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Sheltering, hosting or receiving refugees: the unresolved ambiguities of the La Linière refugee camp

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Frank Esnée and Michaël Neuman invite us here to follow up on previous work. The latter and Angélique Muller already wrote an article about the social and political actors of Grande-Synthe and its refugee settlement, Basroch. Following the dismantlement of this camp and the resettlement of refugees in the new La Linière camp, in the spring 2016, the authors look back on a year of hesitations or even inconsistencies, which say a lot about our relationship to the refugees.

On March 7th 2016, in the town of Grande-Synthe in the north of France, the La Linière camp was opened to nearly 1,300 migrants who had been living in a fetid undergrowth for a few weeks or months, less than four kilometers away. La Linière was initiated by Damien Carême – mayor of the town –, supported by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), responsible for building the camp. The project was designed in a hurry between December 2015 and March of 2016, in order to prevent people dying and improve living conditions in the former camp: located between the A16 motorway and the railway, the parcel was equipped with 368 9-square-meter wooden sheds designed for 4 people. Common spaces were created, and the mayor guaranteed freedom of movement to the migrants who came to live there. Initially intended to shelter the migrants throughout the winter, the camp was not opened until March. A year later, when it was destroyed by arson on April 10th 2017, more than 1,500 people still lived in it. Their projects for the future – mostly focused on the U.K. – had not changed. Their immediate environment, however, had been radically transformed: following the Calais camp's dismantling between October and November 2016 – in which, according to some organisations, up to 10,000 people had lived together – and the similar fate of most of the region's small camps, La Linière was left as the only gathering place allowed by the State for migrants.

With our first article, we had wanted to reflect on the mobilization and the different people's roles[1] in making the building of this camp possible. This time, our analysis and story focus on the "camp" – as an object –, its nature and management.

The choice of a camp

When the mayor Damien Carême and MSF agreed on the impossibility to significantly improve the Basroch site, it was quickly decided to relocate the migrants to a new place: a camp especially built for the occasion. The mayor identified one site on the edge of town: La Linière, location of a former flax conditioning factory.

[1] See Angélique Muller and Michaël Neuman, "MSF in Grande-Synthe: lessons from an unlikely coalition of actors", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n° 3, November 2016, p. 42-51, http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2016/11/22/msf-in-grande-synthe-lessons-from-an-unlikely-coalition-of-actors/

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It should be recalled that building camps is not what the organisation usually does: if MSF's history has largely been written inside camps, it has only built them exceptionally[2]. Despite the heavy overtones of the word, (refugee) camps have advantages that must be taken into consideration in order to understand why resorting to such a gathering of people in difficulty is so common.

From a strictly medical and sanitary standpoint, camps are well fitted to organize prevention and care within the framework of an aid mission. But they are also an appropriate gathering place for people in precarious situations – who feel better protected among peers, and more able to find livelihood. Therefore, despite abundant criticism historically facing camps[3], in Grande-Synthe, this solution was selected: because it has been adopted by the migrants themselves – for years – but also because it was important to successfully and timely transfer them – there were more than 2,500 of them when the project was started. This was all about convincing and transferring everyone, and regrouping all the people of the former Basroch camp in another location – the mayor being unable to afford two sites in his town[4]. In addition, the memories of those who try to cross the Channel are filled with a deep historical mistrust vis-à-vis the French authorities. In Norrent-Fontes in 2012, migrants settled in a town encampment had refused to be transferred to a new parcel downtown, preferring the suburban area that they were used to. In Grande-Synthe, at least 800 people had left Basroch even before the transfer, thus confirming the difficulty to relocate people due to the importance of the encampment's localization for its inhabitants: because it allows for smooth passage and aid from various institutions, escape possibilities in case of a police intervention, and proximity to the city center.

