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## **Médecins Sans Frontières and the limitations of Humanitarian Aid: (Filling a gap)**

João Miguel Gomes de Almeida Gama Costa

Master in International Studies

Supervisor:

PhD., Giulia Daniele, Invited Assistant Professor,  
Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon

November, 2021



SOCIOLOGIA  
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Department of History

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## **Abstract**

In 2015 the increasing number of people looking for shelter in Europe was portrayed as a “refugee crisis”. Due to a lack of response from European Union (EU) state-members, hundreds of humanitarian organizations were called to provide emergency aid to millions of refugees. This dissertation explores this crisis through the lens of one humanitarian organization in the Greek island of Lesbos, to understand their role and limitations in the attempt to “fill a gap” created by elected governments.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was chosen not only because of its long history of humanitarian work, but also because of its critical position in the European response to the “refugee crisis”. By giving a voice to frontline health workers and asylum seekers, this dissertation addresses the most challenging years in Lesbos – 2019 to 2021, a period marked by the destruction of the largest refugee camp in Europe, Moria.

Exploring MSF action during this period of the European “refugee crisis”, it is argued that the humanitarian organization has taken a side, the side of asylum seekers arriving, humanitarian actors have chosen the role of “active witnesses” instead of “merely spectators” (Terry, 2000, p.4) in a “non-neutral” way to answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid.

With a constant call for political responsibility MSF refuses to be confined to a role and to exonerate states from their responsibilities. Instead of just “filling a gap”, the organization is open to challenge the role of the European Union (EU) in receiving refugees at its doorstep.

**Key words:** Asylum Seekers, Humanitarian Aid, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), European “refugee crisis”, Lesbos, Témoignage



## **Resumo**

Em 2015, o número crescente de pessoas a procurar abrigo na Europa foi retratado como uma “crise de refugiados”. A resposta dos estados-membros União Europeia (UE) tardou e por isso centenas de organizações humanitárias foram chamadas a prestar ajuda de emergência a milhões de refugiados. Esta dissertação explora esta crise através do olhar de uma organização humanitária na ilha grega de Lesbos, para compreender o seu papel e limitações na tentativa de “preencher um vazio” criado por governos eleitos.

Os Médicos Sem Fronteiras (MSF) foram escolhidos não apenas pela sua longa história de trabalho humanitário, mas também pela posição crítica da resposta europeia à “crise de refugiados”. Ao dar voz a atores humanitários e refugiados, esta dissertação aborda os anos mais desafiantes em Lesbos – 2019 a 2021, um período marcado pela destruição do maior campo de refugiados da Europa, Moria.

Ao explorar a ação dos MSF durante este período, a dissertação argumenta que a organização humanitária escolheu o lado dos requerentes de asilo, os seus membros escolheram ser “testemunhas ativas” em vez de “meros espectadores” (Terry, 2000, p.4). Os MSF escolheram uma ação “não-neutra” para responder às limitações enfrentadas pela ajuda humanitária, durante a “crise de refugiados” europeias.

Com constantes apelos por responsabilidade política, os MSF recusam um papel limitado, a exonerar os estados das suas responsabilidades. Em vez de se limitar a “preencher um vazio”, a organização está aberta a desafiar a UE sobre a resposta ao acolhimento de refugiados que tinha à sua porta.

**Palavras-chave:** Requerente de Asilo, Ajuda Humanitária, Médicos sem Fronteiras (MSF), “Crise dos Refugiados” na Europa, Lesbos Témoignage



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# **1. Chapter I. Introduction**

## **Why Study the “Refugee Crisis” in 2021**

The European “refugee crisis” started being portrayed as a humanitarian crisis in 2015. In a single year over one million refugees arrived in Europe claiming asylum. Six years have passed and a solution is yet to be agreed on; the European “refugee crisis” remains a challenge for 2021, as it was in 2015.

The number of new migrant arrivals to Europe has decreased dramatically in the latest years, but the situation has not improved on the field. Less than 6 km from Turkey, in the Aegean Sea, the Greek islands of Chios, Kos and Lesbos were the steppingstones into one of the main migrant routes of entrance in Europe. With no more than 100,000 habitants, Lesbos has seen its local population surpassed by the number of refugees arriving at its shores, according to the reports on the field<sup>1</sup>.

Due to the lack of response from EU state-members and institutions, hundreds of humanitarian organizations were called to “fill a gap” and provide emergency aid to millions of asylum seekers that continue to arrive in Europe.

It was during 2019 that the Greek asylum system in the Aegean islands “reached a breaking point”. NGOs, such Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) explain that from 2019 to 2020, Lesbos hit its peak capacity to accommodate asylum seekers and those were the most challenging years for the migrant population, the local population, and the humanitarian organizations (See figure nr. 1).

While the number of new arrivals was decreasing, the number of people living in the reception centers in the Aegean islands reached heights never seen before – more than 38,000 people were living in facilities that had a capacity for less than 13,400. More than half of these refugees were living in one single Reception and Identification Center (RIC) - Moria, in the island of Lesbos. This made Moria not only the largest refugee camp in the Aegean islands of in Greece, but the “largest refugee camp in Europe”<sup>2</sup>.

Moria was built for less than 3,000 people but in its peak capacity housed over 20,000. The overpopulation in these reception centers - or refugee camps as they are commonly called - help deteriorate the living conditions of thousands of migrants. Later, in September 2020, Moria was

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<sup>1</sup>Anadolu Agency, reporting the local population in Lesbos being surpassed by refugees, in 2015, available from: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/greek-island-lesbos-population-surpassed-by-refugee-numbers-87835>

<sup>2</sup>United Nations acknowledges Moria as the largest Refugee Camp in Europe, available from: <https://www.undispatch.com/inside-europes-largest-refugee-camp/>

destroyed by fires and left 13,000 people without shelter for days<sup>3</sup>. Its residents were transferred to a new reception center in Mavrovouni, but the identical conditions led to journalists and humanitarian actors describe the camp as “Moria 2.0”<sup>4</sup>.

The purpose of this dissertation is to study the effects of the European “refugee crisis” through the lens of humanitarian organizations in the island of Lesbos, in Greece to understand their role and limitations during the harshest period of the migrant influx that led to an inevitable humanitarian crisis at Europe’s doorsteps. The non-governmental organization chosen is Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), as a case study, not only because of its long history of humanitarian work, but also because of its critical position in the European response to the “refugee crisis”. Since 2016 MSF staff members have refused funding from EU member states and refuse to work inside refugee camps on the island of Lesbos.

With a constant call for political responsibility and even the accusation that the European “refugee crisis” was “created and continued by migration politics of the European Union” (Sandrone, 2021), MSF refuses to be confined to a role and to exonerate states from their responsibilities. Instead of just “filling a gap”, the organization is open to challenge the role of the European Union (EU) in receiving refugees at its doorstep. Their staff members have chosen the role of active witnesses, speaking out when faced with human rights violations to answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid during the European “refugee crisis”.

Due to my journalistic background, this dissertation focuses heavily on the latest developments of the European “refugee crisis”. The period chosen for the case study starts in 2019 and ends in 2021, taking in consideration MSF past decisions in response to the migrant influx (Moria’s withdrawal and the rejection of EU funding happen in 2016). The fires that destroyed Moria in September 2020 prove that the situation remains dire on the field, and it deserves continued debate in the current literature. To explore these challenges, the research gives a voice to frontline health workers and asylum seekers that have or still live through the effects of the European “refugee crisis”, in Lesbos.

COVID-19 challenged the traditional way to do research. To do any ethnographic work, the field research had to be done online, so the concept of online ethnography and its opportunities was also explored during this investigation, primarily the importance of social media in the communication of volunteers, migrants and organizations. The field work was limited to online interviews with MSF

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<sup>3</sup>BBC News coverage of the Moria camp fires, available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54082201>

<sup>4</sup>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs report of March 2021 on “Moria 2.0” available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-desperation-moria-20-end-housing-programmes-continued-pushbacks-and> and The Guardian reporting on the living conditions in “Moria 2.0”, available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/07/moria-20-refugees-who-escaped-fire-now-living-in-worse-conditions>

staff and asylum seekers that resided in the reception centers or refugee camps, in the Greek island of Lesbos. These conversations were carried out via Skype, phone calls and social media. The humanitarian actors were identified by former public statements or interviews, but the asylum seekers were much harder to find. All of them come from very different backgrounds but have one thing in common: their willingness to have a voice, to use social media as a tool to share with the outside world the reality through their eyes in the refugee camps in Lesbos.

## **Contextualizing the European “Refugee Crisis”**

The phenomenon portrayed as “refugee crisis” is a worldwide challenge. According to the data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),<sup>5</sup> over 82 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes at the end of 2020, because of “persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations”.

26,4 million people are refugees, and 4,1 million are asylum seekers. UNHCR distinguishes refugees that are “forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war of violence” from asylum seekers, who apply for asylum - “the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance”. 39% of the forcibly displaced population around the world are hosted in five countries; the most affected is Turkey, with nearly 3,7 million refugees (See figures nr. 2 and 3)

The definition of refugee was signed in 1951, by the United Nations General Assembly. 149 states agreed on the definition of the term “refugee” and their own legal obligations to protect such people: “A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”<sup>6</sup>.

Historically, Europe is no stranger to major influxes of people feeling conflicts and human rights violations. In 2015, the European countries faced the worst “refugee crisis” since World War II, according to the US Helsinki Commission<sup>7</sup>. The signs of alarm started in 2011, when the Syrian refugee crisis began towards neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey. In June 2013, 6.000

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<sup>5</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refugee data finder”, statistics available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

<sup>6</sup>United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Resolution 2198, available from: <https://cms.emergency.unhcr.org/documents/11982/55726/Convention+relating+to+the+Status+of+Refugees+%28signed+28+July+1951%2C+entered+into+force+22+April+1954%29+189+UNTS+150+and+Protocol+relating+to+the+Status+of+Refugees+%28signed+31+January+1967%2C+entered+into+force+4+October+1967%29+606+UNTS+267/0bf3248a-cfa8-4a60-864d-65cdfec1d47>

<sup>7</sup>US Helsinki Commission advocating for action on Europe’s worst refugee crisis since World War II, available from: <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/press-and-media/statements/taking-action-europe-s-worst-refugee-crisis-world>

people were fleeing the war in Syria per day, being the largest refugee outflow since the mid-1990s with the Rwandan genocide. In June 2014, the terrorist organization ISIS announced the creation of a “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq and over a million Iraqis fled their homes. Turkey closed the border with Syria in March 2015 and in May the European Union (EU) said to have received a record number of asylum applications<sup>8</sup>. By the end of 2015, over a million refugees reached European shores mainly from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, countries involved in armed conflict, according to the UN’s statistics<sup>9</sup>. Due to its geographic location, Greece was one of the countries most affected by this influx. Between 2016 and 2020, more than 350,000 people reached Greece, mainly by sea (86%)<sup>10</sup> (See figures nr. 4 and 5).

During the peak of arrivals, the EU was not capable of giving a united response. Hungary was the first member state to close its borders with other members, on September 15, 2015<sup>11</sup>. An example followed by Croatia just days later when the country closed its borders with Serbia<sup>12</sup>, and months later, Slovenia also built its fences<sup>13</sup>. Even Germany introduced “emergency border controls” in its border with Austria<sup>14</sup>.

These events forced the European Union to find an answer. In March 2016, European decision makers negotiated an agreement with Turkey to close its border with Greece, with the purpose to stop the migrant influx from the Middle East. Under the EU-Turkey Statement, all migrants arriving in Greece irregularly - who did not apply for asylum or saw their claim rejected, would be sent back to Turkey. In return, by the end of 2018, the EU would fund the Facility for Refugees in Turkey with 6 billion euro; “accelerate” the process to lift the visa requirements for Turkish citizens and “re-energise” the process for Turkey's “accession” as a future EU member state<sup>15</sup>.

