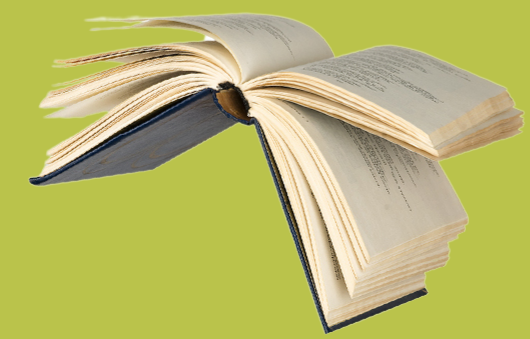


ECHO

for Refugees



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

WELCOME TO ECHO'S 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

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2021 NARRATIVE

2021 did not perhaps get off to a very auspicious start. Immediately following the New Year, Greece was placed back into tight lockdown restrictions which meant that, until mid-May, we could not officially run our library sessions.

Instead, we spent that time helping other grassroots projects in Athens such as Khora and Mazi, delivering dry food, vegetables and other supplies using the library van. We also managed to complete the transformation of our new library van, *Monsieur Renè*, which took over library duties at the end of March. Our original van, Gary, has now been put out to pasture in a comfortable retirement space on some land near to Ioannina in the north of Greece. His rest is well deserved.



In May we were very sad to see Keira, our amazing project coordinator, leave Greece for projects elsewhere. She is sadly missed, having given so much to the library over the past couple of years. Replacing her were two new coordinators, both previously volunteers with the library: Giulio and Azim. Now each coordinator works four days per week, sharing the library responsibilities amongst them. As the lockdown lifted, we were all ready with a new library and new books to head back to our library users, who had all been feeling the brunt of the lockdown in their isolated camps.



Our readers were extremely glad to see us back in the camps and even happier to see our new book collection that we had been gradually compiling. Unfortunately, camp access for the library continued to get worse, and we lost our ability to enter Malakasa camp at the end of May. This was a big blow to us and our ability to really create safe community space for camp residents. Still, with a lot of outreach and more emphasis on getting people's phone numbers, we continued to loan from the camp gate and do other activities in the camp car park.

In June we started a new collaboration with children's art project Pili Pala, who have been providing creative and engaging art-based activities for children, teenagers and women. It has been inspiring to see the joy brought to children and their parents with a bit of paint, glue and paper. Of course, a healthy selection of children's books remains out on display for those keen to engage with them, and these activities complement one another, offering a change of pace, the opportunity to practice basic english, scissor skills, even weaving!



Our new library van Rene in the Malakasa camp car park

We were very lucky to have our new awning (see above) installed before the full summer heat hit. It has provided much-needed shade in places where we really need it, especially being outside the camps where shade is in short supply.

In August extremely high temperatures and serious forest fires caused us to take a longer break than usual (3 weeks instead of 2). However we returned back later in the month and continued our sessions, without interruption, until Christmas.

GREECE AND THE GRASSROOTS

As part of their policy of cracking down on grassroots projects' and civil society's ability to safely work in solidarity with people on the move, the Greek government has taken action to restrict access to camps for many organisations, the library included.

In November 2020 the government passed a law that effectively exposes to criminal charges anyone working with asylum seekers who talk publicly about their experiences. This measure has been widely condemned within Greece and the EU in general.



How Greece is silencing NGOs to hide abuses at refugee camps

In-depth: A new law prohibiting NGOs from reporting accounts of abuse in refugee camps is part of a wider crackdown since the New Democracy party came to power.

The New Arab / Keira Dignan

The library had been struggling to negotiate camp access previously, however in 2021, we lost even informal access to Malakasa, Korinthos and Oinofyta camps. At Malakasa and Korinthos this meant we operated instead from the car parks just outside the camps. At Oinofyta we went inside to run sessions once staff left (at the invitation of residents). At Ritsona, a large camp we started to visit in November 2021, we still had informal access inside.

The camps have become even more prison-like, with concrete walls, barbed wire and now turnstile gates which are operated using biometric data of the residents. An al-Jazeera [article](#) in May describes the alarming measures being put in place. Residents we have spoken to are very concerned, as they believe these measures are not for their own protection, but for further restricting their freedom of movement.

