

Humanitarian discourse and the challenges of migration: the European exception?

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Are non-governmental organisations also guilty of double standards? Reviewing humanitarian actors' approaches to migration in Europe, the author analyses the demands, intentions and dilemmas that drive them.

Since 2015, various humanitarian organisations operating along the exile routes to Europe have publicly expressed their outrage at violations of the basic rights of people on the move, the illegality of refoulement practices, and the criminalisation of migrants and those who help them. If there is no doubt about the truth of the facts described, the explicit nature of the charges made and the tone used to describe “Europe’s failure¹”, the cruelty of its policies² and the perfidy of its methods³ may come as a surprise. Indeed, most of these humanitarian actors generally refrain from pointing the finger at the groups or governments responsible for the crises to which they respond⁴.

Drawing on a dozen semi-structured interviews with professionals from Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières* – MSF in French), the author wants to think about the grounds for these public criticisms of European governments and how they can be applied to other contexts. The discreet advocacy efforts that precede and accompany any public statement are not addressed here. If this limits the analysis, this approach should force us to look at things as they appear to the general public – that is, anyone who has no knowledge of the organisation’s internal discussions.

The politicisation of humanitarian discourse on migration issues

Via a steady stream of publications that speak out against the cynicism of European policies, MSF has contributed to the European public debate on migration challenges over the past few years and has helped to maintain a certain degree of pressure on governments. Between April 2016 and April 2021, the conditions for the reception of migrants and asylum-seekers in Europe were the subject of over one hundred articles, press releases and open letters, in addition to some twenty articles on conditions under which migrants are detained in Libya⁵. In June 2021, MSF used five years of operational presence in

¹ Press release dated 7 November 2016, published on the Doctors of the World (MDM) website, <https://www.medecinsdumonde.org/fr/actualites/leurope/2016/11/07/grece-lechec-de-leurope-lesbos>

² Report from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), “The cruelty of containment: the Mental Health Toll of the EU’s ‘Hotspot’ Approach on the Greek Islands”, December 2020, p.4, https://eu.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/IRC_Cruelty_of_Containment_FINAL.pdf

³ Oxfam Report, “A dangerous game”, October 2017, p.3, https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfam-us/www/static/media/files/A_Dangerous_Game_Final_rP9UNs4.pdf

⁴ Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, 2011, p.33.

⁵ This non-exhaustive list is taken from the dossier entitled « Criminalisation et maltraitance des personnes en migration » published on the website of *Médecins Sans Frontières*, <https://www.msf.fr/decryptages/criminalisation-et-maltraitance-des-personnes-en-migration>

Greece to denounce the impact of European policies on the mental health of those stranded in the Greek island “hotspots” of Lesbos, Samos and Chios, and “call[ed] on European leaders and the Greek government to take accountability”⁶.

It is not unusual for MSF to challenge the authorities on migration issues publicly in this manner. Various publications from 2017⁷, 2018⁸ and 2020⁹ thus reported similar abusive practices by the Mexican, US and Australian governments with regard to the detention and processing of asylum-seekers. In every instance, the criticism is not just aimed at the indecency of the reception conditions but also highlights political responsibilities in generating a crisis with real humanitarian consequences. The European Union and France, for example, are described as “accomplice[s] in the cycle of the human rights’ violations committed [in Libya]”, accused of committing “daily” and “systematic” violations of the rights of migrants, and of being at the root of a “cruel, inhuman, and cynical policy” endangering human lives and reneging both on their principles and their international commitments¹⁰.

It is not so much the vehemence of the statements themselves that disconcerts but the identity of the organisation expressing them because, in most contexts, humanitarian action involves dealing with those who infringe human rights¹¹. An organisation such as MSF faces many dilemmas before it decides to speak out in public. They have been subjected to various in-depth critical reviews¹² that would be impossible to summarise here without undermining their complexity. Suffice to say that humanitarian action is no stranger to contexts in which public denunciation is not possible or desirable because such media exposure would be to the detriment of team safety, the organisation’s presence, and the populations concerned. Sometimes, bilateral and silent advocacy is required, but in a world where information is widely distributed, can humanitarian organisations still adapt their public positions to suit different contexts without being accused of moral expediency?

International solidarity facing up to its responsibilities

It is clear that the shift from a needs-based to a rights-based approach to humanitarian action in the 1990s did not fundamentally advance the debate between an apolitical humanitarian action and a more militant one. Caught in a contradiction between their willingness to remain – when they want to – on the margins of politics so as to access victims in an impartial manner, and what they regard as their responsibility to increase public awareness, humanitarian actors do not take part in the same tense power relationships everywhere they operate.