The agreement resulted in a steep decline of migrant arrivals in Greece. Since 2016 the number of arrivals has remained less than 200,000 per year. More recently, in 2019 123,663 people arrived at

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<sup>8</sup>Natural Hazards Center. Timeline of the European “refugee crisis” from May 2011 - February 2016  
”<https://hazards.colorado.edu/article/timeline-refugee-crisis-from-may-2011-february-2016>

<sup>9</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Statistics and concepts concerning the European “refugee crisis”, available from: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/refugee-crisis-in-europe/>

<sup>10</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Operational Data Portal, Refugee situation in Europe, available from: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

<sup>11</sup>BBC News coverage of the closure of Serbia-Hungary border, available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-34250092>

<sup>12</sup>BBC News coverage of the closure of Croatia-Serbia border, available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34286432>

<sup>13</sup>Politico coverage of the closure of Slovenia-Croatia border, available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovenia-croatia-close-borders-to-migrants-refugees-serbia-macedonia-eu-deal-turkey/>

<sup>14</sup>USA Today coverage of Germany border controls, available from: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/09/13/germany-imposes-emergency-border-controls/72206852/>

<sup>15</sup>European Parliament description of the EU-Turkey Statement, available from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

Europe's doorsteps, by sea or by land, and in 2020 the number decreased to 95,031, according to the Operational Data Portal of UNHCR<sup>16</sup>. However, it was fiercely criticized by humanitarian organizations. The UNHCR redefined its role in Greece, in response to the EU-Turkey Statement, claiming not to be a "party to the EU-Turkey deal" nor "be involved in returns or detention"<sup>17</sup>. Like UNHCR other aid agencies would do the same, including the organization explored in this dissertation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

MSF focused mainly on the Greek islands that are located less than 6 km from Turkey, in the Aegean Sea. Islands such as Chios, Kos and Lesbos were the steppingstones into one of the main migrant routes of entrance in Europe, to reach northern countries, such as Germany, Sweden, and France. However, the intent, the large majority of migrants (81,7%) that entered Greece ended up applying for asylum in the country<sup>18</sup>.

For Médecins Sans Frontières and many other humanitarian organizations, the EU-Turkey Statement was responsible for trapping "thousands of people" in the five Aegean islands, in reception centers where people were "forced to live in inhumane and degrading conditions"<sup>19</sup>. The deal created "hotspots" in the Aegean islands. The reception centers that were first conceived as a "model of operational support to facilitate the swift identification, registration, and fingerprinting of migrants arriving in Europe" became a "disaster", writes MSF in the report of June 2021<sup>20</sup> entitled "Constructing Crisis at Europe's Border". The European-Turkey Statement is often referenced by the organization as a "tipping point" and the first step into a "fortified" European border and into a "structurally violent EU migration policies". It was after March 2016 that the "hotspots transformed into mass containment sites intended to facilitate the fast-track border processing and return of people to Turkey". As a response, the organization withdrew from the reception centers and rejected funding from the European Union state-members and institutions.

Even though there has been a significant decrease in arrivals to Europe, it was during 2019 that the Greek asylum system in the Aegean Islands "reached a breaking point", as described by Oxfam. In its report of February 2021<sup>21</sup> the non-profit organization quotes the numbers from the Hellenic

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<sup>16</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Operational Data Portal, Refugee situation in Europe, available from: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

<sup>17</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees redefining its role in Greece after EU-Turkey Statement, available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/56f10d049.html>

<sup>18</sup>European Commission, Eurostat annual data of asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_asyappctza/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctza/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>19</sup>MSF report in Greece of 2019, available from: <https://www.msf.org/international-activity-report-2019/greece>

<sup>20</sup>MSF report, June 2021. Constructing Crisis At Europe's Borders. The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands

<sup>21</sup>Oxfam briefing on the impact of EU countries refusal to relocate asylum seekers, available from: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/tipping-the-scales-the-role-of-responsibility-and-solidarity-sharing-in-the-si-621158/>

Republic Ministry of Citizen Protection<sup>22</sup> to highlight that while the new arrivals were decreasing, the number of people living in the reception centers in the Aegean Islands reached numbers never seen before (See figure nr. 6). In September 2020, Moria reception center was destroyed by fires and left 13,000 people without shelter for days and their residents were transferred to a new reception center in Mavrovouni, with identical conditions.

To this tragedy, the EU responded with the new Pact on Migration and Asylum<sup>23</sup>. European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson admitted that “conditions in Moria, both before and after the fire, were unacceptable” and that it is “not good enough to say never again” without action and “all member states must play their part”<sup>24</sup>. The new Pact recognized that the current migration system “no longer works” and that the EU “has not been able to fix it”. The President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen describes it as a “European solution” capable to “rebuild trust between member states and to restore citizens’ confidence in our capacity to manage migration as a Union”<sup>25</sup>.

However, these promises of change have not moved humanitarian actors. Organizations like Oxfam and the Greek Council for Refugees in their report of October 2020 on the island of Lesbos lamented “the new Pact does not address gaps in service provision at the new ‘hotspot-like’ screening centers or create real safeguards that ensure that women, men and children are safe and that basic conditions are met”<sup>26</sup>; on the other hand, the International President of Médecins Sans Frontières, Christos Christou criticized the limitations of the new Pact as “it does not increase safe and legal pathways to Europe. It does not include a clear programme to proactively save people’s lives at sea or concrete measures — rather than public announcements — to ensure that places like Moria never exist again”, leading him to conclude that the new Pact was “the same misery for refugees”<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup>Hellenic Republic Ministry of Citizen Protection data on new arrivals during 2019, available from: <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/7363/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-31-12-2019/?lang=en>

<sup>23</sup>European Commission on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/new-pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en)

<sup>24</sup>European Commission announcement of task force to resolve the emergency situation in Lesbos, following the fires of Moria, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1728](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1728)

<sup>25</sup>European Commission presentation of the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1706](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706)

<sup>26</sup>Greek Council for Refugees & Oxfam report on “Moria 2.0”, on October 2020, available from: <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-10/2020-10-21-lesbos-bulletin.pdf>

<sup>27</sup>MSF public position on the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, available from: <https://www.msf.org/new-pact-same-misery-refugees-trapped-greek-islands>



## 2. Chapter II. Research Design

### Research Objectives

Before addressing the testimonies of humanitarian actors, it is important to first contextualize the impact and the answers to the European “refugee crisis”. In the introduction it is explained why the academic debate concerning this topic must still exist, six years since its beginning.

In the literature review the role of NGOs during the European “refugee crisis” is analysed - primarily in Greece. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is the humanitarian organization under study, so the state of the art also explores the most prominent authors that have studied MSF’s work and public statements to explain that neither this period nor this humanitarian organization were random choices.

The chapter dedicated to the research design gathers all that concerns the analysis of different sources of information. It starts by explaining the objectives of the study, followed by the presentation of the research questions, the methodology used and the case study. To find the answers to the research questions that are going to be introduced, the dissertation focuses on the actors present in the field. The role of Médecins Sans Frontières, in the island of Lesbos and in the migrant reception centers, during the years of 2019, 2020 and 2021, is addressed as a case study.

Besides giving a voice to humanitarian workers, the analysis of the case study includes the testimonies of asylum seekers, not only to contextualize the reality lived by this population during the European “refugee crisis”, but also to address the gaps identified in the literature review.

The present dissertation sets out to answer several research questions, in order to contribute to the knowledge available on this topic. *“What is the role of humanitarian aid within the European “Refugee Crisis”?* More specifically, *“What is the role of Médecins Sans Frontières, during the European “Refugee Crisis”?*

The interviews and the primary data collected have the purpose to address the different challenges and difficulties faced by humanitarian actors. In other words: *“What are the challenges and difficulties faced by humanitarian actors who work with the migrant community in Lesbos, such as Médecins Sans Frontières?*

By understanding the role of humanitarian actors in this specific context and their challenges and difficulties, it is also important to discuss the limitations of aid. *Does the European “Refugee Crisis” reveal the limits of Humanitarian Aid? How do humanitarian actors, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, answer this limitation?*

The case study of MSF action in Lesvos from 2019 to 2021 takes into consideration the organization's past actions and public positions. MSF has operated in the Aegean islands since 2015 and in 2016 went from criticism to action, responding to the EU-Turkey Statement. Since 2016, the organization has rejected funding from EU member states and institutions and also has refused to work inside refugee camps on the island of Lesvos. Those actions motivated the following sub-research question that this study attempts to answer. *Have humanitarian actors, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, remained neutral during the European “Refugee Crisis”?*

## **Research Methodology**

The dissertation consists of a qualitative study, based on primary and secondary sources. Qualitative research is described as a “set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” capable of turning “the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involved an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin; Lincoln; 2005, p.3)<sup>28</sup>.

The current state of the European “refugee crisis” is presented following the analysis of media outlets reports, institutional and statistical information from the EU and its member states, and NGOs reports and public statements. On the other hand, the literature review analyses the current academic debate concerning the topic, the work of other researchers was explored in journal articles, reviews, and academic books as secondary sources of information.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) action during the European “refugee crisis” is developed as a case study. The restrictions to travel that were in place during the pandemic of COVID-19 presented different challenges. The field work was limited to online interviews with MSF staff and asylum seekers that resided in the reception centers or refugee camps, in the Greek island of Lesvos. The organization reports from the field, press releases and public statements were used as primary sources of information to complement and contextualize the information gathered with MSF coordinators and staff members.

Online ethnography was a fundamental part to this field work since it was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and strict measures to limit travel and face to face interactions. All protagonists in this dissertation were discovered, contacted and interviewed by online means of communication. The concept of online ethnography and its opportunities was also explored during this investigation,

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<sup>28</sup>Denzin N.K, Lincoln, Y.S (2005). Introduction. The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. Semantic Research, p.1-20.

primarily the importance of social media in the communication of volunteers, migrants and organizations.

Online ethnography can be described as an online research method that adapts the ethnographic methodology to the study of the social interactions between people, communities or cultures that happen in the realm of the internet. By studying social interactions and habits in the digital world, online ethnography might uncover how the internet would radically change society.

Online ethnography presents an opportunity to bring “flexibility and innovative potential to examine our society in flux”, allowing researchers to surpass geographical limitations during field research, while maintaining the ethos of traditional ethnography, to capture the reality of "everyday life" (Robinson; Schulz, 2011, p.182)<sup>29</sup>.

However, the birth of the internet and the possibilities of the online world for social interactions are also a challenge for ethnographers. “Sociological methods have not kept pace with the profound changes in communication ensuing from the Information Revolution” (Robinson; Schulz, 2011, p.180).

Manuel Castells<sup>30</sup> describes this evolution as ethnography of networks, the study of the flow of people, objects, and ideas, with the internet as its main stage. “The growth of the internet is one of the greatest cultural phenomena of our time”, the body of work that studies online communications and interactions is increasing rapidly and creating “mediated and interactive spaces”, such as “virtual cities, virtual community care, virtual organizations” (Wittel, 2000, p.2)<sup>31</sup>. Today social media is the best example of a virtual interactive space. But how does this impact the lives of communities and the work of humanitarian organizations?

Later, in 2018, Dhiraj Murthy<sup>32</sup> recognizes there is still work to be done, since "the literature on social movements and social networks still does not understand how social networks have changed the landscape of organizational communication" (Murthy, 2018, p.1). Murthy chooses Twitter, as an example of the undeniable importance of social media, by allowing to reach people that otherwise would be unachievable with other tools of communication. Humanitarian actors and even asylum seekers use social media to communicate with others but also to publicly have a voice and to share certain situations with the world.

