

MSF in Grande-Synthe: lessons from an unlikely coalition of actors

Angélique Muller • Ancienne coordinatrice du projet Médecins Sans Frontières à Grande-Synthe

Michaël Neuman • Directeur d'études au Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires (Crash), Médecins Sans Frontières

Vivid symbol of the migratory crisis, the situation of refugee camps in the north of France gives way to many erroneous representations. Angélique Muller and Michaël Neuman bring forward in this article a return of experience relating to the action led by MSF within an aid project for migrants in the city of Grande-Synthe [editor's note: located next to Dunkirk]. Useful lessons, very close to the field and to the "improbable coalition of actors" that, each day, demonstrates tangible solidarity.

Many towns and villages in northern France, including Calais and more recently Grande-Synthe, have provided shelter since the mid-1990s to migrants on their way to the UK. With the arrival of migrants transiting from North Africa and Turkey, their numbers rose sharply during 2015 - from several hundred in Calais in March 2015 to over 6,000 by the end of the year, and from a few dozen to more than 2,000 in Basroch camp in Grande-Synthe. This increase should have come as a surprise to no one, particularly anyone following developments in the Syrian conflict or studying migration flows, but the French government's state of denial led to yet more hardship for people reduced to living in deplorable conditions.

Grande-Synthe and migration issues: an old story

Grande-Synthe in France's Nord Department has a population of 22,000. Like many others in the region, this former industrial town is undergoing a painful process of economic regeneration. Nevertheless, the city council was traditionally conspicuous in the region's political landscape with its determination to provide decent living conditions and assistance to migrants (whose total numbers fluctuated between 50 and 80 prior to June 2015) in the Grande-Synthe area. Damien Carême, who was a member of the Socialist Party before joining the Green Party, became the town's mayor in 2001. Among his achievements has been his contribution in establishing the "Network of Hospitable Mayors" to facilitate the hosting of migrants in the Nord Pas-de-Calais region.

While migrants had been seeking shelter in the Basroch woods since the 2000s, summer 2015 saw a considerable increase in new arrivals, culminating in a surge by the end of the year. At the end of 2015, over 2,500 people were living in Basroch, mostly Iraqi Kurds, but also Syrians, Afghans, Iranians, Vietnamese and members of Kuwait's Bedoon community.¹

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) arrived in Grande-Synthe in September 2015. In October, alerted by various testimonies of increasing numbers of migrants and their poor health and

¹ Quite literally stateless, this community of several hundred thousand people did not acquire Kuwaiti citizenship after the country became independent in 1961. They have no political rights whatsoever.

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sanitation situation, associations and volunteers from the UK (Aid Box Convoy, Hummingbird and Refugee Community Kitchen), Belgium (Solidarity for all), Switzerland and the Netherlands (Rastplatz) joined local or national organizations working in the area, including Médecins du Monde (MdM), Carrefour Solidarités, Emmaüs, AMIS, Salam and Terre d'errance. Assistance to migrants in northern France therefore proved not impervious to the wave of solidarity witnessed across Europe, which was marked at times by head-on opposition to migratory policies introduced by European Union member states. Getting the “old” and the “new guard” together was not always an easy task. Tensions were fuelled by the lack of coordination, the dispossession experienced by some local residents and organizations and everyone's mounting frustration with the lack of support from the governments of France and the UK. This was a major challenge for MSF's team, especially those of its members more accustomed to working much further afield: in Grande-Synthe, the organization, just arrived, knew little about the local actors involved, how they inter-acted with each other or what had been done in the past. MSF also found it no easy task negotiating its way among the numerous stakeholders on the ground, and navigating the intricacies of the French administration was uncharted territory. And, although accustomed to recruiting refugees in many of its projects, this was something it did not dare do for fear of contravening employment legislation and for fear of inadvertently recruiting smugglers who could pose security risks to the refugees. Its relations with the volunteers, some of whom were unwilling to accept the vertical organization favoured by MSF, were at times tense. Alternating with MdM, MSF delivered primary health care three days a week, provided logistical support to voluntary associations and endeavoured to improve the camp's horrible and steadily deteriorating sanitation.

Smugglers commandeered and imposed a charge for showers installed by the town council, and, until January 2016, there was just one standpipe. The weather worsened rapidly, foretelling a sodden and muddy winter. The migrants, mostly young men but also a growing number of families, put up small camping tents to provide some shelter.

