Life in Borderland

Exploring How People Navigate Liminality Through Local Humanitarianism on Lesvos

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Abstract

This thesis explores how refugees, local Greek residents, and foreign volunteers navigate life in the borderland of Lesvos, Greece, within the constraints of a prolonged humanitarian context. Challenging dominant narratives that frame borderlands as spaces of passivity and *stuckness*, the study shows how people actively engage in practices of care, resistance, and future-making. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the thesis examines a locally rooted form of humanitarianism that fosters relational, reciprocal, and long-term responses to displacement. Drawing on Ortner's framework of *serious games*, it reveals how individuals build livelihoods and meaningful lives within structures that constrain, but do not determine, their actions. In doing so, the thesis contributes to debates on humanitarianism, liminality, and agency, advocating for a shift in how we understand liminality of borderlands and humanitarianism at Europe's borders.

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Let me first thank my interlocutors, **Home for All**, and the people there that together create it. Thank you for so warmly welcoming me into your daily life. I appreciate every conversation, discussion, and moment.

Towards the end of fieldwork for this thesis, a close family member left us abruptly. **Tore**, your passing has undoubtedly affected this process. The following weeks are a blur. An uncle, brother and son was suddenly gone. A musician that meant a lot to so many. The final weeks of this thesis I listened long hours to Beethoven while typing, thinking and fitting the pieces together. This pushed me to levels I didn't know existed, and made me reflect upon your love for Beethoven. In loving memories to you, Tore!

Lesvos holds a special place in my heart. Seven years ago, under the most difficult and constrained circumstances, I met **Kalle** in this place. In the midst of stress, uncertainty, and experiences beyond comprehension, we found each other - and soon after, we found our beloved dog, Pita. Although those times were marked by hardship, they also gave rise to the beginning of our little family. Lesvos, with all its contradictions and complexities, will always feel like home. With this, I want to thank you, Kalle. Your tireless support and understanding during chaos has been an immense part of this thesis from beginning to end. A journey that in many ways began all those years ago on Lesvos. This personal note talks to my positionality throughout this thesis. Lesvos to me, is a place filled with many incredible people, and non the least, filled with so much engagement and care. It is with this perspective I write this thesis. I have seen the cruelty and suffering put upon people, and I so deeply oppose this. Here, I look beyond; to the spaces of hope carved out by people and that are filled with the complete opposite: **care**.

To my supervisor, **Sidsel Roalkvam**, thank you for pushing and believing in me, guiding me along the way to find my true voice. Your guidance and knowledge has made a profound impact on me. Thank you to my co-supervisor, **Cindy Horst**, your knowledge has been an immense help. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the **Norwegian Red Cross**, which made this research possible. Your contribution supported my fieldwork on Lesvos and completion of this thesis. Last, but not least, a huge thank you to my **family**, both in Oslo and Bergen, for your patience and cheering me on!

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1. Lesvos: A European Borderland

1.1 Introduction

Today, violent conflicts and forced displacement are rising globally. The war in Ukraine has caused Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II, which has critical global consequences interconnected issues like; food security, energy markets, and commodity prices (World Bank, 2024). These, in turn, are intensifying the impacts of fragility and conflicts in places around the world. At the same time, countries are until now struggling with still dealing with the several issues from the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the long-term risks posed by climate change (World Bank, 2024). Far-right parties are on the rise all over Europe. Since Trump was elected US President, many fear the repercussions it will cause globally. This is a situation often referred to as *polycrisis*. The concept of *polycrisis* suggests that today's crises are not just happening at the same time, but are interconnected, enduring and making global instability more prolonged (Lawrence, Janzwood, & Homer-Dixon, 2022). While these multiple crisis are lasting, we simultaneously see an increased focus on fortifying borders and keeping people out – in the name of security.

Lesvos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, where I did my fieldwork, emerged as a poignant symbol of the refugee crisis in Europe. It serves as a place where *polycrises* are vividly unfolding and have done so for many years. My thesis delves into the lived reality of refugees, locals, and volunteers on Lesvos, and how they *remake* their livelihoods within a complex web of social and political relations, at the very margins of power. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I aim to explore how a particular local grassroots organization, Home for All, responds to these lasting crises on Lesvos. Whereas humanitarian action is often focused on saving lives and short time humanitarian relief (Feldman, 2008), this organization has a more long-term focused response. Their response is community-based by establishing relationships, supporting budding local economies, and promoting integration. In short, I will argue that they create belonging in a place that by many is referred to as a *borderland* (Agamben, 1998; Mallki, 1995; Baumann, 2003, Brun & Fabos, 2015).

Lesvos is an external border to Europe situated between Turkey and Europe, which has made it one of the main entry-points for people seeking safety to Europe (Kalogeraki,

2019, p.1). It is characterized by a highly visible and increased border control in terms of an offensive and active coastguard and the EU-funded Closed Control Access Camp (CCAC) Mavrovouni, for asylum seekers. Lesvos has transformed from an entry-point to Europe, to a detention-ground for asylum-seekers being contained (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020). Daily life in the camp consists of uncertainty, waiting and a state of indefinite in-betweenness. However, the conditions on Lesvos have changed with political developments in the asylum regime. Asylum-seekers are now being processed quicker than previously (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024). This is creating a situation where individuals given asylum, find themselves again in a state of in-betweenness, with little to no support once accepted.

Scholars refer to a *borderland* as a transitional space, a place where mobility is controlled and restrictions put in place hinder people from entering and exiting (Tsitsaraki & Petracou, 2023). The concept refers to places that exist in a state of liminality, neither fully belonging to one place nor another. These are zones of uncertainty, waiting, and in-betweenness, where people find themselves stuck between past and future, legality and illegality, inclusion and exclusion (Agamben 1998; Mallki, 1995; Baumann, 2003; Brun & Fabos, 2015). Lesvos as a place situated at the border between Greece and Turkey, marking the dividing boundary between the EU and non-EU territory and is as such; a *borderland*. It serves as the point of entry for boat refugees fleeing their home countries through Turkey in order to reach safety at the European shores. In lack of the documentation needed to enter the EU legally, people cross the Mediterranean Sea mainly from Turkey or the northern parts of Africa (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). However, the journey of crossing the Aegean Sea is far from safe. The young toddler, Alan Kurdi, who drowned and washed-up dead on a Turkish shore as a consequence of a failed attempt to reach the Greek Islands, is burnt in many people's memories as a symbol of this dangerous journey. Unfortunately, these human tragedies continue to unfold. In 2023, the Pylos shipwreck in Greek waters took place, in which it is presumed that over 500 individuals lost their life (Amnesty, 2024). It is estimated that over 31 879 people are dead and missing as an outcome of attempts to cross the sea to Europe (International Organization for Migrations, n.d.).

Allegations of pushbacks, a mechanism of controlling the border, have increased in recent years. Pushbacks are measures by the state which force migrants and asylum seekers out of the border-area and back into the territory they came from without giving them the opportunity for an assessment of their protection needs (González Morales, 2021, p 4). On Lesvos, this entails the Greek Coastguard forcing people in the sea back into Turkish waters from which they attempted to cross the border. These measures, exceptional in their illegality, aim to ease pressure on Greek islands but instead exemplify a biopolitical strategy of control (Mbembe, 2019; Fassin, 2012). States have the right to manage their borders, however forcing people back to places where they might risk torture or inhumane treatment is a breach of international human rights law (Mellersh, 2025). Pushbacks constitute *a state of exception* where normal legal frameworks are suspended to enforce border control (Mbembe, 2019).

If individuals make it across the dangerous route to the Greek Islands, such as Lesvos, exiting or leaving is problematic. Upon applying for asylum, individuals are restricted to stay on the island while waiting for an answer. If asylum-seekers receive asylum in Greece, they are still within the humanitarian space as they continue to live under precarious conditions, reliant on humanitarian support (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024). If given asylum, they can freely move in Greece and can pay for travel documents to travel to the EU. However, there are several hinders to mobility in this situation as well. Refugees have the same social welfare benefits and rights as Greek citizens (greek Council for Refugees, 2024, p. 273); however, these benefits are minimal and practically access is limited due to requirements of five years residence and barriers in obtaining documentation (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024, p. 273-274). Those granted asylum can only obtain housing benefits once they have resided in Greece for five years (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024, p. 274). The Guaranteed Minimum Income is in reality the only social benefit accessible once given asylum, which is 200 euro a month, though this depends also on fulfilling documentation requirements (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024, p. 275). Refugees can travel freely in the EU; however, they will not be accepted for asylum due to their status in Greece (Maani, 2018). In reality, this means that people are *stuck* in Greece, which often was not thought of as a final destination, but as a transit point to reach Europe. As such, life after asylum is still within the liminal place of the borderland, and within the realm of humanitarian response. The tensions between exclusion and belonging, opportunity and marginality define the realities of borderlands

like these. Some argue that border areas like Lesvos, are places where people exist only in regards to their exclusion by border practices and human rights are restricted for certain type of people (Tsitsaraki, 2023, p. 12). The waiting and uncertainty for asylum-seekers awaiting a decision on their application at border zones make people live lives in liminality (Tsitsaraki, 2023, p. 12; see also Agier, 2016; Agamben, 1998).

This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork among people on Lesvos to explore how they manage, survive and attempt to rebuild life in this *nowhere-land*. I studied a local grassroots organization named Home For All. It is local in the sense that it is founded and run by people who are from and reside on Lesvos. They are therefore socially embedded in the society on Lesvos. Their ties to the local community make them a unique exception compared to mainly foreign, international humanitarian organizations present on Lesvos. Home4All seeks to provide refugees who have been granted asylum with a sense of direction in an otherwise precarious and uncertain situation. Through the organization, refugees with asylum status can work and earn money, enabling them to navigate the present and imagine and plan for futures. Some see Lesvos as a place to rebuild their lives, using their income to save for land and long-term settlement. Others view the work as a temporary means to afford passports and travel to other EU countries, hoping for better opportunities. Some employees have already attempted to relocate but after their asylum claims were rejected elsewhere due to their status in Greece, returned to Home4All for work while reconsidering their options. These varied pathways illustrate how, even after receiving asylum, many remain trapped in a state of uncertainty, stuck in *borderland*. Thus, this thesis explores how individuals navigate this liminal place, Lesvos, the EU's external border, as they attempt to rebuild and reshape the present and futures. Through this micro-level exploration, my thesis aims to contribute to broader theoretical discussions on the complex interplay between humanitarian aid, power structures, and the agency of individuals living at the margins of Europe. By grounding these concepts ethnographically, I explore how people on Lesvos navigate and reshape life through Home4All within the constraints of humanitarian governance and European border policies.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 will continue by providing essential background, beginning with sections 1.2 and 1.3, which offer an overview of Lesvos as a place and outline the broader humanitarian context in which the study is situated. This is

followed by a presentation of the conceptual framework and tools, focusing on a relational understanding of place, and the the concepts of *serious games* (Ortner, 2006) and *social navigation* (Vigh, 2008), which guide the analysis of the empirical material. I then introduce the fieldwork context and main research site, Home4All, before presenting the research questions, justification and relevance of the study. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 form the analytical core of the thesis. These chapters integrate ethnographic description with conceptual reflection by drawing on key concepts to develop a deeper understanding of the practices and experiences observed. Finally, the thesis conclusion considers what these findings reveal about the nature of humanitarianism in the borderland context.

1.2 Lesvos as a *nowhere*-land

A History of Managing the Border

The refugee crisis together with the financial crisis has affected local lives in the border area, Lesvos. Located on the political border between Greece and Turkey, it has been a conflictual place for several generations (Tsoni, 2016). The islands history of managing the border, dating back to the Ottoman Empire, is often brought up as a vital aspect of understanding dynamics today, as a history repeating itself (Mogstad, 2024; see also crisis as context Vigh, 2008). Lesvos is located only 6 km from the shore of Turkey. Its proximity to Turkey is important to understand the context. There are approximately 80 000 inhabitants on Lesvos, many are descendants of Anatolian refugees forced to flee from Turkey after the 1919-22 Greek-Turkish war (Tsoni, 2016). In contemporary time, the islands geographical closeness to Turkey has impacted the large influx of people seeking asylum to Europe through crossing the sea to Lesvos. Once known for its stunning beaches and tranquil landscapes, Lesvos has become synonymous with the plight of refugees fleeing wars, persecution, and hardship in search of safety and security on European shores. Images of desperate families arriving on Lesvos´s shore have captured the world´s attention and Moria refugee camp laid bare the human tragedy unfolding on Europe´s doorstep. In 2015, the Greek Islands received 500 000 sea arrivals out of 860 000 total arrivals that year (Clayton & Holland, 2015; Frontex, 2015). The island emerged as a major entry point for people entering Europe, transforming it from a tourist destination to a central stage of the European asylum ´crisis´ (Tsoni, 2016). The situation was defined as a humanitarian crisis in need of intervention from experienced actors, in which UNHCR declared an emergency (Rozakou, 2023, p. 102).

The Refugee Camp

Moria refugee camp on Lesvos showcases the EU´s struggle in managing mobility, revealing harsh realities of increased border securitization (Gordon & Larsen, 2021; Kalir & Rozakou, 2016). After Moria burned down in 2020, Mavrovouni camp was established as a a temporary facility although nothing more permanent has since been provided. The new camp, dubbed Moria 2.0, is run by the Greek Ministry of Migration and has quickly been characterized by its inhumane living conditions, lack of electricity, water, and sanitation (Mogstad, 2023). The latest update from UNHCR, documents that 2964 people reside inside Mavrovouni camp (UNHCR, 2024). It has increased control of inhabitants through private security and police, and constant checkpoints (AreYouSyrious, 2022). The new camp has entailed more restrictions and surveillance of asylum seekers, which can be seen in light of legal and policy developments in EU and Greece. Lesvos as a hotspot has been examined as a biopolitical border zone, emphasizing the role of waiting as a form of biopolitical violence (Topak, 2020). The inadequate facilities, heavily reliant on NGO support, highlight the state´s minimal involvement and refugees´ mistreatment. The EU´s policies in managing mobility through stringent methods transforms these environments into spaces of ´bare life´(Kalir & Rozakou, 2016; Illiadou, 2023). Since the EU Turkey Deal in 2016, geographical restrictions are imposed on people, preventing them from leaving the island and forcing them to stay in Reception and Identification Centres such as Mavrovouni, further confining people within Lesvos and restricting movement (Mogstad, 2023). Camp residents are not allowed to leave until 8.30 AM when the food line for breakfast starts (AreYouSyrious, 2022). The gate to the camp closes between 8-9 pm and entering after can result in a fine (AreYouSyrious, 2022). Everyday life consists of waiting. Waiting for an update on the asylum case, the next food line, to see a doctor, or simply to pass time.

Lesvos became the center of the European ´refugee crisis´, while also a place showcasing the enormous support and solidarity with refugees (Rozakou, 2023, p. 102). However, the ´refugee crisis´ is netiher new or exclusively European, nor is the situation in Greece undocumented or unknown. Many locals raised concerns regarding the transformation of Lesvos into a ´Third World´ country and claimed many humanitarian actors came with a neocolonial attitude (Rozakou, 2023, p. 102, Mogstad, 2024). Locals on Lesvos have been struggling since the financial crisis in 2008 (Tsoni, 2016). As of December 2024, the unemployment rate in Greece was 9,4 %, the second highest rate in Europe (Statista,

Febuary 2025). According to Greek law, individuals who have received asylum, have the same rights as Greek citizens, such as social welfare (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024). After the EU-Turkey deal, which geographically restricted asylum seekers, the local space was transformed as people were "stuck" on Lesvos, which became a strain for themselves as well as the local community. The hot-spot of Moria led to unrest within the displaced and local community leading to protests and mobilizations with key moments of violent reactions from locals, burning of humanitarian facilities, and the destruction of Moria (Kousis et al, 2022, p. 173; Mogstad, 2024). The significance of Lesvos extends beyond its geographical location. It represents the intersection of complex geopolitical forces, humanitarian challenges and moral dilemmas that define Europe´s response to the refugee crisis, which has become a lasting situation.

Containment Policies and The Concept of Bare Life

Lesvos, as a border zone, embodies the failures and shortcomings of the EU´s border control and asylum policies. It displays how these systems, rather than solely providing protection or managing migration, actively contribute to human suffering and reinforcing precarity. At first Lesvos was a means of entering other countries in Europe, a transit entry-point, but now it is transformed into a detention-ground and containment of people seeking protection (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). Uncertainty, prolonged waiting, and a sense of being trapped in an indefinite in-betweenness characterize this state. The transformation of Lesvos into a key site for EU border control, critiqued for its migration policy and militarized exclusion, shapes the socio-political landscape and lives of refugees and migrants (Tsitsaraki & Petracou, 2014). EU´s securitization of migration has been criticized for prioritizing border security over humanitarian responsibilities (Panebianco, 2022).

Agamben (1998) has defined a *state of exception* as a situation where normal laws are put on hold because of an emergency or a serious crisis threatening the state. The security of the state takes priority over other branches of power, and allowing the usual rules to be broken by the state to deal with the crisis. By applying Agamben´s *state of exception* to modern governance of refugees on Lesvos, one can offer an understanding of the experiences and re-imagine refugee lives within new frameworks (Espinoza Garrido et al., 2021). Lesvos is a place of overlapping crises and challenges traditional notions of

humanitarianism and borderlands (De Lauri, 2019, see also Tsoni, 2016). It contains spaces which blur the lines between care and control which reveal the paradoxes within humanitarian efforts and challenges conventional understandings of humanitarianism at Europe´s borders (Franck, 2018).

The impact of EU policies extends beyond living conditions in refugee camps. The externalization of border controls and outsourcing of asylum processing to countries like Turkey has raised significant human rights concerns as to reports of pushbacks, violations of the right to seek asylum, and lack of access to fair asylum procedures. The European Commission (EC) recently agreed on the new Asylum and Migration Pact aimed at reforming the European approach to migration, which has been highly criticized for the likelihood of increasing detention mechanisms and human rights violations for people seeking asylum at the external borders (Amnesty International, 2024). The current situation on Lesvos remains dire due to the prolonged humanitarian crisis. The challenges persist despite efforts, further exacerbated by various factors including EU policies and geopolitical dynamics. The EU-Turkey deal, implemented in 2016, aimed to stem the flow of refugees crossing the Aegean Sea by facilitating return of irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024. However, the deal resulted in significant human rights concerns and challenges. Geographical restrictions were imposed further confining asylum seekers to the Greek islands until their cases were processed. This could take months or even years due to backlogs. This led to severe overcrowding in the camp. These geographical restrictions imposed have effectively trapped asylum seekers on the island by limiting their freedom of movement and access to basic services (Tsitsaraki & Petracou, 2023). This has created a humanitarian crisis within a humanitarian crisis.

The situation has taken a new turn as changes in the system occur, in which people are now being processed in the asylum system on Lesvos quickly in order to take pressure of the system which has led to people being left with little support in a welfare system that is already under severe constraints. Due to the protracted situation perpetuated by the EU-Turkey deal, NGOs have attempted to respond to these confinements. Some NGOs focus on empowerment and participation through community centers to attend to the constraints of waiting. Some hire refugees to be part of their activities (AreYouSyrious, 2022). It has become increasingly difficult for NGOs to operate inside the camp due to restrictions

from authorities and fear of criminalization of humanitarian work (Tazzioli & Walters, 2019). Therefore, only a handful of organizations work inside the camp, and many operate outside.

1.3 The Humanitarian Space

As the above demonstrates, the context of Lesvos as a *borderland* creates a humanitarian space that is highly complex and characterized by dynamics of being in-between the larger forces of power and the needs of individuals. As migration has been transformed into a security threat to Europe, there has been a demand on NGOs to resist the securitization narrative (Bello, 2022). The role of NGOs in responding to humanitarian needs on Lesvos has thus undergone significant changes. Humanitarian aid on Lesvos has shifted from emergency aid to long-term solutions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Haaland & Wallevik, 2019; Mogstad, 2024). Solidarity and humanitarian practices have also transformed from traditional views of gifts and aid to a more inclusive approach which as such signifies a shift in response mechanisms (Rozakou, 2016, 2023). This transition is important for understanding the evolving landscape of grassroots organizations, such as Home For All is this thesis, and their impact on traditional humanitarian practices.

There are ethical, political and social implications of sharing refugees´ narratives in fostering solidarity with refugees (Woods, 2020). A balanced approach that recognizes refugees´ agency, challenges oversimplified narratives and understands storytelling as part of a broader commitment to solidarity is needed (Cabot, 2013; Rozakou, 2016). The conventional perspective on aid giving and recipients, assumes that aid recipients are passive in the process and loose agency and ability. Cabot´s (2013) work on legal assistance NGO in Athens brings to light the active role of aid receivers in shaping perceptions of deservingness, victimhood and vulnerability, highlighting the overlooked form of agency of aid recipients (Cabot, 2013). This can sometimes subvert the established narratives of aid and challenge the conventional power dynamics in humanitarian assistance, which aligns with Agamben´s notion of reinforcing established orders. This suggests that despite reinforcing exclusion, aid encounters may enable a limited form of agency for refugees (Cabot, 2013).

Prior to the rapid increase in arrivals in 2015, people arriving to Lesvos by sea were met by local initiatives and some helpful locals. During the increase of arrivals, the pre-existing local initiatives were taken over by over 100 international organizations (Tsoni, 2016). Already in 2015, there were over one hundred humanitarian organizations active on Lesvos (Rozakou, 2023, p 102). This led to frustrations in the local community of feeling excluded, in addition to frustration over the lasting situation and economic and social toll on their community. This eventually led to tensions rising into conflict in 2020, where many international NGOs were forced to leave due to the local community attacks (UNHCR, 2020). At the height of the mass arrivals, more than 3000 non-local volunteers were active on Lesvos (Kousis, 2022, p. 166; Mogstad, 2024).The burn-down of Moria led to changes in the humanitarian regime and space, to the Greek authorities gradually taking over important functions in managing the crisis, and foreign NGOs left in the background having a marginal role (Kousis et al, 2022, p. 173).

Traditionally, humanitarianism is understood as "alleviating suffering for the distant other" (Malkki, 2015, Brun & Horst, 2023), which has been argued to be based on an inevitably unequal power relation between the helper and the helped. Often, the humanitarian response is focused on an emergency aspect, human suffering and tending to basic needs. In the context of Lesvos, there are many emergencies to tend to and by focusing on them, the long-term perspective may be lost. It is important to note that the notion of saving lives is highly relevant given the brutal conditions in the refugee camp. The lasting humanitarian crisis on Lesvos challenges humanitarian action which is working by the call of an emergency (De Lauri, 2019). An emergency is commonly understood as an event or series of events that represent a critical threat to the health, safety, security, or well-being of a community (Calhoun, 2008). Fassin (2012, p. 189) puts forward three features of an emergency: Temporality in need of immediate action in contrast to the idea of development being inscribed in the long-term; Act of mobilization in order to save lives; Moral sentiment of emotion and values which is the spirit that drives humanitarian action.

Rozakou (2023) critically reflects on the role of anthropologists in studying these phenomena, cautioning against self-assertiveness and moral superiority. Rozakou (2023) and others in the field (see Brun & Horst, 2023; Brkovic, 2016) emphasize the importance of understanding the cultural and vernacular aspects of solidarity and humanitarianism.

