



Dear Friends

As the world faces a new challenge, this seems an appropriate time to write to you all with an update on the work being carried out by Mediterranean Hope and how we are experiencing the current situation. Tough operational decisions have had to be made within a rapid timeframe. However, we remain committed to carrying out what work we can with due regard for the current health situation and attendant measures.

Rome and Palermo

The lockdown has now been in force throughout Italy for over a fortnight, steadily more restrictive measures having been enforced every few days. Like other offices, shops and schools, the FCEI office and La Noce Diaconal Centre are closed. Staff in Rome and Palermo are working remotely, keeping in regular contact through a variety of online apps and messaging services.



Direct contact with the asylum-seekers we support cannot currently take place. Those who are in apartments of their own remain there; those who are in small supported structures are confined to their own quarters. Many are using the time to continue online language tuition. Where possible, Wifi is being made available along with online resources to support ongoing learning. MH staff are maintaining regular calls and video calls with those we support. Asylum applications are effectively on hold as public offices are not, in general, open and court hearings have been suspended until 15th April.

Those involved in advocacy work are no longer in a position to travel. Our international conference on asylum, to be held jointly with CCME and Diakonie Deutschland in May, has had to be postponed. However, there is much that can be done remotely. As the world adjusts to the current situation, we anticipate a significant increase in virtual meetings. We continue to lobby in respect of our proposal for

European Humanitarian Corridors and to negotiate the renewal of the existing Memorandum of Understanding with the Italian government regarding the corridors already operating here.

Beirut

Following discussion with the Italian government and our Sant'Egidio partners, the Humanitarian Corridor (HC) due to be opened at the end of March will remain closed, notwithstanding the final preparations for roll-out being made by the teams in Beirut and Rome. We very much regret the impact that this will have on the intended beneficiaries but accept that this is the right decision for now.



Travel between Lebanon and Italy having now been suspended, our entire team has been recalled from Beirut. They too are adapting to remote working, using the time now available to improve systems and engage in strategic planning. Where possible, the team will interview and work with HC candidates remotely.

120 people have so far tested positive for Covid 19 in Lebanon and a lockdown has been imposed. The team reports that, notwithstanding that Lebanon is ill-equipped to cope with a large-scale health crisis, preventative measures have been taken at an early stage by the authorities and, individually, citizens are playing their part to contain the virus.

Scicli

The lockdown measures apply to Sicily, in the same way as to the rest of Italy. Travel to Sicily from mainland Italy has been suspended other than in case of necessity, health or work. Given the emergency measures in place, staff at the Casa delle Culture are unable to interact directly with those housed there. Fortunately, those living there are housed in their own apartments and can remain there. Communal activities can, however, no longer take place.

Whilst Wifi is available within the Casa delle Culture, the majority of those who live there do not have computers and are reliant, at best, on mobile phones for information and connecting with the rest of the world. This is very hard on children, in particular. With all schools shut, the emphasis is now on online learning. However, in a household where there is no computer, accessing lessons is very difficult.

After-school groups to support homework are currently suspended. The everyday interaction which encouraged language learning and cultural integration simply cannot take place. Staff are maintaining what contact they can by way of telephone and video calls, disseminating links to information about the outbreak in a variety of languages and providing guidelines for how to comply with the current measures. Families used to shop together, each one bringing home a bag. Now only one person per household may go to the supermarket. Blank self-certification forms – and information about how to complete them - are being supplied to residents, none of whom have access to a printer, so that these can be completed before any outing is made.

For people who were already struggling to adjust to life in a new culture, it is particularly difficult to adapt to some of these changes, particularly in the absence of physical interaction. For some, their world is collapsing for a second time. However, staff are doing all that they can to maintain as much virtual contact as possible and to keep our guests as well-informed as the rest of us.

Lampedusa

Although physically separated from the rest of Italy, and although no cases of Covid 19 have so far been identified there, Lampedusa is subject to the same lockdown measures as the rest of Italy. As a result, the MH staff based there have been obliged to close the office and work from home. This presents a strange situation for the volunteers whose home shares the premises which house the office!

Whilst the team's usual activities have had to be suspended, migrants have not stopped coming to Lampedusa's shores. Just a few days ago 150 people arrived within the space of 48 hours. Notwithstanding the crisis in Italy and the risk of contracting a fatal illness by coming here, not many miles away others face something worse. And so, still, they risk their lives to come. The Lampedusa team asks us to reflect on that: *people are still fleeing; people are still migrating.*

In order to comply with current measures, those who arrive must be placed in quarantine. As a result, a few nights ago, more than 40 migrants had to spend a night and a day on the jetty, for the hotspot was already full with 26 others who had arrived the day before. No other space was available to place the group, which included women and small children.

The MH team, being unable at present to offer a welcome at the jetty and legal information to those who come, is focusing on monitoring what is happening, disseminating accurate information locally and beyond to dissipate misplaced tension and anxiety. It is hard for the team not to be alongside the most vulnerable in a situation such as this but they can continue to be eyes and ears for the rest of us. Like all of us, they are using any spare time to reflect, review and plan. This is a moment which can bring us fresh perspectives. For all of us are now being forced to experience limits on our freedom.

They write: "And this is surely the most powerful realization: how precious and vital is the survival of freedom. A vital breath to which every individual who inhabits this planet has the right and must struggle to keep."