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<sup>29</sup>Robinson, L., & Schulz, J. (2011). *New Fieldsites, New Methods: New Ethnographic Opportunities*. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>30</sup>Castells, M. (1996). *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Vol. I: *The Rise of the Network Society*. Malden (MA): Blackwell Publishers

<sup>31</sup>Wittel, A. (2000). *Ethnography on the Move: From Field to Net to Internet, Forum: Qualitative Social Research*

<sup>32</sup>Murthy, D. (2018). *Introduction to Social Media, Activism and Organizations*. *Social Media + Society*

For Yang and Saffer<sup>33</sup> NGOs interventions during the European “refugee crisis” go hand in hand with their communication strategy, with a common purpose to “influence media coverage and social media conversations about the refugee crisis”. Humanitarian organization’s success is linked with their ability to mobilize resources and “have their messages heard in the networked public sphere — the digital space where politicians, journalists, organizations, groups, and citizens publicly negotiate issues”. Social media is a tool for NGOs advocacy of human rights, to gain media coverage and the public’s attention in order to “magnify their collective voices” (Yang; Saffer, 2018, p.422).

## **Data collection and interviews**

The collection of primary data is divided in two distinct groups of participants: humanitarian workers as in active members of MSF, and asylum seekers who reside or have resided in the refugee camps on the island of Lesbos. In total, eight semi-structured interviews were carried out via Skype, phone calls and social media chats, since it was not feasible to do such interviews in person. Four humanitarian workers, long time MSF members with current or former experience working in Lesbos, and four asylum seekers that experience daily the living conditions in the island were interviewed. There were prepared two separate scripts with unstructured questions for each group (scripts in the appendix).

For the humanitarian actors it was prepared a script that consists of a total of 21 questions, prepared personally for each MSF staff member, based on primary and secondary data collected. The interviews were divided into 1) their role in the organization and the activities carried out on the island of Lesbos in helping asylum seekers. 2) the challenges and threats in Lesbos to humanitarian actors and asylum seekers. 3) their perspective on MSF’s commitment to independence and to publicly criticize the EU response to the “refugee crisis”. 4) their opinion on the role of MSF in Lesbos, to fill a gap with temporary measures or to find a solution to the European “refugee crisis”.

For the asylum seekers it was prepared a shorter script that consists of a total of 15 questions. The interviews were divided into 1) their experience living in the reception centers for migrants in Lesbos. 2) their experience with humanitarian actors and their view of humanitarian aid 3) their willingness to share their living conditions through social media.

The humanitarian actors were identified by former public statements or interviews concerning MSF efforts in Lesbos. The asylum seekers were much harder to find. All of them come from very different backgrounds but have one thing in common: their willingness to have a voice, to use social media as a tool to share with the outside world the reality through their eyes in the refugee camps in Lesbos.

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<sup>33</sup>Yang, A and Saffer, A. (2018). NGOs’ Advocacy in the 2015 Refugee Crisis: A Study of Agenda Building in the Digital Age. *American Behavioral Scientist* 2018, Vol. 62(4) p.421–439

Two examples come to mind. A (fictional name to protect its identity) is the creator of the Instagram page “The Humans of Moria”<sup>34</sup>, a platform with a purpose to “raise awareness through personal refugee stories, to change people's perceptions of refugees” and a long-term vision to “appeal to European decision-makers for greater integration and more opportunities for all asylum seekers”. The inspiration comes “100%” from New York, from a page with a similar name to “Humans of New York”. This online interconnection shows the importance in using online ethnography as a tool of research. (Figures nr. 11 and 12)

Another example is O (fictional name to protect its identity), who also shares his work inside the refugee camps in his social media account. He is the founder of the “Moria Corona Awareness Team”<sup>35</sup>, a refugee volunteer project created to fight the effects of COVID-19 in Lesvos refugee camps, “by refugees to help other refugees” (Figures nr. 13 and 14)

This study takes in consideration that these participants are people belonging to minority groups in a vulnerable situation or even people in an illegal situation. Due to the personal and sensible information gathered, related mostly to traumatic experiences and psychological suffering, the interviews were conducted with greater care and information concerning the refugees is disclosed anonymously.

It is also important to clarify that, according to article 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation<sup>36</sup> personal data that reveal racial or ethnic origin and political opinions was processed, only in case of explicit consent of the holder, explaining the purpose of the investigation, and it was not processed any data relating to criminal convictions or infractions, according to article 10 of GDPR.<sup>37</sup>

## **Case Study. MSF in Lesvos from 2019 - 2021**

This chapter focuses on the humanitarian aid of Médecins Sans Frontières in Lesvos, giving a response to the European “Refugee Crisis”, from 2019 to 2021; the time period was not an accident. 2019 and 2020 were often described by MSF staff members as “the peak of the refugee crisis”. The island was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, its overcrowded reception centers with lack of living conditions ended in terror, when Moria, the largest refugee camp in Europe was destroyed by fires leaving

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<sup>34</sup>The Humans of Moria, Instagram page, available from: [https://www.instagram.com/the\\_humans\\_of\\_moria/](https://www.instagram.com/the_humans_of_moria/)

<sup>35</sup>Moria Corona Awareness Team, Instagram page, available from: <https://www.instagram.com/moriacoronaawarenessteam/?hl=en>

<sup>36</sup>General Data Protection Regulation EU, article 9, available from: <https://gdpr.algolia.com/gdpr-article-9#:~:text=Processing%20of%20personal%20data%20revealing,concerning%20a%20natural%20person%27s%20sex>

<sup>37</sup>General Data Protection Regulation EU, article 10, available from: <https://www.privacy-regulation.eu/en/article-10-processing-of-personal-data-relating-to-criminal-convictions-and-offences-GDPR.htm#:~:text=%22Processing%20of%20personal%20data%20relating%20to%20criminal%20convictions%20and%20offences%22&text=Any%20comprehensive%20register%20of%20criminal,the%20control%20of%20official%20authority.>

thousands of people homeless and accelerated the change in the Greek political landscape led to a rise of discontent by the local population against migrants.

However, it was since 2016 that MSF public criticism of the European migration policies grew into more than words, following the EU-Turkey Statement; MSF withdrew from the reception centers in the island of Lesbos and rejected EU funding. The case study is built upon primary sources of information. Other than the interviews with four coordinators and staff members of MSF that work or have worked in Lesbos, MSF's reports and public position concerning the European "refugee crisis" were the other main sources of information.

A comprehensive analysis of MSF action and public positions during the European "refugee crisis" also requires the knowledge of the authors who had already explored the history of the organization, its dilemmas, the limits of its own action and its "modus operandi". In that sense it is important to highlight that the information displayed in the chapter dedicated to the literature review is fundamental to the conclusions drawn from this case study.

### **3. Chapter III. The State of the Art**

#### **Does humanitarian aid create “speechless” victims?**

How does humanitarian aid impact refugees? The question firstly is explored by Liisa Malkki after her experience with Hutu refugee camps in Mishamo, Tanzania in 1972<sup>38</sup>, where the management of the camps “depoliticized” refugees and created “ahistorical, universal humanitarian subjects”. Humanitarian interventions tend to abstract from specific contexts, political, historical or cultural and that practice tends to silence refugees. “Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general”, as a result refugees become “mute victims” (Malkki, 1996, p.378).

When entering the refugee camps of Mishamo, people “saw themselves as a nation in exile”, with the hope to reclaim the homeland in Burundi, sometime in the future. “They saw themselves as a people, sharing a historical identity”. To be a Hutu refugee from Burundi, in Mishamo was a “historicizing and politicizing condition”, but in the camps things changed overtime. Volunteers tried to construct the “real refugee”, the ideal image of the victims (Malkki, 1996, p.384).

Constructing the refugee as an ideal victim leads to their “dehistoricization” and “depoliticization”. Talking about politics or history couldn’t be encouraged by the camp administration, at the time the Ministry of Home Affairs and UNHCR, because “political activism and refugee status were mutually exclusive”, as explained by Malkki.

These humanitarian representations and interventions produce refugees that are “anonymous and speechless”. Giving people a voice, acknowledging human suffering and refugee’s narratives, historical agency, and political memory is the change Barthes calls for, a progressive, historicizing humanism (Barthes, 1980, p.101, quoted by Malkki 1996).

Exploring the same topic, Michael Agier<sup>39</sup> questions the principle that “humanitarianism excludes the political”. “In the end, everything is political”, and the humanitarian apparatus “fulfils certain political functions” (Agier, 2010, p.42). Much like Malkki, Agier’s perspective is also built on his experience in refugee camps. In Tobanda, Sierra Leone, Michel Agier saw politics being left at the

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<sup>38</sup>Malkki, L.H. (1996). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. University of California. Cultural Anthropology. p.377-404

<sup>39</sup>Agier, M. (2010): Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government). *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 1(1), p.29-45.

entrance of the tents. “The camp does not need democracy in order to function” he was told by a project coordinator for MSF in the refugee camp.

In essence, by refusing the political implications of its humanitarian work, refugee camps became “fulfilment of the exceptional treatment of a human ‘waste’, a way of managing the undesirables”, and the subject of humanitarian aid is the “unmediated, nameless victim”, that has “no voice and no place in this world”. Refugees are not seen as political or historical human beings; they are distinguished and put in categories based on their vulnerability, subdivided in categories such as age, marital status, showing their injury, or the story of a traumatic event (Agier, 2010, p.43).

Agier compares refugee camps to “naked cities” since they “become spaces of control and benevolence” that play their role in removing the individuality of the refugee. Even though political action can disturb the humanitarian missions, refugee camps need to be seen also as spaces for political action.

And yet, not all refugee camps are the same. Michael Agier identifies four different types when describing its infrastructure and the security measures in places. The first type describes camps “that are self-installed and self-organized” and under surveillance, established in hostile environments. The second type resembles the descriptions of the refugee camps in the Aegean islands. Agier describes them as “retention centers in Europe”, located at the borders to prevent free movement; the similarities within the camps go from lack of mobilization, a restricted space, difficult access to registration places. The third type is portrayed as “city camps” that can be illustrated by the Palestinian refugee camps as “urban centers maintained in an informal and precarious state”. Finally, the fourth type is represented by camps on the periphery of big cities, usually for internally displaced people in cities such as Freetown in Sierra Leone, Khartoum in Sudan, Monrovia in Liberia (Agier, 2010, p.36).

### **Humanitarian response to the European “refugee crisis”**

The migrant influx that affected Europe from 2015 until today is presented as a European “refugee crisis”. The concept of crisis “has been abused” since the beginning of the decade of 2010, argues Giuseppe Campesi<sup>40</sup>, with no specific definition attached to this phenomenon: “what is meant by ‘migrant crisis’ or ‘refugee crisis’ is not entirely clear”. The migrant arrivals in Europe’s border can be seen as an “epistemic crisis”. While a refugee is seen “as a victim in need of protection”, defining its movement as a crisis can “be used to cast doubts on the rights of those arriving in Europe to claim asylum” (Campesi, 2018, p.197). The label of crisis reveals a situation that calls for immediate action,

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<sup>40</sup>Campesi, G. (2018). Crisis, migration and the consolidation of the EU border control regime. *Migration and Border Studies*, 4(3), p.196-221



almost a “synonym for emergency”, raising alarm and suggesting the existence of a threat to the lives of the populace, as Campesi portrays it.

The EU is no stranger to facing international crisis. The financial crisis of 2011, the “refugee crisis” of 2015 and even Brexit in 2016 are all examples that have “accelerated a process of potential political disintegration” of the Union (Campesi, 2018, p.214). When faced with a “refugee crisis” at its doorsteps the EU “lost an opportunity to rethink its border regime”, Campesi argues. Instead of creating new asylum and migration policies and reforming its border control, the European member states reinforced restrictive measures and passed the responsibility to their neighbouring countries, as the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 illustrates.

This reality presents a “paradox of a crisis that does not produce a policy change but triggers a further ‘consolidation’ of the European border regime”, since the political roots were not addressed by the EU (Campesi, 2018, p.215). The “refugee crisis” was not treated as a global phenomenon that demanded a different solution but was seen as an emergency that could be addressed by management tools such as the reinforcement of borders and the hotspot approach.

