

Mercy Corps cash programming in the Greece migrant crisis response

By Alan Glasgow



Alan Glasgow is Mercy Corps Director of the European Migration Response. In 2015, Mercy Corps established its European Migration

Response to meet the urgent needs of thousands of refugees and migrants who were travelling from Turkey to Greece and through the Balkans.



Hassan and his family receive a cash transfer from Mercy Corps staff members in Katsikas camp, Ionnina

Sara Hylton for Mercy Corps

Location: *Greece*

What we know: Cash as a humanitarian response mechanism has grown in significance over the last decade.

What this article adds: In response to the Greece migrant crisis, Mercy Corps responded in 2014 with a clear strategy for a cash-based response, informed by recent experiences and enabled by government collaboration and private sector support and partnerships. Support of Mastercard allowed for start-up and innovation on the use of cash in a highly complex and fluid situation to meet the needs and the context. Mercy Corps is now responsible for roughly 25% of all cash programming among the refugee response in Greece and its islands (distributing €600,000/month). Over half of cash (54%) is spent on food. Cash programming has allowed for greater dignity, autonomy and cultural sensitivity to needs. Learning informed other agency and donors responses; a cash working group now coordinates response and the shared distribution mechanism makes for an efficient, equitable response.

From 2014 onwards, Greece and its islands faced a challenge like they have never previously encountered and for which they, and the humanitarian community, were ill-prepared. Wars and economic crises in countries across the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, resulted in a tide of people on the move across the globe on an unprecedented scale. Greece, with its position as a gateway to a prosperous and stable Europe, became the one of the first shores upon which waves of citizens landed, displaced and in possession of only that which they could carry.

When Mercy Corps arrived in Greece in August 2015 to assess the conditions and begin to

provide support in helping refugees and the Greek people face this modern crisis, thousands of people were moving through the country each day, onwards to find refuge in other European countries. In our rapid assessment of the situation, our staff and volunteers on the island asked themselves, “how can we provide for a transient population who can only use what they can carry?”

Cash

Using our expertise in the humanitarian sector, and the growing significance of using cash in the humanitarian context for the past decade, the answer was surprisingly simple – to give refugees the money to buy what they need,

when and where they needed it. Pre-paid cards provided to each family unit or individual refugee or migrant, pre-loaded with a monthly sum with which they could buy the items they and their family needed.

Cash as a humanitarian response mechanism has been growing in significance for more than a decade, with Mercy Corps first implementing it in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. We made the strong case for cash programming as a best fit for dealing with the crisis in Greece and we were the first organisation to start using cash in the country. As an organisation, we took a stance that said that people have the right to move and claim asylum where they

wish to do so, and cash helps to protect them and do so in a more dignified way.

We used the blueprint from smaller programming we were running in Serbia and Macedonia, we moved it over to Greece and scaled it up. Initially, because of good links with the local government and with the help of partners such as Airbnb, Google.org, Mastercard, TripAdvisor Charitable Foundation and private philanthropists who generously supported Mercy Corps' innovative approach to this humanitarian situation, we were able to push ahead with the type of programming that we recognised matched the nature of the crisis most.

As a firm believer in the efficacy of cash programming, over the last decade, Mercy Corps has implemented schemes in 31 countries including Syria, Ukraine, Haiti, Niger, Yemen and Uganda. Indeed, since 2014 we have distributed over £36 million in cash programming to more than 400,000 households. In each context, an assessment is undertaken to determine whether local markets are suitably functioning to undertake cash programming and, if so, which form will be most efficient. One of the many advantages of this practice is that it can be adapted depending on the needs of the people and situation. Some examples include distribution of paper vouchers, mobile money transfers, or pre-paid debit cards that can be used to withdraw cash around the world. Some programmes even include cash-for-work initiatives.

When our programming first began on the two Greek islands, it was a light touch response to complement the responses from volunteer-led, and other organisations, which were already underway. Beginning on the islands of Lesbos and Kos, refugees were spending all of two or three days in Greece as they transited on towards northern Europe. Their 'expenditure basket' (the amount of money received per individual) was primarily calculated on the basis of the cost of a ferry ticket to mainland Greece.

Box 1 Walaa's story

One family that cash has helped in Greece is Walaa and her children. After a rocket landed on their house and set it on fire, along with her eight month old daughter Fatima, Walaa knew that they had to escape Syria. She fled in early 2016 with her three children. They walked across the desert for two days to Turkey's border, where smugglers took them across the country and the Aegean Sea. They arrived in Greece on the 19 March, one day before the EU-Turkey deal came into effect.

