

## REFUGEE CRISIS AND VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN LESVOS, GREECE

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Greece has become one of the main gateways for immigrants and refugees seeking safety in Europe. The enormous humanitarian crisis that has taken place mainly on the northeastern Aegean islands has prompted the activation of dozens of organizations and thousands of volunteers. The aim of this study is to examine the profile, motivations and on-site experiences of volunteer tourists who operated on the island of Lesbos in Greece to deal with the refugee crisis. Survey was conducted in a sample of 107 volunteers. The results of the study revealed three altruistic motivations: to help people in need, to do something meaningful and worthwhile, and to work with an organization whose mission they support. Moreover, when choosing a destination to offer their voluntary services, volunteer tourists take into account mainly two factors: the level of need in the destination and the safety in the destination. Volunteers' perceptions of best experiences were largely linked to the concept of altruism and the social dimension of volunteer tourism, whereas worst experiences highlighted the themes of dead refugees, especially children, and the lack of adequate means to face the massive influx of refugees in the island. Findings and discussion of this study are useful to academic researchers and organizations (NGOs, volunteer organizations, community stakeholders) interested in volunteer tourism.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Volunteers, Voluntourism, Motivations, Lesbos, Greece

### Introduction

Since 2015, Europe has witnessed an unprecedented influx of refugees seeking safety, the largest since Second World War (Cretu, 2015), as a result of the on-going wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, as well as conflicts in many African nations. Greece has become the main entrance gateway for hundreds of thousands of people trying to get to northern European countries through the Balkans (Georgiou, 2016; Sekeris and Vasilakis, 2016). According to UNHCR (2018), a total of 856,723 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece via Turkey in 2015, followed by 173,450 more refugees in 2016, and 29,718 refugees in 2017. The reason for this great reduction in 2016 and 2017 in refugee flows is the EU-Turkey Repatriation Agreement that was signed on 8 March 2016 (Tsoni, 2016). More than half of the refugees (500,000 in 2015) arrived crossing the Aegean Sea in the Greek island of Lesbos, while the rest of them reached the islands of Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros (Rozali, 2016). The favorable location of these islands located near the coast of Turkey turned them into a bridge to Western Europe for the refugees.

Nevertheless, the arrival of the migrants came as Greece was still reeling from a painful financial crisis. The huge, unprecedented numbers of arrivals have made it impossible for reception mechanisms to meet needs (Gkionakis, 2016). For the Greek authorities it was very hard to handle such flows of people due to the economic situation of the country and the lack of infrastructure to accommodate and register the refugees/migrants. The islands that are near Turkey, such as Lesbos, Kos, Chios and Samos were found to face an enormous pressure to deal with such large number of refugee arrivals and were struggling to cope with this humanitarian crisis. These islands happen to have limited economic resources making them very fragile in emergency situations, like the one related to the refugee crisis (Skanavis and Kounani, 2016).

However, the massive and continuous influx of refugees and the circumstances under which they were received in Greece provoked a mass solidarity reaction from all over the world (Gkionakis, 2016). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with thousands of volunteers arrived in the North Aegean islands, and operating sometimes outside the traditional state frameworks, were a determining factor in dealing with the crisis by creating on-site structures for the rescue, reception and support of refugees (Chtouris and Miller, 2017). Thus, the burden of managing the crisis fell almost exclusively on the shoulders of volunteers and local communities which, despite the improvisational nature of their involvement, made a great humanitarian effort to manage the situation, at the same time when the official political or administrative reactions of the Greek or the European authorities remained strongly inadequate, if not entirely absent (Tsoni, 2016).

As a result of the massive arrival of volunteers in the Greek islands, it was the development of a novel type of alternative tourism that combines tourism activity with the need for volunteering, namely volunteer tourism. According to Wearing (2001: 1) volunteer tourism (or 'voluntourism') refers to "*those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment*". These travelers are more sophisticated, and they increasingly seek unique, authentic and meaningful travel experiences to satisfy their specific needs and desires (Lo and Lee, 2011). The growth of volunteer tourism worldwide has triggered many surveys from researchers, marketers, and NGOs, seeking to learn more about the motivations of these travelers. Nevertheless, while there is a growing volume of literature regarding volunteer tourists' motivations in a number of destinations worldwide, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing in the Greek context. This paper comes to partly fill this gap and contribute to the volunteer tourism literature, as one of the first attempts in Greece to explore the motivations and on-site experiences of volunteers who arrived in Greece to face the refugee crisis.

## Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on volunteer tourism, with a number of these studies focusing on volunteers' motivations. According to Pan (2012), motivation is considered as a key factor in explaining tourist behavior and is an important factor influencing an individual into action to become a volunteer. Soderman and Snead (2008) examined motivations as expressed by British gap year travelers to volunteer overseas (Latin America) and found that they are multifaceted and interlaced. Lo and Lee (2011) mention five main motives for volunteer tourists: the desire to give back and show love and concern, cultural immersion and interaction with the local people, religious involvement, a shared experience with family members, and escape from everyday life. In their study, Gage III and Thapa (2012) examined motivational factors of college students to volunteer and found that the strongest motive was to help others which can be related to the values and understanding dimension. Proyrungroj (2017) investigated motivations of volunteers who offered their services at an orphanage in Thailand, and identified five motivations: to help the children, to gain new experiences, to gain personal development and growth, to learn about/be immersed in local culture, and to meet and make friends. Personal development along with academic achievement was also found as important motivational factors for volunteers in the study of Galley and Clifton (2004). Benson and Seibert (2009) examined the motivations of German volunteers that were recruited in South Africa and found five important factors: to experience something different, to learn about another country and cultures and meet African people, to live in another country and to broaden one's mind via cultural experiences. The study of Brown (2005) concluded in four main motives for volunteer trips: the desire to give back, cultural immersion, the camaraderie that occurs on volunteer vacations, and family issues. Rhoden, Ineson and Ralston (2009)

concluded respectively in six motivational dimensions: altruism, personal (work substitute and relaxation/change), social/affiliative, and finally instrumental (hobbies and skills). According to Anderson and Cairncross (2005), creating opportunities to permit new learning experiences and/or the opportunity to use skills or knowledge that would otherwise go unpracticed are the main motives for people to become volunteers. The findings of Pegg, Patterson and Matsumoto's study (2012) revealed that the primary motivations for volunteers included the desire to meet new people while traveling, experiencing a unique natural environment or geographical location where few tourists had previously visited, and finally a desire to engage in an alternative tourism opportunity to what had been previously experienced.

Much of the discussion about the volunteer tourists' motivations concentrates on the 'altruism versus egoism/self-interest' or 'interpersonal versus personal' issue (Trihas, Antonaki and Kouremenou, 2014). Researchers argue that a historical shift is taking place from volunteering motivated primarily by altruism toward including the motivations of self-development and personal growth (Grabowski, 2013). Mittelberg and Palgi (2011) found that volunteers' motivations represent a pluralistic mix of personal and ideological motives with differential and often unanticipated consequences on both dimensions. Chen and Chen (2011) recognized eleven motivations for volunteers to travel overseas which they categorized into three groups: personal (travel, authentic experience, challenge – stimulation, and other interest), interpersonal (interaction with locals/ cultures, desire to help, enhancing relationships, and encouraged by others), and other (time/ money, unique style of the trip, and organization goal). Similarly, Lee and Yen (2015) agree that volunteer tourists are motivated to volunteer not only for interpersonal reasons (giving back, helping others, working with the locals, contributing skills), but also for personal reasons (developing careers, the desire to travel, experiencing new things, developing new relationships, learning professional development, fulfilling a dream). Broad and Jenkins (2008) examined the motivations of volunteers participated in an environmental conservation and wildlife rehabilitation program in Phuket, Thailand and recognized five motivation categories: altruism, travel, career development, personal development, and finally the characteristics of the specific project. Tiessen (2012) examined the motivations of Canadian youth who traveled abroad to participate in volunteer programs and found that many of these motivations (skills development, testing an academic background or career choice, cross-cultural understanding, language acquisition, adventure or travel experience) generally fit under the category of personal growth, and can be described as egoistic, extrinsic and self-oriented rather than altruistic. Likewise, Daldeniz and Hampton (2011) who examined the motivations of long-term volunteers in a rural development project in Nicaragua, found that their main driver was the acquisition of new skills and field experience, and consequently the enhancement of their curriculum vitae (CV), in order to find employment within their desired sectors, while many of them stated that they aspired to a career with an NGO. In the same direction, according to Chtouris and Miller (2017), for many volunteers, the professionalization process is not a taboo as they do not reject a professional cooperation with NGOs or other institutions. The study of Sin (2009) has found that motivating factors for volunteer tourists were 'to travel' rather than 'to contribute' or volunteer. Grimm and Needham (2012) also categorized volunteer motivations for volunteering abroad into self-interested (e.g. learn, travel, escape, have fun, professional development etc) and altruistic (e.g. help, make a difference, contribute, do something worthwhile etc). Altruism was found to be the primary motivation for volunteers in the study of Knollenberg et al. (2014), while other motivations, such as the desire to experience different cultures, build relationships with family and to escape one's daily life are important too. Weaver (2015) concluded that altruism and personal wellbeing are the most important among 24 motivational factors studied. Coghlan and Fennell (2009) argue that altruism is commonly associated with volunteer tourism as a motivational force for participants and a key factor in their on-site experiences. However, they suggest that, while volunteer tourists may behave in an altruistic manner, personal benefits derived from the