It is paramount for this dissertation to comprehend the role played by humanitarian actors during the European “refugee crisis”, mainly in Lesvos. The first calls for aid from the island came on May 30, 2015, when the mayor called the Greek government for immediate support - at a time where 600 refugees were reaching Lesvos a day and were overwhelming the local authorities.<sup>41</sup>

Both the Greek government and professional NGOs responded late to this appeal. The financial crisis and the austerity measures in place limited the Greek state's ability to react effectively to respond to this crisis. International NGOs were slow to respond because “they assumed an EU member state, such as Greece would be able to respond in its own” (Skleparis, Armakolas, 2016, p.172)<sup>42</sup>.

The authors outline the evolution of humanitarian response to the European “refugee crisis” in Greece in three different phases. 1) From May to late August 2015, the initial response started with “spontaneous initiatives”, from the local population and tourists, 2) from September 2015 to mid-January 2016 there was an increasing involvement of international NGOs and so relief operations were professionalized, 3) from mid-January to March 2016, after the EU-Turkey Statement, states “took the lead” and the role of civil society was diminished (Skleparis, Armakolas, 2016, p.173).

The “professionalization of humanitarian response” on the Aegean islands allowed for an increase of capacity and effectiveness addressing the needs of new arrivals, however, it also created an

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<sup>41</sup>Natural Hazards Center. Timeline of the European “refugee crisis” from May 2011 - February 2016”<https://hazards.colorado.edu/article/timeline-refugee-crisis-from-may-2011-february-2016>

<sup>42</sup>Skleparis D and Armakolas, I. (2016). ‘The refugee crisis and the role of NGOs, civil society, and media in Greece’ in Phillips, D. L. (ed.) *Balkan Human Corridor: Essays on the Refugee and Migrant Crisis from Scholars and Opinion Leaders in Southeast Europe*, June 2016, Columbia University, p.171-184.

“unintended rift between professional NGOs and volunteers”. Only in 2016, the Greek state returned to address the European “refugee crisis”, primarily guided by “national security rather than humanitarian concerns” (Skleparis, Armakolas, 2016, p.179).

Riot police were sent to the field to respond to increasing riots as the number of asylum seekers arriving in Lesvos grew every day. In January 2016 “all independent, unregistered volunteer activities conducted on the islands, and placed NGOs and other civil society actors under state monitoring”. A month later, the Greek Parliament voted the new law (4368/16) that established the refugee camps would be under military surveillance. Humanitarian actors accused the Greece of attempting to “target and criminalize” NGOs and volunteers<sup>43</sup>.

Exploring the same topic, Eugene Guribye and Trond Stalsberg Mydland<sup>44</sup> describe humanitarian aid during the European “refugee crisis” as a “new form of volunteering” and a “tendency to break away from established NGOs and state agencies” (Guribye, Mydland, 2018, p.347).

The four authors agree in defining different phases of the humanitarian response to the new arrivals in Greece. For Guribye and Mydland the first ones to respond were independent and spontaneous volunteers “inspired by heartfelt calls for help in social media and dramatic photos”, with different backgrounds these volunteers “provided important aid and support to the refugees in a situation in which the UNHCR and established international NGOs were still absent”. During the fall of 2015, humanitarian activities tended to be more organized by established and international NGOs, at that time there were more than 120 different NGOs active in Lesvos “some of them consisting of a single person” (Guribye, Mydland, 2018, p.351).

While Skleparis and Armakolas describe only three phases, with the latter being the direct involvement of the state in the reception of migrants, Guribye and Mydland address a fourth phase called “Fortress Europe and Resistance”, that extends from March 2016 - with the signature of the EU-Turkey Statement - to today.

In effect, “Europe’s borders were closing and refugees were stuck in the camps on the island until they were returned to Turkey” (Guribye, Mydland, 2018, p.356). This deal struck between EU and Turkey and its effects on the field changed NGOs and volunteers' response to the migrant population in need. The UNHCR and several major international NGOs, including MSF, halted their programmes in Moria, to not be accomplices of a system of detention and deportation.

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<sup>43</sup>Transnational Institute (2018). The shrinking space for solidarity with migrants and refugees: how the European Union and Member States target and criminalize defenders of the rights of people on the move. Available from:[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/web\\_theshrinkingspace.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/web_theshrinkingspace.pdf)

<sup>44</sup>Guribye, E and Mydland, T.S. (2018). Escape to the island: International volunteer engagement on Lesvos during the refugee crisis, *Journal of Civil Society*, 14:4, p.346-363

How can the relation between the Greek State and humanitarian actors be described? Dimitris Skleparis adapts the concept of “shadow state”, pioneered by Geiger and Wolch in 1986<sup>45</sup>, to describe the increasingly important role of NGOs to shoulder social responsibilities of the public sector. The welfare programs remained under state control and in exchange for more funding, the influence of the state grows on the civil society (Trudeau, 2008, p.672, quoted by Skleparis)<sup>46</sup>.

Dimitris Skleparis<sup>47</sup> builds on these former references and argues that “we are witnessing the gradual hybridisation of the ‘shadow state’ relationships between NGOs and the Greek state”, even when Greece was facing the effects of years of recession and cuts on social welfare programs (Skleparis, 2015, p.150).

NGOs that stand up to address the immediate needs of the migrant population continue to serve the Greek’s state interest, even without financial support. These humanitarian actors “not only provide social welfare services to vulnerable populations, but they have also managed to multiply their areas of activity and expand their target population” (Skleparis, 2015, p.152).

One of the non-governmental organizations studied in depth by Skleparis is Médecins Sans Frontières, an organization that takes pride in being independent from institutional funding. Despite that never changing, according to Skleparis the organization continues to “serve the Greek state’s interests” by providing healthcare to the most vulnerable groups in Greece, even without any institutional funding. And so, MSF “gradually moved to a form of hybrid shadow state”.

### **NGOs political ambiguities during the European “refugee crisis”**

Since the beginning, the European “refugee crisis” was portrayed by the UN Secretary General at the time, Ban Ki Moon, not as “a crisis of numbers” but “a crisis of solidarity”<sup>48</sup> within the EU. In the same breath Didier Fassin argues that “the so-called European refugee crisis is a moral issue before it is a demographic one” (Fassin, 2016, quoted by Pries, 2019)<sup>49</sup>.

When European sovereign states closed their borders, civil society, in the form of volunteers and non-governmental organizations, was called to respond to this humanitarian crisis, to “compensate for states failure”, during the most decisive period of the crisis - the second half of 2015 and 2016. By

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<sup>45</sup>Geiger, R.K. and Wolch. J.R., 1986. A shadow state? Voluntarism in metropolitan Los Angeles. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 4(3), pp. 351–66

<sup>46</sup>Trudeau, D. (2008). Towards a relational view of the shadow state. *Political Geography* 27(6), p.669–90

<sup>47</sup>Skleparis, D. (2015). Towards a Hybrid ‘Shadow State’? The Case of Migrant-/Refugee-Serving p.147-165. *Austerity and the Third Sector in Greece: Civil Society at the European Frontline*, by Ashgate Publishing.

<sup>48</sup>UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon remarks at the opening of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on 03 October 2016. Available from: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2016-10-03-0>

<sup>49</sup>Fassin, D. (2016). From Right to Favor. The Refugee Question as Moral Crisis, *The Nation*

stepping up, the civil society “filled the gap left by state authorities that were not able or willing to guarantee refugee protection” (Pries, 2019, p.2)<sup>50</sup>.

Ludger Pries describes how volunteers were able to sustain a great part of the humanitarian care towards the incoming refugees. Civil society acted as “the central link between refugees and the states”, without however ever claiming to be their responsibility. Humanitarian actors engaged during the European “refugee crisis” in an effort of “organized non responsibility”, criticizing having to be in charge of this level of responsibilities that the State was expected to care for. They also recognized the political context that emerged during this period of increasing nationalist and populist rhetoric.

During the first years of the “refugee crisis”, humanitarian actors and organizations emerged “for the first time” as “a crucial actor in almost all European societies”. When responding to the influx of migrants at Europe’s shores, humanitarian actors also question the purpose of their actions. “Should we just address singular and specific needs or also or mainly focus on structural needs?” (Pries, 2019, p.5).

By stating this question Ludger Pries opens the door to the debate on politicizing or de-politicizing the European “refugee crisis”. Should humanitarian actors limit their actions to just focus on the immediate needs of refugees or should they address the broader political questions, even when that could end up forcing strong criticism and a clash with European member states that chose to close their borders instead of participating in the response to this humanitarian crisis?

During the European “refugee crisis” humanitarian organizations portrayed a new “subversive humanitarianism”, instead of being understood as simple “instruments” and “transmission belts” of state and international control agencies (Pries, 2019, p.13).

The political ambiguities of the humanitarian aid response since 2015 are addressed by Robin Vandevordt and Gert Verschraegen<sup>51</sup>. Across Europe, democratically elected governments sought to discourage refugees from entering their territories, either by re-establishing border controls or even by sanctioning humanitarian acts.

Faced with the government's opposition, humanitarian aid didn’t stop, even when focused on alleviating the immediate needs of the refugees and not on criticizing the lack of governmental response, humanitarian actors were subversive, “as they went against the grain of the ruling or dominant political climate and the lines of exclusion that were drawn by policymakers” (Vandevordt, Verschraegen, 2019, p.103). The authors argue for a form of “subversive humanitarianism”, as “a

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<sup>50</sup>Pries, L. (2019). Civil Society and Volunteering in the So-Called Refugee Crisis of 2015—Ambiguities and Structural Tensions p.1-24. *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe*

<sup>51</sup>Vandevordt, R and Verschraegen, G. (2019). Subversive Humanitarianism and Its Challenges: Notes on the Political Ambiguities of Civil Refugee Support 101-124. *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe*

morally motivated set of actions which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifests themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate” (Vandevoordt, Verschraegen, 2019, p.105).

The political ambiguities “seemed to emerge from a grey zone between morality and politics”, Vandevoordt and Verschraegen state. Humanitarian actors have pride in being impartial, neutral and independent to intervene in situations of distress without constraints from the local authorities and governments.

They also have pride in being a-political. Nonetheless as some authors explored in this dissertation argue, refusing to be political “effectively reproduce the causes of the suffering they seek to address” (Vandevoordt, Verschraegen, 2019, p.105). The depoliticizing tendencies of humanitarian action are often criticized. One example that is addressed throughout this dissertation is the humanitarian actor’s capacity to “fill a gap” left open by failing government policies, making it easier for states not to fulfil their responsibilities to deliver on their population’s needs. By doing so, humanitarian actors can be “instrumentalized” and legitimise failed states.

By addressing the most urgent needs of the people arriving in Europe, NGOs risk becoming “a living apology for their governments” and by filling a gap, humanitarian actors can hide “the harshest consequences of a malfunctioning system” without, however “addressing the system itself”. “Filling a gap” during the European “refugee crisis”, could have the opposite effect to the one expected, by “indirectly weakening political support for more stringent government action” (Vandevoordt, Verschraegen, 2019, p.123).

In agreement, Cantat and Feischmidt detail that “while moved by moral and ethical imperatives towards providing assistance to refugees”, humanitarian actors often feel “reluctant to normalize these initiatives as they oppose the idea of replacing the state”. Humanitarian interventions during the European “refugee crisis” can be understood as “a counterbalance to exclusionary and securitizing discourses” (Cantat, Feischmidt, 2019, p.391) but can also have the opposite effect.

The humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) also played a role during the European “refugee crisis”. Charlotte Dany<sup>52</sup> argues that during these years “the lines between humanitarian aid and the political sphere have become increasingly blurred”.

