

CITY REPORT

Tilos

The island community that welcomed migrants.

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Tilos illustrates that even a very small place (800 residents) can create space for refugees, as long as migration is not perceived as a threat, but as an opportunity.

2

The quick inclusion of migrants into the local economy was a win-win situation for newcomers and locals, who needed a workforce during the summer season.

What is unique about the city?

Making actual participation possible: Tilos, an island of 800 residents, showed how existing communities can welcome newcomers and include them quickly into social life. Local authorities, together with residents, worked to create a community with refugees. These weren't just structures for temporary accommodation, but involved actual participation in different aspects of life, from labour to social events.

What are the key factors?

A visionary mayor in a special community: The welcoming of refugees in 2015 on Tilos continued an overall progressive direction for the island over the last 20 years. Ex-mayor Tasos Aliferis, who came as a seasonal doctor to the island and became mayor of Tilos in 1995 after he decided to settle there, spearheaded many of the relevant policies. Overall, what makes the example of Tilos special is not each initiative or project separately, but the overall atmosphere of community and participation created on the island.

What are the most outstanding results?

Refugees as co-owners of local businesses: Tilos received more than 5000 refugees in 2015 alone and has since maintained a welcoming and proactive approach towards inclusion. The most important characteristic of this period, in contrast to most of the other places throughout Greece, was that local businesses also offered jobs to refugees. In the case of the Irrina cooperative cheese factory, city authorities went one step further: they created the opportunity for refugees to become co-owners of a local business. In this sense, the welcoming of refugees in Tilos goes beyond humanitarianism, to a process of more equal participation in economic life on the island.



Population

780

Location/ region

Tilos is in the Aegean Sea, part of the Dodecanese complex and lies midway between the much bigger islands of Kos and Rhodes.

Mayor (party)

Maria Kamma Aliferi (independent)

2. Local background and context

In Tilos, both in terms of discourse and concrete initiatives, a unique approach towards migration is in place: an approach that does not criminalize or separates refugees but encourages participation and coexistence. This approach is a continuation of several progressive initiatives taken in the island within the last decades.

Receiving refugees

From the first days of the refugee crisis of 2015 Tilos declared a welcoming policy for refugees who arrived. Against the managing of refugees as a problem and the creation of camps the mayor of the island stated: “What we say from the beginning is that this is not a correct managing of the refugee issue. To have people locked up in camps, isolated, to feed them but not to provide anything to them. We want to integrate them fully into the social life of the island. There is no other more proper way to deal with the refugee issue.”²

A unanimous decision was taken by the municipal council to do whatever possible to provide hospitality for the refugees on the island. Tilos is also among the twelve cities that participated in the Cities Network for Integration.³ Tilos continues these policies and takes up new projects to enforce them.

Active participation in the local community

The prevailing policies of managing migration in Greece implied either a criminalization or a victimization of refugees; Tilos took a different approach. Refugees were seen as people who could actively participate in social life and could become part of the local community.

¹ <https://www.dimokratiki.gr/27-10-2018/tilos-the-real-success-story/>

² <https://www.dimokratiki.gr/27-10-2018/tilos-the-real-success-story/>

³ <https://www.accmr.gr/en/news/942-1st-cities-net-work-for-integration-newsletter.html>

In most other Greek cities – especially after the first years of the refugee crisis – most local authorities and societies were fiercely resistant to hosting any refugees in their cities. In the same period the mayor of Tilos stated: “We are honored by their choice to live on our island.”⁴

As will be described in what follows, this was not only a discursive strategy, but was translated into concrete policies and practices on the island. In cooperation with UNHCR, the NGO Solidarity Now, the Doctors of the World and the municipality of Meinier in Switzerland, several projects and initiatives were implemented on the island in order to realize the locals’ welcoming ideas.

These declarations and the political initiatives that followed did not come out of the blue, but were a continuation of the progressive policies applied on the island within the previous decades.

