



Emergency Smile Research Project

Lesvos, 2025-2027




Introduction

RED NOSES International is an artistic organisation bringing humour and laughter to people in need of joy through the art of healthcare clowning. Through interactive artistic interventions, training and partnerships, advocacy and research, RED NOSES aims to improve the emotional wellbeing, social inclusion, and creative empowerment of their audiences.

RED NOSES International is launching a pioneering three-year research project on the Greek island of Lesbos to explore the impact of artistic interventions on the emotional wellbeing of displaced children and aid workers.

The Emergency Smile Research Project, co-funded by Fondation Alta Mane, will run from 2025 to 2027 and builds on RED NOSES' longstanding experience in humanitarian settings through its Emergency Smile programme. It will examine how clowning—through performances, parades, workshops, and humour-based trainings—can enhance wellbeing, foster resilience, and strengthen social bonds among children affected by forced migration and the aid workers who support them. The research will take place alongside regular RED NOSES artistic missions in Lesbos, in partnership with grassroots organisations operating across the Greek island, and will be conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe and the Jameel Arts & Health Lab.

Clowning in humanitarian contexts



In 2013, RED NOSES International developed an emergency response programme called Emergency Smile (ES). This programme is a holistic intervention which aims to promote emotional wellbeing, increase social inclusion, and address the psychosocial needs of vulnerable people in crisis settings. Emergency Smile missions consist in bringing an international team of RED NOSES trained clowns to crisis settings to support children, their families and aid workers to better deal with their stressful context and improve their wellbeing.

Through interactive artistic formats, clowns engage migrant children and unaccompanied minors in parades filled with music and playful props, participatory clown shows and the multi-day Circus Smile workshop, where children learn circus skills before performing for aid workers and families. Additionally, the programme includes the Humour Relief Workshop for aid workers, medical staff and volunteers, which aims to strengthen emotional connection, enhance social interactions, and reduce stress.

The Emergency Smile Research Project will explore how these artistic interventions influence emotional wellbeing and social dynamics in crisis settings, aiming to generate robust evidence on their benefits for both displaced children and the professionals who support them.

Insights and Methodology

The research will be conducted in collaboration with grassroots organisations supporting migrant communities in Lesbos, and will take place in community centres and temporary accommodation structures for unaccompanied minors — safe and familiar settings located outside the Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs).

This mixed methods research will combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as interviews, focus groups, child-friendly surveys, and arts-based tools, allowing the researcher to compare wellbeing indicators (e.g., mental health; social connectedness; emotional resilience) between intervention and control groups, across pre- and post-intervention phases.

A detailed research proposal and data collection strategy will be developed by June 2025 and submitted for independent ethical review. Fieldwork will be conducted in Lesbos, although some remote data collection may complement on-the-ground research. The project will engage local partners to support logistics and access, while research assistants will be trained in data collection techniques, translation, and ethical protocols to ensure cultural sensitivity and adherence to the RED NOSES Safeguarding Policy.

Findings from the study will form the basis for one or more academic papers to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals.

Research Team and Collaborators

Dr. Eliala Alice Salvadori leads the Emergency Smile Research Project. She holds a PhD in Developmental Psychopathology from the University of Amsterdam, where she completed her doctoral work at the Research Institute of Child Development and Education. She is currently a researcher at the University of Cagliari in the Department of Pedagogy, Psychology, and Philosophy, and serves as a Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Miami's Department of Psychology.

The project is supported by an international network of experts from leading institutions including Sapienza University of Rome, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, NYU Steinhardt, the University of Miami, and the WHO Regional Office for Europe. These collaborators bring together diverse expertise in clinical, developmental, and social psychology, as well as in arts for health and wellbeing, forming a strong interdisciplinary foundation for comprehensively exploring the role of artistic interventions in supporting mental health in crisis settings.



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Dr. Salvadori during an exploratory visit to Lesbos in May '25.

Policy implications

The project addresses a pressing need, as children and aid workers in humanitarian settings are exposed to ongoing psychological strain and trauma. Despite growing awareness of the health benefits of art, there remains a lack of substantial evidence on its impact in crisis situations. This study will bridge that gap by using both qualitative and quantitative methods to document outcomes and advocate for the inclusion of the arts in humanitarian practice. Ultimately, the findings will provide compelling evidence to reinforce the demand for artistic interventions in these settings, influencing both international and national policies to prioritize the mental health and wellbeing of migrant people on the move and humanitarian workers.



RED NOSES International (RNI) is an artistic organisation bringing humour and laughter to people in need of joy. For 25 years, RED NOSES has been making a difference for patients, families and medical staff in countless health and care facilities in Europe and beyond.

Our professionally trained artists empower vulnerable audiences, such as children in hospitals, older adults in care homes, patients in rehabilitation centres, people with mental and multiple disabilities, and people involved in forced migration.

RED NOSES' Research and Learning Department promotes the impact of artistic interventions on wellbeing. In partnership with universities, we produce evidence-based research on the health benefits of clowning and gather insights from our work to improve practices and broaden our reach.

RED NOSES International

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