The question is not to examine the ideological purity of solidarity initiatives, but rather to capture changes in the contemporary humanitarian world (Rozakou, 2023). Rather than exclusively examining moments of extreme hardship and suffering, my work seeks to look at how people survive, re-make their lives, and exercise agency, even in the margins. Under these limiting conditions people still find new ways to assert agency and resistance, despite severe constraints to their livelihoods (Brun, 2006; see also Das & Poole, 2004; Kallio et al, 2019, p. 1259; Brun, 2015, 2016; Ullrich, 2022).There are concerns with anthropology engaging in the European refugee crisis that may inadvertently reinforce exclusionary practices while trying to do good (Cabot, 2019, p. 262). By fixating on the crisis itself, scholars may ignore the underlying decisions and policies that created it, which perpetuates a narrow view (Cabot, 2019, p. 265).

One of my contributions to scholarly debates is a critique of the academic tendency to chase "crisis" narratives—focusing disproportionately on suffering and emergency (Cabot, 2019; see also Albahari, 2015; Mallki, 1995; Vigh, 2008). I aim to turn the focus toward how people negotiate their social and political environments in a prolonged humanitarian situation, which has become a permanent and lasting state. I aim to highlight a different perspective on humanitarianism through this ethnographic exploration of a local organization. This perspective sheds light on how humanitarianism may not always include the helped as a distant sufferer, or passive receiver – but can become an interdependent relationship between actors (Brun & Horst, 2023. This approach responds to calls in scholarship for more empirical studies that do not just treat refugees and marginalized groups as passive victims, but instead investigate their everyday lives, choices, and survival strategies (Horst, 2006; see also Kaag et al, 2004, p. 49; Jakobsen, 2022; Al-Sharmani, 2004, De Lauri, 2019). Through my research, I aim to highlight the resilience, adaptability, and agency of marginalized people and grassroots actors on Lesvos, showing how they respond to protracted crises in ways that offer new insights into the politics of life and survival- that is, humanitarianism.

1.4 Lesvos as a Relational Place: a Conceptual Framework

The main aim of this research is to explore how a local grassroots organization on Lesvos seeks to give refugees a horizon in a precarious situation. The concepts of 'biopolitics' and 'bare life' can explain the suffering and conditions laid bare in the humanitarian space of this borderland, Lesvos. Through these concepts, the systems of power that structure social life in this borderland are made visible. However, these abstract concepts make it difficult to explore what lived life looks like on the ground, in concrete terms. Therefore, Ortner's (2006) concept of *serious games* is a useful lens in this sense as it bridges structure and agency. The concept highlights that individuals are not passive, but act and engage in complex social processes that shape and reshape the context they are placed in. Individuals are in this sense viewed as active agents who navigate, manipulate, and sometimes even resist these structures (Ortner, 2006). People are not assumed products of larger forces, instead they engage in serious games that are shaped by these forces but also open to negotiation, contestation, and change. Ortner´s (2006) framework of serious games provides a useful lens for analyzing and understanding my empirical data because it allows the exploration of how different actors navigate the borderland through the local grassroots organization in this study. The framework helps illuminate how people actively navigate and shape their circumstances. In the remaining of this thesis, I use the concept *project* in terms of individual aspirations, goals and actions (Ortner, 2006). This is not to be confused with the humanitarian term project in term of aid.

Ortner's (2006) framework of serious games was developed to explore agency, practice and structure of social life. Although there are some limitations when applied to analyzing a place. The framework emphasizes strategic action within fields of power which can underplay the routine or symbolic aspects within a place that are not always strategic. In order to attempt to fully capture the complexity of Lesvos I combine it with a relational understanding of place (Massey, 1994), and Vigh's (2008) notion of *social navigation*. This can help to address some limitations especially in regard to spatiality, temporality and the combination of structure and agency in place-making. By adding Vigh's (2008) social navigation it adds an emphasize on how people move through shifting social and structural conditions. Navigation, in this sense, does not occur in a fixed field, but in an ever-changing context. This reframes *the game* not only as strategic moves but as situated responses to shifting conditions in place. Massey's (1994) notion of a *place* as a dynamic

constellation of social relations brings an understanding of how a place is produced through relations and helps to relocate serious games within a place that is itself shaped by flows, connections and power. The triangulation of these concepts allows for exploring Lesvos not just as a backdrop for serious games, but also as a dynamic field shaped by movement, power and relations within and extending beyond.

Henrik Vigh's (2008, 2009) work on *crisis as context* and *social navigation* offers a lens for understanding how people act and make lives in places marked by uncertainty and constraint, such as the borderland of Lesvos (Horst, 2006a). Rather than viewing crisis as sudden and abrupt, Vigh (2008, p. 9) encourages us to see it as context, embedded in the social fabric (p 8). This shifts our understanding of agency: it is not merely about one's capacity to act, but the possibility of acting within a constantly shifting context (Vigh, 2008, p 10). Even in prolonged crisis, people act and seek their own projects (Vigh, 2008, p. 10). They engage in what Vigh calls social navigation (2008), which captures how individuals act in dynamic and unstable environments. This is not free movement, but movement within movement; where people are both navigating their surroundings and being moved by them (2009, p. 425). Navigation becomes a way of acting in the present toward a desired future while simultaneously adapting to changes and constraints around them (Vigh, 2009, p. 426; see also Horst & Grabska, 2015). This framework is useful for analyzing how people navigate the borderland of Lesvos. They act within and against the conditions of the place. They navigate the environment that shapes but does not fully determine their trajectories (Vigh 2009, p. 433), in terms of Ortner's serious games. This perspective helps us understand how lives are built and futures imagined even amidst crisis.

Some research has looked at issues on Lesvos through these concepts (Hunt, 2023; Papatzani, 2022). Using Vigh's (2008) concept of social navigation, Hunt (2023) explored young refugees' experience on Lesvos highlighting how they navigate uncertainties and adapt to changing circumstances. Hunt (2023, p. 13) also argued that amid crisis and uncertainty, refugees found ways to navigate the liminality of the situation by utilizing the trajectories and resources within the constrained environment in order to continue their lives. This study looked at refugees in camp. Papatzani et al (2022) applied Massey's

(1994) understanding of place to explore fluid and shifting social figurations in Greece. They found that this takes shape through "… the practices, relationships, mobilities and aspirations of the displaced people themselves, which intervene and transform them at multiple scales" (Papatzani, 2022, p. 4397). Through mobility practices people find ways to navigate liminality, which may also lead to new phases of liminality. However, these do not always result in the desired or intended goals (Papatzani, 2022). While earlier research has utilized elements of these concepts to explore refugee navigation within camps (Hunt, 2023) or mobile figurations in Greece (Papatzani et al., 2022), my study expands these by examining how a local NGO Home for All contribute to individual efforts through methods of belonging and care. As will be explored in this thesis, humanitarianism in this specific context is co-produced across positionalities through the everyday interactions of refugees, locals, and volunteers. This adds an contribution to debates on borderlands, agency, liminality and ethics of aid.

As laid out in the background section, life for individuals on Lesvos is characterized by ´bare life´ conditions. In the camp, the inhumane treatment and lack of rights leaves people in a state of limbo and in-betweenness. Once given asylum, a new situation occurs, in which they find themselves with little to no support, and again in a precarious situation. In this nowhere-land, people are situated within a complex humanitarian space on Lesvos shaped by EU border control, local economic hardship, and NGO interventions. These external forces create structural constraints on people's lives, such as limited legal rights, precarious living conditions, and dependency on aid. Yet, within these constraints, the people in this study engage in serious games by actively participating in Home4All, forming relationships with employees, volunteers, and the local community, and contributing to the daily operations.

The local grassroots organization in this study seeks to enable people to pursue their desires and goals in a situation where the dominant power of the state seeks to devalue them through the social and political conditions laid out previously. *Projects of agency* (Ortner, 2006) are built on and shaped by power relations on the micro-level. I seek to bring forward these social relations as they unfold within the everyday life of Home for

All. People always seek to achieve valuable things within a framework, which is achievable in their terms. *Agency of projects*, in this sense, is about how everyday life is socially organized around meaningful projects that provide purpose (Ortner, 2006, p. 145). However, these projects do not come without power relations. They emerge from structurally defined differences in social categories and differentials of power that people hold. However, such projects usually involve internal relationships of power. These internal power relations are heavily policed because they include the potential to disrupt. Subordinates often have projects of their own. So, if power over others is always in the service of some project – so too is resistance – this is the clash or collision of people's projects, their culturally constituted intentions, desires and goals (Ortner, 2006, p. 151). The anthropology of agency is not only about how social subjects are empowered or disempowered but about how the play of the game reproduces or transforms the very context that shapes them (Ortner, 2006, p. 152). In the remaining of this thesis, I use the concept project in terms of individual aspirations, goals and actions (Ortner, 2006). This is not to be confused with the humanitarian term project in term of aid.

1.5 My Study

My academic involvement in humanitarian response originated during my bachelor´s thesis which focused on the changing nature of humanitarian actors on Lesvos. The aim of my bachelor thesis was to examine how NGOs on Lesvos approach challenges related to collaboration with the local community which hosts refugees and what the following implications of these were. The findings showed that organizations were attempting to approach challenges with the local community on Lesvos as tensions were rising due to the protracted situation, however their efforts faced difficulties and limitations. Most approaches focused on inclusion and integration between refugees and local Greek community, rather than addressing needs and challenges the locals also faced. My bachelor thesis concluded that more research on humanitarian response and the local community on Lesvos is needed in order to find durable solutions for the protracted refugee situation (Horst, 2006b, p. 20). This tension between the international and local response is important, specifically as the humanitarian situation has prolonged. By examining how a local actor navigates the protracted crisis in this thesis, I aim to highlight alternative approaches to humanitarian aid that prioritize long-term solutions, dignity, and integration.

These earlier experiences provide the foundation for, and inform, the direction of my master's research in this thesis. This research builds on the idea of how local organizations can foster relationships and contribute to the social conditions and interactions involved in re-building life in the margins. My background and experiences also inevitably influenced the questions I ask, my choice of topic, and the overall aims of this study. My experiences in the humanitarian field on Lesvos provide me with essential background information and knowledge of the context and complexities at play in the multiple emergencies unfolding simultaneously in this borderland. The local grassroots organization in this research, Home for All, saw the changes happening in the borderland, such as fast-tracking of asylum, and shifted their focus to involve refugees and locals in their activities, by integrating employment into their response. They try to integrate humanitarian response, community-development, and long-term solutions into their activities. They do this by employing refugees and locals who work in their farm, with the produce international volunteers cook meals that they distribute to the refugee camp plus local institutions for disabled children and adults. Their circular philosophy challenges the traditional modes of aid by offering opportunities to re-build life on Lesvos rather than solely responding to emergency. Through the lens of serious games, I examine how people engage in strategical navigation of their circumstances through employment, skills, and social networks at Home for All. Even in highly constrained situations, social actors make choices, negotiate power dynamics, and pursue goals within the larger "game" of structural forces (Ortner, 2006).

Before the major influx of people seeking refuge to Europe in 2015, Home for All ran a restaurant that they quickly started serving food from to the desperate people arriving at their doorstep, in addition to local institutions they were already supporting with their restaurant. They expanded with time, creating a space where they grow, cook and serve food to both refugees and locals. In addition to their food aid, they now employ both locals and refugees (accepted asylum-seekers), to run the day-to-day activities in their space. This approach aims to build bridges between the local and refugee community on Lesvos. The organization can be seen as a catalyst or enabler for these different imagined, where people are given the opportunity to fulfil certain ideas. This idea of enabling people through the gift of opportunity versus the traditional understanding in humanitarianism as the gift of aid stood out through the duration of my fieldwork. Refugees are not simply

victims of humanitarian governance; they are actors in a serious game where their actions shape and are shaped by, not only their own experiences but also the social fabric of the local grassroots organization and the broader community. Humanitarianism, often framed as an abstract system of aid and governance, became visible at Home for All rather as deeply rooted in the everyday, relational fabric of the people's lives of those involved. These relationships were constantly shaped by cooperation, negotiation, and shared experiences. This creates Home 4All a space where both care and control, support and dependency were continuously redefined. Even though this small-scale local response only can help two handfuls of people at a small scale at the moment, there are aspects, ideas and ways of thinking that can offer interesting insights as to how we understand liminality in borderlands and humanitarianism.

In the remaining of this thesis, I have chosen to use the term refugees to use the term refugees to refer to employees at Home for All that have been given asylum. I am aware that the term is often used for recognized refugees with international protection. I also acknowledge the risk of homogenizing the experience of one group (Mallki, 1995). However, I use the term as this it what the employees themselves referred to self as, and what Home for All used themselves when referring to those in need. However, I distinguish between people in camp and outside (given asylum) by using the term asylum-seekers for those residing in the refugee camp.

1.6 Research Question

This research explores how individuals re-build, re-make, and re-imagine life within a humanitarian space at the margins of power. Focusing on a local grassroots organization, Home for All, that operates between the humanitarian space and the context of borderland, this thesis explores how refugees navigate and re-build life after asylum on Lesvos. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze the relations that shape everyday interactions and practices between people in the humanitarian border, contributing to broader discussions on humanitarianism, power, and life in the margins within protracted crises. To explore these dynamics, this study is guided by the following research question:

How do people in the borderland of Lesvos navigate liminality, and what does this reveal about agency in humanitarianism?

This question is unpacked in the three analytical chapters which explore how Lesvos is experienced as a *borderland,* and how people imagine futures beyond. Further, I examine how Home for All serves as locally rooted humanitarianism, creating a place where refugees, volunteers, and locals enact agency and build *livelihoods*. Lastly, I explored how Lesvos is experienced and imagined; shaped by varying access to mobility, contrasting experiences of Europe, and daily negotiations of identity and place. I explore how at Home for All, a sense of *belonging* is co-created.

1.7 Justification and Relevance

After the refugee crisis was raised on the agenda in 2015, academic attention increased (Cabot, 2019), but tends to focus on professional humanitarianism from the perspective of the helpers, rather than a relational perspective ((Brun & Horst, 2023, p. 65). There have been calls for more research on the relationships formed between refugees and helpers, exploring power dynamics and empowering projects, also to give agency to these actors (Brun & Horst, 2023; Ambrosini, 2022). There is a need to rethink the Foucauldian tools in border contexts by adding new concepts, to observe the new forms of relations (Walters, 2011, p. 139). In our world where emergencies and crises are being normalized, but remain deeply political and embedded, there is a need to reflect upon the role of humanitarianism in such settings (Calhoun, 2008).

Through my ethnographic fieldwork, I aim to demonstrate how local actors on Lesvos offer responses to the protracted refugee situation by blending humanitarian aid with community-based approaches that foster relationships, support local economies, and promote integration. These localized responses highlight the limitations of the top-down approach of international agencies and reveal how local actors can be incorporated into the humanitarian system (Brun & Horst, 2023). In this sense, I argue that local initiatives should be recognized as humanitarianism. The humanitarian system should take this into consideration when working in such settings. As people tend to be future-oriented even in constrained situations, the humanitarian system should open up a space for utilizing this agency rather than being focused on survival in the present (Brun, 2016).

By focusing on the lived experiences of people in places like Lesvos, I aim to bring attention to the need for policies that prioritize human dignity and long-term solutions over short-term; durable solutions (Horst, 2006b; see also Brun, 2015, 2016). Through a qualitative methodology encompassing ethnographic fieldwork, this study engages with the humanitarian actors on the ground. Findings can contribute to a more holistic view of prolonged refugee situations, particularly in the context of global solidarity and sustainable humanitarian practices. By delving into navigation of adaption life in the margins and precarious situation of Lesvos, it can add a dimension to discussions focused predominantly on organizational strategies and international policies by illuminating resilience and adaption to lasting crises. This research aims to bridge gaps in current discourse by synthesizing critiques of traditional humanitarian models (Fassin, 2012; Feldman, 2008; Calhoun, 2008) and exploring forms of solidarity and agency (Vigh 2008, Horst, 2006a; Brun, 2015, 2016)

2. Life in the Margins: Studying Humanitarianism

2.1 Lesvos: The Place and Context of Fieldwork

Located in the Aegean Sea, Lesvos has become a symbol of the refugee crisis in Europe, standing at the crossroads of multiple, interconnected crises: displacement, humanitarian governance, and European border control. Lesvos embodies the tensions of borderlands: a place of opportunity and hope for some, of restriction and rejection for others. It is marked by highly visible border enforcement measures, such as the EU-funded Closed Controlled Access Camp (CCAC) known as Mavrovouni, and an increasingly militarized coastline patrol.

Over time, Lesvos has shifted from being a gateway to Europe to a place of containment; a *borderland* (Agamben, 1998; Malkki, 1995; Bauman, 2004; Brun & Fabos, 2015). Scholars have characterized *borderlands* as spaces of liminality: zones where people exist in states of waiting, uncertainty, and legal ambiguity (Tsitsaraki & Petracou, 2023; Agier, 2016). For many asylum seekers on Lesvos, life is defined by prolonged liminality, stuck between past and future, legality and illegality, inclusion and exclusion (Brun, 2015). For those given asylum in Greece the situation is not resolved at this point. Many find themselves in a situation with little support which highlights the continued marginalization, even after asylum. It is in this complex context that my fieldwork is situated: among refugees, Greek locals, and foreign volunteers navigating life at the margins. My research specifically focuses on Home for All, embedded within local social structures, maintaining long-standing ties to the local Greek community. Their work seeks to create long-term possibilities for refugees and locals alike, moving beyond emergency relief toward community-building and integration.

Through ethnographic fieldwork, observing and participating in the tasks of Home for All I explored how humanitarian actors, locals and refugees collaborate to create spaces of belonging and opportunity, even within the constrained conditions inhabited by Lesvos as a place. By focusing on the everyday practices and relational networks fostered by Home4All, my thesis aims to contribute to broader discussions on humanitarianism, border governance, and the anthropology of agency. As Fassin reminds us, it is often through careful attention to the margins that we can uncover the logics, contradictions, and ambiguities that shape humanitarian practice (2012, pp. 12-13. Rather than presenting

humanitarianism as a fixed, bounded and unchangeable endeavor, a close anthropological lens can help highlight the complexity and tensions that define actors' lived experiences and decisions. Building on Ortner's (1996, 1999) concept of *serious games*, I approach Lesvos not as a place mainly passively shaped by structures of power but as dynamically negotiated by individuals pursuing their own meaningful projects. Refugees, volunteers, and local actors are not merely subject to structures. They act, navigate, and imagine within and against them (Ortner 1996, 1999; Vigh, 2008).

As Ortner (1999, p. 20) highlights, although ethnography has faced various critiques, particularly regarding the challenges of representing marginalized voices, it still remains grounded in an effort to understand different perspectives. It is precisely this commitment to acknowledging and situating multiple viewpoints that gives ethnography its distinctive strength, even while balancing these perspectives remains an ongoing methodological and ethical challenge. Like (Ortner, 1999, p. 22), I find it essential to situate the different actors in my research within the specific contexts from which they act, live, and imagine. Rather than portraying participants as passive subjects, I understand them as actors navigating and reshaping their worlds within the structural constraints they encounter of the borderland Lesvos. Drawing on Ortner's framework of *serious games*, I also recognize that I am not external to the "game" I analyze.

My fieldwork on Lesvos took place in the summer of 2024 over a four-week period, but my connection to the island stretches back several years, both as a volunteer and as a previous researcher. As a researcher and writer, I engage in my own serious game: I position myself against the inhumane treatment of people at Europe's borders, and I share the urgency of making these conditions visible. However, I consciously choose to emphasize not only suffering but also hope, resilience, and the creative agency people exercise within precarious conditions. My long-term engagement with Lesvos has made me acutely aware of both the profound suffering produced by border regimes and the risk of becoming desensitized through repeated exposure. Over time, I found myself, like many humanitarian actors, acting and reacting pragmatically to situations of suffering; a tendency that can inadvertently obscure the everyday moments of hope, humor, and future-making that also characterize life on Lesvos. In this thesis, I therefore aim to keep both these dimensions in view: acknowledging the suffering while foregrounding the ways in which individuals continue to imagine, build, and sustain futures within the

constraints they face (Brun, 2015; Vigh, 2008). I do this because it most accurately reflects lived life on Lesvos.

In what follows, I will describe my methodological approach in more detail, including my research design, fieldwork strategies, and analytical lens. By situating the study within the specific context of Lesvos and framing it through the serious games perspective, I aim to illuminate the interplay between structure and agency in a borderland often depicted only through the lens of crisis.

2.2 Empirical Methodological Approach

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork: to observe, engage and discuss during the day-to-day activities, and to experience the daily rhythm is particularly fitted for this project. Ethnography entails understanding the context of the particular place of my study, Home for All, which includes observing and participating to understand and describe the complex tapestry of social conditions. I mainly used participant observation in order to engage in the local organization to understand their principles, ethics, rationalities and structure in responding to the changing situation. The ethnographic fieldwork also included conversations and dialogues, in the form of informal ethnographic interviews. I also participated in the general environment and society on Lesvos, which helped me to gain insights from both locals and volunteers from other NGOs.

One of the aims of my methods is to investigate the social conditions, relations and interactions involved in navigating life in the margins of Europe. To do this, I engaged in the everyday activities of Home for All responding to the needs of refugees and locals, which can be understood as marginal groups. This considering several factors discussed in the background section. When aiming at understanding the lived life of marginal groups as an outsider, there is a need to address my role in the research process and to find a framework that can re-present individuals on the margins (Agyeman, 2008, p. 78). There is a difference between re-presenting and representing. Re-presenting is what I strive for in this thesis by giving voice to the people on the ground rather than claiming that it is a clear representation (Agyeman, 2008, p. 79). Agyeman reflects upon the questions that arise when situating our own involvement in such a field. These include my closeness or

distance to the other participants, my experience and feelings in participating, but also whether I could do justice to the refugees or NGO workers as I am not part of these groups (2008, p. 80). The question is whether it is ever possible to achieve re-presentation, as all research is based on the researcher's position, which influences the knowledge construction such as the topics we choose, the questions we ask, or do not ask (Agyeman, 2008, p. 81).

I agree with Agyeman that giving voice aims to have an inherent effect for social change (2008, p. 81). To do this well, one most have knowledge of the social and political context, and the life world of people (Agyeman, 2008, p. 81). The ethnographic methods such as participant observation, and informal conversations, is a way of trying to address issues of power asymmetries in the process. Agyeman (2008, p. 82) argues that it is not a pre-requisite to belong to the group of study. However, to reflect on whether one is writing from their perspective one must take into account the intentions and purpose of the research while acknowledging that writing about others is also a personal process, and to be critically aware of this means to position oneself and make the position clear to participants.

