



FENIX

ACTIVITY
REPORT 2020



FENIX Humanitarian Legal Aid is a USA 501(c)3 and Greek MKO non-profit organization. The organization is made up mainly of international and local lawyers, social workers, psychologists, protection officers, translators and other experts whose work is guided by the core humanitarian principles adopted by the UNGA, Fenix's Code of Conduct and other Professional Codes of Ethics.

Fenix's vision is to promote and advocate for a more equitable European asylum process that treats individuals with dignity, upholds their rights and offers them the knowledge and agency to navigate their own lives. This vision is implemented through its mission, guided by an approach that considers the particular needs and skills of each asylum seeker, empowering them by acknowledging their individuality, and offering them tools to navigate a very complicated procedure and build a new life in a safe country.

To achieve our mission, we currently have three main goals. First, that all our clients receive holistic legal aid, whereby their individual legal, protection and mental health needs are addressed. Second, that our clients are empowered through knowledge of their rights and the agency to navigate the asylum process. Third, to raise awareness and enhance access to basic rights through advocacy and strategic litigation.

The following report summarizes how Fenix worked towards its goals in 2020. Fenix remains steadfast in its commitment to achieving a more just European asylum system in 2021.



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Foreword

Dear Fenix Community,

This year has been extremely challenging for the whole world, but especially difficult for those escaping war and persecution who have sought refuge on the Greek islands. Asylum seekers in Lesvos have faced innumerable challenges this year: outbreaks of meningitis and scabies in the camp, violence from fascist groups, tensions between locals and the police, months of Covid lockdown, a lack of access to essential services, the fire that burnt down Moria camp, and the construction of a new camp with conditions comparable to or worse than before.

Our office and our team have been a source of information, support and safe shelter during the chaos of 2020. **It fills me with absolute pride to lead a team with the level of excellence, commitment and resilience that our teams have shown this year. Throughout all of the challenges, our teams have not stopped - even for a day - the provision of services.** Instead, we have adapted, expanded our services, increased the size of our team, and deepened our expertise. We are proud to share with you our report on the activities carried out by our team this year.

I am also filled with gratitude for the hundreds of people around the world who have continued to support us with financial and material resources, advice, and words of encouragement. The interest and support we have received from concerned people like you is a source of inspiration and strength that keeps us going.

2020 has been an overwhelming year. It has reaffirmed our belief that holistic legal aid is the only way to go. Supporting the whole

person - including their physical, psychological, emotional, social and legal needs - is an essential part of achieving a just and equitable outcome in the asylum process, while empowering our clients to navigate their own futures.

This month marks the end of a challenging year, but not the end of the challenges faced by the asylum seekers of Lesvos. The situation in Lesvos remains dire. 7,300 people remain living in subhuman conditions, in a desperately built new site after the fire. Sick people sleep in freezing tents that flood during the winter storms. People in wheelchairs are pushed through the mud in order to access the small, inadequate, dirty chemical toilets without running water. Children don't go to school and play in what used to be a military range. Women are at risk of gender based violence and shower with buckets of cold water. Men queue for hours under the rain for barely-edible food to feed their families.

It is our biggest wish that the day comes when we are no longer needed here. Until that time comes, I hope you will consider continuing your support; be that with a donation, spreading the word about our work, or volunteering your expertise and time.

On behalf of our board, our volunteers, and the community we serve, thank you. And here's to our work having an even greater impact in 2021.

Amanda Munoz de Toro
Executive Director
30 December 2020

The Year in Review



Photo: David Pichler, September 2020

2020 has been an extremely challenging year. Major events include the clampdown of the asylum process caused by changes in the law, violence towards asylum seekers and humanitarian workers, the threat of a Covid-19 outbreak and two lockdowns of in total 7 months, the fire that destroyed the entire Moria camp and the chaos that followed, and the creation of a new, equally undignified camp on the island. Through it all, our team has remained strong and present, adapting to the challenges and changes that have affected asylum seekers, humanitarian workers, the local community and the asylum process.

The Year in Review

The beginning of the year saw a threefold clampdown in Greece in January: 1) the implementation of a restrictive new Greek asylum legislation, 2) the announcement of the establishment of closed, prison-like detention centres for asylum seekers, and 3) a reinforcement of the policy to contain thousands of vulnerable people on the islands. These three measures have trapped migrants administratively, legislatively, and politically.

