



*for Refugees*



**ANNUAL REPORT 2023**



# WELCOME TO THE ECHO 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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# THE SITUATION IN GREECE IN 2023

*This is intended only as a brief and non-exhaustive summary focused on Greece. See references at the bottom for more information.*

For Greeks 2023 was a turbulent year. In March Greece witnessed its worst ever train crash when a passenger train collided head-on with a freight train on the Athens-Thessalonki route. 57 people were killed, with many more injured.

The disaster prompted widespread protests across the country with anger directed at the government for allowing safety measures and accountability to slide to this degree. Elections that had been scheduled for April were delayed until May.

Many scandals have surrounded this past government; the hushed-up death of a moped driver who was allegedly killed by Mitsotakis's aunt as she left the Greek parliament, a spying scandal, backsliding on civil liberties, not to mention the ongoing inhumane treatment of migrants. One investigation points to the government "distributing" 1.2 million Euros earmarked for migration in small amounts to avoid public scrutiny and transparency. Despite all this and more May Nea Demokratia was re-elected to govern Greece, with an increased majority.

On 14th the shipwreck off Pylos left 750 people drowned and only 140 survivors. The brand new, 55.5 million euro coastguard vessel, 90% EU-funded and equipped with thermal cameras, was obliged to record everything. Conveniently, the cameras were switched off for the entirety of that night. Survivors report having their phones, containing videos of what happened, confiscated and not returned to them. There is also a possibility that certain parts of survivors' initial testimonies which were recorded by the coastguard were omitted to avoid mentioning anything about the coastguard boarding the vessel, the attaching of the rope or the attempted tow which caused the boat to capsize.

Summer arrived, bringing with it Greece's longest ever heatwave, with temperatures exceeding 40 degrees most days for more than a month. Inevitably this weather set off the worst wildfires Greece has ever seen. Rhodes burned for 4 whole days, whilst the Pelopennese, areas around Athens were all badly affected. The worst however was the fire that raged on the border with Turkey. Europe's largest ever wildfire. 86,000 hectares were burned, along with it 18 of migrants caught in the fire, having battled intense heat to make their way across the Turkish border to reach safety in Europe.

In September the heat subsided, only to be replaced by severe flooding caused by storm Daniel. Huge swathes of central Greece were waterlogged, destroying huge areas of agriculture, causing the deaths of thousands of animals and rendering farmland useless. Almost 900 people had to be rescued from the flooding. Three weeks later another storm battered central Greece, especially Volos. Even in December residents of the city were still being told only to use bottled water for drinking and cooking.



# THE SITUATION IN GREECE CONTINUED

Following the Shipwreck and a widely publicised report on the illegal pushback of migrants by the New York times, there was additional scrutiny placed on the practices of the Greek coastguard. The difference in numbers of recorded arrivals and the diminished numbers of recorded pushbacks only seems to confirm what has been going on all this time.

So far this year, more than 36,000 asylum seekers and migrants – mostly from Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea have arrived into Greece via the sea route, up from last year's 12,700. Almost 11,000 arrived in September alone. This dramatic increase has caused severe overcrowding on the islands. At the camp on Samos, the number of residents had gone from about 500 in early July to around 4,000 people by the end of September – roughly double the stated capacity. More than 3,500 people were living in the camp in early December. From our perspective as a project based on the mainland we also noticed a shift in how many new arrivals were being transferred onto the mainland from the islands at a much greater rate than before.

Camp conditions continue to deteriorate. A report in October documented how many asylum seekers and refugees do not get enough food and are reduced to searching through rubbish to feed themselves and their families. On the islands Samos camp continues to suffer from sporadic water issues and a lack of everything from space to food to staff including doctors, interpreters and social workers.

It appears that, as long as the Greek coastguard was carrying out its huge number of illegal pushbacks unhindered, the populations of the island “reception” facilities were within acceptable parameters. To be clear, pushbacks have not stopped at all. But even a slight reduction of pushback operations has greatly affected the supposedly “model” working conditions of the Greek island camps.