Cabot́s (2019) work emphasizes the ethical implications of storytelling in research, particularly crises situations. The European refugee crisis has led to an expansion of systems that manage refugees, involving political, economic and security measures akin to business operations with a range of actors from governments to NGOs with different stakes (Cabot, 2019, s. 262). There are concerns with anthropology engaging in this crisis that it may inadvertently reinforce exclusionary practices (Cabot, 2019, p. 262). By fixating on the crisis itself, scholar may ignore the underlying decisions and policies that created it, which perpetuates a narrow view (Cabot, 2019, p. 265). By emphasizing particular refugee narratives, research can unintentionally support the same structures it aims to critique and maintain a narrow image of refugee identities while romanticizing the "other" as suffering and in need of saving (Cabot, 2019, p. 268). One approach to address the challenges discussed might involve committing to thorough ethnographic research. This means to deeply understand the language and culture of the people studied, building strong relationships in the field, respecting the historical and social context and building on existing scholarly work (Cabot, 2019, p. 269). I do not argue to fully understand what life on Lesvos means, and as such this short-term fieldwork is a

limitation. However, due to my prior humanitarian work on Lesvos, and research, I have gained strong relationships in the field and have an understanding of the humanitarian landscape.

Field site: Lesvos

The choice of Lesvos was well-thought based on my own background and connection to the field, and its critical role as a humanitarian borderland. Lesvos represents the external border of the European Union, placing it at the forefront of European migration and asylum policy. The EU´s externalization of border management is acutely visible on the island. The context of prolonged crisis makes Lesvos a perfect case to examine how local grassroots actors respond to shifting needs. As a site of *polycrisis* crisis; refugee displacement, local economic challenges, and political tensions, Lesvos offers a unique setting for exploring how humanitarian actors navigate complex social interactions. The islands history as a place of human mobility and crises allows to delve into how humanitarian practices have evolved and adapted over time.

Traditionally and historically, ethnographic research was meant to be a long-term immersion into the lives of the group in study, however today ethnographic research can also be short-term, and in places more familiar (Madden, 2017). I did five weeks of field work, and felt this was possible for myself as I have both worked and researched there previously. This meant that I could draw on existing competence and networks in the field. This ethnographic research is emergent in design, which entails a practical response to changes in research design as the project evolves to embrace the human shifts and complexities rather to reduce or ignore them (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). When I arrived on Lesvos, I had a rough plan for my first week of fieldwork building on my existing connections. I decided to keep my ethnographic approach emergent, with my overall theme being how the situation on the external border to Europe has evolved to a protracted humanitarian situation, and how grassroots organizations have adapted to this. However, this is a broad topic with many potential focus areas and through fieldwork I identified what was most pressing to people in the field and explore the issues that they brought up, rather than imposing a narrow focus from the start. This is also a way of balancing inherent asymmetries of researching marginalized groups, by letting their perspective and narrative lead the way, which this research aims to do (Agyeman, 2008).

I had narrowed my focus to include grassroots organizations and excluded larger international agencies and state response as informants due to the scope of this project. This decision was driven by my interest in the local community and the increasing academic and practical focus on localization of aid and citizen initiatives (Haaland & Wallevik, 2019). I reached out to previous connections to re-establish contact. During the first few days, I walked around familiar places, revisiting old stomping grounds and observing changes. I spent time in cafes I knew were frequently visited by volunteers, listening to conversations and reconnecting with local contacts. I quickly noticed that many people, both locals and volunteers, were discussing a new issue: people are no longer stuck waiting in the camp for months. The asylum process was being fast-tracked, with asylum granted within one to two months, after which refugees had ten days to leave the camp and fend for themselves – without a structured integration program in place. At the same time, I noticed the island was booming with tourism, particularly from Turkish visitors. These two developments – the quick asylum process and the growth of tourism – offered new angles for my research. I saw that the shift in humanitarian needs could be linked to these developments, particularly around the integration of refugees.

Gaining access to the field was challenging. At first, several organizations declined participation. This stood in contrast to the openness of Home4All, who welcomed me without hesitation, and reflected a different ethos compared to the restricted environments of formal institutions. I visited a key organization from my bachelor´s thesis to begin my fieldwork. While they were open to my research, they requested that I submit an official project proposal for review. During this time waiting for their response, I reconnected with the local social charity that ended up as my main field site, which I had known from my time as a volunteer. They had strong connection in the local community as they are locals and before the influx of arrivals to the island in 2015 ran a local business. When the large influx hit in 2015, they were quick to respond by using their restaurant to cook meals for people arriving together with the local community. Having evolved since 2015, they were now employing both locals and refugees, and providing food aid to vulnerable people in the camp and the local community. Upon my first visit, I was warmly welcomed invited to participate in their everyday activities. They provide both immediate aid and long-term support for refugees and locals alike, making the organization an ideal primary site for exploring my research question. In addition to their openness and strong

community ties, I believe my previous rapport with the organization helped build trust quickly and facilitating my access to the field.

2.3 Methods of Data Collection

Participant observation

Participant observation is a characteristic of ethnographic research that entails a close involvement in the everyday life of the actors (Stewart, 2011). This provided a wideness to the data, by viewing the information as integrated to a wider whole that needs to be understood in the context of that whole. However, ethnographic research is not all-embracing therefore the narrow focus on the specific situation can give insight into broader themes by seeing observations as linked to others and using concepts which fit the specific context. Employing methodological triangulation (interviews and observations) aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the subject. In addition, data was gathered from the NGOs websites, documents, and publications in both the pre-liminary stage, during and after fieldwork to obtain background knowledge and compare to information from interviews and observations.

The local grassroots organizations, Home for All, became my main field site for data collection, as they operate at the intersection of humanitarian aid and community-building. Their dual focus on immediate needs (such as food aid) and long-term development (through employment and social integration) offered a unique lens through which to explore the local actors´ role in the humanitarian space. I immersed myself in their everyday activities, engaging in participant observation and informal conversations with refugees, locals, and volunteers. Through these observations I began to focus on how the organization fosters relationships between different groups involved, and how these relationships are managed and maintained. Over time, it became clear that my focus would be on the community-based approach of this grassroots organization and how it contrasts with more traditional humanitarian models, which I was well familiar with.

My Role During Field Work

My role in the field was what Kawulich (2005) names the ´observer as participant´, meaning participating in the group of study, while maintaining the role of the researcher. In this role, one is not a member of the group, but interested in participating to gain

knowledge and understand through observation and engagement as a tool to understanding (Kawulich, 2005). Participant observation entailed taking part of the daily routine of the different groups at the organization. Every other week I spent following either the employees or the international volunteers. Everyone at the organization knew I was there as a master's student and researcher. I presented myself as a previous humanitarian worker on Lesvos, who conducted research for my bachelor studies on the relationship between locals and NGOs, and now building on that aiming to understand how local actors respond to the protracted situation. I explained my method of participating in their daily routines and activities, whilst observing and conversing to answer the aims and questions of the research. I focused on how my research design is flexible and open, in order to narrow it down through participating and understanding what is important and pressing to the people I engaged with. I also ensured that everyone knew my work experience back home in social work with refugees and as a teacher in integration classes in Norway. The fact that I have been involved in the field of migration in different roles and contexts reinforced my position and could have been an important factor in establishing trust and support.

The aim of Home4All is to provide both emergency and long-term aid by integrating community work into their response stood as a stark characteristic of the organization. I began to narrow my question, by adding more specific ideas generated in the field through participating, and conversing. I began to see how the organization worked with different communities, which were interconnected and dependent on each other which in turn created a sense of belonging and community in situations where groups have been excluded over time. I then discussed these thoughts with them continuously, by asking questions related to these themes. When they confirmed my observations and thoughts, it allowed me to delve deeper into these themes, and narrow my focus. This organization offered a unique opportunity to explore local actors in a humanitarian setting, with a dual focus on immediate aid and long-term solutions such as employment. The group at the organization consisted of six international volunteers, eight refugee employees, and three locals.

Informal conversations

Madden (2017) highlights the importance of the language and modes used to gain relationships in the field, in which one can learn through the introductory phase of fieldwork to get people talking. Conversation is the term that best captures this process. This entails balancing the task of gathering information whilst maintaining everyday conversations. Interviews is a common tool for gathering information, and there are many different types of interviews. I conducted informal interviews in the form of conversations in the field with participants at my main field site. This meant engaging in dialogue during everyday activities, regarding issues and topics related to the work and my thesis. Swain & King (2022, p. 2) argue that informal conversations have the potential to create more naturalistic data with less performativity and artificialness. This bottom-up and inductive method views the research process as an active form of knowledge construction which necessitates a flexible research strategy – which potentially can bring non-anticipated moments. This makes ethical considerations a factor needing to be reevaluated consequently (Swain & King, 2022, p. 2). As many were intrigued and interested in my topic, they often brought up topics, questions and themes themselves, and engaged often in discussions on the topic and issues or ideas they had. This made it clear to me that they were aware of my role – and did not feel uneasy about discussing or sharing – even in conversation. Using informal conversations to generate data brings up ethical dilemmas like: when does a person need to give consent, and how much does the person need to know about the research? (Swain & King, 2022, p. 6). Obtaining consent in everyday settings can at times be impractical. Conversations around the table during activities such as chopping tomatoes, enabled me to gather information in a laid-back setting, in which I quickly realized people felt comfortable talking and discussing, as the setting was natural. It also allowed me to reflect and think after a day's work on which topics and issues I could bring up the next day. Still, this form of data collection is not free from asymmetrical relations, as the researcher usually has an underlying agenda or intention in conversations in order to answer the questions (Swain & King, 2022, p. 8).

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted four semi-structured interviews with key informants in five other organizations, not my main field site. These organization also worked with refugees but in different ways. Four of these were non-locally led organizations, meaning they were started and ran by people from outside of Lesvos. One was the local office of Red Cross.

These interviews were planned and more structured surrounding specific themes, however I let the conversation flow as to what the participants were focused on. My main objective of these interviews was a means to triangulate information and data. I had thought out some topics which I brought up with all respective organizations such as what they perceived as the main challenges, how the situation has evolved, what their main focus is and why, and how they perceive long-term goals and aims. However, in reality even though all these topics were touched upon in the conversations – they flowed naturally, and I let them to a certain degree steer the conversation in order to understand what was most important to them, the similarities and differences between the pressing issues for each NGO. My means of notetaking during these conversations was jotting down notes and keywords in my notebook – which I expanded on and wrote in more detail after the conversation. I chose not to record conversations for several reasons. Firstly, recording the conversations creates more distance between me and the person of subject as people may be intimidated, or find it uncomfortable. I also discovered during my bachelor fieldwork that while recording, I often become less attentive to small cues and details, and also noticed that it created more distance between myself and the person interviewing. The downside is that without a recorder, the information is less accurate. Yet I practiced writing key notes and expanding these straight after the conversation to minimize risk.

Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes should be as exact as possible, use pseudonyms, describe situations chronologically using dates to record time, be descriptive, and separate interpretations, personal reflections and assumptions (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Every evening after participating in the field, I sat down and wrote every detail of the day from beginning to end, including descriptions of the surroundings (smells, sounds, places, colors), conversations, and the day-to-day activities. I noted relations between people and things, conversations, discussions, routines. I separated my notes into observational, theoretical/conceptual, personal/reflective, and environmental. At the end of each section of notes for that day, I added my personal notes and thoughts regarding key observations or discussions of that day. These were clearly defined as mine, in contrast to the more descriptive observational notes. I did not do conceptual notes every day, but strived to read through the notes at the end of the week, combined with my personal reflections to

write down connections to concepts and theory. The environmental notes entailed descriptions of places, sounds, emotions, body language. Before going on fieldwork, I practiced this mode of notetaking, to train my memory, and how to remember as much as possible in my day to day life in Oslo. This helped me develop a method that works for me. I then read over the notes from that day immediately and coded with the initial codes that emerged and changed over time. These were color codes, which I also noted in a different coding book with the name of the code. These initial codes and themes developed over time and highlighted the complex relations between people, and within the humanitarian space.

The reason for not taking notes in the moment in the field, was based on the fact that it would be practically difficult while conducting activities and would hinder the data collection in terms of creating too much distance between me and the group. Due to the work being very practical and hands-on it would not be possible in this environment. Therefore, the fieldnotes do reflect my positions, aims and memory. Using informal conversations that are less structured, and more flexible by emerging from the field, also means that recollections of these conversations in fieldnotes might not include the exact wording, but rather reflect the line of argument (Swain & King, 2022, p. 8). My notes are based on memory, which means that they are also affected by what I remember, reflecting as such what is important to me which is based on my questions, positions and aims.

2.4 Ethical Reflections

There is a close interaction between researchers and participants in ethnography, which can present challenges that need ethical considerations to protect the rights of participants, enhance credibility, and maintain integrity. Voluntary participation and informed consent are crucial with participants being fully aware of the purpose, benefits, risks, and funding behind the study. One must also address issues of anonymity and confidentiality by excluding identifiable information and secure such information. This research was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data under project number 600766. The data compiled in the duration of this research is in a notebook stored in a locked safe with a passcode.

The political sensitivity of this research necessitates careful considerations of the potential impact, requiring anonymization of all participants. Since Lesvos is a small island, it requires me to reflect on how to conduct the anonymization, due to it not being enough to simply anonymize. Therefore, I have not included details of the exact activities they provide and will need to use time to use wording and text to anonymize. This study adheres to ethical principles like "do no harm" and informed consent, prioritizing voluntary participation and anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the context. I have received approval from SIKT and am following research ethics guidelines.

Informed Consent

I applied for ethical approval from SIKT before going on fieldwork. This involved several rounds of feedback with them due to their assessment of my data as sensitive health-related data under GDPR, given the vulnerability of participants with asylum or asylum seeking. Given the classification of my data as highly sensitive this inevitably shaped my approach to anonomyzation and data protection. I chose to use oral informed consent for ethical and privacy reasons to avoid storing identifiable data. Interlocutors who were asylumseekers or given asylum received information in their language and verbal consent was confirmed without audio recording due to these ethical reflections.

Reflexivity is essential in my research, as my previous volunteer experience in Greece informs my perspective. A critical stance ensures transparency and self-awareness, acknowledging the influence of the researcher on the analysis. The founders of Home for All did not want the organization to be anonymized in the final product of this thesis. During field work I kept the organization anonymous in my notes. However, during the process of writing up, and analyzing my data I soon realized that in terms of safety and privacy there was no need to keep them anonymous. Therefore, I have chosen to respect their wish. Although, all individuals are anonymized. In the text the individuals, refugees, locals, and volunteers have been given pseudonyms. Photography within the refugee camp has been excluded in my methodology, due to camp regulations. As such, visual materials from here are omitted and are replaced with written description. Photography from Home for All is included.

One of the key ethical considerations during my fieldwork was how to handle informed consent with the refugee employees. Given the vulnerable state they inhabit as refugees, it was essential to navigate the process carefully to ensure their rights, safety and dignity. The position of myself as a researcher, and the refugee employees could complicate the process of obtaining true voluntary informed consent. I reflected upon the fact that some might feel obliged to participate due to perceived benefits or a fear of negative consequences. They may have concerns about their legal status, interactions with authorities, or a misconceptions about how the research could affect these. Therefore, I emphasized that participation was completely voluntary, could be withdrawn at any time, and that their decision to participate or not would have no impact on their relationship with the organization or assistance. I stayed as transparent and approachable as possible to build trust and minimize the risk of coercion. Given the potentially sensitive situation of the refugee employees, particularly those who have had negative experiences with documentation or fear of prosecution from home countries or authorities, I decided to use oral consent. I had the consent forms translated to their languages but I still felt uncomfortable about the informed consent forms. With that, I mean that giving the employees such a long document to read with lots of information, also felt like it went against its purpose. Roalkvam (2024) discusses how GDPR regulations can sometimes clash with ethical research practices, especially in anthropology. This is particularly relevant for obtaining informed consent in this study, as strict adherence to standardized consent forms may not be culturally appropriate or effectively convey the research's intentions to people who may have had traumatic experiences with formal documentation. Roalkvam (2024) suggests that research should prioritize genuine ethical engagement over rigid compliance, which supports my use of oral consent and culturally sensitive, context-specific communication.

Many of the refugee employees could communicate in basic English, but there were language barriers that needed to be navigated. Conversations helped clarify any confusion for example explaining the research and my interests in a conversational way, discussing why I was there and how their involvement could shape the research which opened for dialogue. Even with these reflections, I was constantly aware of the ethical dilemmas involved. Refugees´ everyday life are already shaped by structures of power and control, often embedded in the humanitarian system, and as a researcher I was conscious of not reproducing these dynamics in my interactions. This led to many moments of reflexive

thinking. I continuously re-evaluated my role and sought to ensure that the balance of power in our interactions were as equal as possible. What helped me obtain genuine consent was ultimately trust and connection I built with the employees, volunteers, and organization in general. Roalkvam (2024) critiques the often-paternalistic nature of overly protective consent protocols by arguing that they may limit participants' agency and self-determination. This resonates with the challenges and reflections I faced in ensuring that refugee employees feel free to make autonomous decisions regarding participation. It was important for me to foster an open dialogue, addressing any fears or misconceptions they may have, while emphasizing their control over their involvement in the study (Roalkvam, 2024). Through informal conversation during everyday activities at Home for All I was open about my own role and background. I strived to establish a level of mutual respect where my interlocutors could ask me questions, challenge my assumptions and thoughts, and as such feel more like collaborators in the research rather than subjects. Roalkvam (2024) advocates for a flexible, reflective approach that accounts for context-specific challenges and respects participants' lived experiences. For refugees who may distrust official forms and protocols my use of oral consent aligns with this view. By building trust and establishing rapport, it created an environment that I hope honors participants' dignity and autonomy, moving beyond a strict legalistic approach (Roalkvam, 2024).

Positionality

> Participant observation is conducted by a biased human who serves as the instrument for data collection; the researcher must understand how his/her gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and theoretical approach may affect observation, analysis, and interpretation. (Kawulich, 2005).

My identity undeniably shapes my interactions and relationships in the field. As a white, young female student educated in Western knowledge traditions this comes with a certain level of privilege, which can have influenced perceptions by interlocutors. My background may grant me access to spaces that others might find difficult to enter, or it may raise barriers in certain contexts due to power dynamics related to colonial history, global inequalities, or perceptions of Western dominance in humanitarianism. These

background factors can present as both a position of authority and distance from the lived realities of those I am studying, especially the refugees and locals in Greece. This complicates my role as a researcher, as it raises concerns about the authenticity of the data I collect and the influence of my positionality on the knowledge produced. Therefore, a continuous reflection on how my identity and background shaped the power dynamics of the interactions was needed to ensure that I did not unintentionally reinforce imbalances by imposing my worldview. My position, especially in contrast to people placed in vulnerable situations, can affect the interactions as well. The very act of conducting research is a privilege that others in the field might not have access to. I have the luxury of stepping back and reflecting academically on their experiences. Yet, the individuals I engaged with also did and we did together, which helps move away from traditional forms of extractive research towards more co-creative approaches.

Finally, being educated in a particular academic tradition brings both opportunities and challenges. It equips me with critical thinking skills and research methodologies that allow me to engage deeply with the field. On the other hand, this education also frames my understanding of the issues at hand and may risks overshadowing the knowledge and experiences of the people in the field. In response to this, I strive to balance my academic training with commitment to listening and learning from the people I work with, acknowledging their agency and lived knowledge as equally valid forms of understanding the world.

Over-Researched Communities

When conducting research in over-researched communities, such as refugee populations or local actors in crisis settings, especially on Lesvos, it is important to question one's role as a researcher and the value of your work to those you are studying. Communities that have been subject to numerous research projects are often weary or skeptical of researchers because they may feel that their stories have been repeatedly told, without tangible benefits or changes in their situations. This makes it necessary to critically reflect on my position and the contribution I hope to make, ensuring that my research goes beyond simply extracting information for academic purposes. To do this well, one needs to include one´s own role in the project, acknowledging mistakes and broader issues that shape the research (Mosse, 2006). My previous experience working as a volunteer in

Greece informs my perspective. Reflexivity and authenticity are crucial for producing credible work, recognizing that multiple realities exist (O'Leary, 2017). In qualitative research it is difficult to prove ideas because the researchers own views shape what they see as evidence (Mosse, 2006). Therefore, the researcher must give accounts for their backgrounds and positionalities through examining one´s point of view in order to understand the researcher's social basis for knowledge-construction (Mosse, 2006). Fieldwork is like learning by doing in the social world, and so there is no completely objective knowledge or clear line between the researcher and the subject, as the researcher´s thoughts and analyses are included (Mosse, 2006). Ethnographic methods in general, includes the researcher's interpretation of people, places and events – therefore a reflexive stance is needed to.

I have previously lived on Lesvos for six months volunteering as a coordinator for an NGO in 2018. I therefore have prior knowledge of the situation and a special interest in- and connection to the field. My background affects how I view and analyze the situation due to my pre- conceptions and knowledge, so to be reflexive and cautious I will need to be self- aware during the whole process. Participant observation emphasizes experiences, and these experiences shape the interpretation of others by processes of subjectivity (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Here, I used fieldnotes as an essential tool to document and push the processes to understand how meanings are constructed in everyday experiences. This allowed for detailed, context-sensitive, and locally informed thick description (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). One of the challenges I foresaw was maintaining a clear distinction between my roles as a researcher and a former humanitarian worker. This insider/outsider combination is complicated and needs further reflection. My background in the humanitarian field comes with both pros and cons. On the one hand, it facilitated rapport and trust when approaching the organization I spent time with. I have knowledge of the humanitarian field which gives an understanding of the struggles of those working in the humanitarian space. This might have fostered a sense of relatability between us, and strengthened the trust. On the other hand, this knowledge and background that I come with came with a struggle of remaining objective in certain situations. Particularly when participants voiced opinions or frustrations about other NGOs or humanitarianism in general, which I at times shared their frustrations with. The environment among humanitarian organization at the time was filled with rumors circulating about corruption, financial misuse, and patronizing approaches. I had to be mindful of how my reactions to

volunteers opinions or thoughts might shape their response to me, or perception of me. I therefore tried to maintain a balance between an open acknowledgment of their frustrations, while also refraining from reinforcing or feeding into these critical views.

To use an example: a volunteer expressed frustration over a larger international NGO that they felt prioritized donor expectations over refugee needs. Although I could resonate with their perspective due to my own previous experiences in my humanitarian work – I tried to listen actively without aligning myself in the conversation. I reinstated my role as a research as allowing me to explore these approaches, which helped to reinforce my position while acknowledging their viewpoint. Other times volunteers would try to ask of my opinions or seek validation of their experiences. I again emphasized appreciation of their openness to me as I aim to explore these different perspectives rather than represent my personal stance. This approach enabled me to maintain a distance while also showing that I valued their insights by being an active listener. Trying to balance this required reflection for myself on my own beliefs in order to not influence the interlocutor's viewpoints, narratives or project my own into the research. This reflexive practice helped maintain an openness that prioritized participants' perspectives while managing my own biases.

Through these constant reflections, notes and thoughts, I stayed committed to ethical reflexivity. Over-researched communities often feel that their experiences have been "collected" many times, but little has changed as a result. In this study, my focus on a local grassroots actor and their role in humanitarian responses provides a view on how local solutions emerge in protracted crises. By such, offering insights into how these efforts might be understood as humanitarian strategies. I aim to move beyond narratives of crisis settings as adrupt and sudden (Vigh, 2008; Cabot, 2019), by focusing on agency and relations that are formed from and within the humanitarian space (Brun & Horst, 2023). I continuously strived for a research process that took this into account, rather than just extracting knowledge.

2.5 Notes on Limitations: a Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the steps I have taken in the process of this research, as well as the fieldwork in itself, my methods of collecting data, and ethical considerations. These different steps and reflections have been entangled throughout the process of this thesis, by me moving back and forth, in order to have arrived at this final product.