On February 27th, Turkish President Erdogan announced he would 'open' the country's borders with Greece and no longer stop 3.7 million asylum seekers and refugees from crossing into the EU. The subsequent increase of asylum seekers entering Greece - including 1000 people to Lesbos in 48 hours - was met with the announcement from the Greek government that all asylum applications from anyone entering after the first of March would be suspended, a clear violation of international law.

The increase of arrivals also provoked a spike in hate crime and vigilante activity against humanitarian workers and their property. Many international actors, including legal and medical organizations, evacuated their staff from the island. These events exponentially increased the volume and intensity of Fenix's legal and protection work, and concerns for safety of the volunteers, while continuing this important work.

In March, the first cases of Covid-19 were detected on Lesbos. The Greek government responded quickly, with a lockdown of non-essential movement for the entire population. By mid-March, they implemented special measures for refugee camps applicable until May 31, which were then continually extended, even when restrictions for those outside the camps had been lifted or relaxed. As part of these measures, all psychosocial and educational activities were suspended, as well as access to the camp for all NGOs providing 'non-essential' services. At the same time, the closure of the Asylum Office resulted in the delay of the asylum

process for many.

Restrictions were not paired with sufficient supplementary healthcare measures, exposing the refugee community to a greater risk of the spread of COVID-19 by forcing them to remain all day in the inhumane conditions of the camp. Owing to the decrease of NGO support in Moria camp, the continuous lockdown, the suspension of cash distribution, and the suspension of mental health services, there was a sharp increase of tension and violence in the camp, especially sexual violence.

In May, the Asylum Office reopened, but had limited access to lawyers and other legal support because of the continuous restriction of movement for asylum seekers. The legislation applied in May came into effect with negative consequences for those with the right to humanitarian visa (e.g people whose asylum claim was rejected but for humanitarian reasons were allowed to stay, such as people with severe disabilities and mental health issues).

In August, the European Commission approved funding of 130 million euros for the construction of closed camps on the Greek islands. At the same time, and despite the risks to asylum seekers' health, the Greek Government closed down the fully functional and staffed MSF Covid-19 isolation unit, located adjacent to Moria camp, where suspected Covid-19 cases were supported during their quarantine.

The Year in Review

This further limited the access to proper health care during the pandemic, instilling fear and instigating tensions in the camp.

On Wednesday September 9th, a fire broke out that destroyed Moria Camp. The estimated 13,000 asylum seekers living in the overcrowded camp at the time of the fire tried to flee to the island's towns of Moria Village and Mytilene to find safety. However, they were prevented from doing so by police, who enforced the lockdown declared just days before the fire in response to the first cases of Covid-19 in the camp.

The following day, a second fire burnt down what remained of the camp. For ten days, former residents slept on the streets with minimal access to medical care, food, and water, and no access to safe shelter, toilets or showers.

A new camp was built to temporarily house the asylum seekers that were left on the streets. Former residents of the Moria Camp and the island's residents protested against this new camp, but without result. After several big transfers off the island, 7,300 people, including those with disabilities, severe medical conditions, and pregnant women, continue to live in the abhorrent conditions of the new camp.

In October, the Greek government announced that they would interview all asylum seekers before the end of the year. This resulted in asylum seekers having no time to seek free legal aid from lawyers already operating beyond capacity, and thereby receiving no preparation for their interviews. Interviews were held remotely and without any respect for privacy and confidentiality, greatly impacting the already inadequate quality of the process.

The new camp has been described by people living and working there as being worse than the original Moria camp. Its location next to the sea makes it very susceptible to strong winds and flooding, there is a lack of adequate toilets, and no proper showers. There are also numerous protection concerns, especially for women, children, elderly people, and those with disabilities and medical conditions. Local and international humanitarian and human rights organizations continue to urge the European Union and the Greek government to provide an adequate and sustainable solution for the asylum seekers and refugees on the island.



Photo: Karol Kras, September 2020

Impact in Numbers



Photo: David Pichler, August 2020

Impact in Numbers

18



Countries of origin

150



Highly vulnerable Cases

220



People moved into safe shelter

56



Advocacy Efforts

73%



Successful Family Reunification Cases

61



Clients assisted with Family Reunification Cases

76%



Positive Asylum decisions

377



People prepared for their Asylum Interview

Impact in Detail



Interview Preparation

The asylum interview is the single most important moment for asylum seekers in their journey to obtaining refuge. It is the interview which determines whether they will have access to a safe future, or returned to the country from which they fled. At Fenix, we empower our clients through the provision of information on the procedure, and of their rights. Through our holistic approach, we prepare them to be able to express their life story in a safe environment, where they can work through their trauma. The incidents that took place in Lesbos this year resulted in a prolonged closure of the asylum services. Despite this, we have prepared 377 people for their asylum interview this year. 76% of decisions received by our clients have been successful, meaning that they are now able to start to rebuild their lives in a safe country.

