

## Pre-school Education of Children in Migration in Greece

### Ioannina – Greece

#### Program summary

Since October 2020, SOS Children's Villages runs a kindergarten in Ioannina (Greece) to support refugee and migrant children and their families in their development, their mental health, their social interactions and their integration in the Greek community. This project aims to support and care for preschool aged children and their families through preschool educational activities and psychosocial support.

#### Background information on refugees and asylum-seekers in Greece

At the end of 2019, Greece hosted over **186.000 refugees and asylum-seekers**. This included over 5.000 unaccompanied children. Most people were coming from Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iran. Sub-standard reception conditions, overcrowded first-line reception facilities, as well as limited access to psychosocial support, case management, care, protection, health, immunization and slow asylum and administrative procedures remain the **most common issues** faced by refugee and migrant children and their families on the ground. Despite notable progress in national legislative and policy framework related to the protection of refugee children, and overall inclusion into national education systems, national capacities to respond to the needs of some of the most vulnerable children on the move (e.g. living in squats and informal settlements in urban areas, potential victims of Gender Based Violence, as well as in detention or in first identification and reception centres in Greek islands) are limited, requiring additional investments and technical support. On top of that, some of the **current support interventions have been downsized**, which will affect the livelihood of 10.685 people of concern, either forcing them to leave their accommodation or leaving them without cash assistance.

Since the beginning of 2020, as an attempt to decongest the overcrowded camps, especially on the Aegean islands (Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Kos and Leros), the Greek government has launched a **transfer scheme**, where more than 10.000 individuals have been relocated into various accommodation structures in the mainland. At the same time, the authorities have announced the **closure of a significant number of housing facilities** for asylum seekers and have passed new legislation forcing recognized refugees to leave reception facilities after 30 days of stay changing the most recent law that allowed a 6 months stay.

SOS Children's Villages continue to face, especially during these challenging times, an increasing demand to support children and families of refugee and migrant background that are transferred from islands to the mainland and are at risk of separation due to their inability to provide for their family.

#### SOS response to the current needs

In order to better embrace the needs of vulnerable population, SOS Children's Villages assessed, designed and adapted their operations according to the conditions, requirements and requests for support, continuing to provide a more precise and solid care to those in need. **SOS Family Strengthening Programs** have expanded their services providing support to both local families and children with low socioeconomic and vulnerable background, as well as refugee and migrant population. Especially, following the transfer of people into the mainland, SOS focuses on the strengthening of the families in a **holistic way**, rather than the continuous provision of acute services. In collaboration with local actors, SOS continues providing food and non-food items to refugee and migrant families as part of immediate support due to their lack of access to social services after being granted asylum in Greece.

In the light of recent developments in Greece, some geographical areas that were out of the range of existing SOS Emergency Response activities, are quickly becoming in need of assistance, especially since many organizations cease their programs due to change of funding priorities creating a gap on integrational activities. Within this context, SOS launched an **emergency program in Ioannina**. In addition to the existing Family Strengthening Program in Ioannina, and after assessing existing support programs offered by local actors and other NGOs in this region, SOS prioritized the **support and care of preschool aged children**. Despite the large number of families with young children, there is a lack of services responding to the particular needs of very young children in terms of education and (mental) health and to the needs of families in terms of parental skills, prevention of family separation and integration in the Greek community. Existing services are mainly short term and not tailored made, with limited impact for beneficiaries, and insufficiently take into account integrational activities, which prevents children and families to start rebuilding their lives. The support of SOS is directly connected with the smooth integration into Greek host community, the creation of peer-to-peer interaction among children and the proper and healthy development of their mental health minimizing the further psycho-emotional burdening of young children.

The long-term experience of SOS in supporting refugee and migrant population and especially children in similar contexts, highlights the ability of children who attend Kindergarten and other psycho-educational activities **to be integrated into the community, to become better prepared to attend the public schooling community, and to overcome their difficulties that could also lead to drop out from school**. This experience is in line with the European Commission policy on Early Childhood Education and Care, which mentions that "High-quality early childhood education and care<sup>1</sup> (...) lays the foundation for further learning<sup>2</sup> and formation of identity and citizenship. High quality services play a decisive role in improving education outcomes, including the development of social competences. Research indicates that participation in high quality early childhood education and care leads to higher basic skills attainment and is a strong prevention measure to early school

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<sup>1</sup> Early childhood education and care refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age - regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or program content - and includes centre and family day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; pre-school and pre-primary provision.

<sup>2</sup> Stringher, C. (2016), Assessment of learning to learn in early childhood: an Italian framework. Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 1/2016.

leaving<sup>3</sup>. Early childhood education and care experiences are **an opportunity to prevent and mitigate disadvantage for children from disadvantaged communities** and those with migrant backgrounds. Research evidence shows that among children from a comparable migrant background, those who attended early childhood education and care in their host country score better in reading<sup>4</sup>. In addition, high quality early childhood education and care services have positive impacts on labour market participation of parents and clear benefits for achieving more gender equality.”

### **Description of the program in Ioannina**

By running a **kindergarten** in the city of Ioannina, this project aims to **support and care for preschool aged children and their families through various activities and psychosocial support**. By attending preschool education, children will be better prepared to attend primary school, and to overcome their difficulties, which often can lead to dropping out of school. **Parents will be reinforced in their parental role**, they will benefit from **mental health and psychosocial support** to improve their capacity to take on a leading role in their and their children’s lives and they will be able to focus on their professional rehabilitation and personal development, as children are cared for during the day in the kindergarten. As the family is strengthened, integration into the Greek community will be facilitated.

SOS Greece will run this project in the **city of Ioannina** and not in one of the refugee camps, as the population in these refugee camps tends to change very quickly and therefore only allows for short-term support services with limited long-term impact for the beneficiaries. As such, this project allows children to get out of the refugee camps, as these camps are generally not beneficial to the mental well-being of the children, and starts to integrate them in the host community, which allows them to build healthier and normalized social contacts.

The **main objectives** of this intervention are:

- Building the resilience of both children and parents through tailor made interventions
- Strengthening of the family cohesion through parental skill training
- Psycho-educational support of young children who have been out of educational community for a prolonged time or never had the chance to attend classes but also as an important integrational tool and peer to peer interaction

The **principal activities** for this program are the following:

**Pre-school education:** Children between 4 and 6 years old will be able to attend an SOS Kindergarten, where they will be given the opportunity to play, be able to communicate through play-based activities and will create

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2014), Study on the effective use of early childhood education and care in preventing early school leaving.

<sup>4</sup> OECD and European Union (2015), Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015, Settling In, <http://www.oecd.org/els/mig/Indicators-of-Immigrant-Integration-2015.pdf>.

interpersonal relationships. Pre-school education and care lays the foundation for further learning and formation of identity and citizenship and plays a decisive role in improving education outcomes, including the development of social competences. Both migrant and local children can attend the kindergarten, as interactions between locals and refugees is the best way to bridge differences and ease social integration for newcomers.

**Recreational activities:** Children will have the opportunity to engage in various activities that focus on social and life skill trainings, mobilization and comprehension of social issues, as well as creative expression. Children will learn how to express their emotions and needs and develop interpersonal and peer-to-peer contacts.

**Movement-based activities:** Through various activities, children will learn how to interact with one another, express their feelings and release stress and anxiousness.

**Psychosocial support, life skill training and self-growth empowerment for children and parents:** Children and parents will be provided support by mental health professionals to identify and cope with their emotional and behavioural difficulties (i.e. stress, depression, anxiety, despair) through a personalised plan that reflects their needs, and will enable them to become more self-empowered and regain self-esteem. The approaches and methods of this support will be adapted and tailored according to the specific capacities and abilities of pre-school children and adults who will benefit from these activities.

**Parental counselling and development of parental skills:** Parents will strengthen their parental knowledge on positive parenting, will learn healthy ways of communicating with their children and with each other, set boundaries and facilitate the development of their children's resilience and empowerment. Parents will be sufficiently empowered to address serious cases of gender-based violence and domestic abuse, and to fulfil successfully their parental role. Families will also be integrated in a Family Strengthening Program already implemented by SOS Greece in the region of Ioannina.

**Community based activities:** These workshops will focus on the development of life skill trainings, self-empowerment and personal growth. Both local and migrant families will take part in the community-based activities to reinforce interactions and social links, as well as gradual integration into the Greek community.



### **Program location**

Since 2019, SOS Greece implements a Family Strengthening Program in **Ioannina** (capital of Epirus, located in the Nord-West of Greece) one of the poorest areas in Europe<sup>5</sup>. Ioannina already hosted a considerable refugee community and due to the recent delocalization programs of the Greek government to decongest the Greek Isles, even more refugees are going to Ioannina. Needs are increasing and local structures face challenges to respond to these needs. Refugee families with young children in Ioannina are faced with limited opportunities for decent living and social wellbeing. The Covid-19 pandemic has further undermined family cohesion and endangered the mental health of desperate people. Therefore, SOS Greece decided to expand their already existing activities in Ioannina to support refugee and migrant population. Around 2.500 refugees and migrants are currently living in the city of Ioannina.