One of the main limitations is the short duration of fieldwork, which was restricted to four weeks due to financial and time constraints. Although I had prior knowledge of the field, the limited time may affect the depth of my findings. The findings are context-specific to Lesvos and may not be generalizable for all other refugee situations in Europe or other places. This grounded approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of humanitarian response and life at the margins in prolonged crises. While Home for All serves as a critical case for exploring local humanitarian response in global crises, it is only one of many actors on the island. The context-specific focus on Lesvos and one particular grassroots organization limits the generalizability of the findings to other refugee situations or humanitarian contexts. While valuable insights into localized humanitarianism are provided, these results may not apply universally to other protracted crises or border zones. Some themes not explored which emerged in the data as important themes, but not relevant to my research question – although equally interesting and important for further research. This include the aspect of vulnerability label as a category in humanitarian aid, and the gendered aspect as such in aid while also relevant as aid can include labor. The sustainable and environmental approach of locally rooted humanitarianism also emerged as a poignant topic. With the direction of my questions and the flexible approach, my focus became on the local rootedness of Home for All, and the relations flowing in and out, and between people. The following three chapters form the analytical body of this thesis.

3. Re-imagining Futures

> To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we only see the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people behaved magnificently, this gives us energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. (Zinn, 2009, p. 14)

This quote by Zinn captures the spirit of this chapter and the aim of this thesis. It reminds us that even within constrained contexts, people act, build, resist, and reimagine. Lesvos is a place that restricts and rejects certain people, and yet it is also a place of opportunity and hope. As such, it represents a place where ideas about the present, futures and creating a new life are stalled, altered, or abandoned. During my fieldwork, my conversations, interactions, and engagements with local Greeks, asylum-seekers, refugees and foreign volunteers, revealed contrasting and converging experiences of Europe. Europe is experienced as a place of opportunity and hope, and as a fortress that restricts and rejects certain people. Lesvos embodies this liminality; an island where individuals are neither fully able to leave nor truly integrated, thus as scholars have argued existing in a 'state of limbo' (Agamben, 1998; Mallki. 1995; Baumann, 2003; Brun & Fabos, 2015). In this chapter, I explore how this particular *place* symbolizes both opportunity and marginality and is experienced differently by people (Massey, 1994). The place, Lesvos, although not determined by it, shapes how people act and build livelihoods (Ortner, 1999, p. 23). As borderland, Lesvos embodies a duality where Europe is both a promise and a barrier, shaping diverse imaginaries and responses among those who interact with and experience this border.

This chapter explores Lesvos as a place, in order to understand the context in which Home for All is embedded in, in terms of *serious games* (Ortner, 2006). This includes the structural and cultural fields that people are embedded in. This field has rules, roles, hierarchies and possibilities that shape and create the place.

3.1 Borderlands as Liminal Spaces

Border areas have commonly been described in the scholarly literature as places where people are hindered in further mobility, stuck in the present, and unable to plan for, or move into, the future. Scholars describe border-areas as liminal spaces in which people exist in a state of limbo, in-betweenness, and are stuck (Balibar, 2002; Anderson et al, 2009; Tsitsaraki, 2023; Agier, 2016; Brun & Fabos, 2015). Borders create differentiations between people, and are experienced differently (Balibar, 2002, pp. 81-83). For those belonging outside or who are not welcome, they repeatedly pass and repass the border, or are expelled – creating the border as a spatial-liminal space, where life is waiting to be lived (Balibar, 2002, p. 83). While for others, they can easily pass through borders if holding the correct documents. Borders can also be viewed as productive (Anderson, 2009; Khosravi, 2007) and active by placing people in new constellations of power. These new constellations create certain relationships, which are built on divides and inequalities between people (Anderson, 2009, p. 6). It is argued that the temporal dimension of borders often traps people in an infinite present (Anderson, 2009, p. 8), undermining their ability to imagine and plan for the future. The inability to imagine or plan the future contributes to making border areas, such as Lesvos, places of liminality constituted of biopolitical conditions and border policies through the *state of exception*, as laid out in the background section (see p. 9). This emergency image and precarious conditions at the border thus create a humanitarian space focused on immediate needs to relieve suffering, often at the cost of the long-term.

My argument in this thesis is that we need to move beyond conceptualizing the liminality of borderlands as primarily leading to people being *stuck* and passive. Contrary to the common perception, my data suggests that this perspective does not fully encompass or reflect the ways people seek meaningful lives and inclusion in liminal places (see also Brun & Fabos, 2015). Brun and Fabos (2015) critique policies that label refugees as being in "limbo", advocating for a feminist and dynamic approach that acknowledges agency, mobility and the fluidity of home. By taking into consideration that people in precarious situations also have hopes, projects and the capacity to imagine, I argue for a humanitarian response within borderland that is attuned to these movements (Brun, 2016).

Massey`s understanding of place suggests they are imbued with meaning and are interpreted by people thus reflecting different experiences.

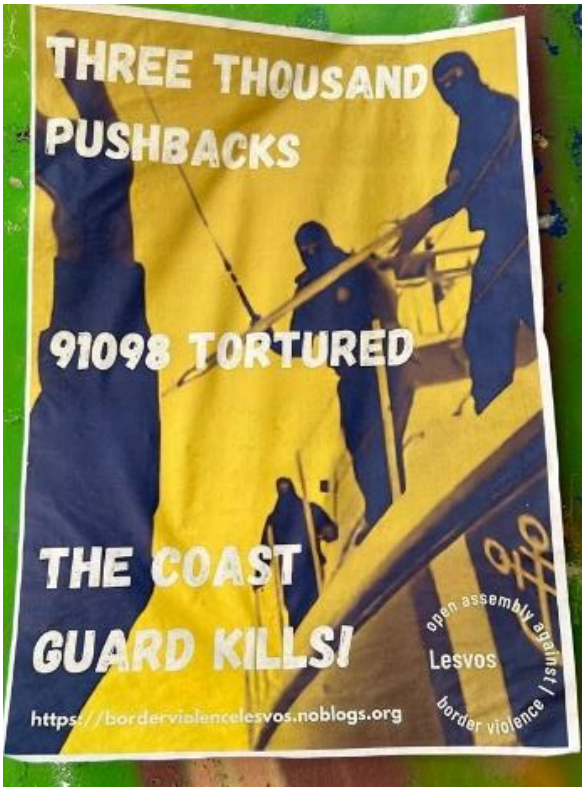
> Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Massey, 1994, p. 149)

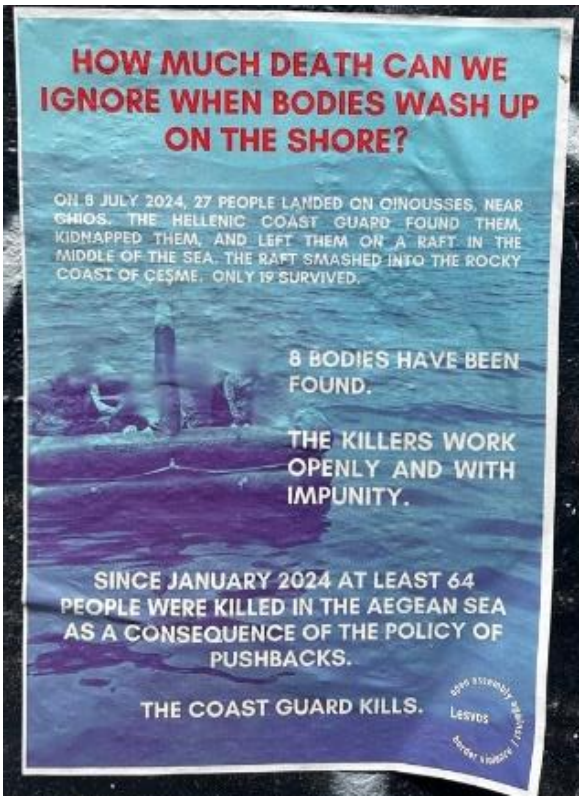
I build on Massey's (1994, p. 154) concept of place as a web of social, economic and cultural relations, where people have varied experiences imbued with power. A place is constituted by its connections to the outside world. To make sense of these processes, I draw on Sherry Ortner's (1996; 1999) concept of *serious games*. Ortner (1999) defines serious games as the interplay of projects and intentions pursued within structured, unequal environments. People act in the world not as passive victims of structure, but as agents engaged in strategic, purposeful practices, even if those practices are shaped by structures of constraints like legal status, border regimes, or humanitarian systems. These games are "serious" because they involve power, stakes, and uneven access to resources and outcomes. They are embedded in relationships with others, with institutions, and with the state. Social order, in this sense, is the sum of people playing serious games at once, in which they can conflict or merge with each other (Ortner, 1999). In anthropology, liminality is seen as threatening the social order (Brun & Fabos, 2015).

My research question reads as follows *How do people in the borderland of Lesvos navigate liminality, and what does this reveal about agency in humanitarianism?* Therefore, this chapter explores how the borderland is experienced in order to further looking into how people navigate this. of how people navigate liminality of the borderland In this chapter, I will first turn to Lesvos as a place, the cultural and structural field that people are embedded in, with rules, roles, hierarchies and possibilities; the context which individuals and Home for All is placed in. I then examine how Home for All navigates this humanitarian space before turning to spaces of hope. The last section explores the horizons of new futures that are imagined and pursued.

3.2 Lesvos a Place of Restriction & Rejection

One of the most profound expressions of restriction and rejection in the borderland is the violent denial of access to safety. Asylum seekers arriving to Lesvos face not only the dangers of the journey but are often forcefully hindered from entering Europe through multiple mechanisms creating the need for trying to enter multiple times. Yet, despite these hostile barriers, many persist, driven by hope and the need for protection. These acts of movement and repeated attempts reveal a form of persistence against exclusionary policies. First, I explore Lesvos as a place that restricts and rejects certain people, then I move into how this shapes the environment in which humanitarian response takes place.





(Pictures taken by me in the city center Lesvos, Fieldnotes, August 2024)

Seeking Safety

I'm visiting an organization that gives out clothing to newly arrived asylum-seekers residing in Mavrovouni camp. A young man shares his story, while waiting in line, of finally reaching Lesvos on his sixth attempt, recounting the fear of being intercepted by authorities during each crossing. Each previous attempt had been thwarted: either the Greek coastguard pushed his boat back into Turkish waters, or the Turkish coastguard apprehended them first. The financial and emotional toll of repeated attempts was significant. On his sixth try, the boat made it to Lesvos undetected, but his relief was tempered by ongoing concerns for his family, who he hoped could avoid the same ordeal by reuniting with him through family reunification processes. A young woman shares a different story from her extraordinary journey from Turkey to Lesvos. She was heavily pregnant at the time, and took the risk of the dangerous route over the Aegean Sea seeking safety for herself and the child's future. However, the journey was taking longer than expected due to motor issues, and she started going into labor in the dinghy while at sea in the heavily overcrowded and chaotic boat. She feared for her and her child's life, and explains that "... was literally trying to squeeze to keep from giving birth in the boat". She was rushed to the hospital and now, she is standing with her weeks old baby in her arms, telling this story while receiving a newborn kit from an organization.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

Stories like these are common to hear on Lesvos, where refugees describe their crossings as part of "the game"; the relentless attempts to cross the Mediterranean or Aegean Sea, or other external borders to Europe, undetected to reach safety and apply for asylum. The practice of pushing refugees back from Greek waters into Turkish territory, often violently, is termed a "pushback". According to data from Aegean Boat Report (2024a, 2024b), 107 pushbacks were conducted in the Aegean Sea, during the time of my fieldwork between July and September 2024. Humanitarian organizations I spoke to during fieldwork, claimed that the relatively low number of arrivals during that time was largely due to increased pushback practices, depriving people of the opportunity to seek asylum. Organizations were also noting an increase in people arriving and living in the camp, who had been to Lesvos several times before. This was evident when camp management had given them the same registration numbers as the previous time, which organizations recognized as backdated numbers. Some of these individuals made it

through Lesvos to a second EU country, and applied for family reunification in order to get their family to them without having to take the sea crossing, but the wait was too long, and they feared for their families' lives. They went back to their home country, got their families, and found themselves back on Lesvos once again. Others of these returnees had been deported to Turkey under the EU-Turkey deal but were forced to flee again as conditions in Turkey grew increasingly unsafe. The cyclical nature of these movements highlights how exclusionary border policies not only fail to deter migration but also reinforce prolonged states of liminality and suffering through exclusion. This "revolving door" of migration exemplifies how border regimes produce systemic inequalities, where refugees are repeatedly subjected to both physical and bureaucratic violence. The above vignette shows how even in the most precarious and dire situations, people continue to pursue their projects to reach their goals, while heavily constrained. This demonstrates how goals of reaching safety are not only dangerous, but create exclusion, in which people persist in their goal of desperately reaching safety. The pictures in the beginning of this section visualize the meaning of humanitarian border. The term *humanitarian border* (Walters, 2011) captures the paradox of care and control at Europe's frontiers, where access to asylum becomes a life-and-death struggle. As Calhoun (2008) and Kousis et al. (2022) argue, crises like these are not temporary or exceptional but systemic, reproduced through state policy (see also Vigh, 2008). The young man's repeated crossings illustrate persistence even under restriction. Once arriving on Lesvos, however, another set of restrictions appears, less violent, but equally structured, contributing to creating liminality. The refugee camp becomes the new space of control.

The Camp - A Restrictive Place

For those who make it through the border to Lesvos and enter the asylum process, life inside the camp is governed by controlled access, daily routines, and rigid categorization. The camp exemplifies how border restrictions do not end at arrival, they shift form. The following section explores how people in the camp experience restriction and rejection in their everyday life, and find ways to navigate this liminality (Horst, 2006b; see also Brun, 2015; Jeffrey, 2008, Vigh, 2008, Tsoni, 2016; Ullrich, 2022, Ambrosini, 2022)

I'm waiting for the other volunteers to arrive, by the gates to the refugee camp to deliver food in the camp. As I'm waiting the bus from the city center that goes between the city and the camp arrives. A young woman with a toddler and a teenager is standing outside the gates. They approach me to ask me where the bus to the city goes from. They have just arrived to Lesvos and need to buy a Sim-card. I show them where the bus comes, which is right outside the gate, but I don't know the times. I try to help them find out, by asking one of the security guards whose looking at us. He points us to an old, almost unreadable time schedule hanging inside the gate. Online, I can find that the busses should leave every 40 minutes. The woman doesn't know how to find Vodafone in the city center as she needs internet on her phone and is afraid she will get lost. I put a pin in her google maps app. The bus arrives, they get on, and around 20 people get off. They all line up to enter the camp. Most have plastic bags in their hands filled with vegetables and food. Some greet the guards, and exchange short phrases in Greek to them. A little girl is trying to enter, but the guards hold her to wait for her father. They start getting out their "badges" which symbolize that they are asylum seekers and live in the camp. A type of ID card. A white badge hangs in a red string around their neck. Once they approach the gate, they show the badge and lift their arms so that the G4S security guards can scan them with the metal detectors. Next, they go to the reception where their IDs are checked again. Then they can pass through. My team arrives, and we head to the registration office to sign in to the camp. They check our IDs, and we sign our name, and we drive to the middle of camp. The organization uses "helpers" in the camp who reside there and help distribute meals to the white containers. The white containers are where people live in the camp it services as a home. I deliver food to the family section together with the helper. He has been living in the camp for two months, and has lost his food rights. So, he helps Home for All, and in return he gets meals. On our path towards the family section where we are delivering food, we pass the official food line. People are waiting in line for the official food. Around the corner we pass the make-shift mosque that residents in the camp have built. Carpets are laid down on the ground, and people are praying while one is chanting on the overhead speakers that prayer is starting. Around the other corner, we pass the camps barbershop. A wooden shack made by residents, where they can trim their hair or beard.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

The above describes certain conditions in the camp, and experiences of exclusion in this precarious condition. The camp's infrastructure, with its sterile white iso-boxes and cage-like food lines, visually and materially reinforces restriction through these controlled structures. The outsourcing of drinking water, the standardized portions of meals, and the limited autonomy over daily life all exemplify conditions of containment and deterrence. Refugees must wear identification cards at all times visually marking them as asylum seekers. Their movement is regulated by a registration system, and their access to resources is determined by bureaucratic categorizations of vulnerability. These measures make visible the duality of care and control in humanitarianism in the borderland, in which these measures can be seen as security measure for the people, whilst simultaneously reinforcing control over them. The women in the vignette expresses uncertainty about how to complete a basic errand, which reflects the broader structural constraints in which asylum-seekers in camp are placed in. The 1-euro bus fare, while seemingly minor, is a significant cost when food allowances are already limited.

The camp is located on the outskirts of the city near the sea. It is surrounded by barbed wire. The camp is divided into "zones" by camp management, which are also referred to by the organizations operating within the camp. These zones are color-coded, such as the "red zone" that is assigned to single men. Each zone has a color coding to designate different types of households. A large map of the camp showing both the zones and camp-services is displayed at the entrance in English. The camp itself is entirely white and sterile: the ground is sandy and dusty, and the containers, often referred to as "ISO-boxes", in which people live, are bright white except for the blue UNHCR logo. An ISO-box is designed like a shipping-container, as such it stands as a strong symbol of liminality or temporariness. There are designated areas for water and food. The water station, with taps beneath a concrete structure, is used by people to wash their hands and feet before entering the nearby mosque. However, few use this water for drinking, despite it being safe. Instead, water is outsourced to a private company, which delivers bottled water once a day—three liters per person. The division of zones, the color-coded map, the rigid food distribution systems; all create an environment of regulation.

The "helper", who assists with food distribution, explained that he himself had lost his food rights after staying in the camp for over a month. As a result, he only receives a small money allowance, which is not enough to survive. People who have received a

second rejection on their asylum application, also lose their food rights, and humanitarian organizations are legally prohibited from providing food to these individuals. The helper described above who lost his rights to food navigated this through reaching out to Home for All to help with their distribution, and receive meals in return. He and his family also co-cook with others in the camp. They buy food collectively so they can cook more food, and they share. People who have received a rejection on their asylum status are in a limbo since returns to Turkey of this group have not been happening since 2022 (Ovacık, Ineli-Ciger, & Ulusoy, 2024, pp. 166-167). Therefore, they are stuck in the camp, but with no rights, as they are not an asylum-seeker, or refugee, but waiting indefinitely to be returned. Organizations, such as Home for All, are legally not allowed to give this group food. However, some places in the city center distribute food particularly to people with a rejected case. A local restaurant has a designated day of the week where individuals with a rejected asylum claim can get free meals and food.

The camp does not facilitate autonomy but rather reinforces dependency, leaving individuals reliant on external actors to meet their basic needs. The camp thus functions as both a place of care and a space of control, restricting access to resources while simultaneously ensuring minimal survival. The camp then becomes a site of liminality, a place where people exist in a state of in-betweenness, as described in the scholarly literature (Tsoni, 2016; Horst, 2006a; Agier, 2011). People in the camp are neither fully inside nor outside the state's protection. For those with rejected asylum claims, this experience is especially strong as they are not entitled to state provisions, but neither are they being returned. The helper who lost his right to food navigated this through informal support and collective cooking, which illustrates how control intersects with humanitarian limits. The described practices of engaging in food distribution for exchange of meals, forming informal networks of shared cooking, and seeking out alternative food support from local actors, are small but significant forms of everyday agency. These show how people navigate liminality. These practices reflect what Ortner (1996) calls *serious games*, actions within existing structures that recognize the constraints and attempt to navigate within or around them. Some decorate their isoboxes with plants and colors, or even handmade curtains over the windows, creating small personal spaces, a feeling of home, within an otherwise depersonalized environment. Others seek employment outside the camp or engage in education finding ways to carve out an alternative in the present and future (Brun, 2015) as they navigate the restrictive context imposed on them. These

actions challenge the notion of refugees as passive recipients of their condition, highlighting their resilience and determination to move beyond bare survival. While the camp restricts movement and enforces categorization, humanitarian actors face a parallel but different set of restrictions; operating and navigating in a tightly regulated and politically charged humanitarian space. Organizations are legally prohibited from helping certain groups, thereby reproducing the logic and inclusion/exclusion even as they navigate providing care. However, even within these structures of control and liminality, people do not simply wait passively (Vigh, 2008; Horst, 2006).

The Humanitarian Space: between Restriction and Possibility

Home for All must constantly negotiate their presence within a restrictive environment while attending to humanitarian needs. Humanitarian actors are often constrained by state regulations, access controls, and internal ethical dilemmas. The interactions between these reveal a complex web of governance, control, and resistance. NGOs navigate this environment which in turn also shapes their ability to provide aid. The humanitarian border, as conceptualized by Walters (2011), is not merely a space of care but also one of governance, where suffering is both managed and made visible. While NGOs seek to alleviate hardship, they simultaneously operate within a system that reinforces exclusion and control, thus raises ethical concerns of implication (Barnett, 2011).

On the list of people Home for All distributes food to, the volunteers observed that a child is on the list. They don't know the age of the child, and seek out the family's container to see for themselves, as they are unsure if the child is old enough to have solid food. When we arrive at the family's container a young mother with a baby on her arm opens the door. Through google translate on her husband's phone they communicate that they need baby milk (formula) for the child, not food. The mother has trouble breastfeeding, and needs help. They only receive the official food in the camp, which she cannot give to her child. Volunteers also faced other ethical dilemmas when asked to prepare a special meal for a pregnant woman, just tomatoes, which raised concerns within the volunteers about the safety and adequacy of such a limited diet during pregnancy.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

These situations illustrates the limitations of the referral-based food system within the camp, where Home for All depends on an external organization for information and access. Home for All receives the names and information on who needs their food from a different organization that works within the refugee camp. This is for people with food rights, but who need extra meals due to health or other issues. This is the one main organization NGO inside the camp. Others like Home4All only get access to camp for visits or food-distributions, or healthcare. This NGO inside the camp, EuroRelief, has the data on these groups, including their names and numbers, but they do not publish or share this information according to privacy and camp management regulations. Home for All receives referrals for additional food needs from them, but many volunteers frequently question the decision-making process behind these referrals. This disconnect often results in confusion, inefficiencies, and moral discomfort for volunteers trying to meet needs responsibly. However, it is important to acknowledge that EuroRelief also operates in this context shaped by restrictions, as they have different goals and aims as such Home for All may find it easier to maneuver and question these ethical concerns.

Home for All encountered further ethical challenges when approached by UNHCR and camp officials with an offer for subsidized food distribution. The proposal would have Home for All prepare the food for everyone in the camp, with the cost covered by the officials. Home for All was initially excited about the offer, but when they learned, the portions were limited to the standard requirements for refugee camps; 120g per person, they were shocked. Recognizing that this would lead to malnutrition. Home for All proposed covering the extra cost to increase the portion size, but this offer was rejected, as the officials insisted on adhering to the standardized portions. Consequently, Home for All could not accept the offer, as it contradicted their mission to provide nutritious food for the people in the camp. The food distribution managed by Home for All caters specifically to individuals referred to them by the medical team for additional nutritional needs. While the camp's official food is distributed to all residents, it is not sufficient for many, and some would argue that it is inadequate for everyone. Home for All efforts help fill this gap and address the nutritional needs that are otherwise overlooked. The above highlights a hierarchy of humanitarian actors, in which Home for All, as a local organization, must operate within these structures, even when their ethical frameworks or goals differ (Fassin, 2012; Feldman, 2008; Brun, 2016). However, their refusal to participate in this system, on the ethical grounds that it would promote malnutrition, can

be seen as a moral stance against this model of care (Baaz et al, 2017; Maeckelbergh, 2016;) and as such navigating being implicated, despite the financial gains it would have brought to their project.