Group Information Sessions

Beside individual interview preparation sessions for our clients, we are committed to holding group sessions in the camps to inform as many people as possible on asylum procedures and their associated rights. We target our sessions according to the intended audience: some sessions are for those who have just arrived and, others for those who have received a rejection, while some sessions were specifically for women, and included information on the rights of women and resources against GBV. These sessions provide a way to empower asylum seekers in having the information to navigate their procedures, while also countering the spread of misinformation and rumours that can create tensions and uncertainty. This year we have provided information sessions in community centers, safe shelters for women, Moria Camp, Kara Tepe Municipality Center and the new emergency site (Mavrovouni).



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Stop
Cool

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جای خود
مروار

Family Reunification

Our family reunification team works hard to reunite clients with their family members in other European countries under the Dublin Regulations. This year, the work of our Family Reunification Team has been highlighted as 'outstanding' by the Greek Asylum Service and the Dublin Unit. We have supported 48 families, and have achieved an acceptance rate of 73%. Many families have been or will be transferred to meet their family in countries such as Germany, Sweden and Austria, among others. We work side by side with lawyers, case workers and advocacy organizations in other European countries to ensure the reunification of our clients with their families. Receiving updates from the reunited families all around Europe is one of the highlights of our work.



Mr. Halimi and his children traveling to Switzerland



Mother, father and children reunited in Switzerland after years apart



Advocacy

One of our goals is to improve access to basic rights through our strategic and advocacy efforts. These efforts help us raise awareness, increase accountability and work towards our vision of a just and equitable European asylum system. This year we attended weekly advocacy and legal meetings with other actors in Greece, and together drafted and published over 25 open letters and press releases to European and Greek authorities. Our legal team has submitted multiple presentations to local, national, and European bodies, advocating for the access to rights. We also hosted Members of Parliament in roundtable sessions to inform them on the situation on Lesbos. We have been featured in press interviews with over 25 different media outlets, and have provided information for reports from human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch. We have also recruited a communication and advocacy officer and boosted our social media presence, by posting blogs and short notes on the situation in Greece.



Ani Chiban, Fenix co-founder and Head of Legal explains the asylum procedure to German MPs

Well-Being

We believe that a one-dimensional approach to legal aid is not sufficient to achieve an equitable outcome in the asylum process. We therefore pursue a comprehensive, holistic approach that supports the entire person and their well-being. This year we referred clients to better housing outside the camp, ensured access to medical and mental health services and covered financial costs when necessary. We also informed and supported clients with registering for informal education, sports, and other social activities, and addressed basic needs such as clothing, blankets, and medical items. A crucial part of focusing on the well-being of our clients consists of creating a space where clients feel safe, heard and supported. 150 of our clients this year were highly vulnerable; including people with disabilities such as paraplegia, people with medical conditions such as cancer, unaccompanied children and survivors of severe violence.

Medical Cases

There are many people with medical conditions who lack access to proper treatment, medicine and support on the island, many of whom are our clients. We work hard to ensure their access to comprehensive medical care and follow up on their treatment and medication. Some of our clients have specific or expensive medication that other organizations cannot cover, or need treatment not provided in public hospitals. In these cases we assess and support our clients' needs. Some of our clients have been moved to other European countries where they will receive adequate medical care. For all of our clients with medical conditions, treatment options and support structures are better on the mainland of Greece. We therefore advocate before camp authorities to support our clients in receiving the proper authorizations to leave the island. With the Covid-19 pandemic this year, this work was crucial, as many of our clients are at high-risk for Covid-19. Since the start of the pandemic, we have co-operated with camp authorities and UNHCR to ensure the identification and accommodation of all our high-risk COVID-19 clients in private hotels and apartments outside of the camp.



Gender Based Violence

At Fenix, many of our clients have experienced gender based violence, either in their country of origin, the country(ies) of transit, or Greece. For these individuals it is especially hard to access services where they can feel safe and be heard. This year the Covid-19 pandemic caused a sharp increase in incidents of gender based violence in the camps, exacerbated by the confinement of people in inhumane conditions. The continued presence of our team in the camp meant that we could support those who had experienced GBV and monitor and report on the increase of violent incidents.

