

## How Europe's (anti-)migration policies are fuelling a humanitarian crisis

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2021, the International Humanitarian Studies Association ([IHSA](#)) and [KUNO](#), the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands, organized a webinar prompted by the publication of a special section of *International Migration*. It's title: 'Politics, humanitarianism and migration to Europe', and which discusses [how Europe's \(anti-\)migration policies are fuelling a humanitarian crisis](#). The articles present difficult and painful dilemmas in humanitarian practices in Europe. The webinar highlighted some most urgent dilemmas, presented by four of the authors, and facilitated a discussion between the researchers and two humanitarian practitioners. This report summarizes the main points made by the speakers.

### ***A crisis of solidarity***

**Susanne Jaspars (Research Associate, SOAS University of London)** started by emphasizing that the deplorable situation in which refugees have to live in Europe on the Greek Island or in Calais, is in fact a humanitarian crisis created by European migration policies. This creates dilemmas for humanitarian actors and requires new strategies by activists, practitioners and researchers for navigating these circumstances. The so-called migration crisis of 2015, when over a million people fled the Middle East and Africa and came to Europe, was rather a crisis of solidarity. This crisis did not stop in 2015, but carries on today when we witness how security and political concerns trump over refugee rights and humanitarian concerns.

The special issue identifies four themes. (1) We are dealing with a policy-induced humanitarian crisis, rather than addressing the causes of migration, European polices create extra risks on refugees. (2) In many European countries we also see a number of less visible strategies that make life difficult for those seeking safety. The resulting humanitarian crisis itself has been instrumentalised as a means of deterrence. (3) As a result of the extreme politicisation of humanitarian action, with the creation of new volunteer and activist groups we see a transformation. (4) The rise of these new volunteer groups has created tensions with traditional and more established humanitarian actors.

Via [this link](#) you'll find the Introduction to the special section edited by Susanne Jaspars and Dorothea Hilhorst. Another good read is [this ISS-blog](#), written by Susanne Jaspars and Dorothea Hilhorst, which summarises the key issues.

### ***Politics of Exhaustion***

**Marta Welander (Executive Director, Refugee Rights Europe)** focused on refugee experiences, based on field research among displaced people in Calais, Paris and Brussels (2016-2019). Her research shows how the United Kingdom is creating a border regime, which is exported to France, and how it engages with human mobility. This is done through a strategy that Marta refers to as 'the politics of exhaustion'. As one refugee stated: "They make us so tired. They hope we want to go home." The situation in France is a decades-long humanitarian disaster as well as a human rights crisis, that is human-made. The absurd nature of the situation becomes clear in some descriptions that state that the situation is 'forever temporary'.

Welander identifies 7 different, yet still interwoven, forms of physical and mental exhaustion tactics. The first one is concerned with direct violence, perpetuated through for example beatings and pepper spraying. The second tactic uses humiliation, dehumanization and racialization. Furthermore, the withdrawal and denial of adequate state care, linked to the criminalization of efforts done by grassroot

activists, is another tactic that is used. The fourth tactic identified are acts of dispossession, also in the realm of mental health. Additionally, the shrinking of access to physical space constitutes a fifth tactic. Alongside the tactic of forced immobility, forced mobility is also used as a tactic for exhaustion. Lastly, Welanders elaborated on tactic of the constant production of uncertainty. The politics of exhaustion attacks people's resilience and their ability to survive these adverse situations. To conclude, these situations have not improved since the onset of Covid-19.

Here you can find Welanders article [The Politics of Exhaustion and the Externalization of British Border Control. An Articulation of a Strategy Designed to Deter, Control and Exclude.](#)

### ***Criminalization of humanitarian aid***

**Francesca Pusterla (Trans European Policy Studies Association, TEPSA)** discussed the criminalization of solidarity with and assistance to asylum seekers in Italy. Pusterla distinguishes a political and a legal dimension of criminalization. Her research reveals a shift of solidarity crime from the political to the legal dimension resulting from the tightening of migrant reception measures from 2016 until 2019.