This also ties back to the argument of this chapter; even in the restrictive liminal space in which they operate, people seek meaningful ethical forms of action, which can be seen as a form of resistance contributing to reimagining how humanitarianism can operate in such spaces. This shows how ethics are in practice not abstract ideals, but situated negotiations (Baaz et al, 2017; Graeber, 2014). Volunteers approaching the family to assess the needs, rather than blindly following a referral; the rejection of malnutrition-inducing contracts despite resource scarcity, these are all moments of ethical decision-making within the constrained space of the game. These small acts become meaningful by demonstrating how actors stretch the boundaries, even if they cannot escape them fully. However, their decline of the offer does not change the 120g portion size from camp officials, as such their action is a form of navigation in the system by offering their own support, however it doesn't change the rules (Vigh, 2008).

Many NGO projects are delayed while waiting for government approval, highlighting furthermore the restrictive environment in which they operate. For instance, Home for All has long planned to open a shared meal space at their farm for refugees, locals and foreign volunteers outside the camp, yet they remain stuck in bureaucratic limbo, waiting for permission to install electricity. Despite repeated assurances that approval is imminent, each week brings further delays. This is not an isolated case. Other NGOs I engaged with shared similar frustrations, citing long wait times for approvals to expand their services. The state's control over NGO operations forces organizations into a precarious position of choosing to operate inside the camp risk greater restrictions, or staying outside to maintain more operational freedom but struggle to gain access to those in need. As one volunteer explained, *"If you're inside the camp, it's harder to advocate due to government restrictions, and you have little leverage because you risk losing your right to remain."* The regulation of humanitarian work extends beyond bureaucratic barriers to logistical restrictions. Home for All faces recurring challenges, such as their only registered vehicle frequently breaking down. Because it is the only vehicle legally permitted to enter the

camp, food distribution is entirely dependent on its functioning. While volunteers were eager to use another vehicle as a temporary solution, they were prohibited from doing so.

These limitations demonstrate how humanitarian governance structures dictate the conditions of aid delivery, which Fassin (2012) terms *humanitarian government*. Humanitarianism thus is deeply entangled with border and state logics, and these entanglements produce hierarchies among humanitarian actors (Walters, 2011; Raghuram, 2019). These examples show how humanitarian actors must navigate and negotiate within systems of constraint, balancing values with realities.

Long-term versus short-term

Larger humanitarian organizations on Lesvos have moved toward professionalization in response to increased government regulation and privatization of services (see e.g france, Ticktin, 2006, 2012). A visit to a larger NGO highlighted how professionalization was both a necessity and an ethical dilemma for them. With the Ministry of Migration taking control over the camp, new regulations required stricter compliance. This shift forced NGOs to decide whether to transition toward a structured, professionalized model. This NGO's emphasis on stability and efficiency, hiring long-term coordinators to manage operations rather than relying on short-term volunteers. Their approach ensures continuity, but it also introduces rigid structures that can limit adaptability and responsiveness. One of their stated long-term goals was for their activities in camp to eventually be community-run, managed by refugees themselves. However, due to the fast turnover of camp residents, this remained difficult to realize. This tension reflects Calhoun's (2008) concept of the emergency imaginary, where humanitarian responses focus on short-term crisis management rather than addressing systemic, long-term issues. While professionalization enhances efficiency, it also reinforces dependency by keeping refugees within structures of aid rather than enabling self-sufficiency. Beyond the divide between grassroots and professionalized NGOs, the humanitarian sector on Lesvos is marked by what my interlocutors named a caring competition, a landscape of fragmented cooperation and internal tensions. This is evident in the way different organizations criticize each other's motives and methods. Volunteers at Home for All distanced themselves from what they termed "patronizing aid" and "disaster tourism", rejecting approaches that they felt stripped people of dignity. Several of the volunteers had, in their

initial visits to Lesvos, volunteered with other NGOs, only to later switch organizations due to such factors. Many felt that humanitarianism on Lesvos had become entangled with bureaucracy, institutionalized in ways that undermined its original purpose. They described a "caring competition" in which organizations, despite their shared goals, remained suspicious of one another's practices. The tensions between organizations on Lesvos can thus be understood as part of a larger struggle over the ethics and effectiveness of aid (Brun, 2016; Fassin, 2012; Feldman, 2008).

Ambrosini (2022) critiques how humanitarian organizations can inadvertently reinforce state control and migration policies. The borderland of Lesvos creates a space where crisis is continuously produced, demanding humanitarian intervention. The framing of migration as a crisis connotes a threat that requires an urgent response, often justifying a state of exception in which normal governance is suspended in favor of extraordinary measures (Kousis et al., 2022, p. 3). Humanitarian responses are often organized around episodic presence focused on immediate relief, at the cost of long-term perspectives, which are lost within the emergency conceptualization of crises (Calhoun, 2008, pp. 374-392). Lesvos, as a humanitarian borderland, exemplifies how crisis narratives justify emergency humanitarianism while simultaneously limiting long-term solutions (Brun, 2016). The emergency imaginary (Calhoun, 2008; see also Brun, 2016) dominates humanitarian responses, prioritizing short-term relief over sustainable, systemic change. Competing forces of care and control shape the humanitarian landscape on Lesvos. NGOs, while operating with altruistic intentions, must navigate a complex system of restrictions, dependencies, and political constraints as described above. As such, humanitarian efforts are often dictated by the very structures they seek to challenge. Despite these constraints, Home for All continues to adapt and navigate the changing circumstances, shifting from emergency response to longer-term support. As asylum processes happen quicker than previously, new gaps emerge leaving recognized refugees without adequate support (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024). The role of local vs. international organizations further complicates the landscape, as tensions between community-led initiatives and external humanitarian actors highlight the power dynamics inherent in aid work (Fassin, 2012).

Lesvos makes visible the contradictions of humanitarian governance as a place where aid is both essential and constrained operating within systems of exclusion. The past crises, present policies, and future uncertainties intersect in this borderland, shaping the possibilities for those who pass through it. Home for All represents an attempt to center agency within an interconnected support system. However, their efforts remain shaped by broader structures of Lesvos as a borderland. The humanitarian border on Lesvos is thus not just a site of assistance but a contested space where power, compassion, and agency intersect. Within this restricted space, people navigate the structures and find ways to continue their lives in the present and seek futures (Brun, 2015, 2016). Home for All is such a place, where people engage in meaningful activities in the present while seeking to alter their future, or navigate the rejections and restrictions that shape the present. The next section turns to how individuals on Lesvos, across different positions, generate hope and create new horizons from within this liminal space.

3.3 A Place of Hope: Establishing New Horizons

Despite being marked by difficulties of precarity and suffering, Lesvos is also a place where individuals begin to reimagine what life could look like through navigating the present on the island. After receiving asylum, refugees must quickly leave the camp, but are offered no formal support system. Yet some carve out new futures through work, social ties, or renewed aspirations through engaging at Home for All.

Life After Asylum: Different Imaginaries

Katerina, one of the founders of Home for All, is showing me the new structure on the farm which will hopefully become a space where they can cook over 100 meals, and invite people from the camp and the local community to share meals together – for free. She has cooked for most of her life, and did not hesitate to cook for the desperate people arriving at their shores in 2015. She quickly adapted their restaurant to also cater the people arriving in high numbers. As the high numbers settled, and slowly decreased, and new developments took place with time, such as the fast-tracking of asylum, she saw the need to create hope within Lesvos. She describes to me how she has seen many people receive asylum, work, save money, received travel documents and leave. In hope for a better life somewhere else in Europe. But, she has seen them return time after time. Some deported back, others because life wasn't better. Therefore, she hopes to show people that they can also chose to build a life here, on Lesvos. She wants to give them a chance to rebuild their life here, and show them that it is possible.

Conversation with Katerina, Fieldnotes, August 2024

Katerina's perspective reflects a deeper understanding of Lesvos not only as a place of passing or waiting, but also as a potential site of belonging. Her commitment to creating a space where people can gather, eat, and imagine new futures is grounded in her long-term engagement with the island and its shifting humanitarian landscape. As such it becomes a place where people can feel belonging because they are welcomed by indeed locals. A symbolic and practical effort to reframe Lesvos as a place where life can be lived and futures can be reimagined. Several stories from my interlocutors at Home for All illustrate the different paths taken, imaginaries, or plans for employees after receiving their asylum documents and while being employed at the organization. These stories reveal various phases of liminality, with individuals either abandoning or altering their

ideas of "Europe," becoming passive in anticipation, or using Lesvos as a temporary steppingstone.

Nawaf, a young man, spent five months in the refugee camp before receiving asylum. He never thought of Lesvos or Greece as his final destination, so in hope of a better life he decided to try his luck in another country. He worked at Home for All and saved money for a passport, and later a flight ticket to his planned destination in Europe. However, after overstaying his visa in that country, he was rejected for asylum because of his asylum status in Greece. He returned to Lesvos, and Home for All welcomed him once again by offering a job. He saved money again, and moved to a different Greek city on the mainland, where he worked several jobs, but none paid well or treated him kindly. Ultimately, he returned to Lesvos once more, where Home for All provided him a job once again. Now, he is saving money but has no clear plans for his future.

By contrast, Matt, another refugee employee at Home for All, has decided to stay on Lesvos and rebuild his life here. Having lived on the island since 2016, first in the refugee camp Moria at that time, he has now worked for Home for All for more than three years. He learned Greek fluently and is saving money to buy property with his wife who also has works with a different organization as a translator. However, more than half of their income goes toward rent, and they are unable to save much. Matt's primary goal is to save enough to go on a holiday, rather than leave Lesvos permanently. He has seen many people come and go, sharing their experiences, and with that decided that Lesvos will do.

Another employee, John, has worked at Home for All for almost three years as well, but remains uncertain about his future. He studies online through an open university, but like Nawaf he does not see Lesvos as his final destination. Despite his studies, he expresses worry about his future in Greece. He feels he is at a fork in the road, and finds making decisions about his future difficult and uncertain.

A new and young employee, Eyob, started at Home for All to save money while awaiting a passport to travel. He applied for family reunification with his brother in another EU country, but his application was rejected because his brother provided conflicting information about his age, no longer considering him a minor. Although he received asylum in Greece, he still wants to join his brother, and he is saving money for a plane

ticket to try his chances again. He was finally able to travel to his brother, and applied for asylum in that country. However, like Nawaf, Eyob was rejected due to his asylum in Greece. Even though he wished to stay with his older brother, who has a family, a job, a house and was ready to take his younger brother in – the young boy was forced to leave the country. He travelled to a different country, which against his belief gave him asylum despite his asylum status in Greece.

Nawaf's repeated attempts to leave Greece reflect Europe as both a dream and a place of rejection, illustrating how externalization policies create cycles of migration and return. In contrast, Matt's decision to stay and rebuild life on Lesvos shows an alternative approach to imagining Europe, not as a final destination, but as a place of survival and stability within limitations. Meanwhile, the failed family reunification narrative of Eyob highlights barriers to fulfilling the dream of "Europe." John, illustrates how the uncertainty of his future and situation is part of his actions in the present, but does not enable him of action. In this sense, Lesvos functions as a threshold, a space where individuals are stuck between the promise of Europe and the harsh realities of marginalization.

The different paths taken by Nawaf, Matt, John, Eyob, and other employees at Home for All highlight how Lesvos functions as a liminal place, not merely as restricting mobility and ideas, but where futures are imagined, pursued and often reshaped through their interaction with Home for All. The island represents both possibility and constraint, as individuals navigate the structural limitations of European asylum system while trying to reclaim agency over their lives. Each trajectory, whether repeated attempts to leave, settling with limited opportunities, or awaiting bureaucratic decisions, demonstrates how individuals navigate uncertainty in borderland. These experiences reveal how the future is not a fixed destination but rather a shifting process shaped by past experiences and present conditions. Nawaf´s repeated departures and returns illustrates how hope and rejection intertwine, reinforcing how externalization policies do not necessarily prevent mobility but rather create cycles of migration and return. Matt´s decision to stay challenges the dominant narrative of onward migration, showing how some find ways to carve out hope even within marginalization (Brun, 2015). Others, like the young employee awaiting his passport, embody the continued pursuit of a future imagined elsewhere, despite bureaucratic barriers.

Viewing this struggle to rebuild life at the border through Ortner´s concept of serious games (1996) highlights how individual acts within structural constraints while also exercising agency in shaping their own paths within these limitations. Lesvos, as a borderland, thus becomes a place where the past, present, and future collide. The past, marked by displacement, trauma, and migration journeys, continues to shape decision-making, while the present is defined by structural limitations and precarious stability. Within this, the future remains uncertain, constantly imagined and reimagined through acts of agency and resistance (see also: Brun, 2015). The borderland becomes not a place of stuckness but of different projects of becoming. Beyond refugees, volunteers and locals also engage with Lesvos as a place of meaning, struggle, and opportunity, adding layers to how hope and futures are co-produced.

3.4 Re-Shaping Futures: a Chapter Conclusion

Refugees who attempt repeated crossings, families who re-assemble projects of mobility after rejection, and individuals who strive to make life meaningful in the in-between, all are playing serious games. The narratives shared throughout this section illustrate the consequences of EU externalization policies on border regions like Lesvos which ultimately shape the context in which individuals and Home for All is placed in. These policies create prolonged crises that affect both migrants and host communities. Within this context, Home for All serves as a site of alternative humanitarian imaginaries, where solidarity and survival are fostered in the margins, as well as individual imaginaries and realities. By providing support and challenging dominant exclusionary narratives, Home for All enable people to navigate the present to reimagine a future for refugees and locals in the margins of Europe and beyond. In this context of the borderland, Home for All acts as a site of alternative imaginaries, challenging the dominant narratives of exclusion.

As Howard Zinn (2006) reminds us, being hopeful in bad times is not naïve, it is an act grounded in history and possibility. Even in crisis, people act and imagine (Vigh, 2008). These findings suggesting the need for a humanitarian response that is attuned not only to immediate crises, but also the lived realities, relationships, and aspirations of those in liminal places (Brun, 2015, 2016). Recognizing that people in precarious situations are

also people with projects, desires, and the capacity to imagine otherwise. This calls for a shift towards relational and long-term humanitarian perspectives, a theme I take up further in the next chapters. In the following chapter, I explore how individuals navigate the present through rebuilding lives in the borderland which ultimately is future-oriented. They actively navigate these constraints, whether by saving money, learning Greek, seek education or attempting to reunite with their family, which I will outline and discuss further in the next chapter.

4. Building Livelihoods

This chapter explores how individuals on Lesvos attempt to rebuild their lives within the constraints of the borderland by engaging in work, forming social relationships, and creating stability despite systemic barriers. I argue that through engagement in social relations and activities, individuals assert agency, sustain hope, and build livelihoods. This chapter aims to illustrate how Home for All enables this by moving beyond bare survival, carving out spaces of belonging and reimagining futures even in the restrictive borderland setting. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at Home for All, the chapter highlights the need to move beyond crisis-oriented humanitarianism toward relational and long-term approaches that recognize and support the lived realities and future-making practices of displaced people. In regards to the guiding question of this thesis: *How do people in the borderland of Lesvos navigate liminality, and what does this reveal about agency in humanitarianism?* As such building livelihoods is one such strategy that navigates the liminality of the borderland, as reveals how agency can be utilized in humanitarianism.

Sherry Ortner's (1996; 1999) concept of serious games enables us to understand how people build livelihoods and pursue their *projects* within the constrained setting of the borderland. The idea of *serious games* offers a way to conceptualize agency not as free will or heroic resistance, but as strategic, intentional action within and shaped by the structural conditions. I follow Ortner's (1996; 1999) claim that people are not enacting scripts dictated upon them or reacting to material necessity. Their actions are shaped by these conditions, yet not determined by them. These games, or actions, are *serious* because they are filled with power, inequality, and real stakes. People act with purpose, even if the outcomes are uncertain and shaped by the rules and limits of the game. Importantly, Ortner emphasizes that people are not isolated agents; they are always situated in webs of relationships, and the games they play, the actions they take, are socially and historically constructed. Yet, through playing these games, people can reproduce and transform the very structures they are embedded in. As she writes, serious games are a "moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity," where agency and structure are co-constitutive (Ortner, 1999, p. 20). In the context of Home for All, refugees, volunteers, and locals all engage in pursuing individual *projects* through work, care, belonging, and mobility. Their actions are shaped by Lesvos as a place, so is Home for All, as analyzed in the previous chapter, but they also reshape the meaning of place, aid,

and future through their daily practices. Thus, building livelihoods in the borderland is not just survival, it is a form of strategic engagement of navigating life in the present and engage in future-making within constraint (Brun, 2015, 2016).

Each actor brings their own backgrounds, projects and goals which meet to pursue a common project, that of Home for All. This is what Ortner terms a *serious game*. When these actors meet, the different projects and goals of the actors can collide and make visible their own projects and backgrounds creating tensions. Tensions are eased in the place in order to continue the common project. Home for All is such a place which enables people to plan for, build and create livelihoods; *projects*. That is, the intentional strategies people pursue to improve or stabilize their lives (Ortner, 1999), even within the limits of the borderland. At Home for All, the employees are not passive recipients of aid and the volunteers are not separated from the helped in an unequal relation. By contrast, they engage in meaningful practices, relations and aspirations which is the focus of this chapter. Drawing on ethnographic engagement at Home for All, this chapter highlights the need to move toward relational and long-term approaches to aid that recognize the lived realities and future-making practices within Lesvos. The chapter is structured as such; first an outline and exploration of Home for All's project and intentions in which volunteers, refugees, and locals meet to pursue common the project of Home for All while also pursuing their own personal projects and individual aspirations. Finally, I will explore what does this mean in terms of a long-term or short-term perspective to humanitarianism. Humanitarianism as ultimately about alleviating suffering, and as such creating change.

> We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. Even when we don't "win" there is fun and fulfillment in the fact that we have been involved, with other good people, in something worthwhile. We need hope. (Zinn, 2009, p 13)

Hope is an important aspect in the process of change (Brun, 2015, 2016; see also Jeffrey, 2008). Without hope as in an image of the future, people feel trapped in the present (Jeffrey, 2008). To look beyond the cruelty and suffering of the borderland, yet acknowledge it, I turn to spaces of navigation where people engage in building their

livelihoods in the present, which contributes to change in the future. At Home for All, people attempt to establish and re-imagine their futures through navigating the situation and re-imagining their futures. My study reveals that life continues even in the uncertainty of the borderland, with people actively engaging and negotiating their futures and present despite the constraints (Horst, 2006a; Vigh, 2008, Brun, 2015). I will through focusing on everyday practices illustrate how people exercise agency in shaping their present and imagining their future. While humanitarian aid often focuses on saving lives, I argue that Home for All creates a space for navigating the context they are placed in, and engage in building livelihoods within these constraints which goes beyond immediate needs to what life comes after (Horst, 2006b). This chapter illustrates how Home for All view refugees not as passive victims of crisis and aid, but active in shaping their futures. By recognizing this, we can move beyond narratives of *stuckness* in liminality to explore how refugees engage in serious games (Ortner, 1996), negotiate mobility, and carve out spaces for livelihoods and possible futures.

4.1 Home for All: A Place on Lesvos Where Projects Meet

Home for All is located on a big plot of land in the outskirts of the city center. They moved to this location after having to leave their restaurant sea front where they served and distributed food from to asylum-seekers in camp, refugees, locals and foreign volunteers. They had to move out from their previous location due to increased rental prices. Now, they have a farm on this piece of land with large fields with herbs, vegetables and fruits. At the entrance to the farm, there is a gate where Dark (the farm dog) is always waiting for the first people to arrive in the morning. Then, there are two smaller buildings on the land. One for tools and storage, where also all the cats and kittens sleep over night. And one makeshift structure where food is prepared and cooked. It can only fit two people inside for cooking, so under a roof outside the building there are tables for chopping and prepping to cook. The rest of the farm is fields filled with vegetables, herbs and animals. At the end of the fields, there are more fields of olive trees. At the time of my fieldwork they were in the process of planting many new trees here to produce more olive oil. The main fields are filled with vegetables of the season, herbs and fruits. In the storage building, there is also a big olive presser, from which they make their own olive oil from for sales. The employees at Home for All are in charge of planting, harvesting, weeding, maintenance, whilst the foreign volunteers prepare, cook and distribute food made with

harvest from the farm. The meals are distributed to asylum-seekers with special dietary needs in the refugee camp, in addition to unaccompanied minors in a separate camp, and to local schools for disabled local Greek Children and adults in the city center. Sometimes, local Greeks are invited to come harvest whatever they want from the farm. All the extra harvest not used for the cooking, is sold to a local producer not far from the farm.

In addition to vegetables and fruits, there are many different animals on the farm. There is; a horse, a donkey, chickens, geese, goats. And there are; dogs and cats. Dark is the big puppy, who often hangs out with Sjokosjokko, a small dog, and Abdulleh is the farms main cat, whose nickname is mouse hunter. Home for All also rescued a litter of puppies that they found struggling on the streets with a bad skin disease. They were treating them

when I arrived, and once they are free from the skin disease, they will join Dark in roaming the farm freely. At the farm, all these different actors meet and engage in activities; the everyday rhythm at the farm.

Locally Rooted Humanitarianism

"This is our home and our life. We're not dependent on the crisis or humanitarian situation for our services. We didn't come here because of the crisis, we were already here. No matter what, we will stay. However, in that sense, we are also vulnerable, because while other NGOs can come and go as they please, we are here no matter what."

Conversation with Katerina Home for All, Fieldnotes, August 2024

Katerina, one of the founder of Home for All, encapsulates the essence of locally rooted humanitarianism (Brun & Horst, 2023) in the above quote. This reflects an emotional, social, and political investment to the community. Their embeddedness on Lesvos is a long-term commitment to the place. The local community were initially the first responders to the refugee crisis. As the situation evolved, the international humanitarian community took over as the dominant responder and thereby redefined the aid relationships (Rozakou, 2023), which meant that local economic hardship and conditions remained unaddressed. Refugees were framed as those in need of help, while positioning the local communities as in need as well, or as a source of conflict. This became particularly visible during the clash and tensions from the local community towards the international humanitarian community in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020).