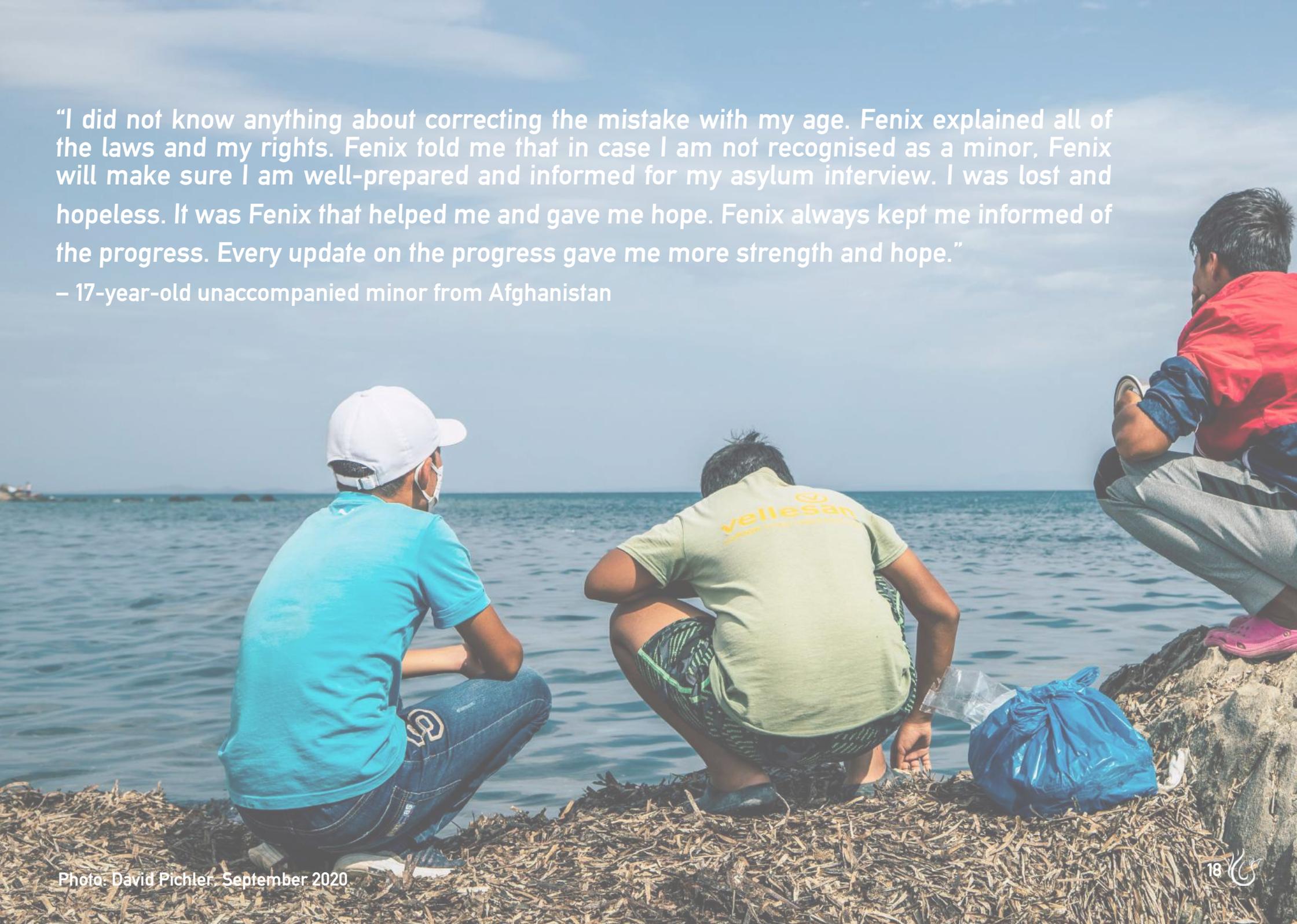
We support these survivors by providing them with a safe space where they can be heard, in confidence. This can be extremely difficult and traumatizing, but is crucial for their healing and their asylum process. We also help them access safer accommodation and ensure access to the medical and mental health support they need.