⁶ MSF Report, “Constructing crisis at Europe’s borders: The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands”, June 2021, p.1, <https://www.msf.fr/sites/default/files/2021-06/Rapport%20-%20Constructing%20Crisis%20at%20Europe%27s%20borders.pdf>

⁷ MSF Report, “Forced to Flee Central America’s Northern Triangle: A neglected humanitarian crisis”, May 2017, https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/msf_forced-to-flee-central-americas-northern-triangle_e.pdf

⁸ MSF Report, “Indefinite despair – The tragic mental health consequences of offshore processing on Nauru”, December 2018, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2018-12/apo-nid207741.pdf>

⁹ MSF Report, “No Way Out – The humanitarian crisis for migrants and asylum seekers trapped between the United States, Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America”, February 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/no-way-out-humanitarian-crisis-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-trapped-between-united>

¹⁰ Articles, press releases and open letters from MSF’s French and Swiss sections published between April 2016 and April 2020.

¹¹ David Rieff, “A false compatibility: Humanitarian action and human rights”, *Humanitarian Stakes*, no.1, MSF Switzerland’s Review on Humanitarian Stakes and Practices, 2007, p.42.

¹² Laurence Binet, *MSF Speaking Out Case Studies*, <https://www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies>

Admittedly, aid actors have no choice but to weigh the relevance of their statements against the positive or negative consequences for the populations concerned. They may therefore be wrong not to capitalise on the extra legitimacy and visibility that their historical and structural roots give them in their home countries to shift a few political boundaries. Yet while the “vow to help strangers in distant lands”¹³ truly is the foundation of the humanitarian endeavour, it is legitimate only because it embodies, through its international outreach, the universalist view of global distributive justice¹⁴. As a result, the “affected communities” should be entitled to demand greater coherence from organisations which – frequently – decide for themselves if it is their relief function or their role as agitator that should prevail.

To suggest that there is some iniquity in the way humanitarian organisations are indignant about the suffering of the people they assist is to risk fuelling unnecessary, if not dangerous, controversy. This is all the more obvious because the point is more one of intuition than mathematics, as comparing the place given to victims on the scale of public indignation is a dangerous exercise and, whatever the method used, questionable. There is no question of doubting the legitimacy of humanitarian organisations to speak out and demand that the right to asylum be respected and that populations in distress be treated with humanity. On the contrary, it is a matter of confirming that encampment in all its forms, as “a way of managing the undesirable” and “keeping out the bothersome”¹⁵, is a dehumanising but unfortunately mundane act of brutality that deserves to be denounced everywhere. Precisely because it is not being denounced everywhere, we can allow ourselves to ask what the specific characteristics of the European migration issue are.

Europe’s “migration crisis”: a moral vision

For humanitarian organisations on the ground, condemning the effects of European policies in Greece, Libya, more generally in the Mediterranean is seen as a moral obligation in several respects. Firstly, they highlight European governments’ direct responsibility for adopting and implementing increasingly restrictive policies that target migrants and asylum-seekers. Secondly, they invoke Europe’s material capacity and the ensuing duty to do more and do better to provide a dignified welcome with European taxpayers’ money¹⁶. Similarly, when MSF appeals to the international community about living conditions and the erosion of the protection of refugees’ rights in camps in Tanzania or Kenya¹⁷, it urges rich countries to assume a share of the responsibility that is commensurate with their material resources.

It is primarily the hypocrisy of European governments that humanitarian organisations are opposing, however, even though the exploitation of migration for political purposes is certainly not the prerogative of European governments. However, the latter’s self-righteousness towards the rest of the world and

¹³ Michel N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity...*, *op. cit.*, p.20.

¹⁴ Philippe Calain, “In Search of the ‘New Informal Legitimacy’ of *Médecins Sans Frontières*”, *Public Health Ethics*, vol.5, no.1, 2012, p.62, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221971406_In_Search_of_the_%27New_Informal_Legitimacy%27_of_Medecins_Sans_Frontieres

¹⁵ Coined by Barbara Harrell-Bond, founder of the Center for Refugee Studies at the University of Oxford, the term “encampment” underscores the political intention behind the use of refugee camps as places of exclusion. The term was transposed into French by Michel Agier (dir.), *Un monde de camps*, La Découverte, 2014.

