

“Others feed our bodies but you feed our minds”

Simon Cloudesley and **Justine Humphrey** speak about volunteering to help run a mobile library for refugees in Greece over the summer, an experience that was sometimes harrowing, sometimes joyful, but always worthwhile.

IN central Athens, a community centre is bursting at the seams. Men, women and children, chatting and playing, fill the rooms and the stairs, spilling out onto the pavement and across the street. Upon entering, two thoughts come to mind: the first is chaos; the second is life. Life in all its chaotic beauty. These are just some of the urban refugee population of the Greek capital and considering their dangerous journeys, many of them could so easily not be here. And yet they made it.

A couple of streets away, in the sweltering summer heat, an old right-hand drive minibus parks as close as possible to a community centre. The van is lovingly refurbished, its shelves laden with books. The outside respray announces the Echo Refugee library in different languages. Faces of curious children peek out from doorways. A few young women come to see what's going on. Then the spark of excitement when they realise that a mobile library has appeared outside Melissa, a centre for refugee women and children. Soon a group gathers inside the van, excited by the prospect of a new opening in their limited world. “Do you have books in Arabic?” Yes we do. We also have Farsi, Urdu, English and a smattering of German, French and Turkish. It is easy to take for granted the ability to find a book in your own language. Once you cross borders, it is a different story.

Volunteering with Echo

Like many others, we have been moved by the refugee situation in Greece. As two



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library assistants, working in Oxford and studying Library and Information Studies at UCL, we decided to combine our desire to help with our commitment to the social justice role of libraries and our passionate belief that books really can change lives. As

The van is lovingly refurbished, its shelves laden with books. The outside respray announces the Echo Refugee Library in different languages.
Photos © Echo Refugee Library.

a result, we flew out to Athens over the summer to volunteer with Echo.

The Echo Refugee Library (Education, Community, Hope, Opportunity) was founded in northern Greece in August 2016 and soon went mobile. Inspired by the refugee community that developed around an EKO petrol station close to the Macedonia border, the project reflects some of the great truths of the recent refugee crisis: communities can develop spontaneously and organically anywhere and their members need the opportunity for growth and development whatever their circumstances.

After relocating to Athens in 2017, the project is coordinated in the field by Megan Yates, a Cambridge graduate with previous experience volunteering in Calais, and Varvara Svoronou, a librarian, social activist and Athens native. It now serves Malakasa, Ristona and Oinofyta refugee camps, as well as community projects in Athens. Only around half of the world's refugees live in camps; others choose to bypass these dire living conditions, swapping one kind of social invisibility for another, in the hope of a better kind of survival in the urban landscape. Echo is the only mobile refugee library project in Greece that is able to go to refugees wherever they may be and to have the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

Break down

The reality of volunteering and running a refugee project soon became evident when, after three days, the van broke down with a faulty clutch. No van, no mobile library. This was a vital lesson: on the ground, anything can and does happen. The refugee situation is in a constant state of flux, both for refugees themselves and for the people that strive to offer a helping hand. It is a



sad irony that many grassroots projects are, like the refugees whom they support, fighting for their very survival. Up until recently Echo has relied solely on the generous private donations and fundraising efforts of individuals. "Is it even worth fixing the van? If we do, can the project even survive?" Sadly, with very little money in the bank, these were honest questions that needed to be asked. Working and living in a crisis environment requires quick, determined and imaginative responses. After a short crowdfunding push, the money (and more) was raised to get the mobile library back on the road for the short term. The down time also proved

vital for the team to take stock, literally, of the project and to plan for the future.

Just another library?

The Echo Refugee Library is a library, after all. Funding and staffing are constant challenges. Stock evaluation, weeding, sorting donations and maintaining a catalogue, are all ongoing processes that require time and effort. Systems need to be put in place and adapted when necessary and staff documentation kept up-to-date. Outreach, promotion and collaboration with the vast network of other grassroots organisations are all vital for success, as well as regular team meetings



and planning. In short, this is hard work.

However, Echo is different in so many ways due to the context in which it operates. The library has around 800 items, the majority being in Arabic, Farsi and English, and covers fiction, non-fiction and language learning resources. Language naturally governs how the material is organised and displayed. The first concern of most users is: “What do you have in my language?” Due to restrictions on storage and transportation space, quality rules over quantity and language learning resources are in highest demand (although Agatha Christie in Arabic is also highly sought after!).

This is testament to the desire of refugees to continue to learn and to develop the skills that will help their future integration into new societies. It also demonstrates that “living” is much more than basic “survival”. As one refugee wrote on the Echo Facebook page: “Others feed our bodies but you feed our minds.”

Locating these resources and getting them to Greece is challenging. New stock is constantly required in order to meet the continuing needs of long-term refugees. In the beginning, Echo was grateful for any material it could get hold of. But as the project has developed and understood its users, so has its approach to collection development. Often material is not useful or becomes obsolete and is passed on to other start-up projects, who will likewise in time go through the same process of refining the character of their collections.