Spontaneous solidarity or a result of long-term progressive policies

The aim of this chapter is to present the local policy background. Although they are not directly connected to migration issues, these policies reveal an overall progressive and alternative political climate on the island. Tilos’s solidarity towards migrants must be seen against this background. Crucial are the policies of the ex-mayor Tasos Aliferis, who arrived as a seasonal doctor to the island and decided to settle. He became mayor of Tilos in 1995 and as the few residents – just 250 at the time – approved his political projects and ideas, he remained mayor until his death in 2012.

One of the first steps to transform the character of the island was to ban hunting in order to preserve biodiversity. The community of Tilos was awarded with the EuroNatur Prize 2009⁵ in recognition of their exemplary protection of migratory birds, and a special kind of tourism has been attracted to the island.⁶

Additionally, the city authorities created a cooperative and bought a ship that would make daily trips to Rhodes island. Tilos was the first municipality in the Aegean to own a ship; it was an attempt to reduce the remoteness of the island, especially in winter months when state authorities and private companies do not invest in regular routes. Furthermore, Tilos’s city authorities not only did not ban – as is happening all over Greece – but encouraged free camping on the island. On Eristos beach, the city built basic infrastructure including toilets and showers for free campers. These initiatives had a major effect on the island. Alternative tourism grew so more jobs were created for locals, while the ship offered easier and stable transportation. The population of Tilos tripled in a period when almost all other remote regions of Greece saw a serious population decline. The demography also changed, as the median age of 65 years in 1991 fell to 45 in 2011.

In 2008 Greek society was divided on the topic of gay marriage. Ignoring the juridical decisions, Tasos Aliferis took the initiative to marry two gay couples on Tilos. Both the mayor and the couples faced prosecution,

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/gr/6494-0c-vnswtwtz-pou-avoiξav-tnv-kaρδιά-kaι.html>

⁵ <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/project-areas/project-areas-a-z/tilos/>

⁶ <https://www.travel-zone-greece.com/blog/tilos-hiking-birdwatching/>

and in 2017 the high court declared the marriages unauthorized.⁷ The mayor would have probably been charged if he had not died a few years before.

“What we said from the beginning is that this is not a correct managing of the refugee issue. To have people locked up in camps, isolated, to feed them but not to provide anything else to them. We want to integrate them fully in the social life of the island. There is no other more proper way to deal with the refugee issue. For as long as these people stay in Greece they can offer.”¹

(Maria Kamma Aliferi, Mayor of Tilos)

Maria Kamma Aliferi, a colleague of Tasos Aliferis and member of the municipal board for some years, became the next mayor of the island. She continued Aliferis’s spirit and political leanings. One of her major achievements was that through a HORIZON 2020 program Tilos became the first island in the Mediterranean to produce energy autonomously through renewable green sources.⁸ For this project Tilos was awarded with two EU Sustainable Energy Awards.⁹ Against this background of progressive policies and local society, the welcoming of refugees in the summer of 2015 seemed common sense.

3. Local migration and integration policies

First reception

During the first months of the summer of 2015, more than a million refugees arrived to the Greek islands. Most of them crossed through Lesbos, Samos and Chios. However, more than 5,500 arrived to Tilos. From this first period, Tilos established practices of solidarity from municipal authorities, local society and the visitors and tourists who happened to be there.

Firstly, the locals organized rescue operations. As many refugee boats would land on remote beaches inaccessible by foot or vehicle, the locals, using their private boats, would transport the refugees to the main harbor of the island (for a video of such a rescue operation see <https://youtu.be/gOhv4FwnuL8>).