## sources:

- <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/12/04/inexcusable-whats-behind-deteriorating-conditions-greek-island-asylum-camps>
- <https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/06/16/information-after-the-shipwreck-near-pylos-of-14-june-2023/>
- <https://medium.com/are-you-syrious/ays-special-hello-i-need-food-what-the-media-isnt-telling-you-about-greece-7d227c378d6e>
- <https://wearesolomon.com/mag/category/focus-area/migration/>



# 2023 NARRATIVE

For the first half of this year our library timetable was much reduced. In January Oinofyta camp was closed and the residents were dispersed, mainly to Malakasa. In addition we had already taken the decision to stop going to Korinthos camp as hostile camp authorities had made it impossible to park in a spot visible for residents. The one community centre operating in the town itself was unable to host us because of concerns about complaints from the neighbours. Despite our best efforts, our ability to reach people inside of the camps was hindered by our lack of inside access and effective outreach. We created whatsapp groups for each camp in order to better stay in communication with people, but we were finding that still not many people were visiting the library. Those who did often never returned their books.

Our collaboration with Rosa moving safe space has always been friendly but inconsistent as their coordination team changes every month. They also experienced issues with their activities, particularly at Malakasa where an anonymous neighbour called the police on them twice, but also at times at Ritsona.

Due to rumours about the camp being forced to close and the gradual process of people finally receiving their travel documents, numbers in Lavrio camp also dwindled. Our city sessions also remained very quiet. In short, we were all wondering whether the library was still the best way of providing services to the people we were trying to serve.

We looked at alternative ways of reaching people, including a high school, other shelters etc. In June we participated in a day for refugees which took place at Protomagias park in Athens centre. In July we brought the library to the Anti-Racist festival, again in the hope to do outreach and connect with people interested in what we had to offer. Then, in July, the Greek government forcibly evicted the self-organised camp in Lavrio town and placed most of the residents into the newly-opened Oinofyta camp.



At this point we decided to re-plan our library timetable. From September, with Lavrio no longer a possibility, we decided to try and visit Thiva camp, which until now we had not had capacity for. We also stayed in contact with the old Lavrio residents and decided to re-start sessions at Oinofyta camp. We were also invited to start a session at one of the only surviving squats in Exarcheia, Notara.



After the summer break coordinators Becka and Giulio took a week to repair the floor of the library - stripping, sanding and varnishing, as well as doing a deep clean. Our language learning resource rack also got its wheels replaced (at last!) and the result has been transformative.

From September the shift in library animation was dramatic. At all the camps we received renewed interest in the library, with many new arrivals and interested adults and young people. Oinofyta sessions were reasonably small but very enthusiastic and it proved a beautiful way to stay in contact with former Lavrio residents, as well as build relationships with other Oinofyta residents, especially as the camp is particularly isolated and lacking in services (just as it was before).



In early October we also ran trial sessions at Thiva camp in coordination with Rosa women's safe space. After a couple of weeks we worked out a method that preserved the safe space element of Rosa's activities, whilst also offering open access to the library for all Thiva residents. We had incredibly high number of loans at Thiva and demand for Arabic books here is very persistent. Once we moved our sessions away from the children's activities we were also able to focus on the library as a resource and community focal point.

In general, both at Thiva and other camps, coordination with Rosa, who have a dedicated team for children's activities, we have been able to focus more on our function as a library and community space for young people and adults. This doesn't mean however we have stopped our children's activities. We usually always have colouring or painting available, and at Oinofyta we always had some fun crafting planned. We also brought a small show from Clowns without Borders to Oinofyta, Ritsona and Thiva in November.



“  
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# LIBRARY TIMETABLE 2023

## MONDAY

For the first half of the year Monday was our time for Ritsona. However, from September onwards we switched to Mondays being our city sessions. We usually go to Victoria Square, followed by Notara Squat in the evening. These sessions are low on loans, but they serve to connect the library with more local migrant solidarity communities and individuals who have moved from the camps into the city.



## TUESDAY

Tuesdays had been our day for Oinofyta before it closed. Once it re-opened we started sessions here on the same day, combining it with our Malakasa day to make the most of the journey and volunteers' time. The former Lavrio residents who were transferred here were incredibly happy to see us and we continue to do more structured activities for children, as well as trying to support the residents with clothing and other things that they say they need. We use a space which is 5 minutes' walk from the camp, giving us peace and quiet to do our library work.

Malakasa has been incredibly up and down. During the first 6 months we loaned only 100 or so books, we had issues with coordinating with ROSA and problems with parking near the camp entrance. Then from September we loaned 232 books and the sessions have been deceptively busy. Since the shifts in Greek migrant strategies the camp has diversified its residents, so now we are loaning a mixture of languages and not only Farsi.