Not your average reading room

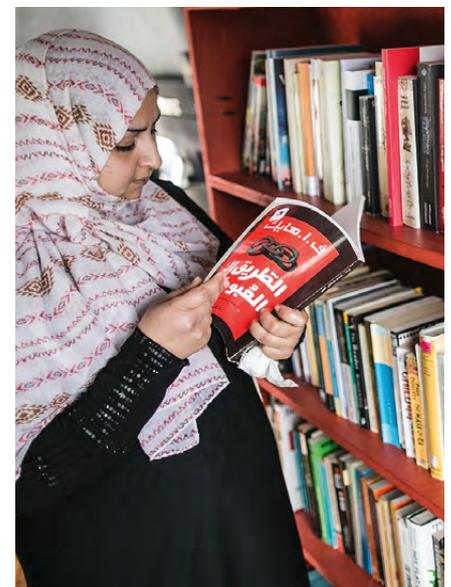
Safeguarding is a constant consideration as situations can arise quickly in which the safety of the team and library users is the priority. Sensitivity to backgrounds, religions and past and ongoing trauma is also fundamental. This is not your average reading room. It would be unusual in any other library to sit with a user and be wondering in the back of your mind: “Where have you come from?” “What did you have to go through to get here?” “What have you left behind?” These questions will generally go unanswered, but they are never very far away.

A day in the life of an Echo librarian

It is another hot morning, especially in a van with no air conditioning. Parking up outside the Melissa refugee centre, it’s time to set up for this impromptu library session down a back street in central Athens. Tables and chairs are placed on the pavement, bookshelves arranged and tidied, tablets booted up and the (temperamental) Wi-Fi switched on. We are ready to receive our first customers. An excited crowd of children and young women soon forms. It is an absolute joy to experience their delight at choosing and borrowing books. They are enthralled. One young woman sits and shows her journal where she has written poetry in English and Arabic. She then goes on to say how much she enjoys writing and that in the future she would write a book. As a refugee from Syria, what stories she has to tell, and at

such a young age! Hopefully one day her book will take its rightful place on a library shelf.

The need to process the experience of a hectic library session would be unusual in other circumstances. But the things that are seen and heard daily when working with refugees often requires this. Leaving the city for the cooler mountain and coastal air, being on the road travelling between destinations gives an opportunity for reflection and also for mental preparation for what may lie ahead. Approaching the gates to Malakasa refugee camp, 26 miles outside Athens, a place where





people have suffered so much, we wonder what good a van full of books can do when these people have lost everything. An ambulance is up ahead trying to enter, waiting for a police car to exit. Inside, our usual parking space is taken up by newly-erected UNHCR tents. There is tension in the air, and we are told that unrest had broken out recently as new arrivals from Lesbos had been promised accommodation that wasn't forthcoming. Everyone should be out of tents and into static Isoboxes within two months (converted shipping containers made in Greece, that come in various configurations).

Expect the unexpected

Unlike other camps, Malakasa is particularly lacking in facilities beyond the very basics (Ritsona, for example, is privately-funded and is well-supported by a school, youth centre, library and other services). Whether Echo is regarded as a novelty, a distraction or an important part of the week, it is clear that we are wholeheartedly welcome. Children who safely roam free in the community of the camp, with nothing but each other and their playful imaginations for company, are the first to crowd round the van. "My friend, my friend!" they shout, tugging at our limbs. "A book, a book!" Some are happy to sit and read quietly; others are more interested in getting inside the van and playing. Books start to go walkabout and need to be retrieved!

This unexpected need for crowd control is just one example of having to react to whatever situation arises. Sometimes it is necessary to make visits to tents to track down loans; but today, with tension in the air, it seems inappropriate. Working in this situation requires going with the flow. Adults and teens come inside looking for language resources and easy-reading books in English. In a surreal moment, one man wears a donated t-shirt that proudly announces: "I ran the Winchester half-marathon". Another's t-shirt says simply: "LOST".

You never know what to expect visiting a place like this. The children can present

the biggest practical challenge; and yet their spirit, resilience and excitement captures what the library is about and the positive impact it is having. At the end of the day there is exhaustion and the need to process some powerful moments, sometimes moving, sometimes painful. But it is a privilege to be a small part of the refugees' world and to see the value books hold for those in desperate need.

What will tomorrow bring?

The Echo Refugee Library is committed wholeheartedly to providing a professional library service in an extremely challenging environment, and with determination and enthusiasm, strives to achieve it. If someone requests a book or resource that they don't have they will try their best to get it. After a bumpy ride over the summer, the future is looking bright: a recent development grant from Lush (the cosmetics company) and promising collaboration with IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) and Book Aid International have opened up financial security and opportunities for book sourcing for the coming months. Looking back, the determination to keep moving when the end seemed inevitable has truly paid off.

What good can a van full of books do? You'd be surprised.

For more information and to support the work of Echo, visit www.Echo-greece.org. **IP**

