



EXIT STRATEGY FROM RITSONA ACCOMMODATION CENTRE FOR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

A CASE STUDY FROM THE HELLENIC RED CROSS

Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA)



CONTEXT

The accommodation centre	1
The project	1
Designing the exit strategy	2
Methodology	3
Face-to-face communication	3
Printed material	4
Information Boards	4
Community representatives	4
Audio and text messages	5
Feedback	5
Feedback elaboration	6
Challenges	7
Key messages.....	8

THE ACCOMMODATION CENTRE

Accommodation centre of
refugees and migrants in
Ritsona

The Ritsona accommodation centre, under the management of Greece's Ministry of Migration and Asylum has been in operation since 2015, hosting around 2.000 refugees and migrants primarily from Afganistan, Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, Cameroon, Ghana and Senegal.

Accommodation is provided in prefabricated residences with built-in sanitation and heating facilities. There is also a local market (groceries, mini markets, hairdressers etc) an initiative from the migrant population, that has been set up by themselves.



THE PROJECT

Psychosocial support and CEA
activities

Hellenic Red Cross implemented psychosocial support and community engagement activities from July 2021 until January 2023. Activities included:

- Recreational activities for minors
- Women's yoga group
- Women's drawing group
- English courses through painting for pre-school children
- Sewing lessons
- Photography lessons
- Recycling activities
- Chess team
- Workout/fitness activities



In addition:

- HRC conducted satisfaction and perception surveys
- Feedback mechanisms were established
- Accurate and timely practical information was provided to the community
- HRC created information materials (announcements and posters)
- HRC participated in community meetings
- Women's information and discussion groups were set up

All the above activities were implemented with the support of Arabic, Farsi and French interpretation to ensure language was not a barrier to participation or accessing information.

For more information about the project click [here](#)

DESIGNING THE EXIT STRATEGY

Basic components

Taking into account that the program and activities were due to conclude at the end of January 2023, the PSS and CEA teams together started preparing for exit one month before.

It was crucial to define and organize all the steps and the actions that would contribute to the National Society's smooth withdrawal from the field.

The main priorities for the exit strategy were:

1. To communicate clearly and widely with the community, the reasons of the program's closure
2. To ensure a smooth transition to the next phase, without jeopardizing the community resilience that had already been achieved
3. To enable people to ask questions, provide feedback and evaluate the overall cooperation with HRC
4. To inform people about alternatives and give people time to understand, accept and adjust to the new situation
5. To maintain the trust that had been built with people in the community, through two-way communication and open dialogue

“

"The exit strategy should be included in advance in every implemented program of the National Society and act as an integral part of the communication policy between RC and target populations."



METHODOLOGY



Main approach

The exit strategy was based and structured on the principles of interactive communication and community engagement. The community's most preferable communication channels were prioritized, alongside the already well-established feedback mechanisms. The use of the CEA tools and methodologies contributed to:

- a) The establishment of an effective dialogue between the field team and people in the community
- b) Maintaining the HRC's relationship of trust, respect and accountability to the community.

Specifically:



Face-to-face communication and door-to-door visits

Field staff (a CEA officer together with social worker and an interpreter) carried out door-to-door visits, informing Ritsona residents about the conclusion of the HRC program and activities through face-to-face meetings.

The stage of the campaign lasted four days. The information was first shared with people who were direct participants in the PSS and CEA activities and was then expanded to the wider community.

Implementation of the exit strategy began two weeks before the program ended and activities ceased, providing people with some time to digest the information, accept the changes and adapt.

In particular, the field team informed people about:

- The reasons of HRC's phasing out (end of funding)
- The exact date of the program's closure (January 31, 2023)
- The NGO's and stakeholders that will still be operational and which people can still approach
- Similar activities that are still available

The overall information campaign was delivered in a respectful, transparent and accountable way, by providing timely and accurate information. The purpose was to give time for people to make plans for their future actions, without provoking tensions and disagreements within the wider community.



Printed material

Printed material was used alongside with the face-to-face communication, including relevant information (announcements and posters) translated into the main spoken languages (Arabic, Farsi, English and French).

The combination of both oral and printed information contributed to clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the information being shared, ensuring a shared understanding amongst all residents and reducing the opportunity for misunderstanding and rumours.

Information was deliberately structured in a precise and clear way, through messages that had been approved by interpreters and tested with community members -a measure which again helped to ensure common understanding and prevent misinformation and rumours.



إعلان

نعلمكم أن خدمة الدعم النفسي والاجتماعي التابعة
للصليب الأحمر اليوناني ستوقف عن العمل اعتباراً
من 1 فبراير 2023.

شكراً لتعاونكم!

لمزيد من المعلومات ، يرجى الاتصال بموظفي الصليب
الأحمر اليوناني.



Information boards

Posters informing people about the changes were posted on all community information boards, further ensuring everyone was aware of, and had access to, the information.



Community representatives

Community representatives from each of the groups present in Ritsona, were identified as a key part of the strategy, who HRC could work with to ensure information reached all community members and nationalities.

Representatives of the Afghan and Arab communities were particularly crucial to engage and discuss the changes with, and ensure they had accurate information to share with their communities.



