

The cause of exiles in France: the reticence of international humanitarian organisations called into question

Frédéric Meunier • Cofondateur et directeur du Group', coordinateur du Fonds de Dotation RIACE France (Lyon, France)

All over France, solidarity with migrants is demonstrated through multiple initiatives led by local associations. But for Frédéric Meunier, the major humanitarian NGOs are not doing enough of their part in this fight.

Regular reminders of the failure to respect humanitarian principles and international law regarding assistance to exiles in France and appeals for help from small French citizen groups and associations are not bringing about change: French international humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not sufficiently involved in this area.

However, no-go areas have been increasing and expanding for several years. These areas are not only geographic (Calais, Montgenèvre, Menton, Paris) or institutional (administrative detention centres, administrative detention facilities, holding areas), they are also connected to the status, background, nationality and age of the people in question. Consequently, France is gradually edging further away from applying articles one and two of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the general framework of international humanitarian law and Community law¹. The picture looks far from hopeful.

A worsening situation

Common law programmes (asylum seeker reception centres, asylum seeker emergency accommodation, asylum seeker reception hubs, reception and guidance centres) are deliberately undersized (roughly 50%)² and run by sub-contractors often forced to water down their services. This inadequate provision serves an asylum policy based on making conditions unbearable and waiting times interminable for those who claim asylum, just as international law authorises them to do.

Furthermore, there is no support mechanism for those who are not fortunate enough to be in the common law system, or who fall outside its scope, and who are classed as being “illegal”. Consequently, countless people and families are in transit and are not covered by these mechanisms or have no official status. They have no or very few rights in France. They number over 100,000³ men, women and children in our railway stations, squats, shantytowns, under bridges, in our homes, in our friends’ homes, and are supported by mobilised and organised citizens. Housing, food, hygiene

¹ The European Court of Human Rights has ruled against France eight times since 2012, National Consultative Commission on Human Rights reports, etc.

² There are 112,000 places on the common law schemes, while 60,000 people have reduced entitlement (€7.40 daily accommodation allowance), and 30,000 are entitled to nothing: see *Dispositif d'accueil des demandeurs d'asiles : Etat des lieux 2021*, *La Cimade*, 27 septembre 2021, <https://www.lacimade.org/schemas-regionaux-daccueil-des-demandeurs-dasile-quel-etat-des-lieux>

³ People not covered by the common law system (90,000 according to *La Cimade*) and people in transit in France (minimum estimate of 30,000).

facilities, healthcare (particularly mental health), disability and safeguarding are all issues. These are humanitarian needs that international emergency missions know how to cover.

Moreover, the prospects and pathways identified by forward-looking studies show that population push factors are increasing, migration routes are getting tougher, and barriers are being put up. Overall, this leads to greater inhumanity and more tragedies, as the numbers of people arriving at France's mountain and coastal borders show no signs of drying up. A crisis has truly taken hold, but it is a reception policy crisis, rather than a migration crisis.

For these "outcasts" and "illegals", countless collectives and small citizen associations cover for the most part (albeit partially) their basic (humanitarian) needs and the specific needs of those who are vulnerable. Most of these collectives and associations were founded over the 2015-2019 period, but many are still being created in 2021. They tend to be regionalised, local and small-scale (ten to forty members), with budgets of a few thousand euros, even if some have experienced significant growth over the past few years (*Utopia 56, Refuges Solidaires*, etc.). They are highly efficient and are very attractive to volunteers. When these organisations were founded, they did not have the resources, skills or experience of rolling out humanitarian assistance. However, they now deliver the lion's share of what is called community provision or reception, due to the shortcomings of the State. They do a large swathe of the work of delivering emergency assistance, accommodation and guidance to exiles, and getting them accepted by the host communities, fostering the necessary local social cohesion and curbing the rise of nationalism. These stakeholders are turning professional, mobilising, developing innovative regional reception projects, starting to coordinate themselves, and raising funds. However, they urgently need support from international NGOs (INGOs) and the active support of the entire French humanitarian ecosystem.

Apart from a handful of remarkable exceptions (with *Médecins du Monde* and *Médecins Sans Frontières* at the forefront), French INGOs are sorely absent on the ground and are not meeting the at times fundamental humanitarian assistance needs of exiled communities in France. This is particularly the case for those with sizeable budgets and available skills and know-how, benefiting from legitimacy, means of action, and a strong capacity to mobilise and advocate. In light of the humanitarian principles espoused by these organisations, there are shortcomings in the implementation of their remits in their own country, and these shortcomings raise questions.

Humanitarian NGO underinvestment can be explained but is a bitter pill to swallow

Admittedly, French INGOs are clearly uninclined to deliver the unconditional humanitarian assistance to exiles in France that they more easily provide abroad. There are many reasons for this.

