



ESTIA: A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Asna, a two-year-old asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, plays with a doll at her home in Athens, under the ESTIA programme.
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UNHCR Greece

November 2015 - September 2021



Syrian asylum-seeker Jad poses with his family outside their ESTIA apartment on Samos island. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis, November 2019

ESTIA [*estía*]: a hearth, or one's home

In 2015 – 2016, over a million people arrived in Greece seeking safety in Europe. In their majority from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, they had fled war and persecution in their home countries. After the closure of the 'Balkan Route' in March 2016, more than 50,000 people remained in Greece. The country was faced with an urgent problem: to house tens of thousands of people when the country had only 1,200 places for them to stay.

UNHCR offered to create 20,000 places in apartments, in what became the first pillar of the ESTIA programme. Having left their homeland and having survived harrowing routes to reach Europe, asylum-seekers needed a new home. The second pillar – ESTIA Cash – ensured that all asylum-seekers could meet their basic daily needs. The cash programme supported not only those in ESTIA apartments but also the tens of thousands of persons living in camps, or on their own in urban areas. Both pillars were implemented by UNHCR and the Hellenic Republic, with financial support from the European Union (EU).

A collective effort

The **ESTIA programme** ([Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation](#)) was a **joint endeavour**. UNHCR introduced the **ESTIA Accommodation component** in November 2015, which it implemented in collaboration with the Greek Government and NGOs, and with the financial support of the European Union. Subsequently, in 2017, UNHCR worked with the Government and an alliance of international and national NGO partners to introduce the **ESTIA Cash Assistance scheme** for asylum-seekers in Greece.

The European Union (EU) has a commitment to meet the essential needs of all asylum-seekers on its soil as per the [EU Reception Conditions Directive](#). UNHCR's ESTIA housing for the most vulnerable and cash assistance for all asylum-seekers were co-funded by the European Union and helped the Greek State fulfil its commitments to the Union. In 2021, the two programmes are transitioning fully to the Government, which will directly oversee the activities.

One vision: restoring normality in people's lives.

ESTIA offered much more than a roof, a bed, and some cash. It offered dignified living conditions to asylum-seekers. **In other words, it helped them create a home away from home.**



Brothers, Ali, 6 and Abubakr, 8 from Syria, play games on a mobile phone inside their ESTIA home in Athens. © UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis, June 2019

Urban Accommodation

Opening the door to a new life

UNHCR, with financial support from the EU, first implemented the **Accommodation** scheme to temporarily host asylum-seekers scheduled for relocation to other European countries under the 2016 – 2017 scheme. The accommodation scheme was meant to end with the conclusion of relocation. However, as the need for housing persisted, ESTIA accommodation developed into hosting vulnerable asylum-seekers and providing services such as psychosocial and mental health support, interpretation, and referral to medical actors.

ESTIA thus became a **flagship initiative** offering, beyond housing, comprehensive support tailored to people’s specific needs. It did so by building a close-knit network of partner NGOs and municipalities throughout the country that brought together experts from different areas to support the participating families. In the process, asylum-seekers were embraced by local communities through daily interaction between neighbours.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO OFFERING SERVICES

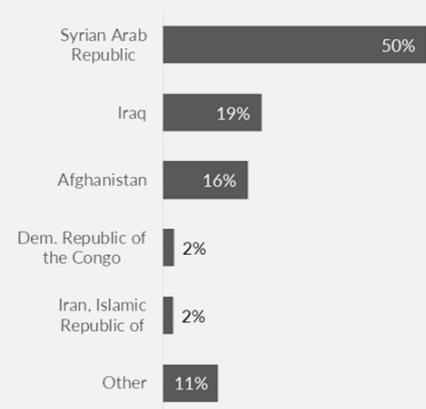
ESTIA partners rented apartments and buildings, as well as hotels. The programme also identified families to host refugees and created shelters for unaccompanied children. The urban locations of the apartments facilitated access to services such as schools, hospitals or language classes. **Social workers were assigned to specific households, to support families throughout their stay.**

The support services of ESTIA were invaluable considering that a significant number of residents had serious medical conditions, such as chronic illness or trauma, were single-parent families or individuals who had survived violence or even torture. NGO and municipal partners helped ESTIA residents obtain key documents, a tax identification and social security number, open a bank account, enrol in school and, when needed, referred them to specialized organizations for legal support or health services.