## WEDNESDAY

From Wednesdays in the city we shifted the timetable so that now it is our day for Ritsona. We coincide with Rosa's presence there to make the most of their outreach, but keep a distance so that everyone feels included in the library space, not just women. After Malakasa Ritson is the next biggest site for loans (around 280 this year). Like Malakasa it is a diverse mix of Farsi, Arabic, English, French and Turkish. We have still not succeeded in finding many options for our small Somali-speaking group, but we will keep trying.

## THURSDAY



Previously our Lavrio day, the eviction of the camp meant that we started sessions at Thiva camp instead. This turned out to be an incredibly rewarding decision for the last 4 months of the year and we have really enjoyed our sessions here, which often turn into community music parties with singing, guitar, jenga and many people browsing our Arabic collection for a long time before telling us exactly what we are missing! In our 9 Thiva sessions we loaned 160 books, with 58% returned by the time we took our winter break (more have been returned since).



# THE LIBRARIANS AND OUR ACTIVITIES



It was a bittersweet moment in March when we said goodbye to our fellow coordinator Azim who finally got his paperwork sorted and left for the UK. We are happy to see him settled in Scotland where he is working and studying and producing beautiful creative writing.

Our volunteer team has remained small, mainly because the first half of the year was so uncertain. In addition continued lack of access to camps and coordination with Rosa has meant that structured children's activities have been less important a component of our work this year. The amazing Lotti took over the driving whilst Becka was away in February and March, but then she also left to return to the UK in May. Merel, who had been so dedicated to the Lavrio sessions and her amazing kids' activities, returned to Belgium in late spring.

Tabo and Lotti were stalwarts of the first part of the year, then later on Tayebe brought her enthusiasm and Farsi language skills to the Ritsona sessions on Wednesdays. Then in September we were joined by Karin and until the end of the year a few other short-term volunteers bolstered the ranks, including Ruth, Maria and Jeryes.



Star volunteer this year was Tulsi who comes once a week to our Tuesdays sessions. Propelled by the lack of available resources for children and adults in Oinofyta, Tulsi managed to raise 900euros at an event in October. The gin evening was well attended and passed in a pleasant haze (for the coordinators at least). With the proceeds she helped provide women's sanitary products, colouring pencils, paint, craft materials and much more to the residents of Oinofyta.



Prior to its eviction we planned special children's activities every week for Lavrio. These then shifted to Oinofyta on Tuesdays, where we get the largest number of children coming regularly and where we don't have Rosa offering their own programme for the younger ones.

We continue to support solidarians and activists to reach out to camp residents. We provide informal legal support and signposting for services in Athens in general. Giulio keeps connected with the Athens-based solidarity movements through attending regular meetings and also through participating in community events such as the anti-racist festival in the summer and visiting Notara each week. This allowed us to organise our successful community day at Oinofyta the day after Christmas which involved many people from the wider communities in Athens dedicated to supporting people on the move.



In November we helped to coordinate the return of Clowns Without Borders who performed shows in Oinofyta, Ritsona and Thiva. Aside from this our guitar continues to be enthusiastically, if not expertly, used, and we added a saz (turkish/kurdish instrument) to the sessions at Malakasa which proved very popular.



Whilst no longer used for Boroume food markets, the library van has continued to be used to deliver clothing to Khora freeshop from the Attica warehouse and also to support Camomile and Mazi housing projects in Athens itself.



# SOME LIBRARY STATISTICS

By the end of the year the ECHO library van was travelling every week about 400km, visiting 4 camps and 2 other community spaces.

Over the year we loaned over **1000** books (down a little from last year's 1169) with **640** of them returned. Returns will always be an issue, especially as it is clear we will never regain access inside the camps. Malakasa has the highest rate of returns at 72% over the year, whilst the lowest is in Athens itself and at Thiva at 58%. We consider it a miracle that more than half our books do get returned, but of course this means that we lose almost half our books too. We have created whatsapp groups for each camp so people are always reminded when we are coming, but we also have to accept that many people do not realise that keeping (or losing) a library book has a huge impact on our collection and our finances.