Firstly, very little public funding has been earmarked, on the grounds that exile provision is a State responsibility, with the State maintaining a "minimum service" on the basis of all kinds of discriminatory factors. International funding, particularly from the European Union (EU) or international institutions, is conspicuous by its absence, undoubtedly to avoid any risks of interpretation of any interference. Consequently, INGOs can only count on their own funds secured through funding appeals or raising private funds.

The issue is also politically divisive, as it has long been exploited in France. Real courage seems to be needed to assert that humanitarian principles also apply in France. This political "tension" visibly gives rise to a fear on the part of INGOs of seeing some of their hard-won donors distancing themselves, as they are more inclined to want to support assistance for exiles in faraway lands. Some of these INGOs

have a definite fear, expressed in hushed tones, that these donors could turn their backs on them if they were to publicise their humanitarian work in France or if, for those who have kept out of France to date, they took the plunge. Therefore, and this is already quite something, some make do with taking action and denouncing situations in other European countries (Belgium, Greece, the Balkans, for instance) rather than in their donor base's home country.

Questions can also legitimately be asked about the fears that French INGOs may have concerning the stability and long-term future of State funding for their international work. Given that there is fierce competition for these subsidies, which were set to amount to €500 million in 2022⁴, getting involved or criticising a shameful government reception policy could – one can understand – also entail a financial risk.

Finally, many large INGOs only have a small base of volunteers who are active on a regular basis in France. These volunteers are often asked to get involved in awareness-raising, advocacy and fundraising initiatives. In contrast, support initiatives by civil society organisations (CSO) currently involved in exile issues are based on high levels of volunteer engagement, with volunteers sometimes coming from other regions and even from other European countries. The inherent nature of their work undoubtedly makes getting involved more appealing, meaningful and experientially enriching. Among the large INGOs, Doctors of the World is one of the last to draw on these invaluable ranks of volunteers, also enabling links with the regions to be strengthened. This closeness also enables partnerships to be developed and managed with complementary and effective local CSOs.

Underestimated challenges

The gap between the discourse of the INGOs in non-EU countries and their inaction in France is starting to become too yawning and is making their stance difficult to justify. Even if it has not already begun, INGOs are likely to be faced with strong criticism about their failure to implement humanitarian principles when they have the expertise and legitimacy to do so. INGOs will then run the risk of seeing their most committed donors not understanding why they are failing to uphold their mandates in their own country, and instead redirecting their support to local stakeholders.

However, these organisations have much to gain, but they will need to take risks, get involved, and lay themselves open a little. Indeed, reaffirming the universal nature of humanitarian principles by applying them in their own land, even if this has always involved risk, can only bolster the image of INGOs and make it possible to combat the rise of nationalism. They would make their international remits clear and coherent if they became credible advocates, able to influence current trends in France. If they were to support local CSOs from a logistical, financial and skills-building perspective, as they already do in partnerships when working abroad, this would enable them to get to the heart of local areas, closest to needs, and raise their profile through local initiatives. Becoming involved, with others, in a citizenship and international aid educational initiative would bring them closer to citizens and help to bolster a committed and activist volunteer base.

⁴ See French Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères, *Stratégie humanitaire de la République française 2018-2022*, mars 2018, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/strategie_humanitaire_web_cle023719.pdf

Joining a committed ecosystem that has proved its worth

By unwaveringly embarking upon this path, French INGOs would be joining an ecosystem that has been quite simply proving for years and on an everyday basis that when we welcome exiles, everything goes well.

Hundreds of collectives and associations are active and developing with the support of their elected representatives, whether these organisations are located in border areas or at the heart of regions and cities. These associations are increasingly gaining recognition from the authorities to the extent that prefectures sometimes officially recognise them as serving the public good. Some work with French, English-speaking, Italian or Spanish INGOs. They forge relationships with national private donors, provide full-time employment, and obtain premises. They coordinate with each other, develop their knowledge, meet and create their own ecosystem, changing citizens' view of exile. This creates bonds and fosters cohesion in tandem with local and regional government. All these initiatives aim to enrich our society and economy by offering a dignified welcome to exiles and preparing them to successfully integrate into society.

An ambitious flagship regional project has been created in Briançon in the Hautes-Alpes department of France. This mountain region has been involved in rescuing and supporting the exiles travelling along the Alpine passes since 2017. In 2020, the stakeholders (*Refuges Solidaires*, *Tous Migrants*, *Médecins du Monde*) ended up approaching private donors, as they had experienced difficulties retaining the use of the main accommodation building and were finding it impossible to identify a solution with local government. Strong local and national mobilisation⁵ enabled a permanent building to be purchased and opened, so that the emergency accommodation could be relocated and a community third place opened. Relations with State services are being strengthened.