Added to this is the deteriorating situation for people on the move themselves. Camp residents have undergone an extremely difficult time due to the extended lockdowns, which saw most if not all of the educational and recreational activities stopped for up to 14 months between 2020 and 2021. Once lockdown was lifted, they faced reduced services due to governmental restrictions. In the autumn, the cash card programme – an insufficient but essential lifeline for most asylum seekers – was halted, partially replaced with meals distribution by government caterers. Most residents we speak with find the food inedible and so rely on dwindling savings and precarious work on the black market to provide for themselves and their families.

UPDATE:

In January 2022, the library arrived at all the camps to find a new team of 24 hour "security" staff at the gate of every camp. This has meant we can no longer run our children's activities safely at either Korinthos or Oinofyta camp as the staff have told us that even the car park or small entrance space is not allowed. One resident at Oinofyta said that this is what he imagined Guantanamo to be like.

ECHO is trying to provide the library services and sense of solidarity through visiting the camps and parking elsewhere, whilst at the same time slowly trying to make the application to join the register of NGOs which would then allows us to apply for camp access. Through the experiences of other NGOs and grassroots groups on the ground, this application is extremely unlikely to succeed. The arbitrary of the decisions and the shortcomings of the registry have been pointed out by several independent observers.

LIBRARY TIMETABLE 2021

Once lockdown was lifted, our library timetable ran to a regular schedule throughout the year. As of the start of 2022 we have re-started our sessions in Exarcheia at the Welcommon hostel on Wednesdays, as well as two minors' shelters on a Tuesday alternating with Korinthos.

MONDAY

MALAKASA - a large camp of between 2500-3000 people, almost all Afghans. Although we lost inside access in May it is still the camp with the largest number of loans.

OINOFYTA - a mixed camp of around 800 people, in a disused chemical factory. The inside is mainly Syrian Kurds, with a large white RUB tent housing around 14 Afghan families.

RITSONA - another large camp of Arabic speakers from Syria and Iraq, Kurds, Afghans and a small West African population. We started going to Ritsona in the middle of October.

TUESDAY

KORINTHOS - when this camp was first opened, the library was the only service that visited. Now there is a small local community centre, but no projects or people are allowed inside. The population is a mixture of Afghans, Iranians, Syrians, Kurds, West Africans as well as some Somalians.

WEDNESDAY

KHORA SOCIAL KITCHEN - until the late summer we were supporting Khora by visiting the municipal market once or twice a week to get fresh vegetables. The kitchen was distributing meals 5 times a week and so the library for a while got a lot of use on Wednesdays, when we could get the parking!

VICTORIA SQUARE PROJECT - This session is beside Victoria Square which is an informal hang-out square for many migrants in the centre of Athens. We have a small number of regular users here.

THURSDAY

LAVRIO KURDISH CAMPS - We continue to visit these two connected camps on a Thursday. Our kids' activities and informal asylum support are particularly appreciated here, particularly in the town camp.

THE LIBRARY TEAM AND OUR ACTIVITIES

We have been lucky to have volunteers joining the library from Greece, Syria, the UK, Italy, Belgium, Germany and Spain. Each volunteer is given a thorough introduction to working in the library and how we do our best to work collaboratively. We acknowledge that within our small team there exist hierarchies of experience, language, nationality and money (our 3 coordinators receive a stipend to assist with living costs). We try our best to overcome these by talking about them, by translating the induction into Arabic and Farsi to make sure that information is accurately conveyed and by offering training to volunteers about some of the inner workings of the library. We are transparent about our finances and also do our best to support each other in our work and outside of the library sphere with one to one chats and social activities.

Our runaway success this year, apart from our lovely Farsi book selection, has been our collaboration with Pili Pala. Their enthusiasm and willingness to take creative ownership of the children's activities has provided some amazing moments in an otherwise challenging year. We have been hopping around like bunnies, making giant murals out of handprints, decorating cardboard octopuses and playing musical statues which has brought new people to the library, including mothers and teenagers keen to make their own jewellery with the beads provided during some of the sessions.

The ability to make something small but unique to an individual has proved a powerful and moving thing to witness at the library, and it has been wonderful to see the library space become a small community hub on a regular basis, even if we are outside the camps.



As part of our holistic approach to being a library, we have offered support with the asylum process which has included occasionally bringing a legal caseworker along with us, writing emails on behalf of individuals to the asylum service, following up on cases and looking for places to refer people to. In July, we hosted a clown troupe that gave performances at several of the camps we visited which was extremely popular. We offer guitar lessons on demand.