¹⁶ See, for example, the opinion piece written by Joanne Liu, International President of MSF 2013-2019: « Libye : la France, l’UE et les réseaux criminels, main dans la main », *Libération*, 6 septembre 2017, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2017/09/06/libye-la-france-l-ue-et-les-reseaux-criminels-main-dans-la-main_1594531

¹⁷ “Dadaab to Somalia: Pushed back into peril”, October 2016, <https://www.msf.org/za/news-and-resources/publications/dadaab-somalia-pushed-back-peril>; MSF press release, “Urgent increase in assistance needed as refugee camps now full”, 16 November 2016, <https://www.msf.org/tanzania-urgent-increase-assistance-needed-refugee-camps-now-full>

their willingness to act as if they were model civilisations and boast about respecting human rights¹⁸ lay them open to being brought face to face with their own contradictions.

Furthermore, when refugees are demonised in populist right-wing and far-right rhetoric that equates them with “criminals¹⁹”, “thieves, killers, rapists”²⁰ or as a threat against which Greece is Europe’s “shield”²¹, the organisations working with them can hardly remain silent. As a result, the rise of anti-immigration sentiment, or at least the absence of nuanced political debate, has probably contributed to their increasingly active challenge to the dominant narrative about migration issues²². This challenge is not just about expressing solidarity with people in distress, but is also, undoubtedly, necessary with regard to donors to whom the organisations are duty-bound to explain who they are and why they are getting involved.

From pragmatism to citizen activism

In practice and on a global scale, however, humanitarian action is ill-suited to normative behaviour. Without being totally utilitarian in the sense that they are concerned with the purpose of the deed itself, which must be altruistic, humanitarian ethics are fundamentally ambivalent, “simultaneously universal and circumstantial”²³. Indeed, while motivated by a sense of injustice, the pronouncements made by humanitarian organisations are often the result of realistic, rather than moral, considerations. An organisation’s visibility in a given context, its ability to “resonate” with the country’s civil society, and the media’s interest in amplifying its messages, are factors in the risk-benefit calculation, in light of which the timeliness of a statement is assessed.

Whatever the rationale behind these factors, humanitarian organisations cannot ignore the fact that they contribute to the over-representation in the public arena of certain crises or victims at the expense of others, creating despite themselves a kind of hierarchy of responsibility and suffering. In this respect, the regular temptation for many organisations to make their presence a political act in itself, by occupying the media space with regard to contexts in which the scale and life-saving impact of their operations are the least significant, raises a number of difficult questions. We may wonder what is the place of the humanitarian worker and what is the place of the citizen in this desire for politicisation? Without turning humanitarian action into a utopian spearhead for supposedly universal values, do organisations not have a duty to be consistent with the people who sometimes rely on them to make themselves heard? Finally, in seeking to outline what is tolerable and intolerable, we may wonder too if humanitarian actors do not contribute to projecting a Manichean interpretation of the world that could fuel the radicalisation of discourse and inflame the polarisation of debate.

¹⁸ On 24 June, 2018, during the European mini-summit on the migration issue, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted: “Let us never forget our values, I will be intractable on this point. We have values. This is what made us” (editor’s translation), see « Migrants : la France “n’a de leçons à recevoir de personne”, affirme Macron », *Le Parisien*, 24 juin 2018, <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/migrants-la-france-n-a-de-lecons-a-recevoir-de-personne-affirme-macron-24-06-2018-7790982.php>

¹⁹ Statement by the Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, during a visit to Sicily in June 2018, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2018/06/italie-salvini-reaffirme-sa-ligne-dure-sur-limmigration-991785>

²⁰ Statement by the commentator and possible candidate for the presidency of the French Republic, Éric Zemmour, on the television programme « Mineurs isolés : une naïveté française ? », *CNews*, 30 septembre 2020, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/propos-sur-les-mineurs-isoles-les-journalistes-de-cnews-se-desolidarisent-deric-zemmour>

²¹ Statement by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, at a press conference during a visit to the Greco-Turkish border on 3 March 2020, <https://brusselsfuture.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/union-soutient-son-bouclier-grec-la-libre-4-mars-2020.pdf>

²² Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart, « Pour en finir avec la moralisation de la question migratoire », *Les migrant.e.s dans l’impasse des gouvernances*, *Mouvements*, n° 93, printemps 2018, p. 20.

²³ Michel N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity...*, *op. cit.*, p.11.

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Holder of a Master's degree in Public Health and a Master's degree in Political Science, Maelle joined Doctors Without Borders in 2015 as head of community activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and Yemen. She then worked as a project coordinator in South Sudan and Tanzania and other countries. Maelle is currently a researcher at the Research Unit on Humanitarian Stakes and Practices (*Unité de Recherche sur les Enjeux et Pratiques Humanitaires* – UREPH in French), based at MSF's operational centre in Geneva.

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