Unaccompanied and Alleged Minors

Unaccompanied and Alleged Minors (UAMs/AMs) are one of the groups that are most at risk in Lesvos. Throughout the year we have supported our UAM and AM clients get their age assessed in order for them to receive the protection and services they are entitled to. After the fire, and until children were moved by the authorities to safe shelter, UAMs were especially vulnerable while living on the streets. Although many were evacuated after the first day, Fenix reported 11 AMs still on the streets to authorities. We also requested the age assessment of 30 alleged minors, and identified 9 children who were separated from their family during the fire, and 6 minors who had been living in special accommodation to return to their parents or to their specific accommodation. Finally, we have drafted specific reports and complaints on the living conditions, age assessment and registration of UAMs.

“I did not know anything about correcting the mistake with my age. Fenix explained all of the laws and my rights. Fenix told me that in case I am not recognised as a minor, Fenix will make sure I am well-prepared and informed for my asylum interview. I was lost and hopeless. It was Fenix that helped me and gave me hope. Fenix always kept me informed of the progress. Every update on the progress gave me more strength and hope.”

– 17-year-old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan



Impact in Detail

Fire Response

After the fire that burnt down Moria camp, our teams immediately stepped in to help where it was most needed. In the first few hours after the fire, we contacted all of our clients to assess their most urgent needs. We ensured that clients with chronic illnesses received their medication, and that those who could not reach or stand in the long lines for distribution could still access food and water. We supported with the identification and location of people who were most at risk, such as single women, people with disabilities and, medical conditions, and unaccompanied children or children who lost their parents in the chaos surrounding the fire. Once identified we worked to ensure access to medical services, special diets for medical cases, and power banks for high risk cases, among other support. Our teams assisted with food and water distribution, first outside the camp and later in the newly reconstructed camp, until the designated food distribution organizations regained capacity to take over. Our legal team pursued urgent legal action to guarantee clients' access to proper and safe accommodation and medical attention: we drafted three claims within a period of 72 hours on behalf of three clients with disabilities to the European Court of Human Rights, and to the Greek Ombudsman on behalf of seventeen unaccompanied minors. We also conducted monitoring activities to assess people's access to food, water, and sanitary facilities, and drafted a report reflecting the results.



Fenix co-founder and Executive Director monitors the situation on the streets after the fire



Fenix team supports the food distribution after the fire

“This year, we had the privilege of supporting two Syrian nationals, who experienced inhumane living conditions in Moria Camp and did not have access to appropriate medical care. The fire that destroyed Moria forced them to spend many days on the street with limited access to food, water and medical care. Given that the New Camp is not suitable for asylum seekers with disabilities, together with Fabiola Velazquez, we managed to transfer them to a safe house and made sure that they received protection and medical support. Our legal team then secured the lifting of geographical restriction for them to leave the island. Not long after we got the fantastic news that they would be transferred to Germany, where they are now staying, and will continue with their asylum procedure in dignified living conditions.”

- Kayleigh, Child Protection Specialist

Mental Health

Throughout 2020 we ensured our clients' access to mental health support by referring them to mental health organizations on the island. Due to the increased need for mental health support on the island, Fenix increased its mental health expertise by recruiting international psychologists to organize group sessions, provide psychological first aid and stabilization, and carry out informed reports, assessments, and referrals. They also train our team in working with vulnerable populations and can flag clients that need urgent support. Furthermore, we have increased the mental health support for our own volunteers. For 2021, we have opened a call for Greek psychologists so we can also provide individual in-house psychological sessions to our clients.

Women's and Interpreters Group Sessions

In October 2020 we began weekly support groups for women and interpreters, led by our international psychologists and held in Farsi, Arabic, and French. During these sessions, attendees can express feelings, thoughts, and experiences regarding life as an asylum seeker, while sharing tea and coffee in a safe space. The psychologist shares coping techniques to reduce stress and deal with difficult feelings.

Spending all day in lines
having nothing to do
lots of fighting. This makes
people crazy



“When I get ready for the group sessions I am so happy. I get dressed, say goodbye to my children and then it’s just me, I go alone, I have time for myself and I am so happy when I come to Fenix.”

“I feel like I am with family in the sessions. I feel safe and able to share my experiences.”

- Two women who attended the women group sessions in 2020

“Everything would be difficult without Fenix’s guidance. It would feel like a person who is standing in front of an intersection and doesn’t know which way to go.”