The Mayor of Grande-Synthe, Carême, received no response from the government to his increasingly frequent appeals for help in providing housing for migrants. This lack of response typified the government's lack of concern for these “undesirables”, and its refusal to either acknowledge the problems the town hall was experiencing trying to cope with the influx or attempt to find a solution to the migrants' predicament. In November, in the absence of government action, the mayor asked MSF for help in building a new camp on a nearby site, to house in better conditions the 2,500 people living in the woods. Carême and MSF also scheduled a press conference to announce their plans for the new camp, but the day before it was due to be held the mayor accepted an invitation to discuss the situation with the Minister of the Interior who gave him a tentative agreement. This was considered a major breakthrough, as the government had consistently refused to contemplate long-term accommodation for the refugees.

From quagmire to “humanitarian camp”

This agreement signaled the start of a race against time fraught with pitfalls related to the French administrative and security obligations, paradox of an emergency occurring on this nameless “jungle”. By now it was the beginning of January. Many viewed Basroch as the “Calais jungle, but worse”. Their tents flooded, people slept in a muddy quagmire in a camp that had by now come to resemble a gigantic dump. Illnesses caused by the cold (respiratory infections) and lack of hygiene (scabies and skin infections) were difficult to treat. People survived in inhuman conditions, driven by their only ray of hope - getting across the Channel. Far more migrants

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arrived than departed, with a few succeeding in getting to the UK and others relocating to temporary reception centres set up across France.

Thanks to the groundswell of solidarity from many associations and volunteers from all kinds of backgrounds, no lives were lost. There were over 40 mostly voluntary associations working in Basroch camp. Coordination was practically non-existent, with the exception of medical services organised by the Ministry of Health. For the most part, basic items and services, such as food, blankets, tents, heaters, fuelwood and schooling, were largely managed by volunteers. The lack of organization, unplanned donations and control exerted by smugglers led to real difficulties. For many at MSF, the waste was all the more unacceptable as the camp was less than 30 metres from a modest but well-maintained housing development, while a third of Grande-Synthe's population lived below the poverty line.

While MSF staff and others took care of day-to-day tasks in Basroch camp, construction began on the new camp several kilometres away, on a site known as La Linière. Soon an entire village designed to accommodate 2,500 people began to take shape. Long and narrow, and sandwiched between a railway track and a motorway, the site was far from ideal. Furthermore, MSF had no particular experience in setting up refugee camps, let alone in France. Tents or wood cabins? Should heaters be installed? How much space should be given over to communal areas? Should the camp be viewed as the foundation of a future village? How could ties be established with Grande-Synthe? How could architectural aspects be taken into account when speed was of the essence? The hesitations were as numerous as the reversals.

Once construction began, the priority was to inform the migrants about their upcoming relocation. Meanwhile, Carême, the mayor of Grande-Synthe, kept repeating that the old site would be entirely dismantled. Despite its unease, MSF never spoke out clearly about this, saying instead that people could only be moved on a voluntary basis. The organization of the move sometimes illustrated the misunderstanding between two modes, or two worlds of volunteer “helpers”: for MSF, it was above all to persuade migrants to move to the new camp; for others, the relocation was putting them at risk of reducing their chance to join England, as every day, passages were tempted and several people reached the UK. Meanwhile, the government set up a Temporary Reception Centre (Centre d’Accueil Provisoire, or CAP) just outside the camp in Calais to accommodate some of its inhabitants. The centre's use of palm print recognition technology and other harsh constraints highlighted the contrast with what was being accomplished in Grande-Synthe. What about the opinion of the inhabitants of the Basroch neighbourhood, concerning these decisions that affected them in the first place? It is clear that their involvement was limited. However, the mayor was careful to communicate with citizens, combining firmness (against smugglers notably) and humanism (for refugees), to temper the tensions with a worried neighbourhood, nevertheless sensitive to the living conditions of the refugees.