Many of the camps have extremely active residents that decide to run self-organised language classes. We have been able to support this through printing specific resources for the teachers or offering them some of our own. In Korinthos for example ECHO's Basic English is used in the English classes of the local community centre and at Malakasa and Ritsona we have on several occasions printed materials for community German lessons.

OUR LIBRARY USERS

In 2021 we loaned 1748 books from May through to December. This is despite a lockdown that was only officially lifted in May, 3 weeks break in August and restricted or completely cut-off access to the camps themselves. 86% of the loans made were to camp residents, with the largest number being in Malakasa, followed by Oinofyta, Korinthos, Ritsona and Lavrio. We continued to visit Khora community kitchen and Victoria Square Project inside Athens on Wednesdays.

WHO BORROWS?

- 55% female
- 47% children and teenagers
- 25% young adults
- 29% other adults



WHAT LANGUAGES?

- Farsi: 47%
- English: 25%
- Arabic: 19%
- Turkish: 12%

WHAT DO PEOPLE READ?

People borrow books for many different reasons. We receive a lot of requests for popular (but good quality) fiction, such as Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, classics in translation such as *Sherlock Holmes*, as well as non-fiction, particularly psychology, history and philosophy. Poetry remains extremely popular in both Arabic and Farsi, as do more practical resources, such as English grammar books, which are essential tools for people's future ability to study or to communicate independently wherever they go.

Basic English parts 1 and 2 remain our most popular language learning resource that we distribute, closely followed by beginners German from Farsi. English part 3 is about half way through being assembled, but it takes a lot of time to design a bespoke English resource with pronunciation guidelines, exercises (with answers) and engaging content that reflects what our library users have asked for. We hope to see it come together soon!



BOOK SUPPLY

Whilst we have seen the library's loans increased since last year, despite restricted access to the camps, fluctuating camp populations and Covid lock-downs, one of the big struggles is to supply and re-stock our library collection. We are lucky to have received many donations from various individuals and groups including Saqi books, Mehri Publications, Nogaam, the Lighthouse Bookshop in Edinburgh and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

We also were able to order new books from shops in Germany. However, for one issue for Farsi/Dari literature is that it is very much dominated by Iranian writers and subjects which do not necessarily speak to our predominantly Afghan library users. Books about Afghanistan, anything by Afghani writers in general, get immediately plucked off the shelves. Of course, as with the most beloved books, they are the most likely to not be returned.

In 2021 we lost about 20% of the books loaned, around 340 books. Almost half of those are Farsi. Afghani nationals make up the majority of the refugee populations that we serve. We suffer from a lack of camp access as we are no longer able to remind people in person by knocking on doors and doing community outreach. The long lock-downs meant there were periods of time where the library was unable to operate. During this time, many people moved on to new countries and we lost books. The living conditions in the camps are also hectic and stressful - an extreme weather warning last winter meant that Malakasa camp was evacuated entirely. People were told to only bring essentials, and upon their return many of the flimsy tents they'd been living in had been washed away.