Lesvos, with its relatively small geographical area and population, has hosted a vast number of international NGOs responding to the humanitarian needs. During my fieldwork in July/August 2024, I identified over 30 active NGOs on Lesvos, a significant reduction from the peak of over 100 in 2016 (Tsoni, 2016), however still a high number. The majority of these organizations are international. Home for All is one of the rare locally led, non-state humanitarian initiatives, ensuring a deep-rooted commitment to both the refugee and the local communities. The organization has since the beginning of

the humanitarian crisis provided food to local institutions and people in need. Many of my interlocutors, both local and international, acknowledged the importance of balancing these needs but that addressing them was challenging. In an interview I had with the local Hellenic Red Cross office, they emphasized the importance of helping the local community as well, in order to bridge the communities (see Horst, 2006b). Several aspects of Home for All's response illustrate this. They distribute meals to local institutions for disabled children and adults. In a conversation I had with the Hellenic Red Cross, they confirmed the ongoing difficulties for struggling families on Lesvos, especially in regards to receiving official social welfare benefits. The process of obtaining this is very long and extensive, and even if you are approved – the amount of support is limited (Greek Council for Refugees, 2024). In addition to supporting local families through food, Home for All buys all their olive trees from local tree farmers to contribute to the local economy, and Lesvos's long history of olive trees. With the olives they harvest, they produce olive oil for sales. Additionally, their collaboration with the local producer by selling their redundant harvest is also a means of rooting their response in the local. Home for All challenges hierarchical humanitarian structures by including refugees, locals, and foreign volunteers into its daily operations. Unlike international NGOs that primarily deliver one-directional aid, Home for All promotes interdependence, ensuring that humanitarianism becomes embedded within social structures while also contributing to the host community, rather than a transactional, temporary intervention (Brun & Horst, 2023; see also Brun, 2016; horst, 2006b).

Turning back to the lens of *serious games*, Home for All's embeddedness, perspective, and moral groundings shape a distinctive project of agency that both navigates and transforms the constraints of the borderland. As Ortner (1999) argues, *serious games* are about how people pursue meaningful projects within certain structures shaped by inequality and power. These projects are not pursued in a vacuum, but are rather situated in time, place, and social relations. Home for All is embedded in the realities of the borderland, constrained by limitations, hurdles and expectations. However, its project facilitates relationships and infrastructures of care from below, from within the community. This is visible in their everyday practices described, which reflect a serious game in action: an intentional and ongoing negotiation between structures that constrain people and ethical commitment. Their actions are nevertheless shaped by the borderland

of Lesvos, but they are not determined by it. Their project rooted in solidarity, reciprocity, and place stands in sharp contrast to both the restrictive environment of the border, and traditional humanitarianism. Rather than reproducing passive hierarchies of giver and receiver, they facilitate a more relational, emplaced humanitarian practice. This positions the local community not as a background, but as a participant in shaping alternative futures for Lesvos and its residents (Vigh, 2008).

The Meaning of Volunteering

Foreign volunteers are a key part of Home for All´s operation, particularly in terms of food preparation and distribution to the local institutions for disabled Greek adults and children. All the volunteers are foreign, meaning they come from countries outside Greece. Most come for shorter periods of time, two-three weeks, and a few stay for several months. All the volunteers at the time of my fieldwork came from countries in the Global North. During my fieldwork, most of them had volunteered on Lesvos before, and only for two of them it was their first time. To volunteer with Home for All, they have to bring a minimum donation of 600 euro. They get free accommodation during their stay in a shared volunteer home that fits three to four volunteers, which is the maximum number of volunteers they usually have. In this sense, the volunteers have a dual role; income and labor. The income the volunteers bring through donating is used to multiple ends – but mainly to cover the employee's salary, and if there is any extra this is used for other expenses. Some volunteers also crowdfund extra for specific expenses, which at the time of my fieldwork was olive trees that they were planting around the farm. If Home for All needed the money for other unforeseen expenses, such as the breakdown of the van, they inquired the volunteers about this before using the donations for other means, and volunteers seemed always to trust Home4Alls decisions on what to use donations for. This role of an income provider puts them in a reciprocal relationship with the organization, in the sense that they are part of sustaining their operations and the worker's salary, whilst in return they get free accommodation and the opportunity to volunteer which may align with personal motivations for meaningful engagement.

We are standing around the wooden table, ready to start chopping vegetables for the meals. Tomatoes are the first veggie to start, and there is a lot! They are used for both tomato sauce, and salad. We start by sorting out the nicer ones for salad, and the mushy ones for sauce. One of the volunteers asks another who has been volunteering for a longer period about the size of the cubes, to which he answers; "That's good. Mainly try to think what you would have liked to have in your own salad".

Fieldnotes, July 2024

As described above the foreign volunteers put care and effort into the food they prepare. Volunteers often express a genuine excitement about their work, particularly when distributing food to local institutions and the refugee camp. Their interactions with the local community are relatively small but meaningful, marked by expressions of gratitude from both sides. The volunteers engage in meaningful activities by preparing and distributing meals that contribute to the well-being of others in need, whilst also feeling useful. This is exemplified in Mark's, one of the long-term volunteers, expression of frustration when the van broke down and they had to cancel the day's food distribution. However, when they van was suddenly fixed and there was only 30 minutes to get the food prepared, he did not hesitate to start cooking and still put care into the meals. Volunteers often voiced proudly and discussed together how they truly felt that the project they were engaging in at Home for All was meaningful and different.

The interdependence between volunteers and Home for All is clear. Volunteers provide resources and labor, yet they are also part of the larger mission to bridge between locals, refugees, and the international humanitarian community. Their contributions help sustain the organization, while their experience working directly with refugees and locals fosters a deeper connection to the issues at hand and Lesvos as such. Volunteers also receive something in return: a unique opportunity for meaningful engagement in a local, grassroots organization. The roles within Home for All are equally interdependent. Volunteers help with food preparation and distribution, but they rely on the employees to grow and harvest the food. Employees, in turn, receive salary for their labor, which come from the donations made by volunteers. This reciprocal relationship ensures that both groups have a stake in the organization. Home for All thus becomes a serious game with its own intentions and purpose in which the people involved, actors, pursue their own projects and goals through engaging. Different projects merge within the *serious game* of

Home for All. These of course, can sometimes collide as well – making peoples own projects visible or collide with the *serious game*.

Volunteers' frustrations with free food for struggling locals, especially when questioning whether they should pay, reflect the asymmetries and collisions of the game. While the intention is often good, people carry assumptions shaped by their own social worlds, sometimes clashing with the lived realities of those they aim to support. This becomes visible e.g. when volunteers get frustrated over not being able to distribute food due to issues with the van. Their own individual aspirations here clash with the constraints Home for All must adhere to. Their agency, in Ortner's terms, is situated: it is both enabled and limited by the constrained environment, such as financial access, short-term engagement, and the informal authority of donor-volunteer. Yet within these constraints, volunteers also experience transformation and change. Many return to Lesvos, express sadness when leaving, or vow to continue advocating in their home countries. These are not minor outcomes. They reflect the relational entanglements that serious games make visible. Humanitarianism here becomes not just an institutional structure, but a web of personal, affective, and political commitments enacted in real time. This section sets the stage for exploring how refugees and local employees, whose projects, labor, and aspirations are equally essential to the *game* of sustaining Home for All. Their everyday acts, too, are grounded in navigating constraint with intention that I turn to next.

More Than a Workplace

Employees at Home for All, including refugees and locals, perform a range of tasks on the farm, including harvesting, weeding, and animal care. Their relationship with the organization resembles more of a work relation: they are paid for their work, which creates an employer-employee dynamic. However, this role also places them in a reciprocal relationship with Home for All, as their labor is essential to Home for All operations and the organization's mission.

I am weeding in the parsley section together with some employees, and Matt passes by with the harvest from today that he is on his way to deliver to the volunteers in the kitchen for cooking. "Wow, a lot of eggplants today – nice work", I say while he passes by. To which he replies: "Thank you. Well, its my job. Its hard work, but all work is hard. Its work".

Conversation with Matt, Fieldnotes, July 202

The employees see their job at the farm as work. Some describe it as "hard work" as above, but add that all work is hard. They do not view Home for All as aid, or charity, as they get salary for their work. However, Home for All is more than a workplace; it is a space where people engage by using the opportunities available to them to build their livelihoods or pursue their goals, even within structural constraints. Refugees save their wages with specific goals in mind, by engaging in economic opportunities, despite structural restrictions and barriers. They organize their own tasks at the farm, deciding among themselves who will tend to the animals, weed, plant, or harvest vegetables. Some take responsibility for looking into improving farming techniques, such as adjusting planting methods or experimenting with irrigation. These actions show agency and decision-making within constraints, rather than passive participation. This interplay between the different groups within Home for All create an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual support. It also highlights the importance of shared routines, such as the harvesting of vegetables and the distribution of food, in fostering social bonds.

I arrive to the farm (Home for All) in the early morning before the foreign volunteers arrive. Two employees, Matt and Kostas, come walking out of the fields with buckets full of vegetables in vibrant colors and many different shapes. They weigh each bucket and write down the total amount of each vegetable. The excess vegetables that they don't use for cooking for food distribution in the refugee camp and to local institutions, gets sold to a local producer. Mark, one of the foreign volunteers, has arrived early as well and is standing by the olive trees, watering them one by one. "Sara, can you grab a hose and help me? I need to finish soon so that the workers can the water for the vegetables!". I grab a hose. Each olive tree needs about 2 minutes of water. The workers start harvesting okra, while they're waiting for the water. All the workers harvest Okra together. Kostas, the Greek employee who doesn't speak much English, approaches Mark – "Cut?". Mark answers, "Yes, thank you. I need parsley today for the salad. Also, do we have cucumber, aguri?". Kostas replies, "I go cut". When I finish the olive tree watering,

I go to join the workers in the okra field. Everyone is wearing long-sleeves and gloves because the okra plant irritates the skin. The other volunteers arrive, greet everyone, before they get started on food preparation. Kostas delivers todays harvest to them. Soon after, one of the founders stop by with a local woman who has a basket with her, which she starts harvesting vegetables into.

Fieldnotes, August, 2024

The interactions between people at Home for All are shaped by language barriers and cultural differences. In the above vignette, Kostas, who does not speak English, communicates with a volunteer, Mark, about harvesting vegetables. Despite the language barrier, Kostas and Mark collaborate effectively, with Mark asking Kostas to cut parsley and cucumbers for a salad. Another example of language barriers contributing to misunderstandings and misread intentions. In the morning pick-up of the employees in the city center to the farm, Matt was interacting with Mark as he usually does, joking and making fun of him. During the weeding section mid-day while Mark was cooking, and me and Matt were weeding, Matt stared intensely at Mark and rolled his eyes. Later, Mark served the employees lunch in the shade by the trees, and Matt didn't make his usual comments on Mark's cooking. Mark seemed surprised and said: "Its terrifying when you're quite". To which Matt replies " Don't talk to me, we are not friends anymore. Just work now". Mark decides to have a conversation with Matt at the end of the day to figure out what has happened between them. Matt explains that when Mark was introducing a new volunteer to the group he had called Matt "a dog". At first Mark was confused, and then he realized that he had said an English wordplay. "He barks like a dog, but he's soft inside". He explains the expression to Matt, as he didn't mean to call him a dog, but it is an expression he used to explain why Matt often shouts. He called it "your way of communication, but even though you sometimes scream, you are kind and we know that". For Matt, he explains that he took the comment very seriously, as a dog in his culture is at the very bottom. This situation both highlights how the constrained place people act in shapes their interactions, in terms of such tensions as above. I cannot claim to know why such tensions occur, but it is not surprising considering the stressful environment they are placed in. In addition, the difference between people equally affect their interactions.

Kostas is drinking coffee with John. He is talking and talking to him in Greek, laughing and pointing at things. John laughs with him. When I ask John if he understands, he says "Not so much, I just nod and smile. He is funny anyway". Matt comes to join us in the sun while shouting "Malakas" to us. He turns to me and says "We only say Malaka to good friends. If you say it to someone else, it means something very bad. But to friends, it means I like you. It's a way of joking with each other".

Fieldnotes, August 2024

Malaka means idiot in Greek, but is a common expression to use to people you know, as a way to joke. When they say it to each other it is a symbol of friendship. These daily exchanges create opportunities for learning, and humor plays a central role in easing communication gaps.

While weeding, Eyob is listening to music on his phone. He doesn't have headphones, so he has the music playing from his phone's built-in speaker on full volume and in his pocket, while he is singing and humming the lyrics. He tells me that the song is from his home country, and is about a refugee living in a new country. The song is about missing your mother as a refugee in an unfamiliar place.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

Several of the refugee employees are, even after given asylum, struggling or dealing with different ideas of the future and the past. Some, have family stuck in war-torn countries and areas and are worrying. The employees see each other, and find ways to show support and care. The routine of working on the farm, caring for animals, planting vegetables, harvesting for cooking, provides a sense of structure and normalcy. Some workers express that engaging in daily tasks helps them mentally cope with uncertainty about their future. The work then becomes not only about economic survival, but a form of self-regulation and grounding.

It´s 5 AM and we´re all sitting outside the shed, drinking coffee, and slowly waking up. The cats are awake – playing in the hay. The sky is dark, but clear – and the moon and the stars give some light in the darkness. Everyone is waiting for the sun to rise, so they can start work. Before the first coffee is down, it's very silent. But soon, all start waking up. Kostas, the Greek employee, has an old Nokia phone in his pocket – he can't read, so Matt reads a message in Greek out loud to him from the doctor. "The translator", the others call Matt. He speaks Greek, in addition to four other languages, and Kostas doesn't speak English. However, the conversation flows, and they all talk. Mostly about who is the biggest boss – or the biggest Malaka (idiot). "Robert is not Kala", Kostas says – and makes a sad facial expression while pointing at John. He´s trying to make him laugh, then shrugs his shoulders as he doesn't understand what's bothering him. John just looks down at his phone. The past days he´s been quiet. The others say he´s thinking about his future. What should he do, where should he go, should he stay? kostas grabs him over the shoulder and says," you good? We work!" John laughs a little, and they all start putting jackets on to pick the okra. John is looking for gloves, and asks Matt for the keys to the shed. Matt makes some jokes and turns his back. John is not in the mood for jokes, and they start arguing. Matt insists he doesn't have the keys to the shed, and John insists Matt is lying, as he is always in charge of the keys. The others rush around to calm down the situation. They start making jokes to ease the tension. "Come on Malaka, it's time for okra".

Fieldnotes, August 2024

This vignette from the field describes several important aspects of the relations created and sustained at Home for All. Kostas, the Greek local employee is an important figure at the farm. Kostas is a Greek man who is born and raised on Lesvos. He has never been to school, so he cannot read or write and has no education. He used to work in Moria camp before it burnt down, as a toilet cleaner and emptier. "A shitty job, literally", he called it. Matt, the refugee employee, speaks Greek almost fluently after several years on Lesvos and working together with locals. He helps Kostas and the others with language barriers. Kostas is always checking people's mood and senses when someone is off. Many of them talked about him warmly, also between themselves. When he noticed that someone was feeling down, low or not as talkative, he would ask "You no good? Many days no good." Then he would use humor to try to cheer the person up. He was a spark of kindness in the everyday life at the farm. He cared for the employees. Sometimes he

would organize Ouzo and Sardine nights in his village, and invite everyone at Home for All. He would make sure everyone felt invited, and reinstate it day after day.

The workers, six refugees and Kostas (the local Greek worker) plus me, started work today at 5 AM due to the scorching heat. After the usual morning coffee around the table, we head to the okra fields to do some harvesting. Okra stems and leaves are prickly and can irritate the skin when picking. Therefore, we all put on long sleeves and gloves for harvesting. Each person harvests from one row, and when you finish a row, you have to walk down the same row from the opposite side to double check that you did not miss any. The workers show me what size are ready to harvest, and how to twist them off the stem. The biggest one´s should not be picked, as they stay to produce new flowers. Many of the workers have a strong relationship with Okra, as it was commonly used in their day-to-day life in their home country. The day before, was one of he workers birthdays and he used some of the okra to make a special dish from his home country. "I love okra", he yearned. When picking the Okra, the workers help each other, by double checking rows. They joke around when finding each other's mistakes: "Big Problem you". After harvesting okra we carry the full buckets over to have them weighed before someone drives the Okra together with the other overload harvest of the day to the local producer for re-sell. Then we do another coffee break before starting the weeding.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

Weeding is one of the main activities mid-day at the farm. Its hard work, as even in the dry landscape, the ground water from the irrigation pipe gives lots of life, and there is flora of little green plants trying to steal nutrition. One of the workers explains weeding as; "giving life to the other plants". Another employee longs for "pharmacy" which he refers to pesticides, to ease the issue of overflowing flora stealing nutrition. The parsley plot is the hardest. Nevertheless, the weeding part of the day is also quite nice, everyone is in their row and for me it is soothing. Often, the employees get into deep discussion regarding their future and choices during weeding. Discussing life aspirations, plans, or failures. They discuss what they want to save money for:

"It's not better if you go another place, just sleep, eat, and repeat – here at least you have freedom at the job, friends, nice work place, and money. I've worked 12 other places, most people treated me badly, like a slave. Here they always welcome me. Here I have freedom". The young employee that dreams about reuniting with his brother in another EU country replies: "I need to try."

Conversation between Nawaf and Eyob, Fieldnotes, August 2024

The employees support each other in navigating the present issues of bureaucracy, finding housing and making migration decisions about the future. Those who have lived on Lesvos longer mentor newer arrivals, on how to save money, their own experiences, and handling of asylum procedures. These informal networks show how people exercise agency collectively, reinforcing the idea that they are not passive, but active in shaping their own futures. At Home for All, different aspirations meet and diverge enabling them to engage in projects to navigate the present, which ultimately affects the future, within structures that limit their options. Working on the farm is not just about earning money, as many employees learn new agricultural and business skills, which gives them skills useful for whichever future, in this sense a future-making activity. Home for All becomes a place to gain skills, plan futures, and make choices through social networks and economic stability, which can be seen as an alternative to dependency on formal humanitarian structures. Within Home for All people navigate and use to their own goals – *serious games*. This demonstrates relational humanitarianism, where aid is not just about survival but enabling new forms of agency and inclusion (Brun & Horst, 2023). In the following section, I turn to this aspect of Home for All's efforts in terms of a differently situated humanitarianism.

4.2 Relational Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism Beyond Saving Lives

Home for All's position in the community is unique because it is rooted in both the local social structure and the humanitarian field, which gives them the opportunity to work with both communities. In addition to tending to basic needs through food distribution, Home4All seeks to create long-term solutions for integration and self-sufficiency for individuals who have been granted asylum, and locals.

> *Our philosophy is circular. Each part supports each other. We aim to help reduce food insecurity while also giving people the opportunity to rebuild life, start their life again. Every piece works together and supports each other. Refugees can rebuild life through work, and also gain skills to enable them to do other things in other places. We need interaction with locals, so they can cooperate, feel included and see that we need each other. Volunteers are needed for the workload, and they also bring money to support the employees. We know life is difficult on Lesvos, but so is it in other places, here at least we give people a chance to try rebuilding life. It doesn't get easier other places unfortunately. Our goal is to enable people to rebuild their own lives, in the way they themselves wish, and at the same time they gain tools and skills.*
>
> Conversation with Katerina, Fieldnotes, July 2024

One of the key findings in my research highlights how Home for All's approach to humanitarianism differs significantly from traditional definitions, especially those rooted in unequal power dynamics between the helpers and the helped (saver and saved). Home for All's approach blurs these boundaries between who is suffering and distant, as they consider both refugees and locals as integral parts of their community (see also horst, 2006b). Home for All becomes a space where people are not just subjects to aid, but actors in serious games, bringing their own projects and intentions. While foreign volunteers donate money and labor, employees pursue livelihoods and social networks. Their efforts are shaped by structures, yet not wholly defined by them. Although, these roles are not without tensions. Volunteers function simultaneously as income providers and workers, a

position that gives them power. In contrast to empoyees reliance on the organization for economic stability. This creates a reciprocal, yet unequal interdependence, echoing Fassins (2012) concern that even well-intentioned humanitarianism can reinforce paternalistic dynamics when the power to define and respond to crisis lies in the hands of the more resourceful "helpers" (see also De Lauri, 2019). Still, it is important to recognize that these interactions are socially embedded. Taking place within a local, grassroots space where meanings of aid, care, and solidarity are constantly negotiated.

Alchemical humanitarianism (Barnett, 2011) moves beyond bare survival to address systemic inequalities, as in Home for All's approach. This disrupts the emergency imaginary (Calhoun, 2008) by focusing on responses that empower people to make decisions for their futures, as such future-oriented approach. Through employment, their mission is further encapsulated in the idea of enabling people to rebuild their own lives, giving them the tools and skills to do so. This reflects enabling agency, viewing refugees not as passive victims but as active participants in regaining control over their own lives. This perspective contrasts with the traditional view of humanitarian aid, which often positions recipients as powerless. Employees at Home for All develop friendships and support networks, which help them navigate the challenges of life after asylum and in future.This integrating of refugees as paid workers and community members disrupts dominant humanitarian narratives that reduce displaced people to passive victims. Instead, it enables new imaginaries of belonging and futures through meaningful engagement. Home for All's circular philosophy: "every piece supports each other", represents an intentional strategy within the serious game. It pushes against dominant humanitarian models that separate givers from receivers, foreigners from locals, helpers from helped by redefining the terms of engagement: aid is not a gift, but part of a shared social contract rooted in solidarity and interdependence (Rozakou, 2023). Drawing on Raghuram's (2019) concept of emplacing, we can understand this as care emerging relationally, across divisions, and not from distant obligation. The shared labor is a form of what Fassin calls ethics in action, but with a twist. Here, refugees are not only cared for, but are caring, towards one another, volunteers, and even animals. This expands the moral register of humanitarianism to include mutual responsibility, rather than one-directional compassion. Barnett (2011) argues that even the most altruistic humanitarian

efforts contain elements of control. While aid seeks to alleviate suffering, it also creates power imbalances, determining who receives assistance and under what conditions.

Between Ethics of Care and Limitations

The role of humanitarians as decision-makers can sideline the agency of refugees reinforcing paternalistic relationships. Home4All attempts to counteract this dynamic by actively involving refugees in their own rebuilding processes in the present but affectively the future. Fassin (2012) highlights the shift from *bare life* to *qualified life* in humanitarian responses, where humanitarian aid moves beyond survival to address social integration. However, this transition introduces new inequalities, as those in positions of power retain the authority to define and respond to crises. Home for All's approach does not erase power asymmetries; as seen in their reliance on camp data or legal restrictions, they remain constrained by broader structures. Yet they demonstrate how people "stretch the game even as they enact it" (Ortner, 1996, p. 20).

Brun (2016) extends this argument by turning attention to the humanitarian system itself. She critiques the dominant logic of humanitarianism for often neglecting the conditions necessary for people to lead meaningful lives. In her analysis, humanitarian workers themselves can become trapped in this system, caught between the ethics of care and the limitations imposed by organizational mandates. The humanitarian system, focused on survival in the present, tends to render the future irrelevant or inaccessible. This creates a clash of temporalities: while displaced individuals may still orient themselves toward future projects, humanitarian actors often operate within a framework that precludes meaningful engagement with that future. To address this tension, Brun (2016) suggests an ethics of care that is future-oriented; situated in historical time and whose capacity to act is shaped by their ability to envision and move toward desired futures (Fassin, 2012; Jansen, 2016). Without access to such futures, people may survive biologically but feel existentially stuck in a "never-ending present" (Jeffrey, 2008). This framework opens up space for considering how people live, dream, and act within conditions of displacement. In the context of Lesvos, this becomes particularly relevant as refugees, volunteers, and locals all engage in forms of future-making that challenge the restrictive logics of the humanitarian system and reimagine the borderland as a space of relational possibility.