In the harbor – also the main city of the island – locals created a structure to receive the newly arrived refugees. As M. Kamma, mayor of the island stated, “Without any kind of support we created a settlement by our own means, with voluntary labor and donations, where we can accommodate around 100 people. In parallel the municipality collected

⁷ <https://www.tornosnews.gr/en/tourism-businesses/thematic-tourism/28563-greek-high-court-strikes-down-same-sex-marriage-on-tilos-island.html>

⁸ <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/7955410>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/energy/news/tilos-island-project-find-out-more-about-double-sustainable-energy-awards-winner_en?redir=1

¹⁰ <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/828016/chiliades-neoi-pros-fyges-kathe-mera-sto-aigaio/>

¹¹ <https://www.pappaspost.com/island-few-hundred-tilos/>

food, and the president of the municipal council cooks every day in the big pots we use for the festivities of the island.”¹⁰ According to newspaper articles more than 10,000 hot meals were served from the self-organized municipal kitchen during the summer of 2015.¹¹

Cooperation with tourists

In many Aegean islands the arrival of refugees was seen as a damaging factor for the tourism industry¹² – a main source of income for the residents of the Greek islands. On Tilos, however, tourists and locals have cooperated to attend the needs of refugees. As Eleni, a resident of the island and owner of a tourist shop put it: “We were able to buy 100 beds thanks to the help of tourists, who on their own initiative opened the site [Support the refugees on Tilos island](#) to collect money from all over the world”¹³. Furthermore, many departing free campers left their tents and other equipment in support for the refugees.

Housing, health, education

From June 2015, the Doctors of the World started operating a small medical center on the island providing equipment and a doctor. Services were offered to both refugees and locals, as in such remote islands there is no stable state provision of medical care. As M. Kamma, the mayor of the island stated: “For more than a year there had been no doctor in the island. A doctor from Rhodes visited once a week but during his short stay he could not attend both locals and refugees. So when the Doctors of the World came to the island and heard about our problems, they set up the clinic, and for the next three years Tilos had a permanent doctor.”¹⁴

Gradually, in cooperation with UNHCR and Solidarity Now, a more organized reception space was created on the island. Ten containers, each with two rooms, bathroom and a kitchen, were set up in the port city of Tilos to accommodate ten Syrian families. In contrast to other places, the accommodation space in Tilos was never fenced or closed off, but always open and with no security measures. Apart from accommodation, through the project of Solidarity Now two teachers – one for English language and one for music – settled in Tilos. Daily classes were offered to both children and adults.

¹² <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/07/06/refugee-crisis-causes-dramatic-drop-in-tourism-on-lesvos/>

¹³ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Greece/Greece-Tilos-a-safe-haven-164506>

¹⁴ <https://www.kar.org.gr/2016/02/23/tilos-to-nisi-pou-agkaliazi-tous-prosfyges/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/07/europe-integrate-refugees-migration-greek-island-tilos-integration>
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-islands-greece-refugees/syrian-refugees-find-safe-haven-but-no-secure-future-on-greek-island-idUSKBN1KHORR>

Inclusion in local businesses

Crucially, and in contrast to most other places in Greece, at this time jobs were offered to refugees in local businesses. As the island is small and Greece was recovering from an economic crisis, these jobs were seasonal, mainly during the tourist period. In media around the world there were reports on the different activities of refugees who worked in the local bakery, small hotels and bars around the city.¹⁵ M. Kamma Aliferi, mayor of the island said, “they fill an economic void, and in the summer we need manpower to fuel our tourism business. The refugees boost our economy. They buy locally, they consume. Everyone comes out ahead.”. Furthermore, as will be outlined in chapter 4, a cooperative

cheese factory where refugees could work all year round started operating on the island.

Through the ESTIA project by UNHCR, the three first apartments were rented for refugees in Tilos in the summer of 2019. The mayor arranged for more apartments through ESTIA so more refugees could live on the island. Today there are 27 refugees on the island, among them 11 children.

Overall, what makes the example of Tilos special is not each initiative or project taken alone, but the overall atmosphere of community and participation, as will be described in chapter 4.

Does the story of Tilos sounds too utopian to be true? The key was a basic shared preconception: refugees are not a threat against which the local society has to defend itself. They are people in need of support, but also people who can contribute. What is more unrealistic: this basic preconception, or EU and national policies trying to defend themselves from people who wish to settle and rebuild their livelihoods?