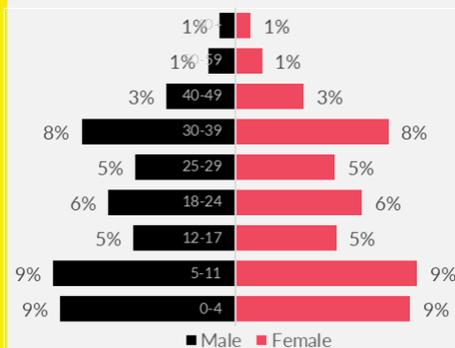
More than one in four residents have at least one of the following **most common vulnerabilities:**

- Serious medical condition
- Child at risk
- Single parent

Nationalities



Demographics



Source: UNHCR Greece (greatim@unhcr.org), reflecting total implementation period

The social workers responded to urgent needs, assisted by interpreters and focal points who accompanied ESTIA residents to the different services. In parallel, accommodation supervisors managed the facilities and ensured repairs, the payment of utility bills and communication with neighbours.

Moreover, municipalities offered asylum-seekers specialized municipal services in collaboration with local organizations and networks. They helped them with basic items such as clothing, offered recreational and educational activities for children as well as sports and cultural activities for adults, or helped them find psychosocial support.

ADVANCING CULTURAL EXCHANGE

ESTIA's homes were in small and large towns, cities, and islands across Greece. Local communities and refugees lived side-by-side, experiencing the richness of cultural exchange and the similarities and differences between Greek life and customs, and those of refugees' home countries. In doing so they helped reduce preconceived ideas and promoted acceptance and inclusion. Social interactions also helped ESTIA residents adapt more easily to their new environment.



Sara (8) from Iraq lives with her family in an ESTIA apartment in Thessaloniki and attends Greek language classes. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis, October 2018



“We have a home, a neighbourhood. People respect us and help us as much as they can. I thank them from the bottom of my heart. My girls go to school. That's all I care about. I want to see my children moving forward and have a good life”.

Maluk Bakri, 41 years old
Refugee from Syria posing with her family at their ESTIA home in Heraklion in Crete
*You can read the rest of the story [here](#).

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Thus, the programme promoted peaceful co-existence between host and refugee communities, acting as a steppingstone for the latter's eventual integration. In parallel, the landlords and local communities benefited from renting their properties to ESTIA. The programme employed local staff as social workers and other specializations, which created hundreds of jobs in and for the communities. In doing so, the programme helped local economies across Greece, at a time when the country faced a financial crisis.

Cash Assistance

Empowering refugees and asylum-seekers to secure their basic needs



Wiam, (11) refugee from Syria, tests her new glasses. © UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis, December 2019

UNHCR and its partners began implementing the **Cash Assistance** programme in April 2017, offering vital support to the thousands of asylum-seekers in Greece. By providing cash directly, asylum-seekers could choose themselves how to prioritize their expenses to best cover their basic needs, helping them regain control of their lives.

PROVIDING A FINANCIAL SAFETY NET

Eligible asylum-seekers received one personalized pre-paid card per household. **Cash cards were loaded monthly with an amount linked to the number of people in each household.** The amount of cash assistance also depended on whether the household was in accommodation where food was provided. The monthly rates were established in coordination with the Greek authorities and aligned to the social welfare benefits for Greek families.

The amounts ranged from EUR 75 for one person in State accommodation where food was provided, to EUR 490 for a family of seven or more residing in accommodation where food was not provided.

Back in 2017, to roll out this complex programme, multiple UNHCR teams across the country worked around the clock to register thousands of asylum-seekers living in different locations across Greece. A single, up-to-date database allowed the information to be cross-checked with key State services. To ensure the programme's integrity and prevent fraud, the programme was designed with multiple layers of checks, dividing responsibilities between actors to rule out conflict of interest.

"I have a baby. My Nassin is only 3 months old. With the monthly cash assistance, I can buy milk and diapers for my little daughter. My husband is looking for a job, while we're trying to learn the language. Until we get to our feet, it is important to know that we'll have some money to feed our child."

Fartun, 21 years old
Refugee from Somalia

UNHCR and its partners conducted frequent verifications to ensure that only those who were eligible and present in Greece continued to receive cash. In the course of 2020, the programme adapted to the COVID-19 public health exigencies in 2020, with no disruption of services to asylum-seekers. Eventually, in the second and third quarters of 2021, the programme was able to return to normal.

MUTUALLY BENEFITING THE REFUGEE AND HOST COMMUNITIES

Asylum-seekers could either withdraw money from ATMs or use their cards directly on POS terminals in shops – facilitating the purchase of goods. By using this card, they could prioritize their needs (e.g. food, medicine or public transportation), **while contributing directly to the economy of the host community.**

There also, the daily interaction between refugees and local communities in grocery stores, bakeries, shops, clinics, transport, helped avert stereotypes and enhanced further social cohesion.

Cash Assistance was more than financial aid; it enabled asylum-seekers to regain control over their lives, facilitating their route to self-reliance.