Calabria

A small team has been based in Calabria for the last eight months or so. Their focus has been the seasonal migrant workers who are so often exploited in the agricultural sector. The team has been working to improve conditions for them, through provision of language tuition, legal information and practical support. The team has also been working with local farmers to build an ethical supply chain which guarantees rights for the workers concerned. A new label, “Etika”, has been developed with a view to marketing this produce beyond Calabria and, indeed, Italy.



The outbreak of Covid 19 and the measures imposed in response brings particular challenges for the migrants in Calabria. Although the south of Italy has so far been much less affected than the north by the virus itself, an outbreak there could be still more serious, given the reduced level of healthcare available in that region. Many of the seasonal workers are living in shanty towns. Conditions often do not exist to maintain social distancing nor hygiene measures. Access to running water, never mind hand sanitiser, is extremely limited.

The MH team is seeking to balance its commitment to the most vulnerable with the need to minimise the possibility of transmission. For that reason, one person only is now present in the camps where we work for up to two hours per day and social distancing measures are being strictly enforced.

Some fundamental work has needed to be done in terms of educating those in the camps about the current situation, its potential impact on them and how to respond to it. Unhelpful rumours, such as this being a “white man’s illness” have had to be dispelled. The team has been teaching people when and how to wash hands using soap and water or sanitiser, the importance of maintaining at least a metre’s distance at all times and what to do should someone develop symptoms of Covid 19. These seemingly simple notions have to gain a foothold in the camps. These lessons are fundamental.



MH has been able to provide water butts and hand-santiser dispensers for some camps. However, a significant practical difficulty is that sanitiser solution is not readily available. Similarly, stocks of masks have been exhausted. This is a huge concern given the conditions there.

MH is calling for ghettos and shanty towns in Calabria and beyond to be dismantled and for those living there to be found accommodation where they can follow the emergency measures. The water supply in one camp having been completely cut off, they are lobbying the local authority to restore this immediately. They remind us that the health of all should be guaranteed, migrants included.

Greece

Although we are consumed by news about the Covid 19, we do not forget that just before this exploded in Europe we were confronted by a migrant crisis on the Greek/Turkish border. The decision by Turkish President Erdogan to send migrants back to Greece and the Greek response to close its border and suspend asylum applications exacerbated an already difficult situation. Quite apart from the breach of international law on one side and the reprehensible use of migrants as pawns in a game of political manoeuvring on the other, for those stuck either side of this border, the situation has been intolerable.

Against that background, MH has called upon national and supra-national institutions urgently to address this situation, and reiterated its commitment to care for the most vulnerable. <https://www.nev.it/nev/2020/03/06/greece-fcei-ready-to-replicate-humanitarian-corridors/>

A working party from MH has engaged directly with NGOs and churches in Greece to assess how MH and other faith-based organisations within Europe can respond directly to this situation. MH's experience of operating Humanitarian Corridors from Lebanon places it in a unique position to assess whether the model could be adapted to ease the situation for the most vulnerable in Greece. Whilst the EU has acknowledged the need to extract unaccompanied minors from this hellish theatre, the response does not go nearly far enough.

Our intended mission to Greece has had to be placed on hold for the time being but our engagement with those on the ground continues. We must not forget the plight of these people, notwithstanding the crisis which surrounds us at home.

Call to Action

“Siamo tutti sulla stessa barca” (“we are all in the same boat”) is a phrase with a particularly poignant resonance at present. However, this global emergency is an opportunity for us all to pull together as a single community, to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable rather than ourselves and to stimulate a collective response to meet their needs. If this does not happen, the most vulnerable, migrants included, will be left to fend for themselves.

We have greatly appreciated the messages of support and encouragement which we have already received. We know that many are already praying hard. If you can, please add your prayers for the following:

- Worldwide collaboration in the race to find treatment and a vaccine for Covid 19;
- Willingness amongst individuals to place the needs of the community above their own; the necessary self-discipline to reduce transmission of the virus; patience with the measures imposed;
- Wisdom for governments across the world as they struggle to respond to this changing context

FCEI has launched an appeal to support three initiatives to tackle the pandemic: provision of disinfectant kits to Italian care homes, healthcare facilities, reception centres for migrants and other public facilities; financial support for institutions monitoring the spread of the virus to enable appropriate plans of action to be drawn up, financial support for healthcare facilities directly engaged in preventing the pandemic from spreading. Please also pray for the success of the appeal at this difficult time.

A useful passage in these difficult times which you may wish to consider can be found in Romans 5:3-5. Here is a fragment:

“We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope [...]”

We will survive this.



In their own words...

To end, here are some recent quotes from those who regularly speak on the project's behalf:

"We are appealing to members of Protestant churches in what is a difficult and painful moment for all. We express our fellowship with those who, as a result of the pandemic, have lost relatives and friends, and with those who are working to tackle it and stem its flow in conditions which are not always safe and with sometimes inadequate protection. We concur with the appeal for responsible behaviour and proper respect for the regulations which have come out in recent days. We pray that the Lord would help us to overcome this trial and, notwithstanding these difficult days, keep us from giving into dejection and despair."

Luca Maria Negro, President, FCEI

"At a point in time when this nation's attention is rightly focused on its own citizens, we nonetheless contend that we must not neglect our commitment to the most vulnerable in society, which includes the many migrants who would otherwise be left to look after themselves. We are so grateful for the support already received and which we hope to receive to enable us to provide the best possible service to that group."

Paolo Naso, Coordinator, Mediterranean Hope