experience by and large dominate the experience. Nevertheless, Mustonen (2007) argues that the line between altruism and egoism is blurred, suggesting that altruistic and ego-centric motives are interconnected.

Other researchers adopt the push-pull factors framework in order to explore the motivations of volunteers. For example, Pan (2012) examined motives for Taiwanese students to volunteer overseas and classified them into pull (expecting challenge, validating personal perceptions of the place, getting to know local residents and experiencing the life in a foreign culture) and push (escaping from daily life to reorganize and relax, look for new ways of life and self-exploration, a desire to give back, to make friends who share a common interest, a less expensive way of traveling, encouragement by others, and parental compulsion) factors. Similarly, Otoo (2013) studied the motivations of American volunteer tourists to Ghana and recognised six key pull factors that motivated them to choose the specific destination (culture, locals, volunteer opportunity, political climate, climate and attractions), and two prime push factors (altruism and learning, and relationship driven motives).

## **Methodology**

A quantitative methodological approach was adopted. This type of research was chosen as it allows the collection of data from a large sample, in a short period of time and with less expense (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Moreover, several researchers in similar previous studies have also applied the quantitative research methodology as it provides the best potential to assess motivations and expectations across a broad population of volunteer tourists (Benson and Seibert, 2009; Gage III and Thapa, 2012; Knollenberg et al., 2014; Lee and Yen, 2015; Otoo, 2013; Rhoden, Ineson and Ralston, 2009; Weaver, 2015). For the purposes of the research, a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections and eighteen questions, based on literature review, was designed. In the first section, participants were asked to provide some basic information about them, such as the organization they represent, the number of volunteer trips and the kind of volunteer projects they have participated in the past, and the criteria that affect their destination choice for volunteer tourism. The second section focuses on the current trip and examines the length of stay in the destination, the factors that motivated them to participate in this project (key push and pull motivational factors that were often cited in the literature were utilized here), their experience in the destination, and the possibility of either visiting the destination for vacations in the future or recommending it to others. The last section contained questions about participants' profile utilizing several demographic variables, i.e. sex, age, marital status, education, occupation and nationality. To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with 10 volunteers in Molyvos, Lesvos, to test efficacy and clarity. Little modifications were then made based on their recommendations.

The survey took place between November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 and February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Mithymna (Molyvos) in the island of Lesvos (see Figure 1). Lesvos is located in the North-Eastern Aegean Sea, and with an area of 1,636 km<sup>2</sup> is the third largest Greek island after Crete and Evia. Its coastline of 371 km is really close to the Turkish coast with 10 km distance from the capital Mytilini and 5 km from Efthalou. It has a total population of 85,330 residents. The local economy is based on the agricultural production – with an emphasis on olive oil production – and secondly on tourism. The number of hotels operating in the island has been steadily rising in recent decades, now reaching the number of 112 units (Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, 2018). Molyvos, on the northern part of the island, is the main tourist destination in the island. This village turned into a de facto migrant outpost, due to its proximity to Turkey.