– 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan

Organizational development

Throughout the chaos of 2020, Fenix has been able to improve the impact of our work by ensuring a flexible, well-trained, and well-prepared team. Our team delivered and attended trainings on security and risk assessment, fire response, first aid, well-being and secondary trauma, cultural awareness, child protection, gender violence, countries of origin, and torture. Furthermore, Fenix has designed a pre-mission online training, as well as a two week intensive theoretical training and one month practical field training for incoming staff and volunteers.

Moreover, in August, an expert on monitoring and evaluation conducted a baseline assessment of our work, carrying out qualitative and quantitative analysis to measure the impact of Fenix's interventions. The report will be published in January 2021 and includes feedback from our current and former volunteers, current and former clients, partners and other organizations on the island, as well as recommendations for the future. Finally, we have designed a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan that will be implemented in January 2021.



Moving Forward



Moving Forward

Fenix is a young but fast-growing organization. In the last year, we have increased our team from 15 to 30 field members, and our minimum length of mission from 3 to 6 months. Most of our volunteers stay much longer than this. We have also hired our first members of staff and aim to secure four positions for Greek local staff in 2021 (3 Greek lawyers and 1 Psychologist).

Our 2021-2022 goal is to be able to retain many of our long term volunteers, and with them their expertise and the context-specific knowledge they have gained during their time here. We take the training of our volunteers very seriously, and our field missions include numerous opportunities to broaden the capabilities of our team. For 2021, besides our intensive in-field training, we have already prepared external expert trainings and workshops on trauma informed care, secondary trauma, resilience, and empowerment. Also, we have developed a plan to support our team's mental health and well-being during their time with us, including professional guidance from counsellors, compulsory breaks, and regular check-ins. We are committed to retaining that knowledge and continue the long term investment in our team's expertise and well-being.

Ensuring long term international experts, as well as Greek lawyers, psychologists, and social workers increases our impact, the continuity of representation for clients, and the high quality of the services provided. Furthermore, the pandemic and the inhumane conditions of the camps have highlighted the deteriorating mental health of our clients, and the insufficient mental health support on Lesbos.

In 2021, we are committed to increasing our funding to support a Fenix Mental Health and Psychosocial Team with Greek and International psychologists, as well as an additional space to hold group sessions. We believe that it is crucial that the safe space we provide to our clients includes in-house mental health support from professionals who already have knowledge of the client's holistic needs.

Although our greatest hope is that these efforts will no longer be needed next year, we aim to increase the drafting of reports on access to basic rights, pursue strategic litigation, and work on national and European advocacy to raise awareness and influence bottom-up and evidence-based policies.

At Fenix, we do not believe in band-aid solutions, and are not afraid to adapt our strategy in the face of new challenges and emergencies that arise to better support our clients. We take pride in our adaptability to the constant changes in the field, characteristics that make us a unique actor in Lesbos. We will continue to adapt for as long as the circumstances and our clients require it.

Thank You

With thanks to our partners, collaborators and donors who have supported us with their donations, advice, skills and encouragement and without whom our work would not be possible:

Ahmad Ali; Ali Millad; Amy Einhorn & Mattew Futterman; Anastasia Thanos; Anastasia Balta; Anthy Doxiadis; Ben & Karen Kahrl; Bob from Sussex, England; Brisa Merino Navarrete; Celine Leong Ying Xian; Charlie Cooper; Charlie Hardstone; Chloe Powers; Christos Dagiellis; Costas Petropoulos; David Pichler; Domitille Gautier de Charnacé; Eirini Zanni; Emma Hogendorp; Fabiola Velazquez; German Bencci; George & Joy Kroussaniotakis; Dr. Helene Feinberg Walker; Jacqueline Bengtson; Janice Firestein; Jonathan Cook; Judy & Sid Shroyer; Karol Kras; Kent Walker, Esquire; Maria Chiban; Maria Cane; Martin Binder; Milosz Palej; Monica Arias; Nicolò Carrara; Osvaldo Galeano; Patrick Münz; Rose Firestein; Sabriyah Saeed; Saskia Wishart; Tadhg Hartnett; Tina Rogers; Woden Teachout; Virginia Alimonda; Yiannis Peytopoulos

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To all of the organizations, staff and volunteers with whom we are proud to work side by side in Athens and on Lesvos.

To all of the media outlets and journalists that helped us share with the world what was happening in the island.

To all of our supporters who donated, shared and raised awareness.

To our incredibly committed and inspiring field team who selflessly and passionately fulfills our mission and vision of providing holistic legal aid.

And above all, to our clients and the refugee community of Lesvos, whose courage and resilience continues to inspire us every day.