Once the decision was made to build a camp, the action plan moved on to its architecture – that of the accommodations in particular. It is clear that a logic of precariousness prevailed: despite all the good will, we think small and temporary. Therefore, MSF's first suggestion was to set up tents from a stock originally intended for displaced people in Syria, with the sole merit being quickly available. The budget necessary to build the camp was yet significant: almost two million euros. It was only after a gust of wind brought the tents down in February that an alternative offer was accepted: MSF chose to equip the La Linière camp with the same wooden sheds that had been successfully distributed to some inhabitants of the Calais "Jungle" in the previous months. This option had initially been rejected because it was thought it could not be achieved in time, and the tents suited the city's project of building something temporary. It was later proved to be realistic. From this standpoint, the storm was salutary, allowing to relocate migrants from Basroch in more protective shelters. But it also contributed to delay the construction of the camp, which was almost 6 weeks behind the initial schedule. And it also added extra costs, with a final budget of over 2.5 million Euros.

Yet, an architect had been involved early in designing the camp's plans and its future. Involved in Grande-Synthe alongside historic nonprofit organisations and local authorities since the summer of 2015 in the construction of a "migrant's home" ("La maison des migrants"), Cyrille Hanappe also worked in the Calais "Jungle", where he and his students conducted architectural surveys. Contacted by MSF in order to advise the construction of the La Linière camp, he worked with the field teams and the city's technical advisors to organise blocks and common spaces. The sheds did not benefit from the same level of attention: poor quality materials, thermal and sound insulation. While their short lifespan was known, their future replacement was not decided, for

[2] Like N'zérékoré camp in Guinea, which was designed to receive several thousands of refugees in the early 2000s.
[3] Rony Brauman and Michaël Neuman, "From Dadaab to Calais: what are the alternatives to the refugee camp?", https://medium.com/@MSF_Crash/from-dadaab-to-calais-what-are-the-alternatives-to-the-refugee-camp-4db9abba86d5
[4] Angélique Muller and Michaël Neuman, "MSF in Grande-Synthe…", art. cit.

the decision makers didn't share the same view of what the camp should be. Indeed, the mayor had promised his constituents that it would only be temporary, and MSF only thought of itself as an emergency actor. In the end, Cyrille Hanappe was alone in thinking that La Linière should be regarded as a durable place which would eventually become part of the town, whereas Utopia 56 – the organization that became responsible for the camp's management – did not think of its project as being "long term". Everyone seemed to support their own project, without agreeing on, or even discussing, its future.

For those at MSF who organised the organisation's response, it was never about anything else than a shelter operation – with no thought given to hospitality, reception or connection to the city. The service provided was essentially meant to prevent outbreaks of diseases or casualties among a population largely motivated by its desire to continue its journey. With two square meters per person, housing was limited to a sleeping function. The sheds were small, non fireproof, close to one another, which would later cause tensions between MSF and the prefecture regarding security norms. While there is no doubt that the prefecture used these flaws with a view to slow down the camp's opening, this must not keep MSF from examining its own shortcomings regarding its involvement in the project.

The choice of a management style

The second consequence of MSF's lack of interest in the long run was that it immediately distanced itself from the camp's management. The atmosphere was all about fraternity, cooperation among organisations and common struggle, and although there were informal talks between MSF and the mayor, no one would discuss framework agreements or anticipation. Both physical and intellectual energies were mainly focused on the project's technical realization. Once the camp was opened, the city hall trusted Utopia 56 – an associative partner – with the coordination of the camp's activities and its de facto management, for an initial two-month period. This very young organisation had been founded by the people managing the "*Vieilles Charrues*" [Old plows] music festival's camp, in Brittany: without experience in camp management, it benefited from limited funding (€320,000) from the Grande-Synthe city hall, and was relying on the mobilization of volunteers supported by a small team of employees. Nonetheless, it took charge of day-to-day operations, running the collective kitchens and laundry, organising distributions. MSF denied any responsibility in this domain: camp management wasn't part of its mandate, it didn't feel competent in it and didn't see the point in investing important resources in it. Showing little interest in considering a co-management and co-financing partnership between organisations, resorting to the language of emergency, sure that it had done its part and determined to pass on the logistical responsibilities regarding the camp's equipment to the city hall, MSF would keep to its medical activities and to a role of main partner. In short, the camp was open, people had shelter: the promise had been kept. Now was the time to run a clinic, to provide care and support to people, to shape the medical project and ensure liaison with local sanitary structures in order to ensure the quality of patient care.