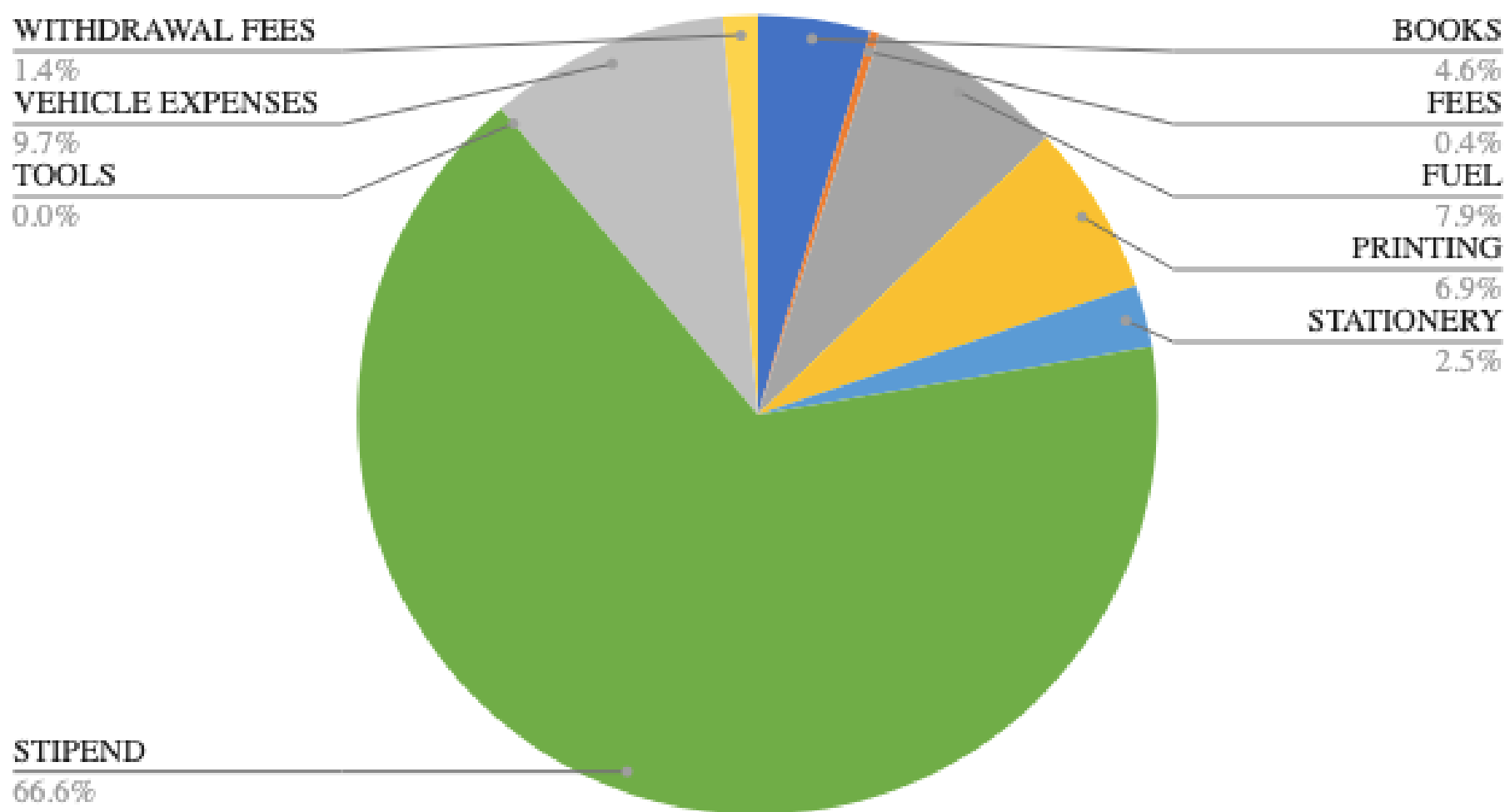
Farsi books are expensive to source and ship. If we are to keep up with demand we are going to have to fundraise substantially to increase our book-buying budget for 2022.



FINANCES

In 2021 our total income was £24,806.84. £18,201.85 of that came from grants, and the rest was from individual donations. Our total expenses was a little more than this: £28,567.79, with 66% of this being for the coordinators' stipends. We are hoping to strengthen our relationship with the ECF to see if we can collaborate further, as well as re-apply to other grant-givers.