Since 2015, MSF increasingly outspoken and “confrontational strategies” are understood as a step into a “political role” (Dany, 2019, p.185) and not just as non-neutral humanitarian aid. The public criticism of European migration policies in the form of open letters and statements that accuse the EU

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<sup>52</sup>Dany, C. (2019). Exploring the Political Agency of Humanitarian NGOs: Médecins Sans Frontières During the European Refugee Crisis.

of abdicating “moral and legal responsibility”<sup>53</sup> are not limited to medical or emergency issues, but, as Danny argues, “address core political issues”. Médecins Sans Frontières adapted its history of witnessing and speaking out to “a form of information politics” by sharing information to “accuse the EU and individual member states of being responsible for the humanitarian crisis” (Dany, 2019, p.192).

Engaging in sea rescue activities for the first time in MSF history was also seen as a “highly political statement”, because it allowed the staff members not only to witness the reality in the islands and reception centers, but also “the deaths and the suffering of people at sea”. The information gathered in these activities was also deployed as a way to mobilise civil society to “put pressure on the EU from below” (Dany, 2019, p.193).

As a response to the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, MSF took two major actions. To avoid being instrumentalized by an “inhumane system”<sup>54</sup> the organization withdrew from the Moria reception center. A couple of months later MSF started rejecting EU and its member states funds, while calling to “European governments to shift priorities”<sup>55</sup>.

Financial independence is a tradition that makes the organization proud and enables it to take a more confrontational stance by not being dependent on EU money. Therefore, rejecting European funds had a larger goal, to convey a “political message” not only to EU institutions and governments but also “to national publics”. “We are not a political organization”, I was proudly reminded by MSF staff in Lesvos. However, Charlotte Dany argues that the organization's actions had a “political approach” to the European “refugee crisis.” Sandrine Tiller, a strategic adviser for MSF UK, concludes that this response was triggered because this migration crisis occurred “on their own doorstep”<sup>56</sup>

“Politically approaching” the European “refugee crisis” is understood as a “stronger confrontation with government and increased public debate”, and in Charlotte Dany’s estimation it shows “the potential of humanitarian NGOs to politicise the global governance of refugees and migrants” (Danny, 2019, p.198).

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<sup>53</sup>Open letter by president of MSF International Joanne Liu, available from: <https://www.msf.org/europe-dont-turn-your-back-asylum-takepeoplein>

<sup>54</sup>MSF explaining its decision to close the Moria Project in Lesvos, on March 2016, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/article/why-msf-closing-its-moria-project-lesvos>

<sup>55</sup>MSF explaining its decision to reject EU fundings, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/ar/node/1150/%7B%7Bsnetwork.link%7D%7D>

<sup>56</sup>Dany, C. (2019). Interview with Sandrine Tyler, from MSF UK on October 27, 2016. Exploring the Political Agency of Humanitarian NGOs: Médecins Sans Frontières During the European Refugee Crisis

## **MSF. 50 years of being “a citizen's response to political failure”**

The state of the art focuses on the role of humanitarian aid in situations of humanitarian crisis. Prior to the case study on Médecins Sans Frontières response to the European “refugee crisis”, it is important to understand how the organization measures its actions since its foundation. The current literature focuses on MSF's answer to the limits of its actions, the organization's relation with states and governments, and its core values of independence, neutrality, and human rights advocacy.

During its nearly 50-year history, the organization Médecins Sans Frontières has not shied away from public and sometimes unpopular positions. MSF believes it is its obligation to use its voice to publicly pressure sovereign states into action. This tradition was firstly described as “témoignage” evolved to human rights advocacy, today one of MSF core activities (Redfield, 2006, p.5)<sup>57</sup>.

Since its foundation, the organization has debated the limits of its own humanitarian action. In 1999 Médecins Sans Frontières was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize and in the acceptance speech it defined its action as “a citizen's response to political failure, an immediate act that cannot erase the long-term necessity of political responsibility”. “Humanitarianism occurs where the political system has failed or is in crisis”<sup>58</sup>, was MSF's conclusion. This speech made evident the strong commitment not just to provide medical care on a global scale, but also to independence and outspokenness as “acts of indignation”.

MSF acknowledges that humanitarianism only exists due to political failure and so it understands the limits of its action. Some authors presented in this dissertation argue for humanitarian action to be reduced to a “technical act”, to minimize “the negative consequences of their actions” and not to “exonerate states of their responsibilities” (Terry, 2002, p.245). Should MSF focus on exclusively treating people “without challenging the political and social origins of their exclusion”? (Marie-Pierre Allié, 2011, p.5). Since its foundation, MSF has debated the role of neutrality and speaking out in its humanitarian action. “We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill”, are a common saying of the organization.

Médecins Sans Frontières is a representation of what Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein portray as “contemporary and secular humanism”.<sup>59</sup> This new way of humanitarianism emerged in the XVIII century in Europe, a period marked by important events and historical shifts. The authors chose the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the response to the Lisbon

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<sup>57</sup>Redfield, P. (2006). A Less Modest Witness: Collective Advocacy and Motivated Truth in a Medical Humanitarian Movement. *American Ethnologist*, 33(1), p.1-26

<sup>58</sup>MSF Nobel Peace Prize of 1999 acceptance speech, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/nobel-peace-prize>

<sup>59</sup>Redfield, P and Bornstein, E (2011). An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism. *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*. SAR Press, Advanced Seminar Series. p.3-30

earthquake in 1755 as well as the abolishment of slavery and Europe's relationship with its colonial populations as guide marks to the birth of this new "contemporary" and "secular" humanitarian aid.

Contemporary humanitarian actors tend to focus on the "immediate needs of living humans in distress" (Redfield, Bornstein, 2011, p.6). This idea of an emergency aid for emergency situations, to operate in regions plagued by disasters or conflicts helps to explain why "no international NGO can match the reach of a powerful state" (Redfield, Bornstein, 2011, p.20).

NGOs tend to have a more assertive role in failed states, or "white jeep states", often in a postcolonial concept, where effective governance extends only to the perimeters patrolled by soldiers in "white jeeps" (Sampson, 2003, quoted by Redfield, Bornstein, 2011)<sup>60</sup>. Where governance and sovereignty fail, humanitarian actors tend to be called upon to provide welfare services that otherwise would not exist.

It is in the broader context of "contemporary humanism" that the organization Médecins Sans Frontières was born. On December 22, 1971, a small group of only 300 French physicians and journalists joint in criticizing the "ineffectual and morally compromised relief work"<sup>61</sup> in the humanitarian intervention during the Nigerian civil war and the devastating floods in Bangladesh. At the time, MSF founders such as Max Recamier and Bernard Kouchner were volunteers for the ICRC.

Working in Nigeria, during the Biafra conflict, Recamier and Kouchner believed the world needed to know what was happening on the field "civilians being murdered by blockading forces", so they openly criticized the Nigerian government and the Red Cross, for what they saw as a "complicit behaviour". By speaking out, these volunteers began to "lay the foundations for a new and questioning form of humanitarianism that would ignore political or religious boundaries and prioritise the welfare of those suffering"<sup>62</sup>.

They said enough and started a new humanitarian organization. The name spoke to its ethos: Médecins sans Frontières, an organization with the purpose to put the medical needs of others over the limits of national borders. The presence of journalists also encouraged a familiarity with media involvement. The organization "pioneered emergency health care to populations in distress", with the purpose to "agitate, disrupt, and encourage others to alter the world by practicing humanitarian medicine" (Redfield, 2005, p.334).

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<sup>60</sup>Sampson, S. (2003). "Trouble Spots": Projects, Bandits and State Formation. In *Globalization, the State and Violence*. p. 309-342. Walnut Creek, AltaMira Press.

<sup>61</sup>Redfield, P. (2005). *Doctors, Borders, and Life in Crisis*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

<sup>62</sup>MSF history and foundation, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/founding-msf>



It strives to be independent, in its humanitarian action and in its funding. In another ethnographic work, Redfield had the opportunity to interview one hundred volunteers after years of field work within MSF projects and he concluded that what separates MSF from other NGOs is its “historical trajectory and restless critical ethos” (Redfield, 2013, p.1)<sup>63</sup>. Since 1980, MSF has opened offices in 28 countries. The organization that started with 300 volunteers employs 37,000 people, nowadays. Over a “hundred million patients” were treated by MSF staff. In 2015, the year of the European “refugee crisis”, MSF carried out 8,6 million consultations.

Fully aware of its own limitations, MSF “fills a gap” with temporary and emergency relief measures and refuses to be held accountable for anything else. Long-term solutions are a responsibility for elected governments and sovereign states. However, there is an argument to be made that by undertaking the responsibilities of states, even if in a temporary and immediate way, humanitarian action can legitimise and perpetuate governments who cannot answer to the needs of its people. And if so, by “filling gaps” is humanitarian action condemned to repeat itself? The question is introduced by Fiona Terry.

### **3.5.(Filling a gap)? The paradox of MSF humanitarian aid**

Fiona Terry is more than an academic; she was a research director for MSF and project coordinator during one of the most defining moments in the organization's history: proclaiming its helplessness and withdrawing its assistance from the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire.

Responding to the humanitarian crisis in Rwanda, MSF denounced the “genocide”<sup>64</sup> of the Tutsi ethnicity. Two million people seek refuge in the neighbouring countries. The international humanitarian aid that was being sent to those refugee camps ended up being diverted to the aggressors. This event leads Fiona Terry<sup>65</sup> to question the “negative consequences that can result from well-intentioned humanitarian action”, in several MSF projects through the organization's history to conclude that the humanitarian action incurs in a paradox: when it “contradicts its fundamental purpose by prolonging the suffering it intends to alleviate” (Terry, 2002, p.2).

In 1994, MSF coordinators in the Rwandan camps questioned themselves: “To what extent were we responsible for the manipulation of humanitarian aid in the camps?” Humanitarian organizations need to recognize their own limitations, so by lacking the power to “ensure what is just”, the

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<sup>63</sup>Redfield, P. (2013). *Life in crisis: The ethical journey of doctors without borders*. University of California Press

<sup>64</sup>MSF Speaking Out Case Studies. *The Genocide of Rwandan Tutsis 1994*, available from: <https://www.msf.org/speakingout/genocide-rwandan-tutsis-1994>

<sup>65</sup>Terry, F. (2002). *Condemned to repeat: The paradox of humanitarian action*, Cornell University Press

organization decided “not participate in what is obviously unjust” and to “refuse the unacceptable and withdraw from the camps” (Terry, 2002, p.4).

This crisis made humanitarian actors take a very hard look in the mirror. By “accepting the priorities and agendas of the government donors” and alleviating authorities of their “political responsibilities to address the more profound issues at the root of the crisis”, NGOs share the responsibility for the human rights abuse that took place (Terry, 2002, p.214). Humanitarian action can be manipulated and become “a scapegoat for the failure of others” in these instance sovereign states.

After MSF’s withdrawal of the Rwandan refugee camps in Tanzania and Zaire in 1994, the camps would start to be closed in 1996. For Andy Storey<sup>66</sup> this closure brought a “partial end to a controversial period in the history of international aid” but started the debate to which extent “aid had helped to support the soldiers and militias of a genocidal regime” (Storey, 1997, p.384).

Analysing the effects of NGOs during the Rwandan crisis, Storey replaces the concept of neutrality with “non-partisanship”. His work explores the “impossibility of neutrality” in the context of the Rwandan crisis. Humanitarian actors can try to achieve the principle of non-partisanship but cannot “claim that their actions can ever be neutral in their impact”.

NGOs were accused of being a part of the process of “violence and oppression” by the organization African Rights in large part by their commitment to neutrality. There is of course a strong defence for the NGOs who participated in the Rwandan crisis: “they were asked to perform impossible roles in vacuums left by the UN and governments”. However, for Andy Storey Rwanda brought a lesson and a challenge for NGOs “to decide whether standing aside is sometimes the best way of confronting the inactions of others”.