## WHO BORROWS?

54% Male  
2/3 aged between  
13-25

## WHAT LANGUAGES?

32% Arabic  
29% Farsi  
24% English  
8% Turkish  
6% French  
4% Kurmanji/Sorani

## WHERE AND WHAT?

We loaned the most books this year at Malakasa, followed by Ritsona, then Thiva. Just as in previous years requests include psychology and history books from non-fiction. For fiction. Becka was kept on her toes searching for PDFs for the apparently trending series "Ard Zikola" in Arabic, amongst other things, Dostoevsky in Arabic, anthropology and Afghani poetry in Farsi and Harry Potter in every language under the sun.

In terms of resources, we distributed more than **1000 language learning resources** in the last 4 months of the year. The surprise resource this year was anything to learn Dutch from Arabic and also Farsi. The perennial favourites of English and German are as popular as ever, with Greek resources also taken but at a lesser rate.





# BOOKS

The surge in use of the library has kept Becka busy trying to source new books, particularly in Arabic for our discerning library users. The lesson this year, more than ever, is that interest in the library is only as high as the quality and diversity of the books within. We hope next year to be able to budget properly for more consistent orders of books to fulfill this need and to be the best library possible for all language groups that we serve.

At present our small number of Somali speakers have almost nothing in the library, despite our best efforts to outreach to community groups in the UK who might be able to help. Our French collection is not as diverse as we would like, especially when it comes to cutting edge fiction and up to date non-fiction, of which we have practically nothing. As always, the books that we go through the fastest are the most popular ones, such as Harry Potter, fiction for teenagers of which there is never enough in either Farsi, French or Turkish and poetry. The recent events in Gaza have brought unprecedented demand for Mahmoud Darwish which we have done our best to fill. There is always demand for books on psychology, particularly in the areas of so-called 'self-help' books. We would love to provide more holistic alternatives that are sensitive to people's material circumstances, which is why we are trying to look at books that specifically tackle psychology from a non-western, intersectional perspective.

This year we bought around 15 Farsi books from Forogh in March. Donationns-wise we received some lovely bi-lingual poetry books from the UK's poetry translation centre, about 50 novels from the IPAF list and some more bilingual children's books from Hoopoe publishing. In October we purchased some young person's fiction from Dar Al Janub in Berlin. As most of our specific orders are in reponse to the articulated needs of our library users, it is no wonder that almost as soon as we put these new books on our shelves they are immediately loaned.