Audio and text messages

For languages where interpretation was not available, pre-recorded audio messages were prepared to help share the information.

With the support and the engagement of Ritsona residents who spoke these languages, short audio messages were recorded on the mobile phones and played back to people during the door-to-door visits.

In parallel, text messages were also created in multiple languages and shared through relevant WhatsApp groups, to further spread the information.



FEEDBACK



Seeking for people's opinion

Through the door-to-door visits, the team provided people the opportunity to ask questions, discuss the changes and express and share any uncertainties they might have.



Information sessions were also combined together with a micro-survey which aimed to capture feedback on people's experiences and perception of the HRC program and activities.

It was decided to include two questions:

α) "Are you satisfied with the cooperation you had with HRC and the program's impact?"

β) "Do you have any comments you would like to share with us?"

The questions aimed not only to evaluate and measure the project's impact, but also to encourage fruitful dialogue towards reducing any feelings of anxiety, uncertainty or disappointment.

In total, 73 minors and adults, both men and women, provided feedback in Arabic, Farsi and French language.

ELABORATING THE FEEDBACK:

Feedback was collected manually by the field team and later shared with technical staff in HRC. People's level of satisfaction with the overall program was high and people expressed their positive experience with HRC's work and cooperation.

Key points of the collected feedback included:

- Everybody surveyed, expressed their gratitude for the fruitful cooperation during all this time and wished HRC good luck in future
- Many of the people surveyed expressed their disappointment about HRC's exit, as the activities helped to keep both them and their children busy and to spend their time creatively
- Everybody approached was very kind and willing to engage in dialogue and express their feelings



“

"Why are you leaving?", "The camp is empty without you", "We don't want you to leave, we come here spend out time and we feel nice", "What will happen to us if more stakeholders leave?", "I'll go to the door and I won't let you go", "What am I going to do now with my children? There is no activity for them"

”





- The HRC staff handled every piece of feedback with respect and answered people's questions in a clear and honest way, paying attention not to create false expectations or trigger confusion
- Certain comments and actions of people in Ritsona -especially from the children- made the process quite emotional e.g hugs, children didn't want to let HRC staff go, people wanted to give presents.
- A feedback report was created and shared together with the monthly satisfaction survey report, to all relevant colleagues in HRC HQ.


CHALLENGES




Despite the detailed exit planning through collaborations and meetings with all members of the team, there were some factors that were unexpected, or outside the team's control that affected implementation of the strategy. In particular:

 The conclusion of the HRC program and activities coincided with other agencies also ending their activities at the same time (mainly due to lack of funding), which contributed to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety amongst community members.

 The fact that another NGO that was also implementing recreational activities for minors was suspending its operations at exactly the same time as HRC, was of particular concern to parents, as it meant there were no alternative activities to refer people when HRC stopped. This also placed field staff in a difficult position as there was little reassurance to offer people.

 Informing children about the phase-out of the program, presented another layer of difficulty compared with adults. Children were more emotional and spontaneous in responding to the news, which was something that affected the field staff. Despite this, staff explained the situation using *"child-friendly language"* and in a clear and simple way, paying attention not to create false expectations.

 Because many field staff had leave days to use up before the end of their contracts, there was a shortage of people available to support delivery of the exit strategy. For instance, there was not enough of human resource available to establish additional feedback channels (suggestion boxes or a community meeting), so the team were limited to using only those channels people were already most familiar with (e.g face-to-face communication).



KEY MESSAGES



Two of the main goals of the exit strategy were:

- a) not to jeopardize the quality and the sustainability of the program's outcomes and ensure that the benefits achieved so far would continue beyond the program's closure
- b) to communicate widely with the community about alternative sources of support, by enabling an effective dialogue between field staff and migrants.

More specifically:



- The exit strategy was designed ensuring the principles of reliability, respect and transparency towards people living in the accommodation centre were upheld
- People living in the accommodation centre were engaged and consulted in the exit planning (e.g helped to record audio messages, double-checked announcements, asked questions and expressed their opinions)
- Complementary communication channels were used in a coordinated way, to ensure that everyone received the information and nobody was excluded
- The fact that the Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) approach was already institutionilized within the National Society, enhanced the exit strategy design (tools, methodologies, case studies were already available and the staff was sensitized and fully supported the campaign)
- Due to the program's nature and profile two weeks appeared to be a sufficient period to engage with people and implement the exit strategy
- Meaningful participation of community members was a critical element of the information campaign: two-way communication was established, including specific opportunities for people to provide feedback
- People's reactions, questions, concerns and uncertainties were received and treated with full respect, recorded, discussed by the team and responses provided, thus closing the feedback loop
- The exit strategy ought to maintain trust between the HRC and people in the communities where the program was working, whilst also preventing the development of rumours or other misinformation
- The exit strategy made use of existing HRC tools, specifically the CEA tool: *"How to plan a succesful exit strategy in an HRC program"*





For more information you may contact:



*Hellenic Red Cross
Social Welfare Division,
Athens, Lykavritou 1, 10672
tel. 0030 210 3639538, swd@redcross.gr*



*Maria Zygouri, HRC CEA Coordinator,
m.zygouri@redcross.gr*