A lesson learned by MSF in 1994. This model, I argue, was then followed in Lesvos. Not that the organization has stopped working with the migrant population in the island, but it refuses to work inside the refugee camps, in order to avoid being “instrumentalized” to fill the impossible “vacuum” or “gap” left by international agencies or governments, according to the volunteers on the field. As it did in Rwanda, MSF still resorts to its “responsibility to denounce the violence and oppression, even at the cost of expulsion” from refugee camps, regions or countries. (Terry, 2002, p.21).

Humanitarian action has the power to legitimize a government by sitting at the table and recognizing its authority over a territory, and also, by “fulfilling the social obligations normally required of a regime toward its citizens” (Terry, 2002 p.44). Humanitarian aid incurs a paradox when it allows the transfer of “state responsibilities of the welfare of citizens”. NGO’s action always

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<sup>66</sup>Storey, A. (1997). Non-neutral humanitarianism: NGOs and the Rwanda crisis, *Development in Practice*, 7:4, p.384-394

generates winners and losers, and they always take a side. The paradoxes of aid are “inescapable”, and what organizations should do is to minimize “the negative consequences of their actions” and not to “exonerate states of their responsibilities”, by undertaking its functions and obligations to their people. (Terry, 2002, p.245).

To minimize the negative consequences of its actions, NGOs must reduce its action to a “technical act” temporary and immediate, and to refuse to be instrumentalized by reclaiming an “activist role, reminding states that failure to meet higher responsibilities is what allows crisis to unfold in the first place” (Terry, 2002, p.217).

This activist role is the ethos of the organization’s advocacy, a reminder that the responsibilities of its citizens belong to sovereign states. The organization fills a gap, knowingly and critically. Peter Redfield, also one of the main academics that studied MSF, states that “the group focus on political failure and reject justifications for human suffering” (Redfield, 2013, p.236).

Building for a future is outside of the expectations of MSF, and its members know the limits of its actions, as one MSF staff member told Redfield: “NGO can be a safety net of sorts, but to replace states? No, not in any systematic way. Fighting poverty or something like that, that's way beyond our reach”. “To think that we’re fixing anything is wrong” (Redfield, 2013, p.240).

### **MSF and Governments. Dialogue or opposition?**

The European “refugee crisis” marks a chapter in MSF history of negotiating and confronting states according to its humanitarian objectives. For a better understanding, this dissertation delves into the organization history of relationships with states and governments. Claire Magone, Michaël Neuman, and Fabrice Weissman<sup>67</sup>gather the work of authors focusing on one key question: “What is an acceptable compromise for MSF? “Should MSF focus on exclusively treating people “without challenging the political and social origins of their exclusion”, or is “playing into their hands by looking after the people deliberately rejected at the margins of society?” (Allié, 2011, p.5).

MSF has a history of deploying its activities in conflict zones. However, operating in Europe, mainly with the migrant population is nothing new. In his chapter “France: Managing the ‘Undesirables’”<sup>68</sup> Michaël Neuman addresses the organization's initiatives in France, since 1991, to alert the “authorities to the shortcomings in access to healthcare for the most vulnerable”, while “refusing to become a substitute for the state” (Neuman, 2011, p.171).The similarities of MSF’s work

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<sup>67</sup>Magone, C and Neuman M and Weissman F. (2011). Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience. Médecins Sans Frontières

<sup>68</sup>Neuman, M. (2011). Managing the “Undesirables”. Chapter in Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience. p.171-174

in France since the 90's and nowadays work in the Aegean islands is revealing; both projects focus on activities to preserve the health of the most vulnerable, to offer "legal support to foreign nationals", and more recently in 2007, to open a healthcare center to provide "psychological care to asylum seekers".

Even in 1991, the stance taken by MSF with the refugee population in France, and their right to asylum, raised some concerns of some of its members that "the organization was engaging in a political battle too far removed from its field of expertise". And to that, Neuman responded: "Is MSF not confining itself to the role expected of it by the authorities: in other words, playing into their hands by looking after people rejected by the system?" (Neuman, 2011, p.174).

In its 50 year of humanitarian work, MSF's priorities changed. According to Jean-Hervé Bradol<sup>69</sup> in the 1970's the priority was simple: send the most health officials out to the field; but in the 1980's with growing recognition, MSF "needed to distinguish itself" not only through its "presence in the field", but also with "its arguments voiced in the public arena". Ideological debates gained more ground in the organization, such as the concept of "third worldism" and "neoliberalism" had a growing influence.

In relation to this, in 1984, Liberté Sans Frontières was founded to "challenge dominant views about the problems and disasters occurring in the Third World"<sup>70</sup>, without however aiming "to transform society" but to "help its members get through a crisis period" (Bradol, 2011, p.207).

At the end of the 1990's, MSF started to address the "very root of the problem", in order to "influence public policies action". Advocacy gained a more prominent role as "the political aspect of the humanitarian operator's work" with the purpose of "exposing this responsibility by offering tangible proof that it is possible to do better" (Bradol, 2011, p.217).

### **MSF history built on its willingness to "Speak out"**

In its original charter of 1971, MSF stated that its members would avoid interfering in "states internal affairs" and abstain from "publicly expressing an opinion". For Peter Redfield in 1979, "the right to speak out" emerged under a new leadership. Its first test was the "March for survival" in Cambodia, when MSF and other organizations showed at the border with a food convoy and were turned away by state authorities. These two instances tell Redfield that "witnessing had arrived to stay" and later

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<sup>69</sup>Bradol, J.H. (2011). Caring for Health. Chapter in Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience. p.199-217

<sup>70</sup>MSF's Former President, Rony Brauman. on the organization ideology and Liberté Sans Frontières, available from: <https://www.msf.ie/article/ideology-without-borders>

would emerge as “more systematic within MSF’s ideology” winning over against the “silent diplomacy”, adopted by organizations like ICRC (Redfield, 2013, p.103).

Fabrice Weissman details how during the organization’s history speaking out became an extension of the organization's medical action. During the 1980’s, in Afghanistan, MSF believed to be helping “more people by denouncing what was happening over there than by offering assistance” to the few people it could. In Ethiopia, MSF used public opinion to pressure the UN, other NGOs, and western nations to reform its humanitarian aid, when it discovered that the Government was using food aid as blackmail in exchange for a relocation programme (Weissman, 2011, p.182)<sup>71</sup>.

MSF also used its voice to criticize the international community, mainly the West, when they believed they weren’t doing enough. Weissman uses as an example the Bosnian War, from 1992 to 1995. Again, facing a crisis in which its medical intervention was limited, MSF resorted to another instrument: its voice and consecutively criticised the “passivity of the international community”, in face of a crisis they deemed an “ethnic cleansing”. In this specific case, MSF called for war, for a military intervention. As Rony Brauman declared on French radio station RTL in April 1992, “It’s the hills of Sarajevo that should be bombed. We should declare war on the Serb nationalists”<sup>72</sup> (Vallaëys, 1999, p.666, quoted by Weissman 2011).

The same happened in Rwanda, in 1994. MSF gradually became aware of the genocidal nature of the massacres of the Tutsi population. As an answer, for the first time in its history, it launched an explicit appeal for international armed intervention against a regime that was attempting the extermination of a community. As a result, the organization withdrew from these refugee camps. In 1999, there was a shift in the organization's strategy of speaking out, the UN became a target and the organization accused its members of lack of interest in the violence around the world. During this period MSF refused the idea of “humanitarian wars” and declared neutrality in conflicts where international forces were involved.

Since 2009, Weissman details an organization “more hesitant than ever to speak out, out of fear that its words will be used to justify war”. However, for the author this is one of the responsibilities of the NGOs in the field, humanitarian actors have the responsibility to engage the public space, as it is the way to avoid being a “passive instrument in the service of power” and also to be involved in “negotiations with local political and health authorities”, in order to be effective in its humanitarian action (Weissman, 2011, p.197).

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<sup>71</sup>Weissman, F. (2011). Silence Heals... From the Cold War to the War on Terror, MSF speaks out: a brief history. Chapter in *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience*. p.177-199

<sup>72</sup>Vallaëys, A. (1999). *Médecins sans Frontières: La biographie*. Fayard publication. Quoted by Fabrice Weissman. p. 666

One of the organization's focuses has been to provide humanitarian aid and medical relief for those in need but doing so independently. Peter Redfield highlights that the main way to assure its independence is through private donations “freeing (MSF) from the potentially compromising control and funding cycles of institutional donors” (Redfield, 2013, p.97)<sup>73</sup> .

Another way to preserve its independence it is becoming “troublesome witnesses”<sup>74</sup> by constantly engaging in the public sphere, as described by Rony Brauman, former president of the organization. “Speaking out” came to be described traditionally as “témoignage”, a communication based on evidence, from the facts drawn by direct observations from the field. It was given a voice to the victims, surveys were created to back these testimonies with statistical proof, studies and reports would be written based on the professional specialization of the members involved and by its own direct experience in the field.

“Témoignage” may have emerged as a secondary effect of the organization's medical humanitarian action, a “by-product” that evolved overtime to a “strategic resource”. After all, its willingness to “speak out” is now part of the organization's identity and a building block on its independence. “Témoignage” is the answer the organization found to the “need to justify the obvious incompleteness of MSF’s medical interventions with a sense of the wider effects of action” (Redfield, 2013, p.111).

Peter Redfield<sup>75</sup> describes the practice of “témoignage” as the act of witnessing and embracing public positions and public controversy. It was described formally for the first time in 1995, in a gathering at Chantilly, France as it follows: “Where MSF is present as a witness to massive and repeated violations of human rights and/or humanitarian law (such as forced population displacements, refoulement [forced return], genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes), then MSF may ultimately be forced to make public denunciations” (Redfield, 2006, p.8).

“Collectively, then, MSF operates as a modestly immodest witness, a mirror of reality that reinforces its own unmotivated veracity even as it transmits a distinctly moral framing vision.” (Redfield, 2006, p.17).

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<sup>73</sup>Redfield, P. (2013). *Life in crisis: The ethical journey of doctors without borders*. University of California Press

<sup>74</sup>MSF Crash: The Era of the Witness - Human rights sentinel and supporter of the oppressed, available from: <https://www.msf-crash.org/en/publications/msf-et-la-protection-une-question-reglee/i-era-witness-human-rights-sentinel-and>

<sup>75</sup>Redfield, P. (2006). *A Less Modest Witness: Collective Advocacy and Motivated Truth in a Medical Humanitarian Movement*

## **The role of neutrality in MSF**

Can neutrality compromise humanitarian aid? This question is answered by Joachim Savelsberg<sup>76</sup>, who states that neutrality comes with a “price to be paid”, a price that became “painfully clear” during the II World War, when ICRC traded its silence during the inspections of Nazi Germany concentration camps for operational access to the victims. This failure propelled the recently created MSF to embrace the media and choose speaking out over neutrality, during its 50-year history it has engaged in political controversies, without fear of taking a side and having a voice.

MSF rebelled against the ICRC past but didn’t remove neutrality from its values. ICRC “privileges the principle of neutrality as an operational tool for securing access and dialogue”. Rather than speaking out and exerting public pressure, the Red Cross prefers a “silent diplomacy”, to earn the confidence of states for better access to victims. This is not the same model adopted by MSF, an organization that puts “the needs of victims above concerns of state sovereignty and neutrality” and considers “that informing the public of the causes of suffering is part of its responsibility, rather than a last resort” (Terry, 2002, p.21)<sup>77</sup>.

Humanitarian aid is never isolated from the context in which it is undertaken and when human lives are at stake, there are no “small victories” in making compromises and playing the long game, the “silent diplomacy” to remain neutral. This is the point of David Rieff<sup>78</sup> that recognizes neutrality and impartiality as important ideas, “but they beg as many questions as they illuminate” (Rieff, 2011, p.253).