Figure 1. Study area



Source: Google maps

Lesvos was selected among the other northeastern Aegean islands, because it was the epicenter of the refugee crisis, receiving most of the refugee/migrant population. In 2015, up to 7,000 refugees arrived in Lesbos daily and up to 100 national and international organizations, agencies and solidarity collectives, as well as thousands of independent international volunteers were active on the island (Tsoni, 2016). The volunteers' initial primary contribution consisted of frequently saving the refugees, children in particular, upon disembarking on the island and welcoming them (Chtouris and Miller, 2017). A convenience sample was selected. A total of 107 usable questionnaires were collected through personal interviews with volunteers that were active in the area and approached at random in their accommodations. They were informed of the nature of the survey and were asked to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered only to the volunteers who agreed to participate in the survey. Each survey lasted about 20 minutes. The sample size was considered as acceptable. The collected data were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0.

## Results

The demographic characteristics of the 107 respondents are presented in Table 1. The majority of the respondents (54.2%) were female, while 49 of them (45.8%) were male. Most of them (42.1%) were between 25-34 years old, followed by 25 persons 35-44 years old (23.4%), 22 persons 18-24 years old (20.6%), 14 persons 45-60 years old (13.1%), and just one participant over the age of 60. More than half of the respondents (62.6%) were single, followed by married people (35.5%), while divorced participants only reached a 1.9%. The educational level of the participants was remarkably high, with 69 of them (64.5%) to have graduated from a college or university, and 25 persons (23.4%) holding a Master's or PhD degree. Regarding their occupation, a significant number of participants (40 persons) were either doctors or nurses, followed by students (5.6%), journalists or photojournalists (3.7%) and various other

professionals (47.7%). Full time volunteers represented only 5.6% of the sample (6 persons). In terms of the nationality, 38.3% of the respondents originated from Netherlands, 29.9% from Norway, 11.2% from USA, 9.3% from Canada and the rest from various other countries, mainly European.

**Table 1. Sample Information**

		<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Sex	Male	49	45,8
	Female	58	54,2
Age	18 to 24	22	20,6
	25 to 34	45	42,1
	35 to 44	25	23,4
	45 to 60	14	13,1
	60 and over	1	0,9
Marital Status	Married	38	35,5
	Single	67	62,6
	Divorced	2	1,9
Education Level	Basic	1	0,9
	High school	12	11,2
	College/university	69	64,5
	Master / Doctorate	25	23,4
Occupation	Doctor/Nurse	40	37,4
	Student	6	5,6
	Journalist/ Photojournalist	4	3,7
	Full time volunteer	6	5,6
	Other	51	47,7
Country of origin	Netherlands	41	38,3
	Norway	32	29,9
	USA	12	11,2
	Canada	10	9,3
	Israel	2	1,9
	Denmark	1	0,9
	Ireland	1	0,9
	Italy	1	0,9
	Sweden	1	0,9
	Scotland	1	0,9
	Switzerland	1	0,9
	Jordan	1	0,9
	Greece-Canada	1	0,9
Sweden-Hungary	1	0,9	
Norway-Iraq	1	0,9	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>107</b>	

For 52 volunteers (48.6%), this was their first volunteer trip abroad. 21 volunteers (19.6%) can be described as experienced by having participated in more than three volunteer trips, while two of them have three trips, 18 of them have two trips, and 14 volunteers have participated in one volunteer trip before. For 47 of the volunteers (43.9%) this was their first trip to Greece, while the rest 56.1% had visited the country before. Regarding their length of stay in Lesvos, 59.8% of the respondents stated that they will stay for one to two weeks, 22.4% for 15-30 days, 6.5% for 31-60 days, another 6.5% for more than 60 days, and finally 5 volunteers for less than one week.

A high percentage of participants (43%) did not have any previous experience in volunteer programs, as this was the first project, they participated in. The others were asked about the type of the most recent volunteer project they participated in. Their responses vary and confirm the variety of relevant projects available: community development (22.4%), medical assistance (15.9%), economic and social development (5.6%), scientific research (2.8%), cultural/historical restoration (2.8%), ecological conservation (1.9%), and other (5.6%) (building projects, church mission trips, orphanage, arts). Only two of the participants reported recent past experience of a migrant or refugee crisis (in Mexico in particular).

In the following part of the research the participants were asked to indicate in a scale of 1 (unimportant) to 5 (extremely important) on how important are some aspects when choosing a destination for volunteer trips (pull factors) (Table 2). Two factors seem to be of great importance to the respondents: first, the level of need in the destination (Mean=4.46) and secondly the safety in the destination (Mean=3.36). Accessibility to the destination is less important, while other factors most relevant to the 'touristic' characteristics of the destination (i.e. attractiveness and familiarity of the destination, not visited before) appear to play no important role in the destination selection process.