The *Maison Sésame* in Herzele in Northern France is a real haven in the hell of Calais. It came about because a suitable property became available and due to the urgent need for protection and rest for those living in inhumane conditions on the French shores of the English Channel. This shelter and support centre has fifteen to twenty places and is located inland from Calais. It provides persons in exile with a temporary safe stopping place. The concept is being extensively discussed; it is supported by the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development, the Abbé Pierre Foundation, and the *Fonds RIACE France*, with a view to creating spin-offs.

In Saint-Etienne in the Loire region, the *Maison Solidaire* is the result of citizens taking action to help minors who are not recognised as such, those who have been “deminorised”, are appealing a decision, are “midults”⁶ or have just become adults, and who have been evicted by the specialised services. The group's development and process of institutionalisation have primarily been supported by private funds⁷, aided by premises becoming available. Relations with State services are also being strengthened.

⁵ €1.4 million, of which 25% was local funds as of 30 September 2021 (source: *Fonds RIACE France*). About the mobilisation in the French Hautes-Alpes, see in this issue Agnès Antoine *et al.*, “The French Hautes-Alpes: community solidarity locks horns with a security ideology”, p.36-48.

⁶ The term “midult” [a contraction of “minor” and “adult”] arose from the observation that the French administration could consider a person as a minor in order to take legal action against their carer and as an adult in order to refuse them protection. See, for example: ARRECO, « Les “majeurs” ou les “ni-ni”, une catégorie juridique empreinte de souffrances et d'incertitudes », *Hypothèses*, novembre 2019, <https://arrec.hypotheses.org/595>

⁷ Abbé Pierre Foundation, *Fonds RIACE France*, local private backer, CCAS, etc.

Furthermore, private donors are getting involved alongside operational stakeholders by mobilising increasingly large amounts of funding. For instance, the *Fondation de France*, *Fonds RIACE France* and the Abbé Pierre Foundation annually raise around €3 million. The *Fonds RIACE France*⁸ estimates that 84% of the funds raised for the projects that it supports are private funds, while the remaining 16% is public funding. These thirty-two projects harness €3.66 million to support 18,650 people, *i.e.*, slightly under €200 per person.

Finally, ANVITA⁹ (*Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants* - National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories), founded in 2018, completes this ecosystem. Fifty cities and local authorities (including Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Grenoble, Metz, Nantes, Montpellier, Strasbourg, Villeurbanne, etc.) adhere to a charter and are part of a strong national and international network, which has an unconditional welcome as its core commitment. ANVITA advises, supports and educates elected representatives on exile issues, and facilitates relations between elected representatives and civil society stakeholders.

A system of support and emergency aid is therefore being cemented at the heart of the French regions with a strong citizen commitment, coherence with local governance, and growing private funding. This system delivers a minimum level of humanitarian assistance, partially replacing the State, in order to endeavour to guarantee respect for fundamental rights and international humanitarian law. However, the system remains fragile, and the current French election campaign, in which candidates and others raise the spectre of migration and use it to distract from the country's real problems, runs the risk of ruining it. Germany took the opposite, more courageous path at the country's last elections, during which the topic of immigration stayed in its rightful place.

In this context, it is hard for French INGOs to remain in France hiding behind the principle of neutrality. Instead, they should assert the principle of their independence. In these times of hesitation and prevarication, we need to be aware that local CSOs will take risks to ensure that exile rights are respected and help to consolidate social cohesion in a society that has been shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic and weakened by the economic crisis. However, French INGOs can and perhaps even should play their part and take up their rightful place. There is still time.

Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton

Biography • Frédéric Meunier

Co-founder of *Le Group'* (<http://legroup-ess.org>), of which he is the current director, Frédéric has worked in the international aid sector for over two decades, following a career in industrial restructuring project management for a multinational. From 1998, he worked with several organisations on international programmes in Africa, Central America, the Middle East, Asia and Central Asia, as a project coordinator, head of mission, and programme officer. In 2001-2005, he spearheaded the creation and management of Handicap International's humanitarian action department. An independent consultant for over a decade, he works regularly with aid organisations, French and European international cooperation agencies, the EU, the United Nations, universities, graduate schools, and research and training institutes. Since 2019, he has also coordinated the *RIACE France* endowment fund (<https://riacefrance.org>), which financially supports associations providing unconditional assistance to exiles on national territory and at national borders.

⁸ See: [www.riacefrance.org](http://riacefrance.org)

⁹ *Association Nationale des Villes et Territoires Accueillants* [National Association of Welcoming Cities and Territories, (editor's translation)]: <https://www.anvita.fr>

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

Frédéric Meunier, "The cause of exiles in France: the reticence of international humanitarian organisations called into question", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 18, November 2021, p.49-58,

<https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/11/10/the-cause-of-exiles-in-france-the-reticence-of-international-humanitarian-organisations-called-into-question/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-872-4