## WISHLIST FOR 2024:

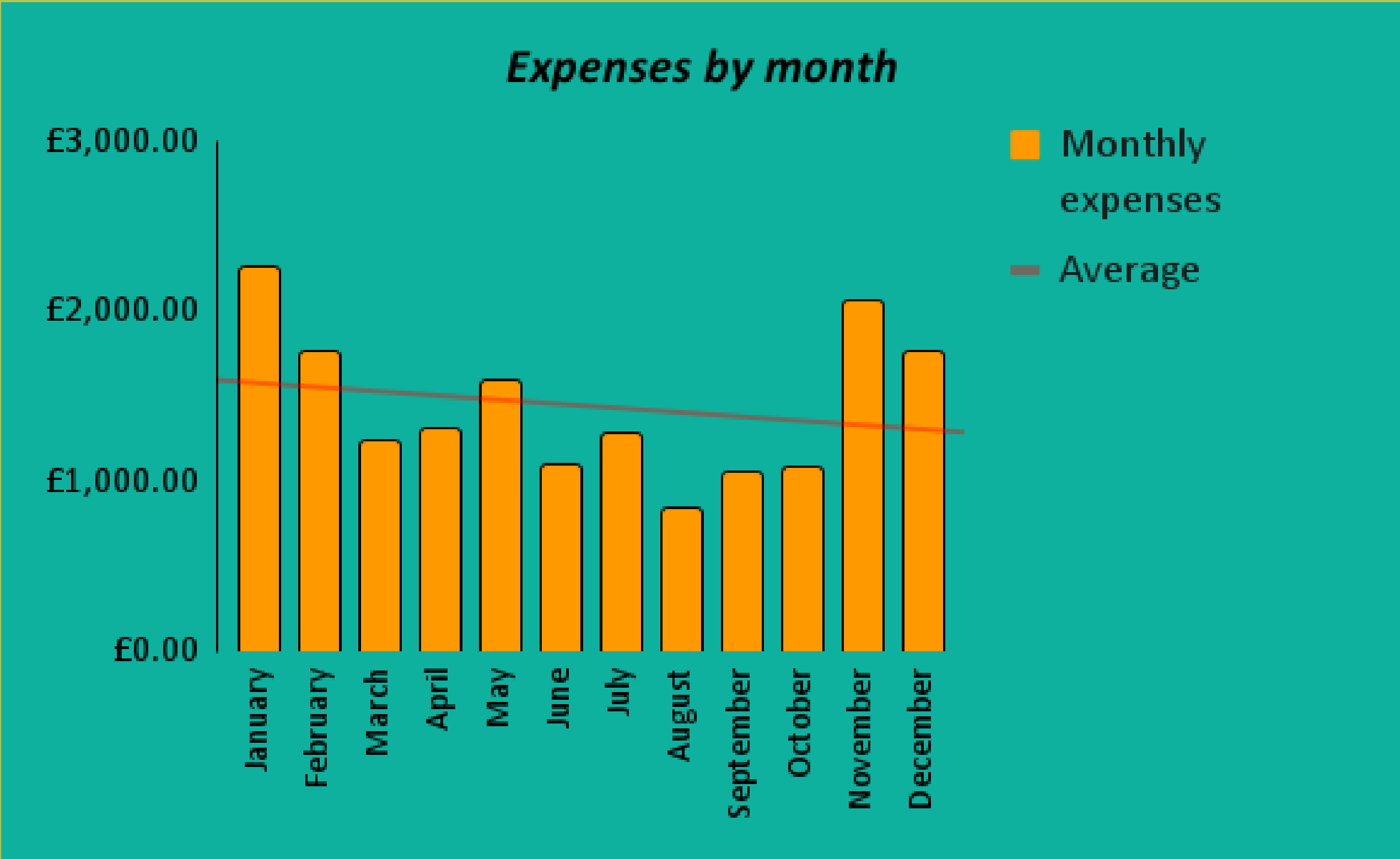
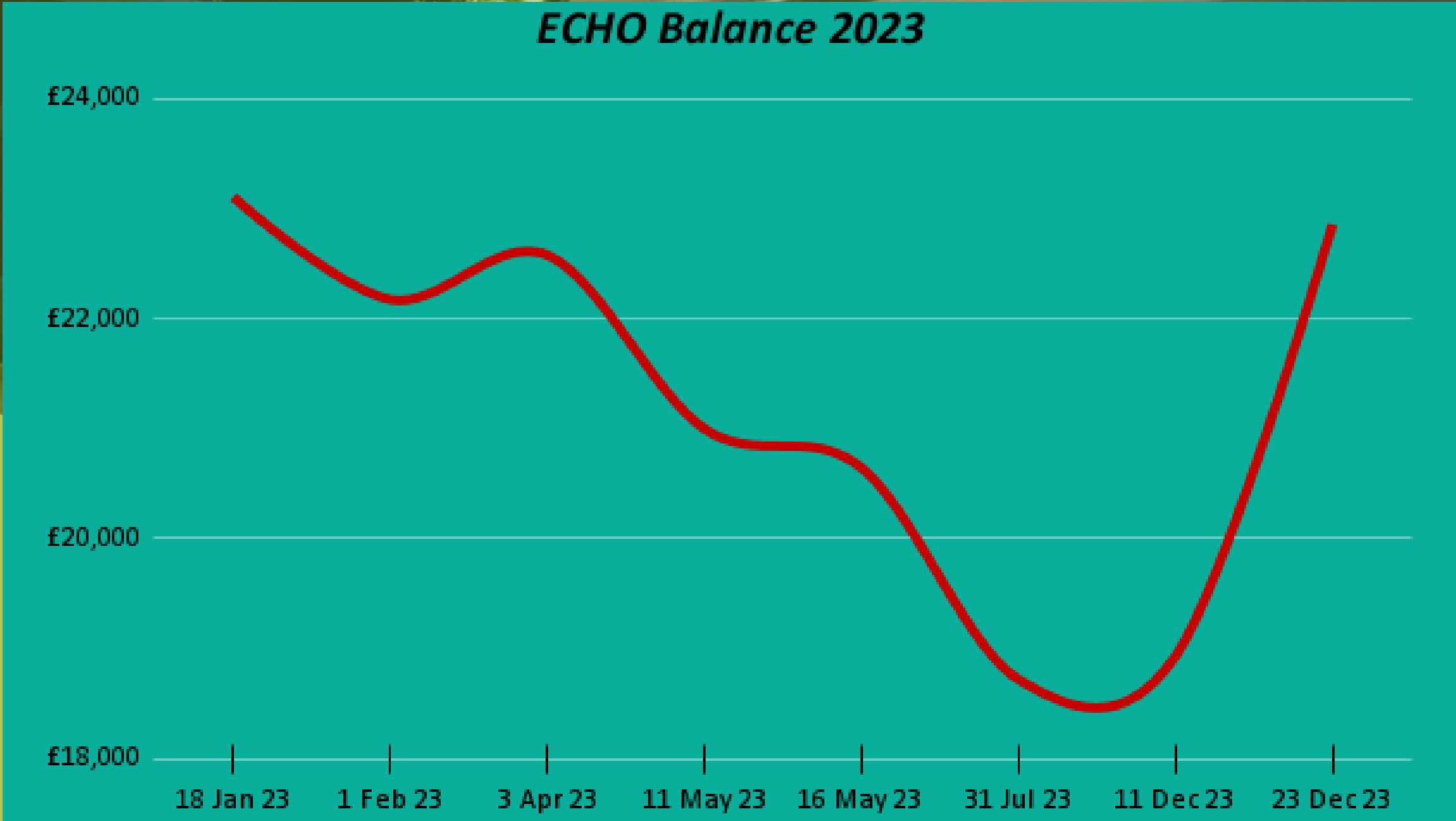
- MORE CONTEMPORARY FICTION, SCIENCE FICTION AND LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND TEENAGERS IN ALL LANGUAGES
- SOMALI LANGUAGE BOOKS
- QUALITY NON-FICTION IN FRENCH
- MORE DE-COLONIAL WORKS IN ALL LANGUAGES EXCEPT ENGLISH.
- HARRY POTTER IN EVERY LANGUAGE UNDER THE SUN!
- LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY BOOKS IN ARABIC, FARSI AND FRENCH.



