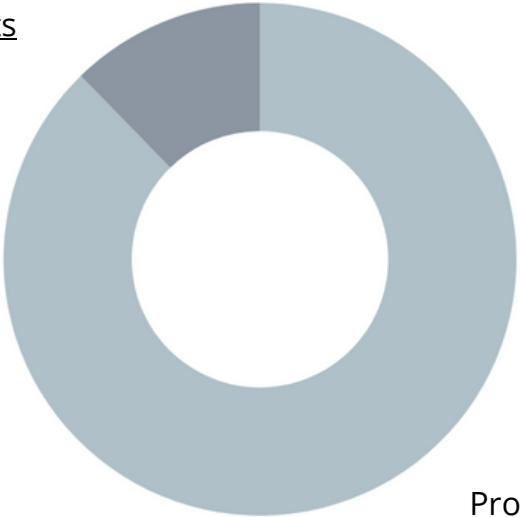


Grants
€546,075.13

2020 Spending

€617,105.19

Support Costs
15%



Programme Costs
85%





To find out more and donate, visit:

