

Stay home without a home?

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, individuals have been asked to self-isolate - to "stay home". However, millions of people around the globe do not have a home because they have been forced to leave their communities due to war or persecution.

At this moment, for 71 million refugees, COVID-19 poses threats that prove extremely daunting if not addressed in time. The simple recommendations from health officials around the world and institutions like WHO already seem difficult to uphold for the general public, but for refugees, they are more than routine changes - they are almost impossible to carry out.

The mass accommodation conditions most refugees are exposed to - in refugee camps, transit camps and arrival centers - precipitate overcrowding, lack of proper hygiene, virtually non-existent privacy, and lack of access to adequate healthcare. These conditions already were a major obstacle for the psycho - social wellbeing of their inhabitants before the virus, but now, they pose a threat to life.

Mass accommodation, in all its forms, has been openly criticized by experts for some time. It is obvious that the existing solutions are not fit for the protracted crisis scenarios of the 21st century. The contexts have dramatically changed, but the handbooks have not. Mass accommodation approaches were designed to enable monitoring, surveillance, and managing everyday life for a few months. Now, people stay there for years or even decades.

Within those time frames, the prison-like grid structure and the excessive top-down power and control that is often employed in these settings have massive negative psycho-social effects on individuals and their human dignity. Current practice neglects the sociocultural needs of their population, which go beyond the main tenets of survival - shelter, food, and water - such as education, individual and social progress, and self-

realisation. As seen in many places, refugee populations kept in this marginalized state of limbo in camps and closed centers for years suffer in an unimaginable way. Furthermore, camps and centers in their current form impose massive stress to their surrounding local contexts. They are often seen as a burden by local communities, instead of an integrated part of local and regional development.

Adding to these weaknesses, it is a fact that overall, the way mass sheltering is currently designed and implemented is far too costly. This is firstly because the costs of mass accommodation are the costs of human dignity - the ability to grow, connect, and be an active citizen rather than a mere beneficiary of organized aid. In this regard, current solutions come with a high price not only for the refugee communities, but also for the host populations, as refugees are poorly integrated into the local or regional context, lowering their ability to contribute. Lastly, mass accommodation is a poor cost-sensitive solution from an economic perspective if the camps and centers remain beyond crisis-response time frames of a few months. They become a bottomless pit for primary implementation, maintenance costs, and for secondary socio-economic costs within the refugee and host populations.

Whichever way we look at it - human warehousing is always the least beneficial solution for both refugees, local communities, and governments. Again, during times like now, with a pandemic sweeping across the world, mass accommodation also puts the physical safety of millions at risk.

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The good news is that for all contexts - crisis scenarios, transit routes and regions and municipalities of arrival - better solutions are available. MORE THAN SHELTERS, as part of a larger humanitarian innovation context, has developed and tested such solutions within the last decade. The concept of "arrival cities" has been partially implemented for Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, dignified reception and transit camps were tested in Greece, and a new framework called "Integration Hub" has been developed and implemented for the

cities of Berlin and Stuttgart. These solutions focus on strengthening refugee and host communities. They foster self-agency and self-development within a socio-spatial neighborhood development framework. They incubate locally adapted solutions for living, working, and thriving together by focusing on the needs, talents, and ideas of newcomers and old residents alike.

How to move forward?

In times of COVID-19, life threatening mass accommodation camps need to be closed and their populations evacuated, particularly those on the Greek Islands. Everyone deserves to be equally well protected from COVID-19.

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The current pandemic is yet another reminder of the need to change the way mass accommodation centers are conceived. This can be achieved through innovation. Alternative accommodation models already exist but need to be further supported. We - donors, humanitarian agencies, and humanitarian innovators - can define the new standards but the EU and its Member States have to integrate them into policy in order to radically transform the way accommodation is provided to newcomers.

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About MORE THAN SHELTERS

MORE THAN SHELTERS is a German based social business designing innovative solutions for the humanitarian relief in refugee camps.