Ashraf Al Ali, a 43-year-old refugee from Syria, uses the cash assistance to buy his groceries at the local supermarket in Tripoli, where he lives with his nine-member family. The family arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos in 2017. They stayed at the municipal Kara Tepe accommodation site before moving to an ESTIA apartment in Tripoli, Peloponnese. His elder children attend the public school, and his younger daughter was born in Tripoli.

"I would like to stay in Greece. People here are kind and a lot of things remind me of my country. I would like to find a job here so that I can fully support my family", says Ashraf.

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Mehdi, a 32-year-old asylum-seeker from Afghanistan and his wife, Roghaya, made a fresh start in Heraklion, Crete, where they live with their children in an ESTIA apartment. Mehdi has been working in a carpentry shop just outside the city, while twice a week the couple attends Greek lessons.

“When I arrived in Crete, I found a job quickly as a carpenter. Through my job I got to know many people and I have made friends. Therefore, I can send my children to school and have a better life in Crete”, says Mehdi.

© UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis, July 2020



A relay race to ESTIA II

A new era: UNHCR hands over legacy and results to the State

When UNHCR stepped in to cover the urgent accommodation needs of thousands of asylum-seekers in Greece in 2015, it was with the ultimate goal that the State would take over this responsibility, in line with its obligations as an EU Member State.

To make this a reality, UNHCR, the Government and the EU worked for the transition of the programme. The planning started three years ago, when UNHCR teams worked closely with State agencies in the newly established Ministry of Migration and Asylum to jointly review tools and processes and adjust them to ensure that the programme can be transferred smoothly with maximum cost-efficiency. To further strengthen the transition, UNHCR, with EU support, deployed experts to key State agencies between 2018 and 2021. The experts helped put systems, software and processes in place for the transition.

In 2020, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the European Commission and UNHCR signed a Grant Agreement on the implementation of the ESTIA II Accommodation scheme for asylum-seekers in the country. The agreement affirmed the transition of the accommodation component of ESTIA, managed by UNHCR, to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The transition began on 1 September 2020 with 12,000 places and was completed in early 2021.

The ESTIA Cash programme was due to transition to the Government in July 2021. On the State’s request, to better prepare to take on the provision of basic assistance through cash, an extension was agreed between the three partners until September 2021.

“The ESTIA programme was unique. It was a bet at a very challenging time of emergency in Greece. With everyone’s goodwill and cooperation, the programme managed to respond very rapidly to a huge need, at scale and with a humane touch. It made a difference for many people. This is not the end of ESTIA. The programme now continues under the leadership of the Government and with the unfailing support of the EU.”

Mireille Girard, Representative (a.i.), UNHCR Greece

UNHCR ESTIA programme in numbers:

73,000

Accommodation residents

27,088

Maximum number of accommodation places (2018)

16 cities & 7 islands

Hosted ESTIA apartments

200,000

Total number of Cash Assistance beneficiaries

743.7 million EUR

Total amount the European Union contributed for the implementation of the ESTIA programme

1,646,031

Total distinct cash loadings

158,570

Total prepaid cards were issued

123

Locations in Greece where families were reached with Cash Assistance

Source: UNHCR Greece (greatim@unhcr.org)



Six-year-old Abrar from Iraq plays in the ESTIA apartment she lives with her family in Karditsa. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis, October 2018



Islam, a ten-year-old refugee from Syria, holds her one-year-old sister Rawan, inside their ESTIA house in Tripoli. © UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis, December 2018

Working with partners

A big thank you!

The implementation of the ESTIA Accommodation and Cash Assistance programmes was possible thanks to the coordinated efforts of central and local authorities and NGO partners with co-funding from the European Union. Their work made a real impact in the lives of the children, women and men who the programme assisted.

ESTIA has been unique in showcasing **positive and tangible outcomes for local communities and asylum-seekers in Greece**. Having engaged 11 municipal and nine NGO partners around the country, it has shown in practice that daily interaction between residents and refugees contributes to peaceful co-existence and can benefit social cohesion.

A special tribute is owed to Tzanetos Antypas, President of the NGO Praksis, a true humanitarian, who was the first to join UNHCR in ESTIA in what, at the time, seemed impossible. He passed away in 2017 and could not witness the full development of the programme he contributed to setting up.

The ESTIA Accommodation and Cash Assistance programme was implemented by UNHCR and the Hellenic Republic, with co-funding from the European Union:



UNHCR worked for the provision of social, legal, interpretation and mental health aid, as part of the ESTIA programme, with:



For the Accommodation Scheme, UNHCR worked with its partners:



For the Cash Assistance scheme, UNHCR worked with its partners:



For more information on the implementation of the ESTIA programme and its positive impact on refugees' lives, please visit the dedicated [ESTIA website](#).

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