First, arresting smugglers was not a top goal of Italian policy, but it mainly focused on rescuing people from sea. In 2016, the criminalization of solidarity and NGO's begins. This has been done through accusations of working together with smugglers as well as certain policies that have been implemented. The NGO's started to experience troubles in their search and rescue activities. In 2018, attacks and threats to NGO ships and the recognition of a Libyan SAR-zone showed the process of criminalization of solidarity. Furthermore, the adoption of the Decree-law on Immigration and Security really changed the policy of reception of migrants in Italian territory.

This is a link to the article [Legal Perspectives on Solidarity Crime in Italy](#) written by Francesca Pusterla.

### ***Humanitarian advocacy disempowered***

**Dorothea Hilhorst (Professor of Humanitarian Aid, ISS Erasmus University)** elaborated on humanitarian advocacy related to pressure points of migration in and around Europe, specifically looking at the situations in Lesbos, Calais and Libya. Her research shows that humanitarians feel disempowered and stopped advocating for bigger issues, like the criminalization of solidarity or the dehumanizing effects of European migration policies. In contrast, the advocacy was now more focused on more practical things, such as more showers. Many humanitarian workers felt abandoned by established agencies, especially the UNHCR. They feel that humanitarian principles are not enough to guide their actions in these cases.

Furthermore, Hilhorst drew attention to the gap between the traditional humanitarian agencies and all other kinds of agencies. Particularly at the local level, it is felt that there is no solidarity among the humanitarians. The research showed humanitarian NGOs trying to do some advocacy on the basis of complementarity. However, there did not seem to be much deliberation about this. A more consciously and concerted cooperation could improve the effectiveness of advocacy activities.

Here is a link to the article [Reconsidering humanitarian advocacy through pressure points of the European 'migration crisis'.](#)

### ***Missing solidarity***

**Gonzalo Vargas Llosa (UNHCR, Representative for EU Affairs)** opened the discussion by stating that the biggest crises over the course of 2015 and 2016 was the lack of solidarity. Some governments were more generous than others, but in the end, there was a lack of solidarity among member states in terms of sharing responsibility. This resulted in dangerous practices, such as pushbacks. Vargas Llosa also mentioned that the vast majority of people who flee do not come to Europe, but find refuge in other parts of the world. The solidarity that Europe is being asked for is quite small in comparison to

other countries in much less wealthier regions. Paying (a part) of the bill does not exclude European countries from the responsibility to also host some refugees that make it to Europe.

### ***Refraining from activism***

**Adil Izemrane (Co-founder and director Movement on the Ground)** stated that if we look back at the last six years, we must conclude that when it comes to people being put at risk in the Mediterranean Sea, it is still very present. As a civil society we did not make big steps in providing dignity to people who arrive as well as when it comes to safe passages.

Movement on the Ground (MotG) started in 2015 as a volunteer organization, a grassroots, at Lesbos. Initially MotG refrained from political activism, also to ensure access to camps run by the government: to provide dignity to the people outside and inside the camps. Another issue was the lack of resources to advocate in a proper manner. The last 5 to 6 years has been a roller coaster and a very steep learning curve; at the moment MotG is exploring a more active role, also in awareness raising and campaigning for humane refugee policies.

### ***Political theatre and the opportunity for telling the stories***

At the end, Susanne Jaspers referred to a [paper](#) by [David Keen](#), in which he explores the notion of political theatre. For example, the camp with displaced people in Calais. That is a humanitarian crisis, which is meant to deter, as well as sending a political message. There is a need to expose the political theatre and to show what policies are actually doing: they are causing harm but they are not stopping migration. This does not only refer to countries in Europe, but also to places of origin. It could be argued that it is equally difficult there to highlight the political causes of crises as it is in Europe.

Dorothea Hilhorst expanded by saying that we are seeing a crisis of solidarity. However, we do have an asylum system that promises people that if you come and ask for rescue and asylum, that you are given an opportunity to tell your story and make a claim. This is a fundamental right and should be guaranteed for everyone individually. Many people do support this right. Hilhorst challenges the idea that we are only facing resistance in Europe. She knows for a fact that this is not true in the case of the Netherlands. However, most politicians lend their ears to the other side, as they fear that side more. Therefore, we should expose that there is a bigger group that believes that more things should be done.

Both a [video](#) and [podcast](#) of the full webinar are available via this [KUNO-webpage](#).