The values underpinning Home for All ´s work align with a sense of home and shared experience. Both locals and refugees are struggling, and Home for All aims to unite these two groups through common goals and concerns by rooting themselves in this context. However, while their approach seeks to promote solidarity, it still operates within a system that contains inherent hierarchies. For example, Eurorelief provides Home for All with data regarding which individuals require additional food based on health needs, and Home for All has limited control over how this data is managed and who receives aid. Similarly, employment opportunities are not directly controlled by Home for All; they are sometimes dictated by other organizations or external factors. This highlights a key ethical dilemma in humanitarian governance (Fassin, 2012; see also Brun, 2016). While Home for All strives to provide dignity and agency through its community-based approach, the distribution of aid remains to some extent governed by external authorities, which can perpetuate power imbalances. Finally, as discussed by Ambrosini (2022), humanitarian organizations can sometimes reinforce state control and policies, despite their altruistic aims. By managing refugee populations and offering support that keeps them away from the borders of the Global North, NGOs may inadvertently contribute to the broader geopolitical agenda of containment. While Home for All ´s approach seeks to empower and integrate refugees, it still operates within a larger system that governs and regulates migration, making it difficult to fully challenge or subvert the policies that restrict refugees' movement and opportunities.

4.3 Creating "home": a Chapter Conclusion

One of the key findings highlights how Home4All's approach to humanitarianism differs significantly from traditional models. While humanitarian responses often focus on saving lives through immediate response during crises, my research shows how care can take alternative forms rooted in community, mutual engagement, and long-term inclusion (Brun & Horst, 2023). Conventional humanitarianism is often associated with alleviating suffering for distant strangers, but Home for All's embeddedness blurs these boundaries and they consider both refugees and locals as integral parts of their community (see also: Horst, 2006b). Aid becomes embedded in the social (Brun & Horst, 2023) by recognizing the relations that emerge as a consequence of it and emphasis lies on shared responsibility, which challenges the binary of helper/helped. The organization is embedded in the structures of the humanitarian space, yet they actively advance their values of dignity,

solidarity, and community-building. As Ortner (1996;1999) reminds us, *serious games* are not without power asymmetries, they are shaped by inequality, and power as such is woven into its rules and dynamics. In this context, Home for All attempts to foster relational and community-based models of aid; however, they still have to navigate a field defined by other actors. The shift from viewing refugees as recipients to viewing them as community members and agents is significant. Yet, as Fassin (2012) and Barnett (2011) argue, even these progressive models must contend with the reproduction of power in humanitarian settings. Serious games, as a framework, allows us to hold both truths at once: that agency exists, and that it is shaped, restricted, and always negotiated in relation to power. The relationships within the organization are complex, shaped by both shared tasks and differences. However, these interactions ultimately create a sense of community as all groups work together to address the ongoing needs of both refugees and locals. This relational approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of all actors involved, highlighting the importance of mutual dependence and solidarity in humanitarian efforts.

The organization´s roots in the local community of Lesvos highlight the potential for fostering resilience through localized approaches, in order to rethink humanitarian practices beyond emergency response. While many refugees are reduced to the passivity of marginality, they resist this label by creating a space to navigate the present in order to pursue livelihoods and future-oriented projects. My research shows how Home for All fosters an alternative model to traditional humanitarianism where aid is not about mere survival, but creating pathways for the present and future (Brun, 2015). The employees are not merely aid recipients; they are workers, decision-makers, and contributors to the organizations functioning. Hope is relational and situated (Brun, 2015), and at Home for All it is sustained by work, community, present and past experiences. Agency thus emerges in negotiating constraints and possibilities within the humanitarian system (Ortner, 2006). I now continue this story in the last analytical chapter which focuses on how Home for All is a place where images of belonging are created, thus reshaping the humanitarian space and borderland.

5. Images of Belonging

Home for All reshapes the humanitarian borderland by rooting their response into the context that shapes Lesvos as a place; the relational, everyday life within and beyond. The *webs of relations* between refugees, locals, and foreign volunteers creates a place of belonging which is stretched beyond its physical location. However, this place is marked by inequalities within these webs of relations such as; contrasting experiences of mobility and attachment, as some are able to come and go freely, while others remain rooted in uncertainty, longing and hope. In this chapter my focus is on how humanitarian aid and care emerge from within the community itself. How Home for All integrates the community in their work exemplifies, I will argue, what Rozakou (2016) and Brun & Horst (2023) describe as solidarity- and relational humanitarianism (see also: Brkovic, 2016), grounded as it is in local relationships and social contracts, rather than distant hierarchical aid. Such practices *emplace* care by rooting it within local socal structures rather than imposing external hierarchies (Rughuram, 2023). Ambrosini's (2022) concept of "de-bordering solidarity" can also resonate here, I suggest, in that it highlights how grassroots aid challenges restrictive border regimes by fostering inclusive, community-based response. As I will show, these embedded relational practices enacted by Home for All unfold within a broader context of Lesvos, its history of prevailing crises and exclusion as well as thoughts about aspirations and longing for a better life. However, the possibility of belonging in Lesvos also for refugees exists in tension with the persistent imagined elsewhere – especially the good life in Europe that stands just beyond the horizon. We will see how Lesvos as a place is not static, but is constituted by the social relations and power that flow through it (cf. Massey, 1994). In this context, Lesvos becomes a site of differentiated mobility where some groups are able to imitate movement (e.g, tourists, volunteers).

This chapter is thus divided into these three themes; *Changing Humanitarian Space through Embedding*, *Images of Europe and Unequal Mobility*, and *Web of Relations: Creating Belonging*. Throughout this chapter, I explore how the shared practices of living, working, and imagining futures on Lesvos weave together a complex, shifting fabric of community; a sense of belonging shaped by both solidarity and difference, attachment and displacement. Importantly, I emphasize that people are not isolated agents (Ortner,

1996, 1999); they are always situated in webs of relationships, and the games they play are socially and historically constructed. That is; individuals within Home for All engage in the overall game or intention of the organization; providing food and employment, however this is embedded in the locality of Lesvos. Yet, through engaging in Home for All's project, people also pursue and act on their own intentions, this together reproduces or transforms the very structures Home for All is embedded in, as this chapter finally will argue. As we will see in the next sections, these embedded practices are not without contradictions or inequalities. However, they carve out a space where refugees, locals, and volunteers participate in building something shared; a community that, while shaped by the crisis, is not defined or hindered by it (Vigh, 2008; Ortner, 2006).

Place, as Doreen Massey (1994) reminds us, is not a static bounded site. Rather, it is a dynamic constellation of social relations, a meeting point of histories, movements, and interactions. Places are "… constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey, 1994, p. 154). They are always in the process of being made and re-made, shaped by the flows of people, ideas, emotions, and power that converge and collide within them. Rather than being closed or self-contained, places like Lesvos are open and relational, produced through their connections with the wider world (Massey, 1994, p. 155). As such, I explore how Lesvos is constituted as such a "nodal point" (Massey, 1994) of social relations, shaped by the intersecting trajectories of refugees, volunteers, and locals; that is their own projects and intentions (Ortner, 2006). Through everyday practices at Home for All of care, work, and community-building, new forms of belonging and meaning are created, ultimately contributing to reshaping the humanitarian landscape on Lesvos. This relational view of place allows us to see how individuals, despite operating within structures of exclusion and control, actively participate in reshaping Lesvos as place through pursuing their own projects while engaging in Home for All. Drawing on Massey's relational view of place and Ortner's *serious games*, I argue that these practices both reproduce and transform the games of the humanitarian space and that of the borderland on Lesvos.

First, we must return to Lesvos as a place, marked by a particular history of migration and crises which shapes Home for All's interactions in the field, that is crisis as context as Vigh views it (2008). In this chapter we shall see how Home for All has developed a method of emergency relief that emphasizes belonging and rootedness in the local community. For many of the refugees, their journey ends at Lesvos, and how can Home for All come to terms with that and develop their livelihoods on Lesvos. They do that in very specific ways, first and foremost by establishing a firm relation to the local community, secondly by utilizing relations between actors to stretch their efforts and reach beyond, and lastly reshaping the image of Lesvos as static to a place of belonging constituted by the social relations that have different aspirations and experiences that sometimes meet or clash (Massey, 1994).

5.1 Reshaping The Humanitarian Space

> *This community is not new to crises; many are themselves descendants of refugees. We have reacted to different crises before. There is a possibility to use these lessons and resources.*
>
> Conversation in the field, Fieldnotes, August 2024

Traditional models of humanitarianism often position humanitarian aid as a top-down intervention delivered by external actors to passive recipients in emergency settings (Feldman, 2008; Fassin, 2012; Calhoun, 2008). Home for All exemplifies a form of embedded, relational humanitarianism that emerges from within the community itself. Situated within and developed from within the historical and social context (Vigh, 2008) of Lesvos, Home for All challenges hierarchical structures by fostering everyday practices of mutual support and solidarity (Brun & Horst, 2023) among refugees, locals, and volunteers. This section explores how Home for All reconfigures the humanitarian space on Lesvos – transforming it from a site of crises into a space co-created belonging and rootedness in the community of Lesvos.

The statement above is from a Greek aid worker, who works at a community center for asylum-seekers just outside Mavrovouni camp. Her statement reflects the long history of

displacement and economic precarity on Lesvos. The island has long been shaped by waves of migration, crisis, and resilience, a history that continues to inform both local and refugee experiences today (Vigh, 2008). All the people I engaged with brought up the issue of engaging with the local community. Several emphasized that Lesvonians are not new to crises, and most are even descendants of refugees. They have reacted and responded to different forms of crises before (Tsoni, 2016).

Establishing Relations with the Community and The Role of volunteers

Home for All emphasize the importance of this context that Lesvos holds, and utilize this in their response. They find ways to collaborate with the local community in order to share lessons and resources. Unlike NGOs that focus exclusively on refugee populations, Home for All has deliberately developed a method that includes struggling locals in its aid network, both as workers and as beneficiaries. As Katerina explained:

> *Lesvos has plenty of low resource families, and as we have strong ties in the community – we aim for helping our community as well. This of course strengthens our ties in the community by supporting them as well.*
>
> Conversation with Katerina, Fieldnotes, August 2024

The above quote is about Home for All's commitment to giving free meals and work to local Greeks that are struggling. Home for All acknowledges and emphasizes the impact of migration on the local community. In 2015, Lesvos became the epicenter of the European refugee crisis, but the local community was already experiencing its own economic and following austerity crisis. Locals were not on the margins of the crisis; they were right in the midst of it. Struggling with high unemployment and strained social services the local community are themselves navigating overlapping crises of their own pressing needs while simultaneously responding to the arrival of refugees. By providing food to institutions for disabled individuals, Home for All is establishing a relation which stretches beyond the immediate needs of refugees to the wider fabric of local society. This form of care reflects a broader ethic of rooted solidarity in that it acknowledges the interconnectedness of crises and treats it as a common reality that embraces both groups (Vigh, 2008), and builds a shared space of support across difference. This is not purely

altruistic, it is a deliberate attempt to strengthen their legitimacy and role in the local community. As Massey reminds us (1994), place is made through relations, relations that stretch outwards. And relations that stretch inwards. In helping the local population, Home for All not only bridges the divide between groups – locals, refugees, and volunteers-, but also ensures community integration, trust and continuity; important elements in sustaining a model of relational, embedded care (see also Brun & Horst, 2023).

Foreign volunteers primarily interact with locals through the food distribution program where they deliver meals to local schools and institutions, and through their colleagues that work at the farm. Volunteers express gratitude for the opportunity to contribute, and locals in turn appreciate the support they receive. However, these interactions also highlight the power dynamics at play. As previously mentioned, volunteers pay weekly to come and volunteer, that is to work with Home for All as part of their contribution. Some volunteers express frustration with the idea of giving food away free thereby questioning whether it would be more sustainable for local families to contribute to the costs. However, the founder points out that many of these families are facing similar hardships and cannot afford to contribute financially. This situation underscores the challenges that Home for All faces in balancing the needs of both communities while maintaining its mission. One volunteer explained it to me as a system of "hand to mouth". This interdependent relationship between the volunteers and Home for All can be seen to in part hinder their sustainability, as they are partly dependent on them for money. The risk is that if volunteer numbers drop, income drops – however, the relationship does enable donations in the future. Many of the volunteers state that they continue to donate and crowdfund when they return to their home countries. The experience makes it easier for them they explain. The experience of volunteering creates some kind of closeness the issues at hand and that helps them to crowdfund and raise awareness at home. In addition, an important task volunteers contribute to Home for All is bringing olive oil made from the farm back to their home countries to sell, this is an aspect I will return to later in this chapter.

The founders of Home4All do see this troubling relationship of dependency on volunteers and expressed on several occasions that they aim to be more independent in terms of

funds. Their goal is to eventually be able to produce enough of their own products, to sell and sustain the operations and salaries from this. Several volunteers also pointed this out as a realistic trajectory for Home for All and supported the founders in this thinking, as they also were worried about the sustainability and vulnerability of resources. This situation underscores the challenges that Home for All faces in balancing the needs of both communities while maintaining its mission. This is an example of how the meeting of projects, that is the different aspirations and goals that indivuals bring in to Home for All, can transform the common project (Ortner, 2006). Everyone meets or joins at home for all for a common purpose, however individuals come into this with different aspirations for being there which ultimately can change Home for All's purpose and directions - or the individuals. This is the serious game.

> These are the olive trees that our olive oil coming from. These trees have soul, centuries of wisdom of nature, thousands of days they see the sunshine and the moonlight at night, their roots deep in the earth, their leaves breathing the cold fresh air on winter, they drink the hot sunny air on summer, they fill their body with clear crystal water coming from the earth and the magic rain drops shower their branches. All this magic, we offer you in a bottle of olive oil to get in your body.
>
> (Quote from Home for All's social media)

Home for All further integrates itself into the island's economic and social fabric by purchasing olives from local farmers, thereby reinforcing the Lesvos's long-standing agricultural heritage. This practice sustains local livelihoods while grounding the organization in place not just a site of crisis, but as a space of production, memory and value. With the olives, Home for All makes olive oil that they sell commercially. Volunteers play a vital role in this process. They often buy large quantities of the oil to resell in their home countries, extending the reach of the project into international markets and through this establishing social networks that stretch beyond Lesvos. This is rooted

in Lesvos, but dependent on and sustained by relations and ties that move across borders. In this way, olive oil becomes a connection that links the work of Home for All to wider solidarities, support networks, and relations beyond Lesvos.

However, the possibility of creating belonging in Lesvos exists in tension with the persistent imagined elsewhere, especially the Europe that stands just beyond the horizon. The next section explores how people construct and relate to Europe as both a physical destination and a powerful imaginary. These reveal how mobility, hope, and exclusion shape belonging in and beyond the borderland.

5.2 Images of Europe: Unequal mobility

For many of my interlocutors, Lesvos is perceived as belonging outside Europe. It is also for them, a borderland. Europe exists as something people aim to reach, something out there, something further ahead, both spatially as outside Lesvos or as belonging to the future. This section examines how people, both locals and refugees, negotiate the idea of Europe from the margins, although still part of the EU and absolutely part of Europe on the map. It also holds symbolic and emotional weight for local Greek residents and foreign volunteers. Their imaginaries contribute to how hope is sustained, challenged, or redefined on the island.

I am on the direct charter-flight with Apollo from Oslo to Lesvos. The aircraft is fully booked, almost 200 passengers. Most are Norwegians travelling in couples or families. The flight takes almost four hours. I have never taken a chart-flight, or a direct flight to Lesvos before, it was never an option. The number of people going there surprises me. So surprised that I actually start wondering if I might be on the wrong flight? However, as the plane starts lowering and I see land, I can tell we are heading to Lesvos. From the sky you can see the dry landscape, mountains, and the small passage of water that separates Lesvos from Turkey. When the plane lands, we are welcomed on the runway by a line of travel agency workers greeting all the passengers. Most passengers are then escorted by an Apollo employee, who follows them to their transportation heading to a big resort – south on the island. I, on the other hand, take a taxi to my own accommodation.

Fieldnotes, July, 2024

I have included this vignette from my fieldnotes to illustrate a striking contrast that became evident upon my arrival. Lesvos had become both a tourist destination and continuously also a *borderland*. The experience of flying in on a direct charter flight surrounded by relaxed affluent vacationers headed to beach resorts contrasted sharply with the island I had come to know through previous visits. What was once primarily marked by emergency and displacement now also served as a vacation site, layered with divergent mobilities and imaginaries. Of course, this is always the case, but it became vivid to me through this experience. This moment captures a broader development on Lesvos where the presence of tourists, aid workers, and asylum-seekers reflect deeply unequal forms of movement and access. While some can come and go, others remain stuck. This highlights the differentiated experiences of Europe, and Lesvos, within the same physical place.

Everyone I talked to during my fieldwork brought this up as a new element. The local car and scooter rental company was thrilled, their business had tripled in just a couple of months and they had never been busier. The workers in the cafés were constantly running on their feet to take and deliver orders as all the tables were full. In April 2024, Greece and Turkey launched their new fast-track visa agreement which allows Turkish tourists to stay up to a week without apply for the full EU visa (Ekathimerini, April 2024). Throughout the summer, Lesvos saw a high increase of these tourists and it had a huge effect on the economy which increased revenues by over 40 % compared to 2023 (Manavis, 2024). Not only Turkish tourists increased, as the number of charter tourists from other countries also rose significantly this year (Manavis, 2024). Most of the local Greeks I came in contact with were thrilled by these increases in visitors, coupled with the decrease of people seeking safety which many claimed is the main cause to the increase in tourism.

Lesvos, once a tourist destination that later turned into a borderland as the multiple crises unfolded and saw tourist numbers dropped and did so over time. Now once again, tourists are coming back to the island. My taxi driver from the airport, and who continued to be my go-to driver, believed that the increase in tourists is due to decrease of people arriving to their shores. Importantly, the decreases in arrivals to the shore are also connected to the violent mechanisms hindering refugees such as earlier referred to “pushbacks”, and

the other mechanisms of keeping people in restricted camps far away from the touristy areas.

Many of my interlocutors both within and outside of Home for All both locals, volunteers, and refugees, told me about Vastria,. They all share fears and thoughts about it. John called it "a prison for refugees". No one is allowed to come close to Vastria however; I took by scooter and drove as close as was allowed. It's in the middle of the island, surrounded by a dry forest landscape. The road was sandy and rocky, no paved roads in site.

Fieldnotes, August 2024

This is further exemplified in the construction of a prisonlike camp, Vastria, in a landlocked area in the middle of the island (Legal Centre Lesvos, 2024). This camp has been halted due to human rights and environmental concerns, however many fear that it will soon become a reality. The government plans to host asylum-seekers in this structure while awaiting their decision (Legal Centre Lesvos, 2024). Recently, the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum reported that the construction of Vastria is nearly complete and will replace Mavrouvoni (AMNA, 2025). Home for All, and other NGOs I engaged with during my fieldwork had heard rumors that no NGOs would be given access inside, it will be completely cut off from civil society and state run. This creates a place not of belonging, but of exclusion and unwelcoming – in which is also a context that shapes the environment in which Home for All, and the people within, are embedded in. This further intensifies the image of Lesvos not as a permanent or potential home for people arriving, but as a place of confinement or temporality.

These movements illustrate the unequal nature of mobility in between Europe and the borderland: while some individuals can travel freely as tourists, researchers (including myself), or foreign volunteers, others must navigate restrictive and often dangerous conditions to seek safety while still others experience immobility and a sense of being stuck. These differentiated experiences will be described in what follows, in order to explore how these experiences shape Lesvos and the reality of Home for All´s work.

At a local café, a young local Greek student, Sophia, shared her desire to leave Lesvos, reflecting a similar perspective to the asylum-seekers and refugees described previously.

I want to leave and go anywhere. This is Europe, but at the same time not. Life is very hard here.

Conversation with Sophia, Fieldnotes, August, 2024

Sophia describes Europe as a place she wants to reach, and as Lesvos and herself outside of this. She believes life is better in Europe, "… where one can earn a living and not just work to cover expenses", she lamented. Sophia studies at the university, while working almost every day at the local café in order to pay the rising rental and living costs. She wonders how life in Europe is like, and pictures Berlin as a place where people are free and can afford to live not only survive, in contrast to how she describes her life on Lesvos. She, as many others at this borderland, do not consider Lesvos or Greece as Europe. Kostas who used to work in Moria to clean toilets (chapter 3) is very happy to have found a job with Home for All. He has no education and is illiterate. At Home for All he has been given a role and a purpose both within Home for All and among the employees. Through his previous job in Moria, he met Home for All. Through Home for All he meets the other people, employees and volunteers, in which he becomes a social network for others and is important. For him, Lesvos for all its hardship and precariousness is a place not only of survival, but also opportunity.

Many of the foreign volunteers I met at Home for All had been to Lesvos before and continue to return to volunteer. Some even come back as tourists, bringing their families to show them Lesvos, as conditions have seemingly improved. Me and foreign volunteers alike, have the privileged position of moving freely in and out of the borderland, whilst returning to our home. Still, many continue to return to Lesvos as volunteers, and express feelings of sadness about leaving. However, for them Lesvos has become a site of belonging, although quite differ one from Kostas.

It is Andrew's last day. He has volunteered with Home4All for three weeks, using his holiday for this cause, as a primary school teacher back home he has a long holiday. We are in the car driving to distribute food to the local institutions. As he starts talking about how strange it will be to go home, and engage in "normal" life again. He plans to come back next year, and wants to bring his teenage children with him next time, as he believes it will be a meaningful experience for them. Susan, the other short-term volunteer, agrees. This is her third time here, and after her first visit she brought her daughter on her following trip.

Fieldnotes, July 2024

These volunteers discussion regarding feelings of longing to Lesvos, while also undoubtedly belonging in the privileged position of being able to return to a home elsewhere, highlights both how the borderland is experienced and imagined. Volunteers frequently expressed opposition to European border policies, seeing them as mechanisms that keep people out at all costs. Volunteers who return repeatedly often demonstrate a sense of attachment to Lesvos, driven by resistance and solidarity. Their criticisms of Europe's restrictive border policies challenge the exclusionary nature of the EU border regime. However, many volunteers acknowledge that their work at Home for All helps only a small fraction of the people in need. They often expressed frustration, feeling that they could do more for more people. One volunteer referred to their involvement at Home for All as being in "an idyllic bubble", isolated from the larger, more difficult realities faced by refugees. Still, they found hope in Home for All's model, which contrasts with what they described as the dehumanizing nature of many larger humanitarian initiatives: "Here they don't just give people the fish, but actually give them the fishing rod—so they can learn and do it for themselves." (Susan Volunteer, August, 2024). These reflections from volunteer render visible in part their intention and purpose of engaging at Home for All, as a meaningful contribution. Sometimes the project of Home for All clashes with volunteers own ideas of what is good, as described in their reflections regarding wishing to help more. However, they converge in their idea that Home for All's method of a long-term response is morally good. Even within these spaces of solidarity, there are differences in mobility and privilege that ultimately shape relations.

Two of the volunteers are going to travel by car to a beach village the upcoming long weekend, as there is a national holiday and food distribution will be closed to both the camp and the local institutions. John, one of the employees, starts laughing. He will be going to work, as the farm does not close. "The animals still need food, and the work won't do itself. I would love a holiday, that is actually what I'm saving for, but I can't afford to miss a few days of work.