# FINANCES

In 2023 our total income was £16,175.74. £9,198.81 of that came from grants from Emmaus Åland and MASS Action, and the rest was from donations collected through Global Giving and Chuffed, or sent directly to us by individual donors.

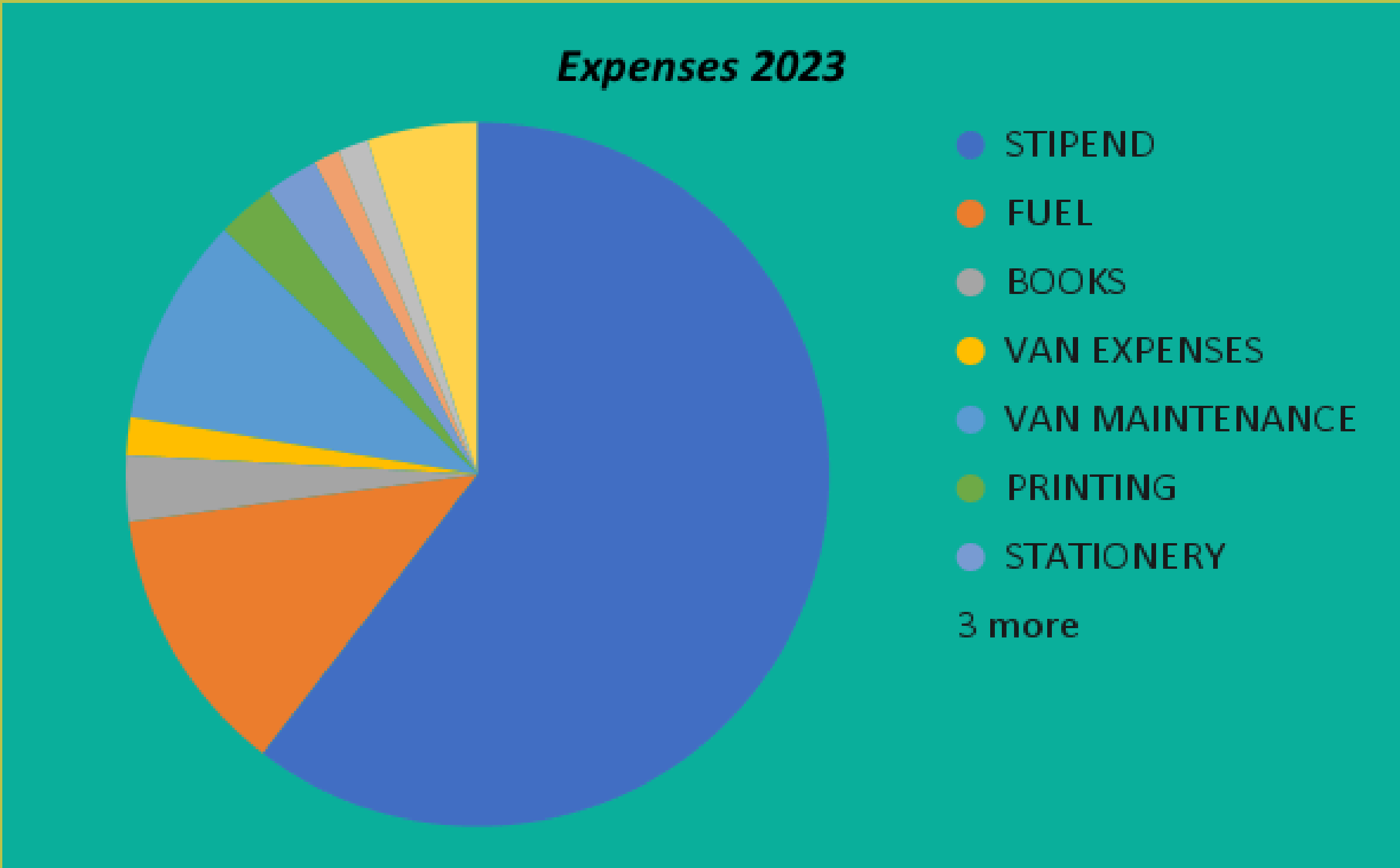
Our total expenses were £17,447.51, with 60% of this being for the coordinators' stipends and 32% for running costs (Fuel, Van maintenance, Fees, Stationery and Printing).