Based on former and current experiences, SOS decided to implement this program outside of the existing refugee camps. Although other and sort-like SOS interventions on preschool education in refugee camps in Greece offer a safe space for children, in the best way possible considering the precarious conditions in refugee camps, SOS Greece considers that these refugee camps are never an appropriate place for children to grow up and that all efforts should be done to get children out of these camps. By implementing the program outside of refugee camps, this intervention strongly focuses on the integration of refugee communities in the existing social fabric to allow people to start rebuilding their lives again.

### **Beneficiaries**

SOS offers support tailored on the individual needs of the beneficiaries, with a strong focus on the long-term impact for the beneficiaries. This requires a **highly individualized and one-to-one approach** (in contrast to a one-size-fits-all approach). The beneficiaries for this project include:

- i) 40 refugee and migrant children aged from 4 to 6 years (20 children per year). The program is coordinated with other actors to identify those children who do not have access to existing pre-school educational services provided by other state or non-state actors.
- ii) The families of the children (40 adults per year)
- iii) Indirect beneficiaries: other family members

As this is a pilot project of SOS Greece in Ioannina for refugee and migrant children and their parents, the project focuses in this first stage on this particular target group. After a mid-term evaluation, it can be decided to extend the number of beneficiaries or to open the Kindergarten for other children of the host community.

### **Project duration**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ekathimerini.com/238082/article/ekathimerini/business/four-greek-regions-among-poorest-in-eu-data-show>

The project started in **October 2020 and will continue until July 2022** (following the school year calendar). After a mid-term evaluation of the program, it can be decided to extend the program beyond this period and/or to add other intervention modules to extend the scope of the program.

### **Covid-19**

Since March 2020, the threat that has been spreading around the globe, affecting individuals in a socioeconomic and mental health level, reached Greece altering the function of everyday life and creating a new “normality” for all. Despite the fact that the country had and continues to have a low score of identified cases and deaths, the Greek government responded immediately by postponing the operation in both the public and private sector, including the cessation of schools, closure of borders, cancelation of flights, controlled documented and authorized reasons for transportation and at last lockdown.

The operations of this SOS program in Ioannina follow the rules and guidelines of the Greek Ministry of Education. Although this program was planned to start in September 2020, operations were only started in October 2020 as the reopening of schools, kindergartens and educational centres was postponed as a precaution measure against the spread of the Covid-19 virus. SOS Greece is currently exploring the possibilities to adapt the interventions (including remote support) in case the Ministry of Education decides to suspend all activities of the educational structures. On other projects, SOS Greece has already launched a Google Digital Classroom Platform for children from 11 years old, in collaboration with INCO Education Accelerator, and is looking how this platform could be used for preschool educational services, should the situation demand for this.

### **Budget**

The budget for the program for the whole period is **243.800 EUR**, as detailed here below.

<b>Description</b>	<b>months</b>	<b>Cost/Month</b>	<b>total</b>
<i>psychologist</i>	24	€ 1.630	€ 39.120
<i>social worker</i>	24	€ 1.400	€ 33.600
<i>social worker</i>	12	€ 1.400	€ 16.800
<i>educator</i>	18	€ 1.350	€ 24.300
<i>educator</i>	18	€ 1.350	€ 24.300
<i>cultural mediator</i>	24	€ 930	€ 22.320
<i>cultural mediator</i>	24	€ 930	€ 22.320
<i>admin</i>	24	€ 930	€ 22.320
<i>material</i>			€ 6.000
<i>furnishing/equipment</i>			€ 8.000
<i>food/snacks</i>			€ 16.000
<i>rent and utilities</i>			€ 8.000
			<b>€ 243.080</b>

This budget is already partially covered by SOS Greece, SOS Germany and SOS Belgium. The remaining part (91.380 EUR) will be covered by members of the International Federation of SOS and/or by other donors.

### **Implementing partner**

This program will be implemented by **SOS Children's Villages Greece**. SOS has been active in Greece since 1975. Currently, SOS Greece has four SOS villages across the country for children without parental care, nine Family Strengthening Programs to support families in their socio-economic capacities and to prevent family separation, two SOS baby homes for abused babies and infants and two youth houses. Since 2015, SOS Greece has launched a refugee assistance program. SOS continues to operate in different parts of Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Lesbos and Crete), covering a wide range of services that focus on the psycho-social and educational empowerment, as well as community-based activities as part of integrational support and capacity building of professionals. In the first semester of 2020, 1.680 individual children and 391 individual adults were supported by the SOS emergency program in Greece. The program in Ioannina will be part of this encompassing Emergency Response Program of SOS Greece.



**Pictures**



First day at the SOS Kindergarten in Ioannina



Girls studying outside the SOS classroom in the  
refugee camp of KaraTepe

Girls studying outside the SOS classroom in the



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES



Digital Classroom platform within SOS programs



SOS Classroom in refugee camp of KaraTepe