MSF's eagerness to withdraw quickly can be seen as consistent with the overall dynamics of this project: the State was eager to weigh in on its management, Damien Carême was eager to limit access to the camp, the Dunkirk "sous-préfet"[5] was eager to change its initial course in order to turn this open facility into a place restricted to those who seek asylum in France. Reducing the camp's reception capacity, disassembling empty sheds, limiting access to it and finally forbidding

[5] Under the authority of the "Préfet", the "sous-préfet" is the representative of the State at the administrative level beneath that of the "department".

access to all newcomers would soon become the main obsessions. Only the historic nonprofit organizations ("*Auberge des migrants*" [Migrant's inn], Emmaüs, or "*Secours catholique*") remained and stood fast, thinking about the long run, because they knew that once the cameras were busy elsewhere, the needs would still the same – they have kept emerging regularly for 20 years in the regions of Calais and Dunkirk.

Utopia 56's supposed frailty – because it is young and volunteer-based –, the sometimes overwhelming insecurity inside the camp and MSF's absence from its management encouraged the mayor to hire a contractor: the choice fell on the Afeji (Flanders' association for education, youth training and social and professional inclusion) after winning the State's 2.5 million euros contract. The Afeji had been working in the camp since its opening, and started managing the sanitation facilities. While MSF worried about the consequences of this transition – especially the authoritarian way that the State would shape the Afeji's mission –, it was in no position to make a fuss about it. In fact, the steering committee – mayor-Afeji-State – that was supposed to manage the camp and, above all, translate the past tripartite agreement's vague terms into concrete actions, would never function properly. The Afeji was having a hard time getting the locally-active associations on board; it was less present in the field than Utopia 56, and seemed to act as the armed wing of public authorities, which were mainly focused on not letting this place continue forever. As for Damien Carême, he was under increasing pressure from the prefecture. His position among the associational network had been weakened by the hasty decision, in June, to prevent single men from accessing the camp, and to limit the reception capacity to 700 people – even though newcomers were already waiting for shelter and people were expecting the Calais "Jungle" to be dismantled. Although he remained faithful to his initial commitment to limit the camp's reception capacity, he was nonetheless put in a difficult position by the absence of similar shelter projects in other towns of the region of Calais and Dunkirk. Grande-Synthe was isolated and the "Réseau des élus hospitaliers" [Hospitable Representatives Network], praised not long ago, now seemed very frail.

The choice of non-choice

But the hasty decision of June was being condemned by organisations. Utopia 56 would stop its operations in September – which would lead to the demobilization of associative forces and activism. All the while, MSF was lobbying the city hall and the Afeji, raising the alarm and trying to weigh in on this questionable management. It went so far as to threaten to create a "camp within the camp" in order to circumvent the expulsion of newcomers. On a few points, it was heard: satisfying number of qualified personnel, provision of translators and care, and support of the most vulnerable; but not on the necessity to define a longer-term orientation.

Despite the tensions already looming during the first months, the camp lived, its inhabitants were taking ownership of it; it would take the hybrid city-camp form that some of its designers had wanted it to become: a structuring light enough to serve as a framework for "living together", allowing evolutions and fostering creativity. Thus, shelter extensions, decorations, flower boxes and gardens started appearing. Collective spaces were created; people ate together, played music; the camp's configuration – added to the migrants and social workers blending together – encouraged discussions and gatherings. The relationship with people from Grande-Synthe was rather good, and no incidents had been reported. Some of the mayor's initiatives – such as sending children to the town school – contributed to connect it to La Linière. However, the camp's inhabitants' involvement in the place would never come close to what had been seen in Calais, in terms of sharing and ownership. Mostly Kurds, the inhabitants were much influenced

by smugglers and by a powerful network. Their life project depended on it: entering the U.K. after a journey almost always painful and difficult. This reality, already there at Basroch, soon caught up with La Linière. Investigations, surveillance, police interventions and presence and repeated arrests alone cannot be blamed. The fault lies, perhaps again, with the haste; it also lies with a State policy which never did help keep this camp well maintained. And, *a fortiori*, it never intended to do so. At La Linière, humanitarians and organisations quickly faced smugglers – wary and sometimes threatening. The smuggling business is lucrative, and getting a hold of more resources can be even more tempting: extorting money for showers and meals, controlling shelter distribution… Under these conditions, some inhabitants – minors in particular – were hardly accessible to nonprofit organisations. Yet, regulating life in the camp implies acknowledging people's autonomy – which in return requires trust and reliable information about life in the camp.