Expenses by category

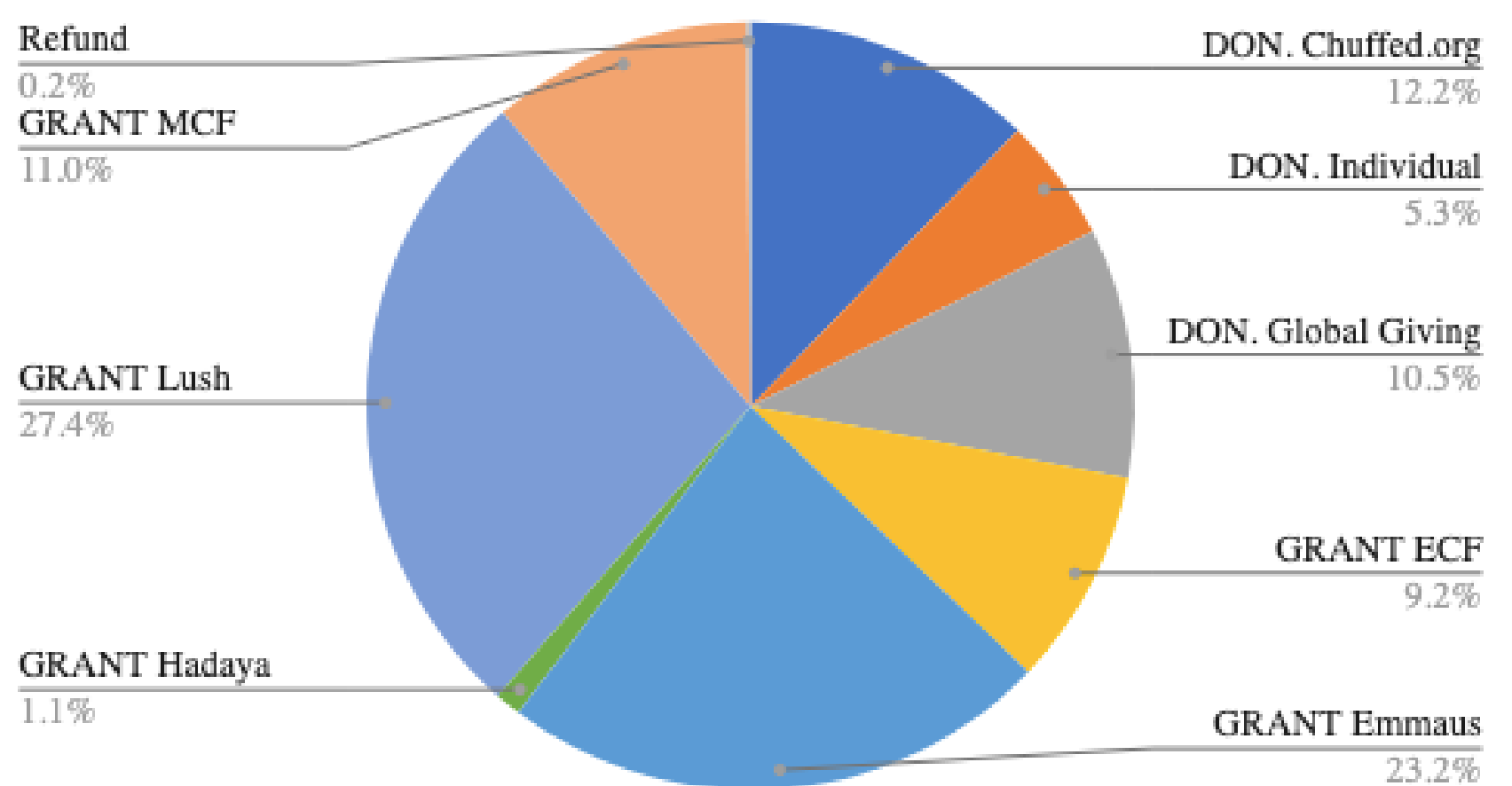


This year we were able to stabilise the library through increasing the number of coordinators. This has allowed us to reduce pressure on the remaining coordinator who was the only stipended volunteer who could both drive and had necessary language skills to communicate with library users. Now tasks are shared more evenly, with each coordinator working 4 days a week.

Vehicle expenses were high this year due to the work on the new library van, including the awning which came to almost 800 euros. Insurance cost us this year 357 euros, road tax around 150. The technical inspection is due next year. We anticipate that next year might see a small increase in costs of stationery for our children's activities and, as mentioned previously, we will need to increase our book-purchasing budget to keep up with demand.

The crowdfunding platforms of Global Giving and Chuffed, as well as individual donations through our bank account make up 28% of our income. We are proud to be so supported by our grassroots base and we hoped that our Christmas crowdfunder further spread the word about the library to a larger audience.

Income by Source



We are also fortunate to have been supported this year by Emmaus, the Matrix Causes Foundation, the Lush charity pot, Hadaya, Faversham Refugee Solidarity Group and the European Cultural Foundation.

ECHO 2022

2022 has already announced itself with the continued deterioration of living conditions for our library users and restricted camp access for the library itself. This year we need more than ever to defend people's access to the library services: ensuring that we are there for them at the camp gates even if we cannot physically go inside as we used to, whilst searching for ways around the restrictive and politically-motivated bureaucracy of camp access.

Meanwhile we also intend to broaden the library's reach to other sites and diversify, with the support of our partner Pili Pala, the activities that we can offer. As our camp access decreases we hope that we can do more to create a sense of shared community, even outside the camp gates. We aim to do what our library is best at - being mobile, flexible and sensitive to the ever-fluctuating situation on the ground.

We also want to strengthen the library's role in advocacy - we are currently taking ahead a plan to twin our library with a library in the UK. We hope this will be yet another innovative way of breaking down borders and connecting people through a love of reading, as well as educating people about the situation in Greece for people on the move.

