



# Mental Health & Psycho Social Support Greece programme

## Context

There have consistently been about 20,000 asylum seekers living in the 5 Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) of the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros and Samos in the last year, facilities originally constructed for less than a third of that population. Due to overcrowding, most residents live in conditions that are unsafe and unhygienic. Lack of access to critical services, such as health care, water and sanitation, are extremely harmful to their safety and overall wellbeing. Moreover, most asylum seekers residing on the islands live in limbo, with a future that is unknown, often having to wait months, or even years, to get an answer on their asylum claim.



*Living conditions in the RICs are often unsafe.  
Pictured above is Moria, Lesbos, September 2019*

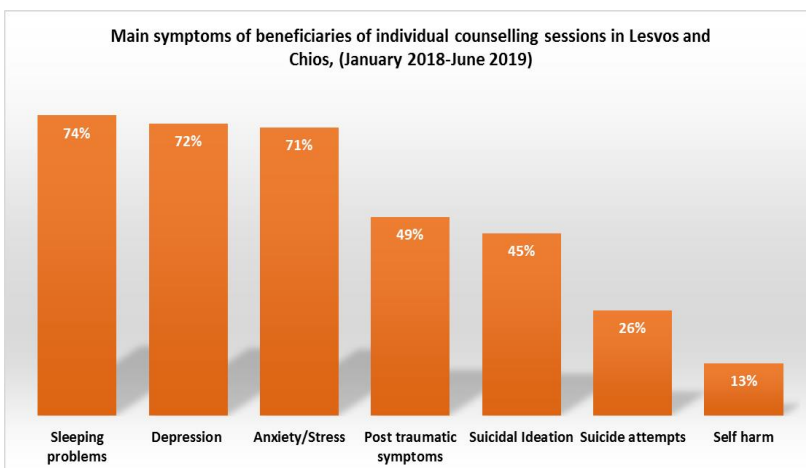
Lack of protection, lack of support and lack of any certainty about their future negatively impacts the well-being and mental health status of asylum seekers and can exacerbate existing trauma or trigger mental health problems.

## Need for mental health and psychosocial support programming

While asylum seekers should be able to access the public health system for psychological support and psychiatric services, there has consistently been inadequate capacity to meet their needs on the islands. The National Agency for Public Health (EODY), responsible for providing health care to asylum seekers, has never been able to overcome staffing deficits, while local hospitals are as well understaffed, and thus unable to deal with the workload. Interpretation for psychosocial and psychiatric services is critical, but there, also, major gaps are found.

This is why, in 2018, the IRC decided to start a mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programme to respond to the needs of people living in the RICs of Lesbos and Chios.

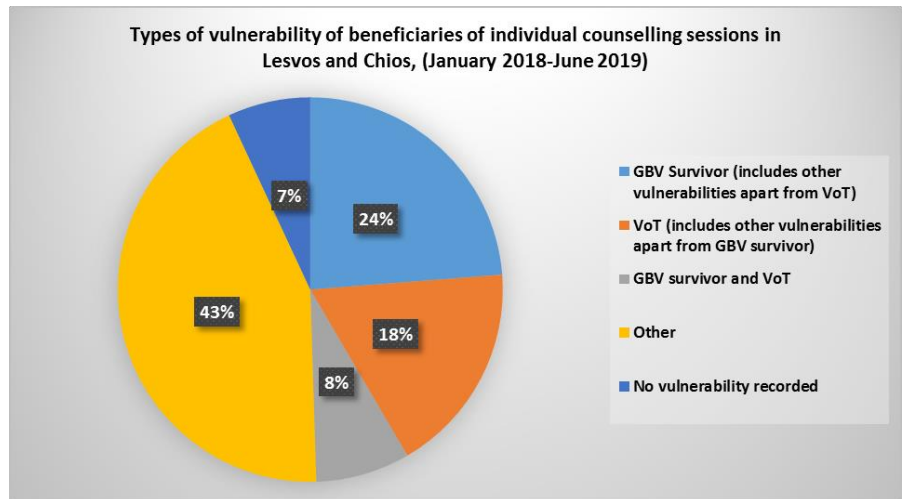
## The IRC MHPSS caseload



Since the beginning of the programme in March 2018, 326 asylum seekers, residents of the RICs have used the IRC MHPSS services on Lesbos and 114 on Chios. Cases are roughly split 66% male and 33% female.

Most of the people attending the IRC sessions present sleeping problems (82%), symptoms of depression (72%) and anxiety (71%). There are also high rates of suicidal thoughts within the IRC's cohort (45%), as well as suicide attempts in their countries of origin, transit or whilst in Greece (26%).

Most IRC cases present multiple vulnerabilities. Many have survived torture (18%), gender-based violence (24%) or both (8%). Other vulnerabilities, include survivors of shipwrecks or relatives of survivors of shipwrecks, victims of violence, pregnant or lactating mothers/ female headed household or single parent, LGBTQI persons, chronic disease or physical and mental disability, victim of trafficking (mainly linked to GBV survivors).



### Overview of the IRC MHPSS programme

The IRC offers wrap-around services: individual and group counselling by psychologists as well as case management by caseworkers, which includes identification of needs and where necessary, referrals/escorts to private psychiatrists, provision of psychiatric medication, escorts to the hospital, private neurologist, referrals to UNHCR for safe accommodation, referrals for legal support. IRC covers the costs of appointments with private psychiatrists and neurologists when needed, as well as the costs of psychiatric medication if the appropriate documentation (AMKA) to purchase medication for free or at low cost is lacking.

The sessions are held at the IRC mental health centres in the towns of the two islands, so that confidentiality and safety can be ensured, as well as giving people the chance to escape the environment of the RICs, even for a short while. IRC cars pick the asylum seekers from the RICs, drive them to our centres for their appointments and back.

The teams accept referrals by UNHCR, medical NGOs and other protection actors. All staff have received training on clinical management of psychological trauma. IRC also conducts psycho-education sessions for the asylum applicants residing in Moria and Vial RICs in collaboration with other actors. Furthermore, the team has conducted mental health trainings to humanitarian workers from different NGOs on Lesvos and Chios.

The programme on both islands is overseen by a manager based on Lesvos. The mental health centre on Lesvos currently employs 5 psychologists, 2 caseworkers, a Snr MHPSS officer, 2 interpreters (Farsi and French), a programmatic assistant and a driver. The centre on Chios employs 2 psychologists, a case worker, 1 interpreter (Arabic/French) and a programmatic assistant. The interpretation on both islands is outsourced for the cases that interpretation cannot be supported internally.

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