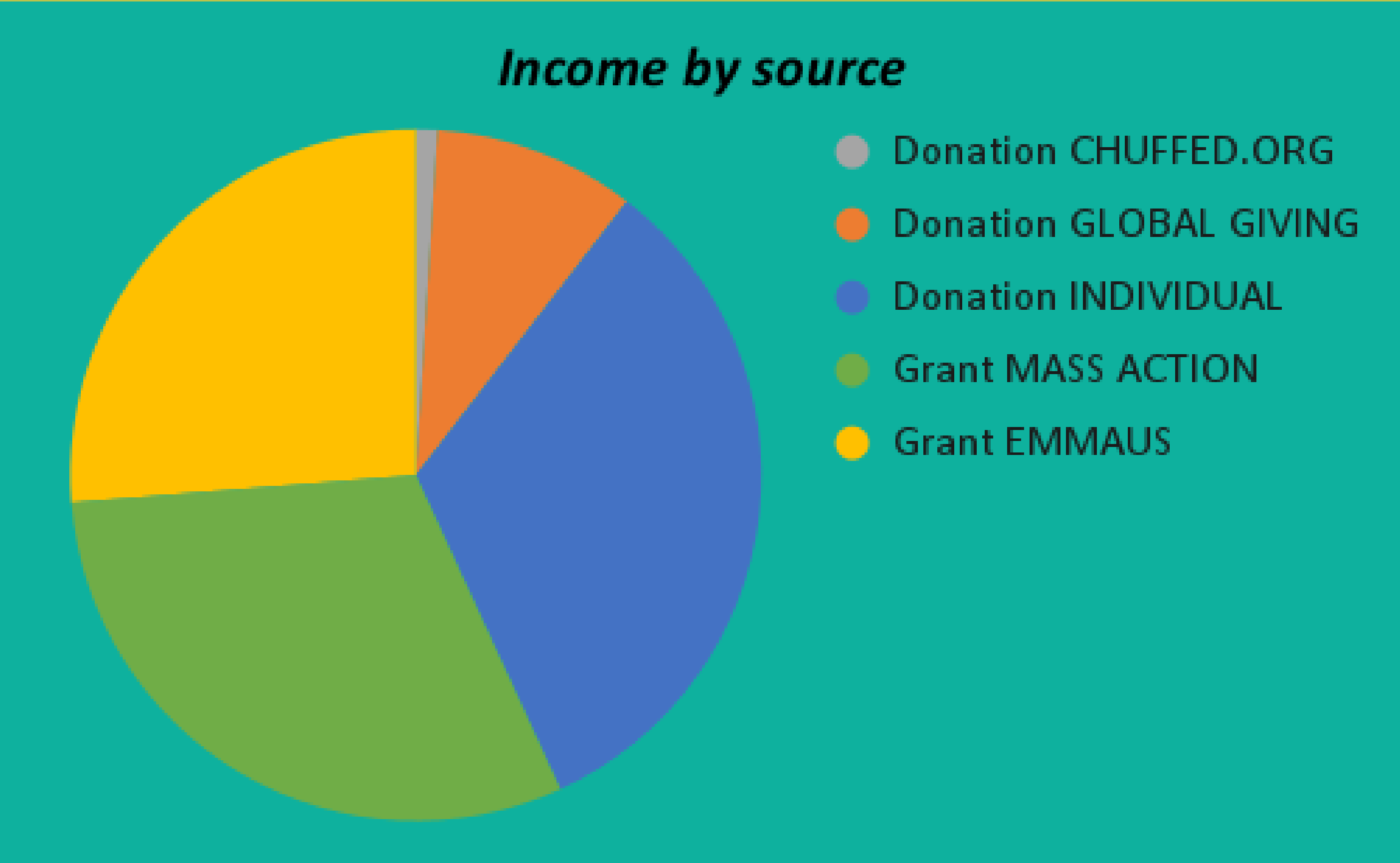
Compared to previous years, we spent and received less funding. One crucial change was the reduction from three to two Coordinators, after Azim left in March 2023. In 2022 our total expenses were £23,099.48, while in 2021 they had been £22,607.86.