**Table 2. Importance of various aspects when choosing a destination for voluntourism**

	Unimportant				Extremely important	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Safety in the destination	3,7	25,2	25,2	22,4	23,4	3,36	1,201
Level of need in the destination	0,0	3,7	3,7	35,5	57,0	4,46	0,743
Attractiveness of the destination	47,7	32,7	11,2	6,5	1,9	1,82	0,998
Accessibility of the destination	19,6	36,4	23,4	11,2	9,3	2,54	1,200
Familiarity of the destination	56,1	25,2	9,3	5,6	3,7	1,76	1,080
Not visited before the destination	66,4	15,0	14,0	1,9	2,8	1,60	0,989

**Note:** 1=Unimportant, 5=Extremely important

Subsequently, participants were asked to state the reasons (motivations) that prompted them to participate as volunteers on this trip to Lesvos (Table 3). As can be seen from their answers, volunteers traveled to Lesvos mainly to help people in need (Mean=4.94), to do something meaningful and worthwhile (Mean=4.69), and to work with an organization whose mission they support (Mean=4.09). Other quite important motivations are 'to do something always wanted to' (Mean=3.51), 'to challenge myself' (Mean=3.31), and 'to broaden my horizon' (Mean=3.02). On the contrary, the motivational factors that contributed the least to the volunteers' decision to participate in this trip are 'to escape from my own troubles' (Mean=1.36), 'to visit Greece / Lesvos' (Mean=1.57), 'to be close to nature' (Mean=1.36), and 'to view the scenery' (Mean=1.44).

**Table 3. Volunteers' level of agreement on various reasons regarding their decision to participate in this volunteer trip**

<i>One of the reasons I chose to come on this trip was...</i>	Strongly Disagree		Neither Agree or Disagree		Strongly agree	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
To travel	59,8	15,9	14,0	4,7	5,6	1,80	1,185
To visit Greece / Lesbos	66,4	15,9	12,1	5,6	0,0	1,57	0,912
To view the scenery	66,4	25,2	6,5	0,0	1,9	1,44	0,769
To help people in need	0,0	0,0	1,9	1,9	96,3	4,94	0,302
To live a cathartic experience	45,8	20,6	24,3	7,5	1,9	1,99	1,086
To meet people who may help me in my career	66,4	17,8	8,4	1,9	5,6	1,63	1,095
To be daring and adventurous	50,5	20,6	18,7	3,7	6,5	1,95	1,200
To think about my personal values	42,1	15,0	20,6	14,0	8,4	2,32	1,364
To have a good time	54,2	16,8	21,5	3,7	3,7	1,86	1,111
To be close to nature	74,8	17,8	5,6	0,0	1,9	1,36	0,757
To gain experience and skills that will help me in my career	36,4	19,6	20,6	11,2	12,1	2,43	1,395
To experience new and different things	28,0	20,6	14,0	24,3	13,1	2,74	1,430
To be with people who have similar values	27,1	15,9	25,2	24,3	7,5	2,69	1,306
To explore new places	54,2	19,6	10,3	12,1	3,7	1,92	1,214
To experience the challenge of the task	29,9	6,5	28,0	25,2	10,3	2,79	1,392
To develop my personal interests	39,3	20,6	16,8	15,0	8,4	2,32	1,356
To experience different cultures	33,6	29,0	13,1	11,2	13,1	2,41	1,394
To develop a relationship with other volunteer tourists	42,1	19,6	25,2	7,5	5,6	2,13	1,217
To escape from the daily routine	57,9	15,0	12,1	5,6	9,3	1,93	1,334
To take part in a rare opportunity	34,6	16,8	18,7	12,1	17,8	2,62	1,502
To meet new people	37,4	19,6	24,3	7,5	11,2	2,36	1,348



