

Civil Society Responses to the ‘Migration Crisis’

This briefing discusses recent research on civil society responses to the migration crisis. It examines the responsibilities civil society actors (individual volunteers and groups and non-governmental organisations [NGOs]) assumed, the gaps in governmental policy they addressed, and highlights examples of good practice in refugee reception provided by civil society groups.

Policy implications

- Civil society actors provided shelter, food, medical care, search and rescue, and other forms of support to new arrivals across Europe, often in the absence of official support from the EU, national governments and international relief agencies.
- At the same time, some local and national governments have worked with NGOs to promote a climate of inclusion and welcome towards new refugee/migrant arrivals.
- At times, humanitarian actors have been criminalised, in particular those engaged in search and rescue activities.
- The European Union and member states need to place more emphasis on humanitarian assistance in the context of large-scale irregular migrant/refugee arrivals.
- Mechanisms to coordinate international assistance and provide swift relief in situations of increased arrivals should be improved.
- Those acting for humanitarian purposes or for a civil society organisation should never be charged/prosecuted under human trafficking legislation. Criminalisation risks undermining the practices aimed at saving lives and at addressing new arrivals' most fundamental needs.



Research findings

What role did civil society play in response to the crisis?

Across Europe, civil society organisations stepped in where state actors failed to meet the most basic needs of new arrivals by providing healthcare, shelter, food and water, and by supporting new arrivals with registration and onward travel.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, search and rescue operations were aided considerably by civil society groups who were often the first to encounter new arrivals. Despite this, some of those engaging in search and rescue were charged with people trafficking while others have been arrested for providing ad hoc shelter, food or transportation. This criminalisation of humanitarian activities, while not a new phenomenon, appears to be intensifying and to be aimed at discouraging others from providing assistance, thereby putting human lives at risk.

CASE STUDY 1: CITY PLAZA HOTEL

Squatted in April 2016, City Plaza Hotel in Athens had been abandoned for seven years before local activists transformed it into temporary housing for refugees stuck in Greece. The hotel hosts around 400 refugees, including more than 180 children, who live together with local and international activists on site.

By hosting people who need additional support as well as those can provide it, City Plaza fosters a culture of mutual respect and solidarity. Pregnant women, new-borns, single men, people with disabilities, unaccompanied minors, teachers and translators live together and support one another in City Plaza. All residents agree to abide by a basic set of rules, and to participate in the activities that keep the collective living arrangements running, including cleaning, providing communal meals, and language classes. Decisions are taken collectively in a range of cross-represented assemblies.

With its emphasis on self-organisation, participation, shared decision-making and mutual support and solidarity, City Plaza stands in stark contrast to EU hotspots and refugee camps. City Plaza shows that people in precarious situations can be meaningfully engaged in taking decisions about their living conditions, allowing them to begin to rebuild their lives without being constrained by their status.

CASE STUDY 2: SEARCH AND RESCUE VOLUNTEERS ARRESTED IN GREECE.

On 11 January 2016, the Greek Coast Guard arrested five volunteers on a boat off the Greek island of Lesbos on charges of human trafficking for facilitating the “illegal entry” of migrants and refugees into Greece. The Danish and Spanish volunteers were working for the NGOs Team Humanity and PROEM-AID and were trying to tow a heavily laden dinghy to the coast of Lesbos. The Danish skipper of the rescue vessel was prevented from leaving Greece and ordered to pay 10,000 Euros bail while the other crew had to post bail of 5,000 Euros each.

Wider concerns over the eligibility and identity of those active on the island culminated in the implementation of a formal registration process by the Greek state. This unprecedented step included the submission of a clear statement of purpose and activities, as well as the personal profiles of affiliated individuals. This effort can be read as an attempt to solve the current European paradox of both wanting to save lives and secure external borders.

The creation of the hotspot has catalysed a shift from humanitarianism to securitization shrinking the space for humanitarian action.

References and further information

For information about the Mediterranean Migration Research Programme, including the methodology and evidence base for the research, see: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/mmrp/about/

On City Plaza:

- <https://www.opendemocracy.net/vicki-squire/city-plaza-way-forward-for-european-migration-crisis> (June 2016)

On activists and NGOs in Greece:

- <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mediterranean-journeys-in-hope/evie-papada/humanitarian-space-and-border-management-in-lesbos> (May 2016)

On support for refugees at a local level:

- Orlando, Leoluca and Parker, Simon. “Palermo Open City: From the Mediterranean Migrant Crisis to a Europe Without Borders?” Near Futures Online | “Europe at a Crossroads” (March 2016).