Walaa's children will carry their scars for years but with the Mercy Corps cash support, she can afford to buy some healthy food, especially for Fatima as she needs special, soft food, since she has difficulty chewing and swallowing, and clean clothes for the children. Two years after the attack, Fatima cannot speak, hear or walk. Half of her head is covered in scar tissue where her hair never grew, and her legs are covered with the web-like scarring of burned skin. She needs a special stroller to stretch out her legs and have a better quality of life. Walaa also uses the cash to create little moments of joy for the children, such as purchasing a treat of peanuts and soda for her other children. "So they can forget the hunger and the horrible days they've lived. So they can be happy," she told our team.

Initially, the programme targeted the most vulnerable cases, which saw over 1,600 cards distributed in the first six months of the programme benefiting more than 3,500 individuals. Cards for adults were topped up with €90 and for families, €250 and saw, €291,700 being distributed. In doing so, we aimed to reduce the negative coping mechanisms that those under stress may have felt the need to turn to. While the Greek government was providing food and shelter, some people had no source of income for transportation, medicines and additional food so there was a concern that some might turn to other ways of coping such as drugs, prostitution, and violence.

When things changed

Then in March 2016, the anticipated EU-Turkey deal was struck between the European Union and Turkey. This followed the closing of borders by some European countries, and radically changed the nature of the crisis. According to the deal, Turkey agreed to send one Syrian refugee to Europe for permanent resettlement in return for accepting one refugee or migrant

who entered Greece by crossing the Aegean Sea. This had the effect of closing the Greek route into Europe, halting the flow of refugees and migrants through the country, turning the transient population into a static one.

The deal had various implications on Mercy Corps' programming. With the halting of the journey of many refugees and migrants, they effectively became stuck in Greece and therefore Mercy Corps had to pivot the programme quickly from targeting the most vulnerable, to all individuals in the camps who Mercy Corps was responsible for helping. Part of this decision involved the recognition that refugees and migrants living in such proximity to one another made it practically impossible to isolate certain individual for cash programming without creating a level of tension among the residents of the refugee camps.

Mercy Corps was the first organisation to set up cash programming in Greece, from our cash office in Lesbos we met families like Walaa's (see Box 1) on a daily basis. We undertook distributions in camps across Greece – on the islands, in Attica and in the northwest district of Ioannina. Depending on size, families receive up to €340 each month via a pre-paid card, while an individual receives €90 a month. They can withdraw the money to spend in local markets and shops, or could use it in any place where there is a POS (point of sale) machine and the card is topped up each month following an interview and analysis of needs.

As we shared our learnings with other agencies and the UNCHR, gradually they began following Mercy Corps' leadership, along with other donors, including the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO).

Overcoming challenges

A key partner of Mercy Corps cash efforts until December 2016 was Mastercard, who gifted us free cards and helped set up a cost-efficient delivery mechanism. While initially we had hoped to be able to capture POS information for all those using the cards, due to the scale of the

Walaa, 23, and her three children were (May 2016) living in a hotel designated as a camp for the most vulnerable refugees



programme, we had to adjust our monitoring and evaluation methods. This meant that part of the process included interviews with refugees and migrants each month before and after they received their cards in order to analyse their spending habits and the impact that the card were having on meeting their basic needs.

Through this data analysis, we have been able to track the changes over time and within groups in how the funds are used. Although food is provided at the camps which are run by the Greek Government, buying additional food remains the majority use of the money, standing at 54 per cent in the November 2016 report, clothing at 15 per cent, communication on 9.5 per cent, medical expenses at 6.5 per cent and after that transport and miscellaneous costs come in. Ninety-five per cent of cardholders said in November 2016 that their safety has either improved (60 per cent) or remained stable (30 per cent) due to the receipt of cash.

Implementing the scheme across different demographics, nationalities and social groups has required that staff think flexibly to overcome challenges. We can often have up to 20 different nationalities arriving on the islands and Mercy Corps has staff to cover five of the main languages spoken: Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, French and English. It is an unusual situation to have this many different languages in one place and to have to programme accordingly. In addition, there are different capacities which different people have to use the electronic cards and machines, and our training accompanies any cash distribution.

Unaccompanied minors (under 18 years) are another group to be considered, and they currently receive alternative assistance such as accompanied shopping or a gift card or voucher to spend.

Through our cash transfer programme in Greece, we have seen the dignity and autonomy that the cash has provided refugees, allowing individuals to spend their money and how social differences such as gender and culture affect spending habits. Women spend relatively more on clothes and medicines while men have higher rates in transportation and communications. Afghans have higher expenditures in clothing, and medical expenses, Pakistanis in communication and Syrians on food.

In Ramadan we saw families saving up their money to go out and eat in the evenings at a restaurant; the cash gives some sense of normality to their existence instead of living simply off of government and army handouts.

Mercy Corps is now responsible for roughly 25 per cent of all cash programming among the refugee response in Greece and its islands, currently distributing around €600,000 a month at our seven locations. Since December 2015 a total of 16,828 beneficiaries have received a share of €2,849,100 on the Greek mainland and islands. This money not only provides dignity and choice to refugees and migrants, but supports the local economy – shops and markets – as

well as the livelihoods of Greek shopkeepers. An additional benefit is the increasing goodwill from shopkeepers who view refugees and migrants with some cash in their pockets as customers and not always as an additional burden.