To do something meaningful and worthwhile	1,9	0,9	1,9	16,8	78,5	4,69	0,732
To work with an organization whose mission I support	11,2	1,9	4,7	30,8	51,4	4,09	1,285
To do something always wanted to	13,1	12,1	19,6	20,6	34,6	3,51	1,410
To live an authentic experience	29,0	15,0	25,2	12,1	18,7	2,77	1,464
To be more than a tourist	30,8	10,3	14,0	20,6	24,3	2,97	1,593
To broaden my horizon	20,6	11,2	29,0	24,3	15,0	3,02	1,352
To challenge myself	13,1	16,8	19,6	27,1	23,4	3,31	1,349
To learn more about the country	58,9	12,1	18,7	2,8	7,5	1,88	1,249
To learn new skills	24,3	19,6	22,4	18,7	15,0	2,80	1,390
To escape from my own troubles	77,6	14,0	4,7	1,9	1,9	1,36	0,817
To combine a love of travel with a desire to give back	37,4	14,0	19,6	12,1	16,8	2,57	1,505

**Note:** 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree

In the next part of the survey, volunteers were asked to freely describe their best and worst experiences of participating in the program. Participants' perceptions of best experience were largely linked to the concept of altruism: "the sense of solidarity and cooperation", "the privilege of helping traumatized people", "the gratitude of people that we were able to help and the smiles of the children", "the rewarding feeling", "all the helping hands", "giving smiles to those in need", "all the families and people we helped", "the fact that we are doing something to help people, although not enough", "smiling children after they get dry clothes", "saving people's lives and seeing their smiles on their faces knowing that I have touched a part of their painful experience to a better experience", "helping people off the boats and giving them a hug, warm clothes and food/water to see their joy at arriving safely", "the gratefulness of the refugees and the feeling of doing good things", "what the volunteer represent: love compassion, heart" were just few of the many responses that focused on the feeling of helping other people in need. Another group of answers focused on the meeting of volunteers with other people, whether they were locals, other volunteers or refugees: "the amazing people I have met here", "the people who are from this area and their kindness", "my fellow volunteers", "good heartfelt contact with local Greeks, cooperation of people from different European countries", "all the good people I have met", "all the lovely Greek people of this island and from around Greece and all the volunteers", "the good people of Lesbos – they are all so kind, generous and giving, I am amazed", "the local's people generosity", "the people of Lesbos are very kind and thankful", "talking with refugees and hearing their stories", "having a football match with refugees", "the different people of all over Europe and elsewhere coming to help people in need, it feels like one big international family". Finally, some volunteers reported "the beautiful scenery", "the nature" and "the nice food" in Lesbos.

On the contrary, worst experiences highlighted mainly the issue of the loss of refugee lives in their voyage from the coasts of Turkey to Lesbos: “I saw dead children”, “when a shipwreck happened where we had to deal with people dying”, “when I saw a boat sinking in front of my eyes and the death of all these people who did not make it”, “resuscitation of two drowned children”, “hypothermic drowned people”. Other volunteers addressed the issue of the lack of adequate means to face the humanitarian crisis and the absence of assistance from other organizations or authorities: “realizing that Lesbos does not receiving any help from the UN or any major organization that can deal with what is happening”, “hospital and ambulance lack means and knowledge to take over patients with life threatening disease”, “not to be able to help them all”, “when we had nothing to give out when everyone was so hungry, wet and cold and there were so many refugees and very few volunteers”, “the lack of coordinated international aid for the refugees and the lack of assistance to the Greek people in this effort”, “not be able to provide the help people needed”, ‘luck of support – coordination by local government”. Various other bad experiences included: “tiredness and sleeplessness”, “storm”, “people with ‘hero’ syndrome”, “my trip to come here”, “crashing my car”, “the journalists – I think we need them, but they are too focused only on bad thinks and tragedy”. Of particular interest are the views of some volunteers focusing on the competition that had developed between the different volunteer groups operating on the island: “there was not much to do, there were many volunteers and not much work”, “not so many boats”, “competing with other volunteer groups”. All in all, participants comparing their experience of participating in the project with their prior expectations, would characterize it ‘as it was expected’ or ‘better’ (Mean=3.26).