“What does neutrality really mean to MSF?” Is the question posed by Fiona Terry in 2000.<sup>79</sup> The author argues that there is a contradiction between neutrality and the core of the organization. “There is a contradiction between claiming to be strictly neutral while adhering to the notion of medical action sans frontières that puts the needs of people and the importance of témoignage above respect for the rules of states” (Terry, 2000, p.1).

MSF answers this question in its charter of principles<sup>80</sup>. The organization claims to observe “neutrality and impartiality in the name of universal medical ethics and the right to humanitarian assistance”. MSF offers assistance based on need and nothing else. “Our decisions are not based on

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<sup>76</sup>Savelsberg, J.J. (2015). The Humanitarian Aid Field and Doctors Without Borders. In *Representing Mass Violence, Conflicting Responses to Human Rights Violations in Darfur*. University of California Press. p.103-133

<sup>77</sup>Terry, F. (2002). *Condemned to repeat: The paradox of humanitarian action*, Cornell University Press

<sup>78</sup>Rieff, D. (2011). Afterword. Chapter in *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience*. p.251-258

<sup>79</sup>Terry, F. (2000). *The principle of neutrality: Is it relevant to MSF?* Médecins Sans Frontières publication

<sup>80</sup>MSF charter and principles of its humanitarian action, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/our-charter-and-principles>

political, economic or religious interests. MSF does not take sides or intervene according to the demands of governments or warring parties”. However, according to its charter, neutrality is not incompatible with the organization tradition of assuming public positions, because neutrality is not “synonymous with silence”, when faced with “extreme acts of violence against individuals or groups, the organization may speak out publicly”.

And yet, Fiona Terry asks MSF to choose. “It is not possible to be a little bit neutral. Either MSF is neutral, or it is not”. Terry goes a step further by claiming that “MSF has not been neutral throughout its history” and gives a suggestion: “Perhaps it is time that we assume this decision and remove neutrality from MSF charter” (Terry, 2000, p.6).

For Peter Redfield<sup>81</sup>neutrality appears to be not an “absence of political positioning”, but an “impossible form of politics: a strategic refusal with moral inflections” (Redfield, 2011, p.53). Being neutral constitutes an “impossible problem”, a problem that becomes evident when “humanitarianism reaches a limit” (Redfield, 2011, p.67) and the organization is faced with its own limitations. When that happens there is only one solution: “speaking out” and taking a side.

The following case study will demonstrate how to this day, MSF keeps on taking sides, specifically the side of asylum seekers arriving at the shores of Europe, with a public criticism of the European Union for not doing enough. If in this case, MSF became neutral and indifferent towards the political fray, acting as “merely spectators” instead of “active witnesses” one side would be at loss, the side of the refugees (Terry, 2000, p.4)

As I mainly stressed in this chapter, MSF volunteers believe that advocating for human rights and publicly criticizing authorities is a way to avoid being “instrumentalized”. The constant call for political responsibility and even the accusation that the European “refugee crisis” was “created and continued by migration politics of the European Union” represented a constant theme of the humanitarian actors (Abassi, 2021). “We want to be present because we need to challenge the authorities and to provide basic services. Filling a gap is the way to be there and speak out” was the justification of the current MSF project coordinator in Lesbos (Saibene, 2021) that will be addressed in detail in the following chapters of this dissertation.

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<sup>81</sup>Redfield, P. (2011). The Impossible Problem of Neutrality. In *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics* (Redfield & Bornstein, eds.) SAR Press, Advanced Seminar Series p.53-70.



## **4. Chapter IV. Case Study of MSF action in Lesvos**

This case study proposes to contribute to the current academic debate concerning the humanitarian response European “refugee crisis”. Due to the dimension of the migrant influx of 2015 and its impact on the entire European continent, the following chapter focuses on the actions of one single NGO, during a specific time period and location - the humanitarian aid of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the Greek island of Lesvos, from 2019 to 2021.

The time period was not an accident. Even with a decrease in the number of new arrivals, 2019 and 2020 were often described by MSF staff members as the most challenging years for the migrant population, the locals, and the humanitarian organizations. The island hit its “peak capacity” to accommodate asylum seekers in the already overcrowded reception centers (Sandrone, 2021).

Médecins Sans Frontières presence in Greece and in the Aegean, islands was not a phenomenon derived from the “refugee crisis”, since the organization “has been providing medical and humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers and migrants in Greece since 1996”<sup>82</sup>. The organization was chosen not only because of its long history of humanitarian work, but also because of its critical position concerning the EU response to the “Refugee Crisis”. MSF considers EU migration policies as responsible for trapping “thousands of people” in the five Aegean islands, in reception centers where people were “forced to live in inhumane and degrading conditions”. Since 2016, criticism has evolved to action. Until today, the organization rejects institutional funding from the State members and refuses to work inside the refugee camps on the island of Lesvos.

The case study is built upon primary sources of information; it gives a voice to these humanitarian workers on the field but also to asylum seekers that lived throughout the difficult conditions in the reception centers in Lesvos. In addition to this, MSF team in the island provided detailed reports and valuable inside information on the objectives and challenges presented to the organization during the European “refugee crisis”.

Ihab Abassi has been the longest-serving person on the island. It happened as an accident. He arrived as a tourist in Lesvos, in July 2015, but encountered a crisis that still hasn’t allowed him “to take the vacations as planned”. A couple months later he joined Médecins Sans Frontières as a cultural mediator supporting the mental health of the migrant population, a role he played for two years. Since then, he has been the assistant coordinator of MSF project in Lesvos. On the field since the beginning of the European “refugee crisis”, Abassi described “nightmares” at a time when neither humanitarian

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<sup>82</sup>MSF report on the organization activity in Greece, on March 2018, available from: <https://www.msf.org/greece-msf-activity-update-%E2%80%93-march-2018>

actors nor European authorities were prepared for the thousands of refugees that arrived at the shores of the island every day. “No one was prepared for this”, he recalls.

In 2015, MSF action in Lesvos was twofold, with a maritime rescue operation in the Aegean Sea and a mobile clinic set up in the port to provide immediate assistance, a clinic in the Moria reception center and a temporary camp between the northern shore of the island and the city of Mytilene. In 2016, the organization expanded its humanitarian response, reinforcing health care, treatment for chronic diseases, sexual health care, psychological care in its clinics, but the number of people arriving at the shores of Lesvos was only increasing. “There were more and more people arriving at night, it was shocking, it was winter, bad weather, rain and cold. We heard people screaming in the sea as we sat and waited” (Abassi, 2021).

Ihab was the right-hand man for Marco Sandrone and Alessandra Saibene, both project coordinators for the Médecins Sans Frontières project in Lesvos. Marco was responsible for the project from July 2019 to November 2020, a period that he portrays as the “peak of the refugee crisis in Lesvos”, that had its darkest moment when the fires destroyed Moria reception center in September 2020. “From that summer until now, the deterioration of the living conditions on the island has been constant”, he says. Marco was then replaced by Alessandra Saibene in December 2020. She was the responsible who inherited the organization's effort in the island after the Moria reception center was destroyed. “I have to say that I arrived at a very special moment”, she acknowledges, “after the fire in Moria everything changed”.

The focus of this dissertation is also on the organization’s role in human rights advocacy. It was paramount to have the perspective of Liza Papadimitriou, one of the responsible for the coordination in MSF’s mission in Greece, specifically in advocacy of human rights. Specialized in migration, Liza has been working with MSF for the last five years.

#### **4.1.2019 and 2020. The “peak of the refugee crisis” in Lesvos**

Even if the numbers of migrants arriving at the Greek shores never reached those in the beginning of the European “refugee crisis”, volunteers describe the period between 2019 and 2020 as “the most difficult time” in the island for humanitarian actors, in terms of having “thousands of people with no minimal conditions” living in the reception centers. Beyond overpopulation, other challenges emerged during this period, such as the “escalation of violence against asylum-seekers and humanitarian workers” and the pandemic of COVID-19 that hit Greece and all of Europe (Saibene, 2021) Lesvos was no exception; the first case was recorded in March 2020. By May, MSF opened its isolation centre for COVID-19 patients, which was forced to close only two months after, by the end of July.

In a matter of months Moria saw its population almost quadrupling and became the largest refugee camp in Europe. “In July 2019 there were 6.000 people living in the Moria camp, by the end of the year the population had increased to 21.000”, when in fact it had space for “2800, 3000 people at the most”. For Marco Sandrone the impact on the island was immediate.

At the same time, the political landscape in Greece changed with the electoral victory of the party New Democracy<sup>83</sup>, responsible for increasing the anti-immigrant rhetoric amongst the Greek population, arguing for the impediment of migrant’s transfers to mainland Greece and for the disinvestment in migrant receiving infrastructures.

The “peak” of the refugee crisis in Lesvos ended in a tone of disaster. In September 2020, it was confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Moria and the response was “a quick implementation of mass quarantine”. Six days later, on the 8th of September, the already overcrowded and impoverish camp was destroyed by fires, leaving thousands of people homeless<sup>84</sup>. For Marco Sandrone this was a “symptom of the failure of the EU's foreign policy”.

MSF staff members share direct criticism of the EU migration policies and consider it the reason for the fire of September 2020. The events were seen not as a surprise, but as a result of a political agenda. Abassi recalls that the migrant population was being “neglected” for a long time: “You can't contain people in these conditions without them responding, something was expected to happen”. The fire is “the result of the agreement between the European Union and Turkey” signed in March 2016, to prevent new arrivals on Europe's soil (Abassi, 2021).

Refugees that lived in Moria stayed “in the streets, without any assistance” for 10 days. Then they were transferred to the new reception center, built by the Greek authorities with the support of the European Commission and international agencies such as UNHCR and IOM, in Mavrovouni, but the conditions did not improve: “It houses 7,000 people. The first showers took months to be installed, before people had to wash in the sea. It was an old shooting range”. The health concerns for MSF are several: possible signs of lead poisoning, minimal sanitary conditions, outbreaks of scabies and lack of drinking water, where fires are recurrent because of short circuits in the field's electricity. “It's worrying that people go to a field where they can get hurt even more” (Sandrone, 2021).

There is however one great difference between Moria and Mavrovouni. The new camp was closed and the liberty of movement of its own residents was limited, due to the lockdown imposed from the Greek authorities during COVID-19 pandemic. In Mavrovouni “people can’t get in, can’t get out”

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<sup>83</sup>BBC report on the Greek elections of 2019, available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48859282>

<sup>84</sup>New York Times report on the fires that destroyed Moria, available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/world/europe/fire-refugee-camp-lesbos-moria.html>

without an appointment, and humanitarian actors also struggle to get free access to the camp. The problems are “daily” to get access to the patients. “This is not a detention center, it is a refugee camp” and humanitarian actors fear an even stricter control with the use of electronic cards for people to enter and leave the reception center (Saibene, 2021).

The repercussions of the fires were felt and “humanitarian actors had to reorganize to understand the new humanitarian challenges”. MSF was able to maintain its medical operations in Mavrovouni and never changed their tone accusing the Greek government and the EU of “deliberately neglecting the refugees”, leaving them in “inhumane conditions” in the reception centers as “part of a strategy of governments and the EU to discourage” new arrivals. “How can you put people sleeping in tents in Europe in 2021?” (Saibene, 2021).

Months prior to the fire, COVID-19 hit Lesbos. To fight the pandemic, public health measures were implemented all across Greece. However, Liza Papadimitriou, MSF’s Advocacy Manager in Greece, denounces that instead of providing refugees with testing and isolation centers, Greek authorities implemented “mass quarantines” whenever there were positive cases. This leads her to conclude that “the migrant population in Greece was excluded from any response” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

At a time when across Greece the restrictive health measures were being lifted, the same did not apply to the migrant population. While the local population in Lesbos was able to enjoy freedom of movement again, the population in refugee camps was excluded. Liza and Marco, both describe “discriminatory restrictions” with the purpose to increase “the control of this population”.

