

A last say on refugees, NGOs and the role of the State

During the last decades, narratives related to migration and refugees, in different parts of the globe, have challenged the classical approach to security and solidarity proposed by nation-states. The rising number of people affected by destitution and destruction, due to the occurrence of war or by being a citizen of a failed state, has been posing serious questions to the international community about the way it should deal with these crises. Considering the international dimension of this phenomenon and given the multiplication of International Organizations and multilateral fora of discussion in the last century, new concepts such as humanitarian assistance and international cooperation have contributed to enrich the way many states, mainly Western, interpret foreign policy. For instance, the decision to include “international cooperation” as a structural component of Foreign Affairs Ministries in many western countries proves the relevance attributed to these types of practices in the relationship between states.

This new approach to crisis management and conflict resolution have broadened the venues of foreign policy-making beyond the closed box of nation-state institutions, both outside and within the national borders.

On one side, International Organizations, such as the UN, EU, UNCHR, IOM offer on-going rooms for discussion, with the aim to establish a common framework of values and practices accepted by everyone. One example, closely tied to the topic of this review, is the “Global Compact on Migration”¹ put forward by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in April 2017, which, according to IOM, “is expected to be the first, intergovernmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.”

On the other side, civil society and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) define their field of action, within these “values and practice” generally agreed by the international community. In this regard, NGOs are the most remarkable foreign policy agents. It is mainly through the work of non-state actors that, indeed, those values such as “human security”, “humanitarian assistance” and “human rights” find a practical application on the ground.

The connection between NGOs and International Organizations is paramount for the development of aid programs and the coordination of different organizations operating in the same context, as

1. <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>

pointed out in the interviews we presented in this review.

Accordingly, is then the role of the nation-state not significant when it comes to issues related to refugees and migration? No, it is still predominant.

Whereas the scope of this review is to present the role of NGOs and international cooperation, the role of state-based foreign policy in the definition of international cooperation goals must not be overlooked. Indeed, states still represent the main actor in the international system and it is through decisions taken by national institutions that the work of NGOs and International Organizations themselves is guaranteed, supported, limited and regulated. For instance, the decision taken by Italian interior ministry to contrast illegal immigration and block the ports for NGOs that save refugees in the Mediterranean Sea², as much as the decision by the Italian government to not participate in the “Global Compact on Migration” meeting in December 2018³, testify the dominant position national institutions keep holding in matter of foreign policy vis-à-vis international non-state actors. Furthermore, the decision to accept or refuse foreign NGOs within the country indicates national institutions of that country as the one that has got the last say. This is why the activists we interviewed remarked the importance of keeping good and proficient relations with local institutions of the countries they work in.

1. Refugees

The refugee issue has become a point of discussion in Europe just in the last decade, due to the consequences of the turmoil in the Middle East, the wars led by NATO in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the instability characterizing Sub-Saharan Africa. However, this is not a new issue for many countries in the Middle East. Jordan, as an example, deals with a huge Palestinian refugee population since the half of the last century. The international community still struggles in the assessment of who should be recognized as a refugee, which rights are guaranteed to them and which obligations the hosting countries have before them. For instance, the UN provides a definition of “Palestinian refugees” as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict”⁴. This definition - meaning that Palestinians forced out of their living places in following periods would not benefit from this status - was tailored out in the aftermath of the particular situation that came about after the 1948 conflict between the just-established State of Israel and some of the surrounding countries. Moreover, international agreements must be accepted, ratified and implemented by nation-states, which often do not do so. For instance, Lebanon is not a signatory member of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Furthermore, the word “refugee” is inaccurate when it is deployed to refer to the entire population targeted by humanitarian protection. The Internally Displaced People (IDPs), the “returnees” (who return to their native country after being refugees abroad) and the Host Communities benefit as well from the work of NGOs and the protection of humanitarian and customary law. Among the four, the two main categories are “refugees” and “IDPs”. The significative difference between them relies on the fact that a refugee is a person who seeks protection in a foreign state, while an IDPs are people who were forced to flee from their hometown due to conflicts, or others, but did not leave the country. It is important to specify these differences in order to have a clear idea of the important role played by NGOs in improving the situation on the ground, regardless of what status a person holds (refugee or IDP).

2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/24/italian-government-approves-bill-anti-migrant-measures-matteo-salvini>

3. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2018-12-10/migranti-164-paesi-firmano-global-compact-l-italia-non-c-e-140603.shtml?uuiid=AEKU2CxG>

4. <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>

For an NGO to work in different countries means to interact with different realities on the ground and overcome different challenges. Jordan has got a large refugee population. Lebanon hosts more refugees than IDPs. Iraq, instead, has to deal with a consistent number of IDPs alongside the refugees.