In the last part of the survey, volunteers were asked if they would visit again Lesbos in the future for vacations this time, and if they would recommend Lesbos as a tourist destination to other people. In both cases, participants were quite positive in their answers (Mean=3.63 and Mean=3.93 respectively).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

As a whole, the on-going refugee and migrant crisis contribute for an unfavorable tourism conjuncture on the Greek islands of the North Aegean Sea. In Lesbos, the ability of the destination to adapt to the refugee crisis and at the same time sustain tourism and, by that, ensure that tourists can co-exist with locals and refugees, was threatened (Rösmaier, 2016). In the last years, the island of Lesbos has been transformed from an idyllic tourist destination into one of the main entry gates for immigrants and refugees to Europe. The refugee crisis affected island’s inbound tourism – one of the main sources of income for the locals – as in 2016 there was a significant decrease in tourist arrivals. According to data by Mytilene airport, international passenger arrivals in 2016 dropped to 32,295 down from 75,767 in 2015, a decline of 42.8%. Some tour operators have stopped offering vacation packages to Lesbos, while many cruise companies have diverted from the island, with just 25 cruise ships docking in 2016, compared with the 46 cruise ships in 2015. The drop-in arrivals was attributed directly to the refugee crisis, with troubled tourists selecting alternative destinations in the country (Kolasa-Sikiaridi, 2016). Tourists – especially the sun-lust tourists (Pappas and Papatheodorou, 2017) – are worried that ‘their’ environment will be altered by refugee presence (Rösmaier, 2016). However, Lesbos has seen the rise of another form of tourism, that of volunteer tourism. Aid workers and volunteers arriving from all over the world to help the refugees, along with UN and Frontex employees, journalists, activists, photographers, researchers and others, keep tourism enterprises unseasonably busy. Consequently, the story of what constitutes ‘tourism’ is expanded yet further by these volunteer arrivals that use tourism services. This paper has been written to contribute to the body of knowledge on volunteers’ travel motivations, and to stimulate further research in the field.

Most of the participants in this survey were female, single, young and well educated. These characteristics confirm the profile of volunteers in previous researches (see Galley and Clifton, 2004). Moreover, many of them were either doctors or nurses, followed by students and journalists/photojournalists. These professions also confirm the findings of other researchers. For example, Chtouris and Miller (2017) argue that in many cases, the contribution of volunteers, particularly senior ones, consists in the skills and experience they have already acquired as part of the profession they exercise or have exercised. Investigating the independent volunteering action in the unofficial settlements in Eidomeni, Piraeus, and Victoria Square in Greece, they found that some of the volunteers' professional activities and skills were cooking, legal services, organization and management, medical and nursing services, and journalism. A high percentage of participants in this survey were first-time volunteers, while only two of them had previous recent experience of a migrant or refugee crisis (in Mexico in particular). Other surveys that were conducted around the same time period in volunteers operating in Lesvos, found also that the majority of them had no prior relation or involvement (personal, educational or professional) with refugee issues (Tsoni, 2016), and even more they had no previous experience in shipwreck response or in dealing with survivors of shipwrecks (Gkionakis, 2016).

Throughout the literature, it is seen that the motivation of volunteer tourists is multidimensional. Many authors categorize the motivations for individuals to take part in volunteer trips into egoistic (self-interested) and altruistic (although that according to Holmes and Smith (2009) they are rarely entirely altruistic) or personal and interpersonal. Other researchers adopt the push-pull factors theory. In this study, it is clear that the driving force behind the decision of the volunteers to travel to Lesvos was altruism. Their main motivations were to help people in need, to do something meaningful and worthwhile, and to work with an organization whose mission they support. Moreover, when choosing a destination to offer their voluntary services, they take into account mainly two factors: the level of need in the destination and the safety in the destination. On the other hand, other motivations oriented toward self-interest or egoism (e.g. the desire to travel or to gain experience and skills that will help them in their career) which are acknowledged as the strongest motivation in other studies (see Daldeniz and Hampton, 2011; Sin, 2009), in this study were found to be rather unimportant. These findings concur with those of several other studies, which argue that volunteering involves a desire to help others and for that is associated with altruism (Chen and Chen, 2011; Coghlan and Fennell, 2009; Grimm and Needham, 2012; Knollenberg et al., 2014; Lee and Yen, 2015; Otoo, 2013; Weaver, 2015). These altruistic travel motivations separate volunteer tourists and traditional tourists. According to Guttentag (2011) volunteer tourists are no longer uncaring hedonists, but rather compassionate ambassadors of goodwill. Wearing and McGehee (2013: 132) introduce a concern regarding the study of volunteer tourists' motivations: "*Have we reached a place in the study of volunteer tourism where we can say with confidence that we truly understand the motivations of the volunteer tourists? If the end result of volunteer tourism has the same impact on the community regardless of motivation, does it matter if the tourist is motivated by altruism?*". These are difficult questions and not easily answered. In any case, knowing why volunteers decide to travel and volunteer can help NGOs and other volunteer tourism organizations in recruiting potential volunteer tourists and in developing programs that can perfectly meet their needs and interests. The results of this study suggest with confidence that altruism is a strong motivation that cannot be ignored in strategies to attract and satisfy participants in volunteer projects.

