



Humanitarian NGOs - actors in the European refugee flow? VOICE event - 11 November 2015

Summary

Following a presentation by migration expert Professor Heaven Crawley on the characteristics of the mixed migration flows in Europe and her reflections on the European response so far, a panel discussion held under Chatham House Rules covered:

- *VOICE members / European humanitarian NGOs' different perceptions of the situation in Europe - as a humanitarian crisis or a public management crisis.*
- *Considerations that guide VOICE members/European humanitarian NGOs decisions to respond in Europe, including the challenges at an organisational level. This included discussion of: NGOs' mandates and the principle of humanity; NGOs' existing experience of working in Europe; the globally high humanitarian and refugee needs; donors', staff and management's expectations; as well as available human and financial resources and skills.*
- *Perceptions of the political response in Europe, where most participants were concerned about the values guiding the political responses.*
- *VOICE members needs and hopes in the current humanitarian situation, from the political to the operational level.*

Detail

VOICE President, Nicolas Borsinger opened the VOICE event traditionally organised on the eve of the European Commission's annual humanitarian Partners' Conference. Given that more than 80% of VOICE members have reinforced or changed their advocacy or their responses in countries of origin, transit and destination as a response to the mixed migration flow into Europe over the summer, the relevance of humanitarian NGOs' involvement is without doubt. **Matthew Tempest, EurActiv.com journalist**, moderator of the evening noted that the political backdrop to the discussion was the fifth of a series of emergency European summits on migration being held on 11-12 November in Valletta.

The [introductory presentation](#) was delivered by **Professor Heaven Crawley** from Coventry University, who briefed the audience on the overall migration situation in Europe, based on a body of evidence she has been accumulating on the issue since the late 1980s, as well as on recent primary research on refugees' intentions when crossing the Mediterranean Sea. She described the current migration to Europe not as a new phenomenon, but as an escalation of already existing trends (according to IOM 773,274 migrants entered Europe in 2015 which is a 3,000% increase compared to last October). She acknowledged the potential 'pull' effects of German Chancellor Merkel's announcement on protection measures for Syrians. However, she pointed out that policies usually respond a minimum of six months, often about six years behind actual migration trends. For example, Syrians have been fleeing a war for nearly five years.

By mapping the different migratory routes to Greece and Italy, she pointed out the differences in the countries of origin of the arrivals these countries see, revealing that the continuous flow from Turkey also comprises those who are looking for long

term protection, including access to employment, education and health care. However their arrival in Europe is not the end, but a beginning of a long journey to build a future here.

Based on her research, the primary cause of increased migration to Europe is conflict: 85% of refugees come from the world's top ten refugee producing countries - and 93% of them arrive in Greece. While others, e.g. people from West and Central Africa, Bangladesh and Pakistan, migrate due to their inability to build a livelihood in countries of origin. Therefore the root causes of forced migration can be political or economic. In addition, the experiences of migration itself can create refugees. For example, economic migrants who were in Libya are now fleeing for their lives from Libya, although technically their country of origin was elsewhere. Despite the complexity of reasons for migrating, the fundamental trigger of migratory moves is the absence of hope in the future. However 95% of the world's displaced people stay in their country or region of origin and do not come to Europe. She added that others are joining the main migratory flow into Europe: currently, for example, Afghan refugees are fleeing Iran where the situation has worsened for them or Albanians are applying for asylum. This is typical of a larger mixed migration flow.

She raised the question of whether we are facing a migration crisis or rather a crisis of solidarity? Lebanon, whose territory is equal to a smaller county of Britain hosts 1,100,000 refugees -more than arrived in the whole of Europe this year¹. What we see is that even though the EU has a common Asylum System, in effect we have experienced the partial suspension of the Dublin Regulation, a lack of safe and legal opportunities to enter the EU for protection, the collapse of external border controls, followed by cascading border closures and the transportation of migrants between European countries. The EU's answer over time has been repeated emergency summits, where finally an agreement was reached to relocate 160,000 refugees. However, so far only 112 people have been relocated. The Valletta Summit should shed a light on whether politicians still want to focus on border control or attempt to address the real political scale of the situation.

Panel discussion

Heather Amstutz, **Danish Refugee Council**; Marco Rotelli, **INTERSOS**; Imran Madden, **Islamic Relief Worldwide**; Jean Saslawsky, **Médecins du Monde international network**

VOICE member organisations working with refugees and IDPs in Europe and abroad brought diverse experiences to the discussion. Within Europe some VOICE members have been active on the 'frontline' of arrivals across the Mediterranean, others in countries of origin and transit for the migratory flows, while others have reinforced their domestic programmes where they have headquarters. Outside of Europe they have strong experience in working with displaced people globally and looking to durable solutions for those in protracted displacement situations. NGOs' approach and **decision-making** to the current situation has in part been shaped by their differing **organisational perception of the current situation in Europe**. Based on the needs and vulnerabilities, some consider this to be a **purely humanitarian crisis**, while according to others, this is a **public management crisis** which has created urgent humanitarian needs. Within an organisation, the **expectations of their management**

¹ Figures for Europe as at October 2015, and for Lebanon as at June 2015:
<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486676.html>

boards and donors (especially private citizens) also helped propel their decisions to scale-up a response in Europe. NGO representatives all emphasised that the ultimate guidance for their organisation has been their **mandate and the humanitarian principles**. Based on this, they emphasised that equal protection needs to be provided to all arrivals regardless of their status. At the same time, all panellists agreed that there is a **crisis of solidarity** in Europe where mainly false perceptions of the effects of migration feed political unwillingness to welcome migrants.