Moreover, it is likely that the refugee population in a given country changes over the years. Jordan was already hosting the aforementioned Palestinian community, when in the last decade it has been experiencing the arrival of a great number of Syrian refugees, because of the conflict started in 2011. According the figures Luca (INTERSOS) provided us during the interview, nowadays, Syrian refugees in Jordan are around 660'000, not including the not registered ones. Just consider that the total population of Jordan is around 9 million.

The situation in Lebanon is slightly different. The refugee population, indeed, composed mainly by Palestinians and Syrians, meets a national demography dominated by different social groups and religions (Sunni, Shia, Maronite, Orthodox). The multi-ethnic character of Lebanon shows pros and cons in relation to refugees. During the interview on the work of INTERSOS in Lebanon, Renè explained how diversity plays a positive role when it comes to accepting foreign cultures and newcomers. On the other side, the Lebanese legal system based upon this multi-ethnicity comprises different institutions and procedures in relation to different social groups, which causes problems that are even more complicated to solve for refugees. Compared to Jordan, which has been peaceful and stable for many years, Lebanon has experienced violent conflicts both inside (civil war 1975-1990) and outside (2006 Hezbollah – Israel war). This led the UN to host a permanent mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Consequently, it means that the country experienced the presence of IDPs in addition to that of refugees.

Finally, of the three countries discussed, Iraq is the most affected by violence. In the last three decades, Iraq suffered the consequences of two wars – the Gulf War in 1991 and the international intervention led by the US in 2003- the establishment of the Islamic State (ISIS) on its territory in 2014, and the huge influx of Syrians refugees forced to flee out their country because of the civil war. According to the figures provided by Eleonora (Un Ponte per.../UPP), IDPs in Iraq are around two million, Syrian refugees are around 250'000.

A widespread view on the issue is that almost all the refugees live in refugee camps organized by NGOs and International Organization. This is not - at least not completely - true. As clearly explained by Luca (INTERSOS), around 80% of the refugee population in Jordan lives outside official refugee camps, many of them lives in cities or in unofficial camps. This is particularly true for many IDPs, who leave refugee camps and try to go back to their places as soon as the conflict is over.

Accordingly, NGOs have to deal with different realities and have to design strategies for different areas. For instance, Eleonora (UPP) informed us on the dissimilarities between working in refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan or in the city of Mosul, which was heavily bombed and mostly destroyed during the conflict with ISIS. Another example was provided by Renè (INTERSOS), who remarked the challenges faced by her organization when it comes to run projects related to gender issues (LGBT protection and Gender-based Violence/GBV) in Northern and Southern Lebanon compared to the situation in the capital city Beirut.

So, what are the main problems and challenges affecting refugees? They are of different kinds: work and income, school for children, access to healthcare system and medication, housing, documents and legal status. Moreover, these issues are strictly intertwined, which makes paramount for NGOs to design aid projects able to address different questions at the same time.

Holding a recognized legal status and being able to provide valid documentation is a structural issue for every refugees. Without these documents, it becomes hard for them to get a job, to go to the hospital, to benefit from the legal system and to freely move across the country. The lack of availability of these documents has different causes. In the case of Syrian refugees, for instance, it is a consequence of the fact that their municipalities and city halls back home do not exist anymore or are unable to provide the requested documentation. Even when a refugee holds all the required documentation, it does not mean that it is easy to get a job or to approach an hospital. According to the figures provided by INTERSOS, the incidence of refugees who actually work is really low and most them live under the poverty line (88% in Jordan). Moreover, even when refugees have got all the documents needed to approach an hospital, it can be that they cannot pay for assistance. In this case, it may happen that the hospital illegally keeps their documents in order to make them pay.

In some cases, problems arise from a decision by the national government of the hosting country to restrict the access to working permits or healthcare system. For example, Luca (INTEROS) told us about the decision taken by the Jordanian government to restrict the access to the health system and rise the fees for refugees.

The lack of jobs and social security creates secondary consequences. For instance, children do not go to school because they have to help their family. Another example, a family cannot pay for a rent and is forced to live in makeshift camps. Finally, it goes without saying that all these issues have a huge impact not only on the material possibility but also on the psychological and social situation of an individual.

2. NGOs and activism

To understand what kind of aid International NGOs deliver in crisis areas we have to start from a consideration put forward by Luca (INTEROS) during the interview: “the refugee population is very resilient. They are not just there waiting for us to ‘save’ them; instead they always act by themselves in the first place”. This is paramount in order to put the work of these organizations in the right place and to contrast a general misconception according to which Western NGOs manage refugee crisis regardless of the actions undertaken by the targeted community itself.

The methodology and the procedures to provide assistance to refugees follow the so-called “Community Based Approach”⁵ which considers the beneficiaries of a specific program as an active participant of the program, not just a passive individual. This Approach has been developed by UN agencies and it works through two steps: analysis and action. The first step is, indeed, to study the socio-economic and political characteristics of the targeted community. The second step is to include the refugee community in the development of the aid programs, enhancing skills and competences of different individuals within the community.