Conversation at Home4All, Fieldnotes, August 2024

This vignette illustrates again, these differentiated positions within a place, even in spaces of belonging. John makes 30 euro a day, which works out to be about 800 euro a month roughly by his own calculations. Him and his wife pay 300 euro in rent a month which they split regarding to who has most money that month. In addition to working on the farm, John does other little jobs around the community to earn some extra money, such as paint jobs, and helping with construction at the local stadium for big events. He and his wife have decided to stay on Lesvos and rebuild life there – and the goal they have in sight is a holiday to somewhere.

The volunteer's ability to come and go, volunteer abroad, leave, and return – reflect these inherent differentiated positions in the borderland. Volunteers enjoy the privilege of mobility and choice, coming for short stays before returning to lives elsewhere. Refugees and locals, however, have limited mobility and fewer choices. This dynamic reflects what Fassin (2012) calls the *"politics of life,"* where some can move and others remain constrained. There is a visible dialectic between those lives that are acted upon or on behalf of, and those who act. In the vignette, this dynamic is evident in the contrast between John and the volunteers who exercise a freedom and privilege. While volunteers choose to enter the humanitarian space and retain the mobility of *bio*, John reflects *zoe* – a life lived in constrained circumstances, where even modest aspirations like a holiday require effort. The humanitarian borderland then, is not a neutral meeting place or nodal point (Massey), but a place structured by differentiated access to mobility and autonomy, echoing Fassin's (2007, p. 607) claim that the inequality between these lives is both ethically troubling due to this dialectic, however structurally tolerated due to the altruism of humanitarianism.

Susan, who brought her daughter with her to Lesvos to volunteer with Home for All on her second trip, described how she saw it change her daughter. On the plane ride back home, her daughter expressed frustration over a couple of tourists drinking beer and laughing. One of the tourists complained to the stewardess that the food was cold. Susan's daughter sighed, and started crying. She asked her mom, «People don't understand, it doesn't matter if your food is cold. At least you have food. Why don't people understand?». I cannot say or delve into here what these personal reasons or aspirations might be. However, a small reflection is needed. As we know (Fassin, 2012; Malkki, 2015), helping others is not always purely altruism. In some ways, it is also useful for oneself, either in terms of educating oneself, or maybe even feeling better about ones safe and secluded life back home.

These differing perspectives described in this section illustrate how for some Europe represents a space of opportunity and escape while Lesvos, although part of Europe on the map, is perceived as peripheral. This mirrors Massey's (1994) argument that place is not static, but is constituted by the social relations and power that flow through it. In this context, Lesvos becomes a site of differentiated mobility where some groups are able to imitate movement (e.g., tourists, volunteers), while others such as refugees or even locals experience constraint or exclusions. Kosta's positioning of Lesvos as a place opportunity, contrasted with Sophia's aspirational orientation of Europe, reveals how strategies, desires and positionalities intersect within place (Massey, 1994; Vigh, 2008; Ortner, 1996). These experiences do not simply occur in Lesvos but rather produce Lesvos as a social and political space shaped by histories of displacement, economic austerity, and contested belonging.

Volunteers, refugees, and locals do not move through Lesvos in the same way. Yet, they engage together at Home for All in a common project. For refugees like John, staying becomes a form of survival strategy; for the local student, dreaming of Europe becomes a quiet act of aspiration. These are not just expressions of inequality. They are engagements with the structures that shape movement, opportunity, and hope. These movements, ideas and experiences of Lesvos, relate to ideas about Europe, and ultimately

contribute to shaping Lesvos as a place. Although there are shared ideas and desires about leaving the borderland, still there are differentiated positions within this of course. However, this does explain how even for people belonging within the borderland, there is an idea about Europe and a different future. In that sense, this creates a shared sense of the borderland for all. As some move through Lesvos temporarily, others remain in more permanent, though often constrained, conditions. Yet even within this place of unequal freedom, people craft forms of connection, meaning and attachment. The following section explores how spaces of belonging are made in the borderland at Home4All as a situated process that emerges from the constraints and possibilities shaped by mobility, care, and solidarity (Vigh, 2008).

5.3 Webs of Relations: Creating Belonging

In the following, I explore how *webs of relations* (Ortner, 1999) play out in daily life at Home4All, and how this transforms and challenges ideas about Lesvos as a place. They seek to transform the borderland from exclusion to a place of belonging. This is visible in how volunteers, refugees, and locals co-create belonging through collaboration, humor and mutual reliance, solidarity is practiced - however it is not free from structural imbalances. Volunteers, coming from the Global North, are vital to Home4All's functioning, but embody a privileged mobility that contrasts sharply with the constrained lives in which they interact. These dynamics highlight how belonging and place, is shaped by certain structures shaped as connections to the outside (Massey, 1994; Ortner, 1996, 1999). The web of relations at Home4All emerges as people engage in shared *serious games* (Ortner, 1996); project that create meaning and belonging even within constrained conditions. However, people's position in these games are shaped by unequal structures; not all are equal players. Drawing from Massey (1994), place is continuously made and remade through these interactions. Here, everyday moments; chopping vegetables, joking, arguing, and helping, build informal, relational ties that bind people together across difference.

In a conversation about what they are trying to create at the farm, Katerina explains "We know life is difficult here for people, both refugees and locals. But this is also the case other places where people go to from here". She told me that she has seen so many people get their papers (asylum and travel documents), work with them, leave for another EU country in hope that life will be better or different there, but very often returning to Lesvos or Greece. Either because they were deported, or because they didn't like it. She talks about culture. She tells me about an employee who didn't like life in "Europe" – he explained it as cold, not only in temperature, but in the day to day life. People went to work, worked all day, drank coffee all day to stay awake and alive, made dinner, ate dinner, sleep and then repeat. She said he would call often, frustrated, and not finding ease with his choice to live there. He had no friends, and had difficulties getting to know people. She contrasts it with Greece and Greek way of living. This is what she wants to show people, that there is a possibility of staying on Lesvos, and she wants to create that opportunity. "We want to give people a chance here, show them that it is possible to create life also on Lesvos."

Fieldnotes, August 2024

Katerina's reflections on creating a place where people can stay rather than leave, and create roots and belonging highlight how their approach is about creating social belonging in the liminality of the borderland. In this way, it reshapes Lesvos to become more than a border but as a place created by the relations created within it and out (see Brun & Horst, 2023). Through localized, everyday practices of care, solidarity, and inclusion, Home4All challenges dominant ideas of humanitarian aid coming from the outside and instead nurtures a place of shared belonging even within the constraints of the borderland. Through work, relationships, and shared routines at the grassroots organization, refugees, locals, and volunteers participate in relational humanitarianism.

Kostas, the Greek employee who previously cleaned toilets in Moria, now has an active role within Home for All. Here he acts as both a kind co-worker taking care of others, while also making sure the farm is running and jobs are getting done. This is an image of how his agency is utilized in Home for All as it merges with the other projects of people. He is very close with Matt the employee who decided to stay on Lesvos with his wife to rebuild life. Matt operates as a mediator between Kostas and the other employees, as Matt speaks both Greek and English, and Kostas speaks no English. Matt and Kostas, as they are the ones permanently engaged in Home for All - function as the day-to-day leaders of the activities at the farm. They have taken on leader roles within the employee group. In addition, Matt has several other job opportunities outside of the farm such as painting, construction and other smaller gigs. He often encourages the others to speak more Greek, and stands as a reminder or image of hope that life is possible within the borderland. Matt navigates the social embeddedness of Home for All to create social networks beyond in which he can get more jobs and form a viable social network. These experiences of belonging become important for Home for All – as the more of such experiences are created, creates possibilities and hope for others desperate for a viable futures.

Since completing my fieldwork, Home for All has further expanded its model of embedded care by opening a space on the farm which was delayed during my fieldwork. This space is an outside restaurant on the farm where locals, refugees, asylum-seekers from the camp, and volunteers now eat together. This new development materializes their long-standing commitment to inclusion, transforming shared meals into a form of everyday solidarity. This creates a place of belonging, where people with vastly different situations sit at the same table and meet at a common shared moment. In this way, Home for All continues to resist the separation between saved and savers enforced by humanitarian governance, creating instead a space where belonging is enacted through shared experience and bridging divides.

Through the actions and activities at the farm people become actors that react and shapes their world in contrast to the reduction of the migrant to *bare life.* As such, one recognizes the relations that develop in and as a consequence of humanitarian response (cf. Brun & Horst, 2023), as part of the social life of everyday activities. These relations surface from from differently situated positions and experiences. But by bridging different actors together at Home for All and ultimately stretching these relations beyond place, their

response goes beyond saving lives and can potentially disrupt the divide of the relations between saver and saved. Through these interactions – humanitarianism; often thought of as an abstract system of aid and governance, was deeply embedded in the everyday, relational fabric of people's lives at Home for All. This collaboration builds social bonds that go beyond the immediate present of "helping." For example, refugees working alongside foreign volunteers create a shared sense of purpose, while learning skills that can help them in the future. Locals who are participating with them in these efforts see refugees not just as passive recipients of aid but as contributors to the community's well-being.

5.4 The Efforts of Belonging: a Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored how belonging is not a given in the humanitarian borderland of Lesvos, but something actively produced through everyday relations, shared work, and situated ethical commitments. While much of the literature frames borderlands as spaces of waiting, passivity and in-betweenness, the practices unfolding in and around Home for All tell a different story. Here, belonging emerges through cohabitation, interdependence and the ongoing negotiation of difference. These practices complicate simplistic binaries of helper and helped, outsider and inside, refugee and host (brun & Horst, 2023. Etc). They reveal a space within Lesvos that is not fixed, but made through relations: embedded, reciprocal and sometimes fragile. In this sense, Lesvos is not only a place of sudden crisis, but also of potential. Where solidarity is enacted in grounded practice. Belonging is both constrained and imagined, precarious yet real. It is produced not in spite of unequal mobility and marginality, but through and within the place. Lesvos is a borderland marked by hardship and exclusion, but also by creativity, solidarity, and hope. Bringing together these threads, webs of relations, mutual care, and homemaking, reveals the borderland not simply as limbo, but as a place where social life is continually reassembled and reimagined. Refugees, locals and volunteers co-produce new forms of belonging, care and meaning. In doing so, they not only navigate the borderland, they quietly, yet powerfully, transform it. Rather than seeing Lesvos merely as a marginal or static site marked by crisis and waiting, my research shows how it becomes a space of belonging, community, and negotiation, even amidst uncertainty (Vigh, 2008).

Even collaborative, egalitarian spaces are shaped by power and inequality Ortner (1996, 1999) reminds us. The serious games people participate in at Home for All in the same purpose, but different aspirations, show how people navigate, stretch, and sometimes transform the very structures that constrain them but never entirely escape them. These relational practices rooted in everyday tasks and shaped by both solidarity and inequality create a shared sense of belonging and mutual responsibility. Yet, as explored, they also generate tensions around sustainability, dependency, and the broader politics of humanitarianism and mobility on Lesvos.

6. Navigating Liminality: a Thesis Conclusion

At the outset of my thesis I asked *How do people in the borderland of Lesvos navigate liminality, and what does this reveal about agency in humanitarianism?*

In my research, I embarked on the journey to tell a story of hope amidst liminality. Over the course of this research, the narrative evolved into an exploration of how agency can be used by individuals in such environments to effect change in both the present and the future. In the analytical chapters; *Re-Imagining Futures, Building Livelihoods, and Images of Belonging*, I examined how Home for All creates a space for individuals to navigate life and find meaning within the borderland of Lesvos. This landscape shapes people's possibilities and actions, allowing refugees, local Greek residents, and foreign volunteers to engage in the humanitarian context of Lesvos. Through ethnographic fieldwork at Home for All, I have investigated how individuals practice care and belonging, often within the constraints imposed by their circumstances. I illuminated how those on the margins of Europe build, negotiate, and envision futures in a space frequently portrayed as one of passivity or exception. Instead of framing borderlands as areas of crisis, this study highlights the relational and agentive aspects of life within the borderland. Drawing on the concept of *serious games*, I demonstrated how individuals act strategically and ethically in pursuit of various projects. Whether they involve survival, assisting others, building livelihoods, or simply persevering. These projects converge within the shared purpose of the serious game of Home for All where individual endeavours can intertwine or clash, all of which are not detached from power but are intricately embedded within it. Additionally, viewing place as relational, following Massey (1994), has informed my analysis of Lesvos through the lenses of intersecting mobilities, imaginaries, and inequalities. This perspective has enabled me to trace how people co-create meaning and connection, even amidst differences, through their everyday practices.

I organized the analysis into three thematic chapters.

In Chapter 3, *Re-Imagining Futures*, I examined how Lesvos is experienced as a borderland marked by restriction, bureaucratic governance, and constrained mobility. Despite the challenges posed by the asylum system, individuals find ways to act, adapt, and dream. Home for All serves as a site where refugees, volunteers, and locals interact in a manner that disrupts the stagnation typically associated with humanitarianism. People

engage in various projects, both large and small, reflecting serious ethical commitments and aspirations. Whether they are rebuilding lives on the island or strategizing new departures, these actions challenge the perception of borderlands as zones of passivity.

Chapter 4, *Building Livelihoods*, focused on agency within the borderland. Through my fieldwork at the Home for All farm, I have illustrated how relational humanitarianism can create opportunities for co-production and shared work. In a context where many refugees receive minimal post-asylum support, Home for All offers a relational model that connects food production, care, and solidarity moving beyond the immediate need. Livelihoods in this space are not solely about generating income; they also involve crafting dignity, fostering interdependence, and grounding life in a specific place. Volunteers are drawn into these shared projects, participating in the co-creation of a dynamic, mutual, and embedded form of humanitarianism.

In Chapter 5, *Images of Belonging*, I explored how Lesvos is experienced and imagined in complex and often conflicting ways. For some, it represents a place of departure; for others, it is a site of arrival or long-term settlement. These imaginaries are shaped by varying access to mobility, contrasting experiences of Europe, and daily negotiations of identity and place. Through the practices at Home for All, a sense of belonging is co-created across lines of difference, reframing the borderland from a space of exception to one of possibility. These relationships illustrate how humanitarian spaces are also social and affective realms where notions of belonging are continually constructed and reconstructed.

The theoretical framework I employed draws on Ortner's (2006) serious games, Massey's (1994) relational understanding of place, and Vigh's (2008, 2009) social navigation. Ortner helped frame people's actions as intentional and strategic responses to structured fields of power. Rather than treating individuals as either victims or free agents, the concept of serious games captured the ethical and intended dimensions of agency within constraint. Vigh's concept of social navigation added depth by showing how people act in and through constantly shifting crises. Navigating Lesvos is not just about making choices within a fixed field; it is about adapting, redirecting, and recalibrating in a changing field. Finally, Massey allowed me to understand place not as a backdrop, but as co-produced through the intersecting trajectories, practices, and relationships that shape

daily life. By combining these concepts, I have offered an analysis that resists static or exceptional framings of the borderland.

I found that, people in the borderland of Lesvos navigate liminality by engaging in relational, future-oriented practices through which they actively shape lives, build belonging, and reconfigure humanitarian space as a site of agency rather than passivity. Lesvos emerges as a dynamic and relational space produced by policy, history, and action. Home for All exemplifies what Brun and Horst (2023) term “relational humanitarianism”—an approach grounded in embeddedness, mutual recognition, and shared labor. This thesis has also engaged broader debates on humanitarianism and liminality. Rather than seeing liminality as a fixed or static condition, I have shown it to be a processual and negotiated state. People are not simply "in between" but actively navigating through uncertain conditions to shape possible futures. Humanitarianism, in turn, must be understood not only as emergency relief but as a long-term social and political condition. The lives of refugees do not begin or end at the moment of displacement; they unfold in contexts of prolonged uncertainty where care, resistance, and creativity are essential. In Lesvos, people engage in everyday acts that reconfigure what humanitarianism can mean: not merely saving lives, but sustaining them with dignity, purpose, and connection. The borderland is not a blank space between nation-states; it is a lived space where lives are made and remade. In that sense, this research challenges narrow understandings of both humanitarianism and borders, offering instead a vision of the humanitarian borderland as a relational place. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to move beyond crisis-driven analyses of displacement. It calls for attention to the everyday practices and relationships that sustain life in the margins. By centering local initiatives like Home for All, and by foregrounding the voices and actions of those navigating the borderland, this study reimagines humanitarianism not as an abstract system, but as a set of lived, relational practices through which people carve out meaning, belonging, and futures—however uncertain they may be.

Home for All, as a case of locally rooted humanitarianism, provides a powerful counterpoint to traditional and extractive models of aid. Its work demonstrates how

humanitarianism can be practiced differently—as a process rooted in and acknowledging the relationships formed as a consequence of aid and prior interactions. This thesis contributes to ongoing debates on humanitarianism, agency, and the politics of borderlands. It advocates for a broader understanding of what it means to live and act within liminal spaces, where individuals are not merely recipients of care but active participants in shaping futures, however limited or fragile those futures may be. In everyday practices, we can glimpse alternative possibilities for how humanitarianism can be enacted and how belonging can be cultivated**.** Finally, I have argued; Lesvos as borderland is a fluid and dynamic place, in which there is movement, hope and change (Vigh, 2008; Horst, 2006a; Horst, & Grabska, 2015; Brun, 2015, 2016).

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Appendix B Consent for participation in the research project

Are you interested in taking part in the research project:

"From Emergency Crisis to Protracted Situation on Lesvos, A Detention Ground for Refugees: Humanitarian Actors Response" ***?***

You are invited to participate in a research project aimed at understanding how the refugee crisis on Lesvos has evolved from an emergency to a prolonged detention ground for refugees, and how this effects the work of NGOs. In this document, I provide information about the project´s goals and what participation would entail for you.

Purpose
The research project is part of my master´s thesis at the University of Oslo. The purpose of the project is to gain knowledge about the broader global forces in the border and asylum regime in Europe and how it affects various actors on the external border of Europe on Lesvos. It examines how Non- Governmental Organizations adapt to the enduring, precarious conditions that refugees experience on this European borderland. The study aims to explore the complex interplay between humanitarian aid, political structures, and refugee agency at the margins of Europe. To explore this, the research question is:
"How do NGOs on Lesvos, at the humanitarian border to Europe, respond to changing social conditions and humanitarian needs?".

The master's thesis is intended to be written and finished by May 16th 2025.

Who is responsible for the research project?
Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) at the University of Oslo (UiO) is responsible for the project (data controller).

The data material will be stored for 5 years after ended project for future research purposes.

Why are you being asked to participate?
Relevant participants for this project are non-governmental organizations on Lesvos and their volunteers or responsible parties, and you are in one of the groups targeted in my research. It is intended that approximately six organizations working with refugees on Lesvos will be involved in the project. The organizations are chosen based

on their work with refugees, either inside or outside the camp, with the aim of reducing challenges for refugees and promoting integration or inclusion.

Refugees may participate in the project where necessary, for example, through refugee-led organizations, by volunteering in other organizations, or using NGOs services.

What does it entail for you to participate?
The method of this research is participant observation. For the purpose of this research project, I would like to use as much time at the research location as possible over a 5-6 week period starting in August 2024. The time frame may vary depending on your availability and schedule, and the content of my findings.

If you choose to take part in the project, it will involve that I will participate in everyday activities connected to the organization where you are involved, I will participate in informal conversations with you, and observe your partaking in everyday activities, conversations, and social relations. I will continuously take notes and write about observations, conversations, and events. Audio recordings will be used in interviews if necessary and acceptable for participants.

Information gathered will include observations and conversations about the daily work, everyday life, dilemmas, and challenges – as well as interviews to follow up on the various challenges and work observed to elaborate and discuss them.

From refugees using services provided by organizations observations and conversations about life in the camp, challenges and dilemmas will be used as well as interviews about these factors observed to elaborate and discuss them.

In the published material, any direct quotes or description of events that can directly or indirectly be traced back to you will not be used unless you give further consent.

Participation is voluntary
You can object. You can object to being included in this research project at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose to object.

You can choose to object the personal data being stored for further research.

Your personal privacy – how we store and use your information
I will only use information about you for the purpose described in this document and your personal data will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation (the GDPR). I treat the information confidentially and in accordance with privacy regulations.
Only I, Sara Maria Pane, and supervisor, Sidsel Roalkvam, from the University of Oslo will have access to the information.
I will take measures to ensure that no unauthorised persons are able to access the personal data:

I will replace your name and contact information with a code stored on a separate list from the rest of the data.
Material will be stored through the University of Oslo´s research server, which is encrypted and secure. I will store the data on a research server called *Nettskjema*, which offers security measures to ensure data accuracy and privacy.
You as a participant will not be recognizable in the publication. In the publication, participants in my research project will be anonymised. Any information that can be traced back to an informant, directly or indirectly, will not be published without further consent.
Information which will be used is regarding the humanitarian response and life in the camp, no personal details will be published. I will not use any information that is not relevant to my research project

The finished publication will be available at the University of Oslo´s database for master theses, and on the Norwegian Red Cross´s webpage. The Norwegian Red Cross funds this research project. However, the project is completely independent from them, and they will not have access to the data.

What happens to your personal information when the research project ends?
The project is scheduled to 16th of May 2025. After the project ends, the data material with your personal information will be archived at **The University of Oslo** for future research and use**.** Personal information will be stored for the purpose of being used in a future PhD education. This anonymized personal information will be securely archived for further research.
Your personal information will be stored for further research
This includes all the data material gathered in this project
This will be stored at UiO
The data material will be stored for 5 years

What gives us the right to process personal data about you?
We process information about you for purposes related to scientific research, and because the research project is considered to be in the public interest. We have taken measures that ensures that the privacy of the data subjects is protected. On behalf of the University of Oslo, the Data Protection Services at Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, have assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with the privacy regulations.

Your rights
As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to:
Access which information we process about you, and to object
Have information about you corrected if it is incorrect or misleading
Have personal information about you deleted
Send a complaint to the Norwegain Data Protection Authroity about the processing of your personal information

Storing of data
The data material will personal data will be stored further for future research purposes

This applies to the entire data material that was collected in the project
The data will be stored at UiO
The data will be stored for 5 years
Where can I find out more?
If you have any questions about the study, or want to exercise your rights, please contact:

Sara Maria Pane (master student and researcher in this project: +47 90 23 47 44, sarapan@student.hf.uio.no
Sidsel Roalkvam (superviser): sidsel.roalkvam@sum.uio.no, +47 22 85 87 96
Our data protection officer: Roger Markgraf-Bye, personvernombud@uio.no

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project by Sikt, contact:
Email: personverntjenester@sikt.no or phone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Best Regards,

Sidsel Roalkvam	Sara Maria Pane
Project Leader	*Student*
(Superviser)	*(Researcher)*

Declaration of Consent

I have received and understood the information regarding the project "***From Emergency Crisis to Protracted Situation on Lesvos, A Detention Ground for Refugees: Humanitarian Actors Response»,***
and have been given the possibility to ask questions. I give consent:

to take part in a research project with participatory observation
to participate in follow-up interviews
to be included in audio-recordings that will be handled in accordance with the information given above
for my personal data to be stored after the end of the project for 5 years for the purpose of future research

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project.

(Signed by project participant, date)