The unprecedented influx of refugees within Europe creates **further challenges to humanitarian NGOs**, compared to providing assistance outside of Europe, such as in developing countries or in more classic settings like in refugee camps. Due to the refugees and migrants intentions to keep moving it is hard to base decision making procedures on a **traditional needs assessment approach**. For those committed to **professional and quality assistance**, ensuring the assistance responds to the needs of people is proving to be challenging. **Cooperation with local actors, volunteer initiatives** and European civil society organisations with little humanitarian expertise, was identified as both critical to success and sustainability but challenging in practice.

For humanitarian NGOs operational responses, the needs of newly arrived refugees in Europe come on top of very large global humanitarian and displacement needs, causing some **human resource questions**. Some organisations have been compelled to deploy headquarter staff to European border and transit countries in order to meet the tremendous needs. While this has allowed some organisations to tap skills in-house (that they were not always aware of) this cannot be a permanent solution, neither for headquarters or any of the field operations. Skills in managing this kind of crisis sometimes had to be pulled from the field, in some cases from other severe crises. For local staff working in a more typical humanitarian setting, this was often a surprising and unwelcome development. **Legal and financial considerations** arise too, as acquiring visas for these skilled professionals to work in Europe has sometimes proven difficult, while many **traditional public humanitarian assistance funds** are not legally allowed to be spent within the EU. Eligible intra-EU funds are inflexible and slow to be disbursed by the responsible national authorities at Member State level.

Other organisations have found it rather easier to cater to the most immediate needs by **building on pre-existing cultural mediation and social cohesion programmes** amongst refugees and their host societies in Europe.

While NGOs agreed that more support and funding is required to respond to the needs, as well as more cooperation with local authorities on the borders in Europe, they also warned against **forgetting about the rest of the world amidst our own crisis**.

On **political responses aiming to reduce the mixed migration flow** - the panel reflected that building walls will only encourage migrating people to resort to illegal routes and methods and expose them to further vulnerability. Member States transporting refugees between each other is also an unprecedented phenomenon. There are so many different actors involved in migrants' journeys, leading to increased risks of institutional violence. The panel also discussed the complex dynamics of this people movement: in the absence of legal means and spurred by desperation, many refugees resort to smugglers or become victims of human trafficking on the way.

Increasing development funding will not necessarily result in a decrease of migration flows either, on the contrary: initially it can boost the phenomenon by providing people with economic means to flee, since (illegal) migration can be very expensive. Panellists emphasised rather the need for political will to put an end to the conflict in Syria. While in Europe there was an urgent need to stop institutional violence along the migration routes, and for responsible authorities to make fact-based, not fear-based decisions allowing for safe, regular, controlled and legal migration.

During the **exchange with the audience**, several organisations expressed concerns about:

- The lack of visionary European leadership in dealing with the refugees arriving in Europe and the position this puts humanitarians in.
- The establishment of the trust funds² and their potential to divert humanitarian actors from a needs-based approach.
- The serious lack of protection measures for refugees and migrants.
- The place of religion in the public debate and the crisis response.

Panel members agreed that taking the place of public services in Europe due to governments' and local authorities' lack of will or capacity, raises concerns for NGOs. However they have felt compelled to engage based on the humanitarian imperative and the obvious protection needs. Some called for active advocacy, perceiving it to be the duty of humanitarians to show where responsibilities should lie. Religion was definitely a matter of concern in the public debate, but also in terms of the European response, where some Member States favour refugees of one religion over another: some openly, while others disguising it as an economic argument. NGOs striving to give impartial assistance need to be mindful of the Member States' position if they are supporting a government response. In addition, the faith-based character of some NGOs helped in parts of the refugee response, due to refugees recognising the organisation from their countries of origin or first settlement. But, this was not seen as important a factor in building acceptance among affected populations as providing a quality response and did not hold true anymore for acceptance in active conflict zones.

In closing, the panellists reflected on their most **urgent concerns in the coming months**. NGOs' priorities encompassed:

- sufficient number of qualified staff
- funding for NGOs' responses
- support and tolerance from authorities in cooperation on the borders
- policy responses allowing regular, coordinated and legal migration.

All the panellists agreed that the political responsibility to be taken up by decision makers to put an end to the conflict in Syria was paramount.

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 84 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction.



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² E.g. Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/emergency-trust-fund-stability-and-addressing-root-causes-irregular-migration-and-displaced-persons_en