4. Selected local approaches

4.1 Irrina Cooperative Cheese Factory

The city authorities went one step further than hiring refugees: they created the opportunity for them to become co-owners of a local business.

The idea of a cheese factory was brought forward by the municipal authorities of the island. According to M. Kamma Aliferi: “The authorities are committed to creating job openings for the refugees. The plan is to open a cheese factory next year using milk from local goats.”

According to the mayor, three factors were important to realize the factory. First, the will of the islanders to provide stable work and a dignified life so the refugees would be able to settle permanently in the island; second, the need to boost the local economy and to return to traditional activities so the economy wouldn't be only depend on tourism; third, the fact that many goats were already living in the mountain areas of Tilos provided the necessary resources.

Cooperation with a Swiss village

Representatives of the Swiss municipality of Meinier, in cooperation with UNHCR, visited Tilos to think of ways to support the refugee settlement in the island. They were impressed by the idea of a cheese factory. The

¹⁶ <https://www.meinier-tilos.com/>

¹⁷ <http://www.belgomilk.gr/en/blog/egkainia-toy-protoy-koi-nonikoy-synetairismoy-galaktoko-mikon-proionton-stin-tilo>

Swiss municipality committed to support the project and provide financial resources¹⁶. The Swiss company Belgomilk provided the equipment for the cheese factory.¹⁷

In the spring of 2018 the cheese factory started operating. It functions as a cooperative where locals, settled migrants and newly arrived refugees are partners. As M. Kamma Aliferi insisted, “refugees wouldn’t be only workers but co-owners of this business”. In this sense, in Tilos the welcoming of migrants goes beyond humanitarianism or care to a process of more equal participation in the economic life of the island. “This is a sustainable and profitable business which can withstand the passing of time and grow by adding more refugees in future,” M. Kamma Aliferi said.

4.2 Participation in the local society

What makes the example of Tilos unique is not each initiative taken alone, but the overall approach and commitment to include refugees in the community of the island.

Inclusion on every level

At a time when most other Greek cities treated refugees as unwanted and a problem, the residents and authorities of Tilos insisted on welcoming refugees and including them in the social and economic life of the community. Most refugee camps in other Greek cities are located in remote areas, far away from cities; the settlement in Tilos is inside the village, in the port of Livadia. Refugees are not locked inside the camp. They use the same public spaces, beaches and cafes, mingling with the locals. The Solidarity Now project is not only about accommodation, but also about teaching Greek and English to both children and adults. It also provides art and music courses. Further, refugees actively participate in all rest of the island’s activities. The children, for example, are included in the football team and train with the local children. The choir includes both children and adults who all sing together. In September 2020, against the prevailing anti-refugee public discourse and policies, when in other Greek cities there were riots against the participation of refugee children in the schools, Tilos celebrated the arrival of the children to the public school. The picture of the eleven refugee children from Congo, Syria, Palestine and Sudan on the door of the school became a topic on social and mainstream media, gathering many positive but also many negative (often nationalist and racist) comments. Maria Kamma Aliferi said: “I thought we had moved passed that as a society. These negative comments do not affect us. We know what we are doing, why, and we are committed to proceed.”¹⁸

One of the most representative images of how this community bonded comes from the farewell of one Syrian family who were leaving the island to be relocated to Germany. Their departure was filmed in a documentary by Arte (<https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/074460-000-A/greece-tilos-solidarity-island/>). The other Syrian families, the social workers of Solidarity Now, the mayor of the island and many locals walked with them to the port to say one last goodbye. Hugs, tears, laughs, wishes for

¹⁸ <https://www.dimokratiki.gr/02-10-2020/i-tilos-anoixe-ta-scholeia-tis-se-anilikoyis-prosfyges-quot-theloyme-na-meinoyn-leei-sto-enikos-gr-i-dimarchos/>

the future and promises to meet again ensued. The Syrian family was departing from the island not as refugees but as members – even if only for a small period of time – of the island’s community.

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

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