Starting from this consideration, it is not surprising that most of the activists working for International NGOs are locals. Jordanian activists working for INTERSOS are actually 96% of the total staff. Only ten out of two hundred UPP’s workers in Iraq are expats, all the others come from the different ethnicities living in the country. Iraq is a great example to show the inclusiveness put in practice by NGOs. Iraqi population is composed by Arabs, Kurdish, Syrians, Christians, Muslims, Yazidis and others. Besides, ethnic and religious communities are not monolithic, they overlap and integrate among each other. As explained by Eleonora (UPP), the work of UPP is based on the effectiveness of the intervention and led by ideas such as social cohesion and the respect of minorities. On the ground, it means that UPP develops

5. (p.20) https://www.intersos.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Annual-Report-2017_ITA-min-1.pdf

humanitarian programs aiming at the collaboration among different groups and the respect of diversity. Sometimes, refugee camps host groups of people coming from different communities. In other cases, like for the Yazidi camp Eleonora told us about, the ethnic integrity of the community is preserved for mere logistical and practical reasons. When it comes to refugees and IDPs communities living in cities, the likelihood to have mixed social groups increases. It is in these cases that the respect and tolerance among the different communities become more difficult and more important. For instance, talking about the city of Mosul, Eleonora pointed out that tensions between different communities are still in place because of the traumas experienced recently.

Furthermore, inclusiveness toward the local community does not only mean to involve locals in the work of an international NGOs, but also to coordinate and collaborate with local organization. This approach has multiple advantages. First of all, it creates a better understanding of the situation on the ground, the peculiarities and challenges of a given society, the mindset and the values of a specific community. Secondly, it permits to transfer know-how and tools to the local community, building up specific skills. This aspect is frequently overlooked even though is of great importance for the strategy of humanitarian NGOs. In the word of Eleonora (UPP), “in the long term they [Local organizations] are the one that need capacity build and need to bring on this work”. Finally, sticking with the national-based reality favours a better relationship with local institution.

Coordination is big part of the work of an NGOs and the humanitarian response tries to be as much integrated as possible. It works with locals as much as among international NGOs themselves, both at the bottom and upper level. We discussed this in depth with the activists we interviewed. Starting from the upper level, NGOs work within the frameworks provided by International Organizations (UN in *primis*) and by the international treaties. Many projects run by INTERSOS and UPP are financed by UN agencies, such as UNDP, UNOCHA, UNCHR, or by other institutions like the European Union. Here it comes the connection between international and non-state actors exposed at the beginning of this article. Many humanitarian programs are not developed by a single NGO, but rather from a consortium of organizations that put efforts, skills and know-how together in order to design the best response to a given issue. Each organization has specific competences. At this level, coordination means to discuss issues and challenges, identify gaps and vulnerabilities, design a common strategy, harmonize the methodology of intervention and work together to provide a complete response. In some cases, *ad-hoc* roundtables and permanent rooms for discussion are organized by different NGOs or they are set by local institutions. This is the case of the ongoing coordination UPP maintains with the “Directorate of Health” and the Ministry of Education in Iraq. Another example is the “GBV task force” INTERSOS is part of in Lebanon. At a lower level, coordination regards more practical issues: sharing common cases, referring an individual to another NGO, involving local organizations.

Through the just discussed methodology of intervention, NGOs address humanitarian crisis from different angles. The main clusters of humanitarian aid programs are: education, health, shelter, basic income and WaSH (water, sanitation, hygiene). Generally speaking, NGOs cover two main areas: international development and humanitarian assistance. The scope of the first one is to promote and support social and economic performance of underdeveloped countries. The second one, aims at responding to humanitarian crisis and emergency situations brought about by wars, natural disasters and others. In the case we discussed in this review, the efforts of INTERSOS and Un Ponte per..., were directed to humanitarian response in post-conflict scenarios. Within this type of intervention, a great challenge comes about when “emergency” becomes a permanent status. In cases of protracted crisis, like Iraq and Afghanistan, the humanitarian situation keeps improving and worsening, remaining critical. Accordingly, it is paramount for NGOs to assess their goals and change their strategy every time it is needed.

The work of NGOs is crucial in every humanitarian crisis, but it cannot provide structural changes and it should not replace the work of governmental and political institutions. According to the Annual Report 2017 by INTERSOS (p.30)⁶: “Humanitarian needs will continue to be - both in the short and long run - spread, severe and hard to provide for; part of the reasons leading to the manifestation of this discrepancy, which makes us face the crucial necessity to provide assistance, consists in the fact that the humanitarian action has nowadays become a substitute of every remarkable political action directed to the prevention and solution of crises”

6. https://www.intersos.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Annual-Report-2017_ITA-min-1.pdf