

The cause of migrants at threat from the rise of nationalisms: what path for international solidarity organisations?

Clara Egger • Assistant Professor at the University of Groningen (The Netherlands), Director of Studies of the NOHA Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree Programme in International Humanitarian Action and Member of the Humanitarian Alternatives Editorial Board

Co-editor of this issue's Focus with Boris Martin, Editor-in-Chief

The end of the Second World War ushered in a movement to amplify international cooperation that has been further magnified since the early 1990s. Many international organisations around the world were founded during this half century marked by a hope of greater solidarity between peoples, societies and economies. In particular, the cause of migrants has always been one of the main pillars of this international solidarity project. While on the one hand the themes of exile and the precariousness of forcibly displaced people occupy a central place in humanitarian iconography, on the other hand the commitment alongside migrants has always been manifold, with the systems of assistance and protection coexisting alongside other, more political, systems such as the recognition of the right of migration. However, since 2015 and what has been wrongly described as a "migration crisis", this project has faced strong opposition from a political current affecting every continent and characterised by the rise of nationalism. By opening a "crisis of reception", this political current has essentially crystallised around the issue of migration.

From the election in 2016 of Donald Trump, who held Muslims and Mexicans responsible for America's ills, to that of Geert Wilders, the leader of the Freedom Party and former member of the government coalition to end the "islamisation" of the Netherlands, or Viktor Orbán, who in Hungary is calling for the construction of an anti-migrant wall, the parties these leaders represent share an isolationist, nationalist and racist rhetoric that has been at the heart of their electoral successes since 2010. The blackmail that Belarusian President Lukashenko is imposing on Europe by despicably using migrants is the current culmination of an escalation that may well push the boundaries in this area. This is not a new migration crisis, nor the one that we have been kindly sold to us for over six years. This is proof through ignominy that the instrumentalisation of migration has become as much a tool of geopolitics as of domestic policy. France has not been spared, and the opening of the 2022 election season has already been marked by a predominance of authoritarian and identity questions. In an unprecedented way, the current political campaign is feeding delusions of a French civilizational decline, fuelled by reception policies merrily described as naive or excessively generous. In Asia, the exodus of the Rohingya fleeing violence perpetrated by the Burmese authorities has left them without status or protection in Bangladesh. In South America, the Venezuelan crisis has prompted Brazil and Ecuador to almost close their borders to undesirable foreigners. These events have left humanitarian organisations deep in torpor, with most major agencies struggling to assert their expertise or establish the truth on these issues.

Beyond questions of advocacy, this new political climate is already fraught with consequences for humanitarian actors. In Norway and Sweden – historically amongst the most generous countries in terms of international aid – parliamentary debates on the sums to be allocated to international solidarity have been particularly tense, and budgetary commitments have been saved *in extremis* from

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

drastic cuts, mainly supported by the far-right parties. In Italy and Hungary, new policies have criminalised migrant relief efforts. In France, police harassment of migrant relief associations at the Italian border remains a daily occurrence, with activists being taken to court for “solidarity crimes” and far-right activists exploiting the situation for their own purposes.

In many countries, the management of Covid-19 has led governments to reduce the scope and possibilities for action by international solidarity associations. Migrants and displaced persons continue to be particularly targeted, often regardless of their health situations. Their social and political management has fallen under the radar because of the crisis, and the outlook on the “post-pandemic world” threatens further restrictions on the action of international civil society.

Combining academic knowledge and practical experience, this issue prompts a discussion on these topics by analysing how humanitarian organisations, in France and around the world, are continuing their action with migrants, in what conditions and according to which relationship with the authorities, and by asking how they can/should influence the political frameworks of humanitarian action. The contributions highlight the different dimensions of humanitarian action in a hostile environment. Firstly, a contextual dimension, relating to the continuities and changes in the context of migration policies in South America and Asia. Lucie Laplace and Yvonne Su alongside Tyler Valiquette and Gerson Scheidweiler respectively highlight the shift from inclusive to exclusive nationalism in Ecuador and the Brazilian government’s broken promises to Venezuelan refugees in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis. Eduardo S. Molano examines the ongoing ethno-racial divisions within the shadow opposition government in Myanmar in the wake of the military coup. This is followed by a consideration of the strategic dimension, in which contributors urge humanitarian non-governmental associations (NGOs) to take a different approach to political advocacy on behalf of migrants, as Maelle L’Homme points out in her analysis of the debates within and beyond *Médecins Sans Frontières*. Frédéric Meunier, for his part, bemoans the commitment he considers insufficient of major international humanitarian NGOs on these issues. Finally, there is a practical dimension, with the protection of migrants giving rise to a redefinition of the humanitarian gesture and the emergence of new types of actors, as illustrated by the emblematic cases of the combined action of *Médecins du Monde* with local activists in French Briançonnais and *Humacoop-Amel* France, in the article by Léna Lefebvre and Guy Caussé reviewing the situation in Greece.

Migration has been a constant and long-standing issue in the humanitarian field. Because it is never more instrumentalised than in times of crisis and election, this dossier offers new ways of understanding methods that might help restore the place of international solidarity, a field greatly undermined by this pandemic, at the heart of national and international debates on the matter.

See also, [on our website](#), the interview that Rony Brauman gave on the topic of migration to Boris Martin, editor-in-chief of our review.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:

Clara Egger, “The cause of migrants at threat from the rise of nationalisms: what path for international solidarity organisations?”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 18, November 2021, p.1-5,

<https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/11/07/the-cause-of-migrants-at-threat-from-the-rise-of-nationalisms-what-path-for-international-solidarity-organisations/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-856-4