However, at La Linière, people were not being informed of the decisions, important visits, political fights or struggles when they did happen, of stakes or of their rights. They hardly knew who did what. Reception rules would change every three months. How is it possible to think a common adventure that is being written on a daily basis? Legal stakeholders would not get physically involved in the camp because they faced intimidations by the smugglers, who were wary of them. La Cimade would maintain a service, but outside the camp, downtown. Legal counseling and information – yet crucial in these complex individual situations – was limited to information and counseling provided by the State. Such messages were conveyed daily by employees of the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) – responsible for promoting French asylum requests among people who, for the most part, wished to go to the U.K.…

For their part, the inhabitants of La Linière were trapped between smugglers – authoritarian and violent – and the State authorities, determined not to allow the development of an extraterritorial space. Surely, MSF was worried that the situation would deteriorate; it was having internal discussions about its own responsibilities vis-à-vis the camp – which it had initiated and built, and given the fact that it was still renting some of the plots occupied by it. But it was pulling away from it nonetheless. The reasons for this attitude are difficult to understand.

MSF stopped working in the camp in mid-August 2016, after it handed over to the Dunkirk hospital as far as medical activities are concerned; it had also pulled out of "*Hauts-de-France*"[6] after the Calais "Jungle" was dismantled in October. And so it was becoming difficult to keep monitoring the camp's situation. As early as September, and then following the dismantling of the "jungle", nearly 400 people came to the camp – mostly Afghans, repelled to collective spaces where they somehow managed to camp after the unoccupied sheds had all been removed. Overcrowding, gloominess of organisations that had been kept out, deterioration of habitat, constant political tension between the city hall and the sub-prefecture, harshness of winter… all made for a very explosive situation. And indeed, it was a fire that reshuffled the deck. Since then, the inhabitants of La Linière are hiding in the woods, and others have gone to Paris. The presence of all those not staying in a temporary reception centre, following the fire, is considered illegal. The migrants in the Hauts-de-France region are hunted down and all those who try to help them, associations or individuals, are dissuaded to do so.

The Grande-Synthe project shows the difficulty of an isolated initiative – however courageous it is – to last in an inhospitable national and European environment. But the at least partial failure

[6] New enlarged region encompassing Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy.

of La Linière may very well be attributed to the collective refusal to take responsibility for receiving the migrants – beyond shelter and emergency –, and to assertively propose to invent a reception model for people in transit.

Translated from the French by Benjamin Richardier

Biographies

Franck Esnée • His professional career started on stage. First performing in a circus, he moved on to dancing and finally contemporary theatre. As a writer and a director, Franck Esnée has developed an educational method for dance improvisation, which he teaches in prisons and psychiatric institutions. In 2011, he turned to international solidarity and joined Doctors Without Borders as a logistics specialist in Mali then Haiti.
After this, he worked with ALIMA as a logistics coordinator and carried out several missions, mainly in Africa.
In 2015, he was mobilized again during the migrant crisis, first in Greece where he was MSF's project coordinator, then in France as head of mission. He is today working with Médecins du Monde in the Hauts-de-France region.

Michaël Neuman • Michaël Neuman has been working as Research Director at the Center for Reflection on Humanitarian Knowledge and Action (Crash) since 2010. He graduated in Contemporary history and International relations (Paris-I University). He started working with Doctors Without Borders in 1999 and has alternately worked in the field (Balkans, Sudan, Caucasia, West Africa inter alia) and assumed headquarter-based positions (in New York and Paris as deputy program officer). He was also involved in political analysis projects pertaining to immigration issues. He was a member of French and American Boards of directors from 2008 to 2010. He co-directed *Agir à tout prix ? Négociations humanitaires, l'expérience de MSF* [*Acting at any price? Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience*], La Découverte, 2011 (published in French), and *Saving Lives and Staying Alive. Humanitarian Security in the Age of Security Management*, Hurst Publishers, 2016.

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