A number of the available studies focus on the on-site experiences gained by volunteer tourists suggesting that they are diverse and play a significant role towards their satisfaction. According to Wearing and McGehee (2013), volunteer tourism as a form of alternative tourism can create

a tourism experience that is more heavily influenced by motivations such as altruism than in the case of mainstream tourism. In this study, it was found that refugees did play a significant role in the volunteer tourists' on-site experiences, causing both strong positive and negative feelings to them. Volunteer tourists' perceptions of best experience are largely based on altruism and the feeling of helping others and doing something meaningful and worthwhile. Moreover, the social dimension of volunteer tourism experiences which is highlighted in many other previous studies (Brown, 2005; Lo and Lee, 2011; Proyrungroj, 2017) was also identified as crucial for the creation of a positive experience. This social dimension includes the opportunity to meet, interact and develop relationships with local people in Lesvos, other volunteer tourists and refugees. According to Proyrungroj (2017), the interaction of volunteers with local people allows them to experience more authentic and genuine experiences. Wearing and Grabowski (2011) also argue that the relationship between the volunteer tourist and the local community allows a richer understanding of the volunteer tourism experience, where more equal power relationships are evolving. The beautiful scenery of Lesvos also contributed to a positive experience in a smaller number of refugees. In total, it seems that in Lesvos there is an intense interaction between the volunteer tourists, the refugees, the host community and the natural environment, and this interaction form the volunteers' experience.

As expected, the sight of dead refugees, especially children, largely shaped the worst experience for volunteer tourists. Previous studies (Zahra and McIntosh, 2007) argue that witnessing and encountering suffering and hardship among local people in host countries can lead to negative feelings for volunteers. In Lesvos, the images of the dead refugees were so strong that actually it was impossible for volunteers to remain indifferent. Proyrungroj (2017) suggests that volunteer tourism experiences are learning in nature: the volunteer tourists are out of their comfort zone and have to face unfamiliar and challenging things on their own. As mentioned before, many of the volunteer tourists who participated in this survey were first-time volunteers with no previous experience in refugee crises, in shipwreck response or in dealing with survivors of shipwrecks. This fact made the feelings of the situations they faced in Lesvos even stronger. These experiences differ from the 'normal' tourism experiences and are life changing (Zahra, 2011). Other bad experiences were related with the lack of adequate means to face the massive influx of refugees in the island and the absence of assistance from other organizations or authorities. Overall, volunteer tourists in Lesvos were satisfied with their involvement in the program, which is in line with the findings of previous studies suggesting that volunteer tourists are generally satisfied with their experiences (Brown, 2005; Lo and Lee, 2011; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007).

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

There are some limitations in this study. The number of respondents is relatively small. Therefore, the results might not reflect the volunteer tourism market as a whole and may not be applicable to the thousands of volunteers operating in Lesvos and other North Aegean islands (Chios, Samos, Kos, Leros) which due to their geographical proximity to the coasts of Turkey turned into entry points for the refugees. Moreover, the same research in a different time period with fewer inflows of refugees and fewer shipwrecks would likely significantly differentiate the on-site experiences of volunteers on the island. The findings of this study are unique to the concept of refugee crisis volunteer tourism. Therefore, future studies could focus on the differences on motivations and on-site experiences of volunteer tourists who participated in different type of projects (e.g. sports and other special events, community development, economic and social development, scientific research, cultural/historical restoration, ecological conservation etc.). Grabowski (2013) argues that the type of activity that is performed while volunteering has a large part to play in the types of volunteers it attracts and, therefore, the needs and motivations that are satisfied. Finally, volunteer tourism in Lesvos can be

investigated from the perspectives of other stakeholders directly involved with the refugee crisis, such as the local community, the local authorities, the tourism businesses, and the refugees themselves as they are direct aid recipients of the volunteer tourists.

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