Harmonising cash programming across Greece

As in many humanitarian settings, organisations in Greece involved in the refugee response have formed working groups to coordinate our activities in order to address common problems. The cash working group collectively sets the ‘expenditure basket’ funds received each month by individuals, and this calculation remains a function of needs established through our collective research. Such is the relative ease of cash distribution that it is much more straightforward to coordinate operations among the organisations at work in the country, making the response quick, efficient and equitable.

The working group is building towards a unified and streamlined response across the different organisations and there is a real desire, especially as more donors are committing more funds to cash, that there is standardisation of cash programming across Greece.

All organisations are now using the same standard operating procedures in order to harmonise cash programming across the country, and we’re now using the same provider called a ‘PFS’ or Prepaid Financial Service, which is a partner of Mastercard. This harmonisation of cash programming across all organisations means that we can provide more joined-up and better services for refugees and migrants receiving cash through the programme, even if they should move from camp to camp.

Cash for the future

It is not news that globally, there is unprecedented humanitarian need – the world is spending around £15 billion a year responding to 125 million people devastated by wars and natural

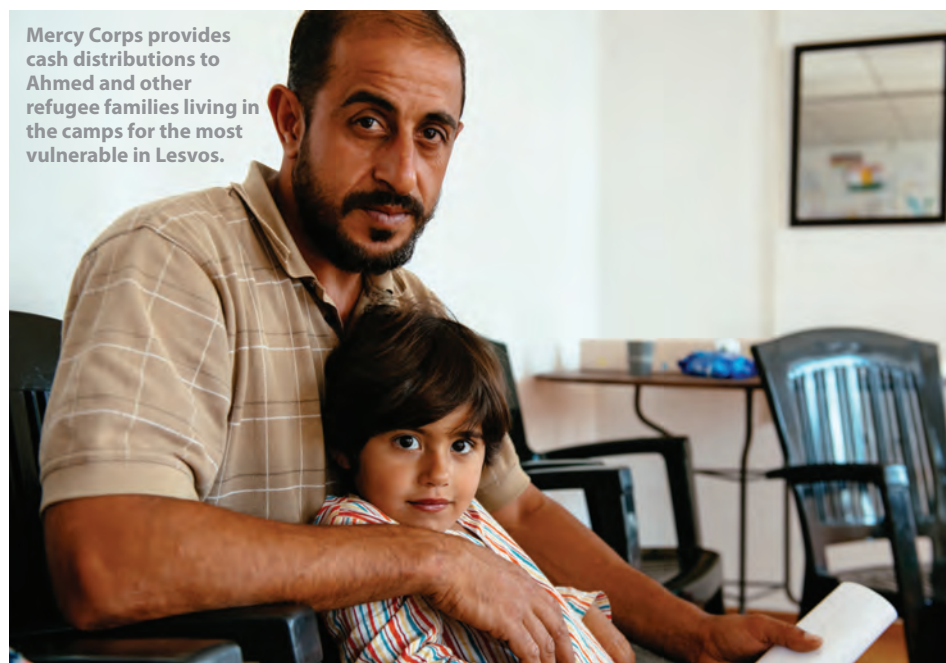
disasters. Unfortunately, we’re not even coming close to keeping up with the needs. But we are also in a time of unprecedented new opportunities: new technologies, new kinds of partnerships with global business, new research into what works (and what doesn’t) and a new profile of those we’re trying to help. Increasingly we are supporting educated, mobile and urban populations. What Mercy Corps was able to do in Greece, with the support of Mastercard, was quickly start-up and trailblaze the use of cash in a highly complex and fluid situation to meet the needs and the context.

In 2016, the UN Secretary General called for cash to be the default method of support for crisis-affected people where the situation allows, and Mercy Corps has committed 25 per cent of our humanitarian programming to cash by 2018. While cash is largely accepted as a form of humanitarian response, we must do more to ensure that it is considered as a starting point. Similarly, more must be done to win the public and donors’ trust of accountability around cash.

Mercy Corps firmly believes that cash is an integral component to bridging the divide between urgent relief and longer-term recovery and we are working to improve the policy environment for increasing cash-based assistance through the World Economic Forum’s principles for public private partnerships.

Time and time again, when we ask people who are benefiting from Mercy Corps’ cash programme, what difference it makes to them – they say that the little amount of money “helps them to live”. They don’t always mean literally, but rather it support their well-being, allows them to feel some sense of normalcy and hopeful about their options. For a programme that already makes good economic sense, this furthers its tremendous value.

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Mercy Corps provides cash distributions to Ahmed and other refugee families living in the camps for the most vulnerable in Lesbos.