Spending by Category	2023 (£)	2023 (%)	2022 (£)	2022 (%)	2021 (£)	2021 (%)
STIPEND	£10,544.56	60.44%	£14,599.98	63.20%	£14,652.76	64.81%
FUEL	£2,165.00	12.41%	£2,984.64	12.92%	£1,738.50	7.69%
BOOKS	£527.31	3.02%	£873.32	3.78%	£1,001.29	4.43%
VAN EXPENSES	£304.89	1.75%	£643.74	2.79%	£306.79	1.36%
VAN MAINTENANCE	£1,674.84	9.60%	£1,845.21	7.99%	£1,825.86	8.08%
PRINTING	£469.06	2.69%	£841.74	3.64%	£1,524.40	6.74%
STATIONERY	£426.72	2.45%	£339.02	1.47%	£557.15	2.46%
FEES	£209.71	1.20%	£971.21	4.20%	£391.07	1.73%
FURNITURE	£240.46	1.38%	£0.00	0.00%	£311.01	1.38%
Donations to other groups	£884.96	5.07%	£0.00	0.00%	£0.00	0.00%





<b>INCOME 2023: £16,175.74 — Income by source</b>	
Donation CHUFFED.ORG	<b>£ 160.53</b>
Donation GLOBAL GIVING	<b>£ 1,530.40</b>
Donation INDIVIDUAL	<b>£ 5,286.00</b>
Grant MASS ACTION	<b>£ 4,950.00</b>
Grant EMMAUS	<b>£ 4,248.81</b>





# ECHO 2024

We are excited to be going into 2024 with renewed energy for our existing activities and ideas for new ones.

For the longevity of ECHO as a community library project we are looking at ways of being able to register as a legal entity in Greece. Whilst the costs involved will require substantial increases in our annual spending, we think that it will bring more opportunities for partnerships, funding and recognition of our work in Greece.

In December we discussed expanding our timetable to once again include Lavrio, where the upper camp is still hosting people, and Korinthos, where the community centre has now invited us to run sessions, as their relations with neighbours has improved. This will increase the work of our coordinators and will require more volunteers. However, we think it is an excellent use of library resources and time.

Due to increased library use we need to redouble our efforts to keep the books rolling in. We plan to more regularly order several copies of popular books to maintain interest in the library and to try and better respond to requests if it is possible.

We want to also start a journey into cultural production. We are searching for funds that will allow us to curate and produce a series of podcasts titled History for New Greeks. Many of our library users ask for European history, but a lot of material remains inaccessible because of language or availability. ECHO aims to offer radical and de-colonial historical perspectives on Greek/European/Global history in an accessible form, produced and translated into English, Greek, French, Arabic and Farsi.



All in all, we are excited to see what 2024 brings. Even in the face of global disasters, warmongering, political hypocrisy, racism and uncertainty, we hope in our little corner to stand together for hope, community, education and collective liberation.