After seven weeks of construction and meetings, the camp at La Linière was ready to receive people from Basroch. The move itself began on 7 March and lasted three days. It was supervised by around 100 volunteers from various associations and 25 MSF staff. Using buses hired by the town hall, around 900 people were relocated on the first day, and by the fourth Basroch was empty. No police intervention was necessary. Over 1,300 people (numbers had decreased as some had gone to emergency accommodation and others to CAPs or to the UK) were now installed in the new camp in wood cabins with access to basic services such as toilets, showers and meals. Carême appointed volunteer service provider Utopia 56 to manage the site. Irony of ironies, a few days after the move Carême received an injunction requiring him to bring La

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Linière camp “up to standard”, as the government considered that the safety of its residents was at risk. In the meantime, the authorities had begun razing the southern - and busiest - part of the Calais “jungle”, leaving its inhabitants either to go to the CAP or to the northern part of the camp, or leave Calais altogether.

Lessons learned

A successful logistical operation, subversive if only for a while, to relocate the residents of Basroch to La Linière camp enabled - and was only possible because of - an improbable coalition of elected representatives, municipal officials, political activists and humanitarian workers. The episode demonstrates that the construction of a dignified space that includes congenial communal areas to accommodate and address the basic needs of refugees is achievable at reasonable cost. And who knows, it could even be an indication of the shape of future collaborative initiatives to foster the local integration of migrants in other French and European towns. The proposal made by Anne Hidalgo, Mayor of Paris, in June 2016 appears to suggest drawing inspiration from the Grande-Synthe experience.

The neighbouring town of Tétéghem, which for many years has also had to cope with migrants in transit, is a good example of how very hard it is for elected representatives to resist pressure from the national authorities and the public to remove camps. In November 2015, at the request of the town’s mayor and after a court ruling, the camp, accommodating 200 to 250 migrants, which was supported by volunteers and associations, was razed because of tensions and suspicions of trafficking related to clandestine immigration. However, shortly after the successful setting up of “La Linière” camp, the mayor, an elected member of the Les Républicains party, expressed his regret at having razed the camp in his town and praised his neighbour’s courage and perseverance.

The challenge of the La Linière camp is also a barometer of the power of public discourse and the ability to overcome fears regarding public opinion. Although it is difficult to gauge the views of Basroch’s inhabitants on the continuing presence of migrants in transit in their town - even more so as their numbers grew - we can attest to the incomprehension and resentment felt by some local people. That said, little or no violence against migrants has been reported, nor have militias been formed as they have in Calais. We believe that this is in part due to the quality of the public discourse, an appropriate police presence and the peaceful relations established between the authorities and the migrants.

Ultimately, nothing is resolved in Grande-Synthe, except that 1,000 people escaped the cold and mud. Thanks to the impetus and actions of numerous partner associations, a degree of social and collective life has begun to emerge. Nevertheless, residents’ gaze remains resolutely set on the UK and there is still a great deal of tension - among the migrants themselves, between smugglers and migrants, and at times between migrants and aid organizations. As for the migrants’ prospects, their options are more than limited. In a context where the countries of Europe continue to ignore the consequences of their actions - their migrant policies are confined to erecting fences - the Grande-Synthe camp can only be a makeshift, hence inadequate, solution.

This article is a revised and expanded version of the article “Temporary palliatives to an ongoing humanitarian need: MSF’s intervention in Dunkirk” by Angelique Muller and Michael Neuman, published in the Humanitarian Exchange magazine, N°. 67, September 2016, p. 36-38. It is available in pdf format, with all of the special feature Refugees and vulnerable migrants in Europe

(<http://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/HE-67-FINAL.pdf>) and online
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Biographies

Michaël Neuman • Director of studies at Crash / Médecins Sans Frontières, Michaël Neuman graduated in Contemporary History and International Relations (University Paris-I). He joined Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999 and has worked both on the ground (Balkans, Sudan, Caucasus, West Africa) and in headquarters (New York, Paris as deputy director responsible for programmes). He has also participated in research on issues of immigration and geopolitics. He also sat on the boards of the French and American sections of MSF between 2008 and 2010. He is co-editor of *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed. The MSF Experience*, London, Hurst and Co., 2011. He is also the co-editor of *Saving lives and staying alive. Humanitarian Security in the Age of Risk Management*, London, Hurst and Co., 2016.

Angélique Muller • Angélique Muller joined Médecins Sans Frontières in 2012 after working eight years in Nancy as an emergency nurse. For MSF she worked for several missions as a nurse (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Liberia). Project coordinator in Grande-Synthe between January and April 2016, she currently holds an equivalent position in Libya.

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