As the project coordinator during the beginning of the pandemic, Sandrone recalls refugees “felt humiliated, imprisoned, the situation became increasingly unstable and led to the fires of September 2020”. In an increasingly critical tone, all staff members accuse the Greek government of “instrumentalizing the pandemic” to restrict the rights of asylum seekers. “We didn’t understand why a Greek person who lives 10 meters from the Moria camp can go to the city, but the refugees can’t” (Abassi, 2021).

#### **4.1.1. Challenges for humanitarian actors in Lesbos**

“In 2015, Lesbos was the island of solidarity”, but those days are long gone. Papadimitriou explains that acceptance around refugees and humanitarian workers amongst the local population has dropped substantially and was replaced by tension. The rise of xenophobia is one of the first challenges identified by MSF staff members in Lesbos. An increase of demonstrations against migrants and NGOs has culminated in “attacks against humanitarian workers and an increase in violence against migrants”. Violence was also a result of the “failure” of European migration policies with the purpose

to “bring the local population closer to the migrants” instead of “enclose them in a ghetto” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

Sandrone on August 21, 2020, denounced an attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières clinic outside the Moria reception center. It was not the first, nor the last “it was just one of the episodes we saw in 2020 of NGOs being targeted by anti-migrant groups”. Sandrone attributes the rise of violence not just to the failures of EU policies but also to the political manipulation of anti-migrant sentiments that present “humanitarian work as a factor for migrants to reach Europe”. The “atmosphere of solidarity” in Lesvos was “rotten” and the island in 2020 was increasingly polarized. “It's a useful strategy to win elections and keep power. The problem is that it creates a very unstable and dangerous environment” (Sandrone, 2021).

Abassi shared with me a conversation with a local citizen from Mytilene who explained the challenges of receiving such a number of migrants. In 2015 the number asylum seekers in the island surpassed the number of the local population: “One night you come to my house, you knock on the door and ask me for a bed to sleep in and something to eat, and we help, the next day your cousin comes, and the day after your neighbourhood and your city. I can't do it anymore and I start asking my neighbours for help to help me support these people. And I see that the doors are closed, what should I do?” (Lesvos citizen to Abassi, 2021).

“The local population is also under pressure”, recognizes Abassi. The responsibility remains the same; MSF accuses the Greek government and the EU of neglecting the migrant and local population in these distress areas. “Their negligence in turning the Aegean islands into prisons played a big role” (Abassi, 2021).

In May 2020, Médecins Sans Frontières opened its isolation centre for Covid-19 patients. The clinic was forced to close only two months after, by the end of July and was fined up to 35.000 €. The relationship with local authorities is also a challenge for MSF. “Everyone knows that there is no capacity to respond to the pandemic on the island” but still MSF was forced to close its new clinic. “The authorities are shooting themselves in the foot. But we have seen that the level of negligence and indifference is very high. If there are any shortcomings in these types of answers they don't care” (Abassi, 2021).

The bureaucratic challenges continue to be felt by NGOs in Greece. In February 2020, a new law (3063/2020) was passed to require all non-governmental organizations to register with the Greek government. The repercussions were felt by humanitarian actors. Papadimitriou explains that “the problem is not the registration, that's normal, especially when we're talking about such a vulnerable population, but the way it's implemented, as if it comes to clean up a landscape of NGOs that are suspicious of their operations”. It creates “a very dangerous narrative” (Papadimitriou, 2021). The law

was discussed in the European Parliament<sup>85</sup> and strongly criticized by humanitarian actors. Amnesty International described a regulation that “threatens civic space”<sup>86</sup> and the NGO Choose Love surveyed 70 civil society organizations operating in Greece on the new regulation - 45% of the organizations admitted to be “unlikely to comply with all the requirements” mandated by Greek legislation to keep working with migrants in the country and in general all organizations were “extremely concerned about the financial impact of the registration process”<sup>87</sup>.

The new legislation raised concerns and brought even more difficulties to the work of the current NGOs in Greece with the migrant population. Due to the dimension of the organization and the long-time operation in Lesbos, the financial impact was not an impediment for MSF. However, for Sandrone it was clear the tendency to “reduce the space for action of humanitarian actors, greater restrictions on the registration of new NGOs”. Humanitarian actors fear that the aim of the new law is “to reduce and blame NGOs for something that is solely responsible for European politics”, the current challenges of the European “refugee crisis”.

### **MSF action in Lesbos. More than a medical organization**

In response to the European “refugee crisis” MSF keeps evolving into more than a medical humanitarian organization, without ever losing its main responsibility of saving lives and taking care for those who cannot. Advocacy of human rights and a critical perspective about the action and inaction of states and European authorities is ever more present.

According to the information provided to this research by the MSF project coordinators in Lesbos, the main objective of the advocacy strategy for 2021 is to “erode the most harmful aspects of the policies” implemented by Greece and the European institutions. The humanitarian organization believes that “exposing the medical consequences of containment” and “exposing the approach as a policy that creates human suffering” can be the most effective way to advocate for human rights and to “instigate policy change” and “challenge the system” (Saibene, 2021).

Alessandra Saibene, the current project coordinator, describes the organization’s effort to advocate for human rights as “the other soul of the project” which has become “a fundamental activity”. “This is a European problem” not a Greek one. Saibene wants the public opinion to

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<sup>85</sup>European Parliament questions concerning Greek law to monitor, available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-001537\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-001537_EN.html)

<sup>86</sup>Amnesty International report on the Greek regulation of NGOs working on migration, available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/greece-regulation-ngos-working-migration-and-asylum-threatens-civic-space>

<sup>87</sup>Choose Love report on the struggles of NGO to register in Greece: Under Pressure - How Greece is closing in on Civil Society Organizations working with refugees, available from: <https://helprefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/27-02-2021-REPORT-Report-Civil-society-Greece-under-pressure.pdf>

understand that the Greek Government doesn't shoulder all the blame for the lack of human conditions in the reception centers.

Today, in Lesbos, MSF has a supply and logistics department alongside medical ones. Its clinics operate side by side social and legal support operations and data analysis departments. On the medical side, doctors work alongside health promoters, psychologists, and case workers, highlighting the different facets of health the organization needs to answer in this population and in this context. MSF activities go from mobile clinics in different locations in Lesbos, a vaccination center, providing consultations addressing children and pregnant care, family planning, sexual violence, and abortion care, without forgetting mental health.

Providing mental healthcare to the migrant population in Lesbos is a matter of pride for MSF. Saibene believes it's the organization responsibility to address needs that too often goes unnoticed in the humanitarian field: "Many others provide neonatal care, more than those who provide mental health care for severe cases, we provide psychiatric specialized care, which is not common, it is a gap that we are trying to tackle" (Saibene, 2021).

Furthermore, MSF humanitarian aid goes beyond its medical expertise. One of the organization's main objectives in its Lesbos project is to "promote a synergy between legal and medical help, which means to also provide legal support to our medical health patients". For MSF's Advocacy Manager in Greece, this synergy between healthcare, legal support and advocacy for human rights is necessary to give a comprehensive response to a crisis created by "the European policies of containment" (Papadimitriou, 2021).

The evaluation of the migrant situation during the remainder of 2021 is bitter-sweet. MSF project in Lesbos does not expect a new flood of arrivals, like it experienced in 2019-2020, not because of a change in the migration policies of the EU, but because of the closure of borders to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The humanitarian organization is not hopeful on a solution to the European "refugee crisis". The project in Lesbos anticipates that the "deportation to Turkey and countries of origin either resumes or intensifies", and due to the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum the practices of "containment" of the migrant population in the Aegean islands will "intensify" (MSF, 2021).

The calls for political responsibility or the intent to challenge European migration policies are not novelties in MSF humanitarian operations in Greece. In 2016, following the EU-Turkey Statement, the criticism rose in tone. The deal is often referenced by the organization as a "tipping point" and the first step into a "fortified" European border and into a "structurally violent EU migration policies". It was

after the EU-Turkey Statement that the “hotspots transformed into mass containment sites intended to facilitate the fast-track border processing and return of people to Turkey”<sup>88</sup>.

### **MSF response to the EU-Turkey Statement**

Papadimitriou details how she arrived in Lesbos in 2015, to witness “the period before and after the deal between the European Union and Turkey”. For the Advocacy Manager, the agreement made “clear” the intention to “close borders and arrest people within Greece, a plan formed to put a system into action that would prevent people from entering Europe” that resulted on a “policy to contain people in the Greek islands and the reinforcement of border controls” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

In response, MSF activities in the Aegean Islands changed. “We made the decision to stop receiving funds from the European Union for our missions around the world and left Moria. We believed that at the time they turned Moria into a detention center, a mass deportation centre, and that is why we left in protest” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

As already mentioned since 2016, Médecins Sans Frontières has refused to work in the refugee camps on the island of Lesbos. Withdrawing from the refugee camps in Lesbos, either from Moria and later refusing to work inside Mavrovouni was never an easy decision for MSF members, but it was considered by the organization as the only way not to be a “complicit” in a system that MSF consider “unfair and inhumane”. The organization and its members refused to be “instrumentalized for a mass expulsion”<sup>89</sup>. It was a transformation of the organization's work on the island, not a shutdown, since MSF kept working on mobile clinics outside the refugee camps, in the port and more recently even opening a new clinic closer to Mytilene.

“We want to give people a safe, dignified space, away from the structural violence that is present in the countryside. We want to preserve a decent space in medical care, for anyone who comes to ask for help, this is the main reason nowadays”, Abassi explains that there are other reasons for MSF to not work inside the refugee camps in Lesbos, other than to avoid giving the “European Union any more reasons to escape its responsibilities”. Between choosing to be an accomplice or leaving, MSF chose the latter: “We wouldn’t be exploited or instrumentalized by European policies that lead to the suffering of more and more people” (Abassi, 2021).

Even more resounding was MSF's decision to reject funding from EU member states. The decision was taken a couple months later, in June 2016, reinforcing its protest against European

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<sup>88</sup>MSF report of June 2021: Constructing Crisis At Europe’s Borders. The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands

<sup>89</sup>MSF Head of Mission in Greece in 2016, Marie Elisabeth Ingres of the withdrawal from Moria, available from: <https://www.msf.org/greece-msf-ends-activities-inside-lesvos-%E2%80%9Chotspot%E2%80%9D>



migration and asylum policies. “We are calling on European governments to shift priorities”, was the appeal made at the time.<sup>90</sup>

The decision had an immediate effect and it applied to MSF projects worldwide. As covered before, MSF has pride in being independently funded. At the time, 92% of the organization activities were privately funded, according to MSF reports. However, in the previous year of 2015, MSF received 19 million euro from EU institutions and 37 million from its member states. The decision, which still holds in 2021, has cost the organization almost 60 million per year on European funding.

The rejection of European funding was not consensual within MSF and was strongly criticized by some of its members. Fabrice Weissman for instance, considers this decision revealing of an “amazing naivety and inconsistency” depriving the organization of “essential financial resources, while following an opportunistic morality” (Weissman, 2016)<sup>91</sup>.

MSF acts to provide healthcare in Lesvos, but never closes its eyes to the reality on the field, nor tries to avoid the responsibility to denounce it. "In terms of our advocacy we don't fail to mention the devastating consequences for the mental and physical health of people who are stranded on the islands, we are addressing the consequences of containment policies, not the consequences of a bad winter" (Papadimitriou, 2021).

### **“Non-neutral” aid of MSF**

As MSF is “completely independent and not funded by governments” its members feel that a humanitarian actor is not doing enough by “saving and treating people”, it is necessary to go beyond that, to “show the world what Europe is doing in these camps” and to make clear that “this is not because of a disaster” but rather “a clear political strategy” (Sandrone, 2021). MSF’s human rights advocacy is a “by-product” of the organization's clinical work, that it evolved into a “strategic resource” as explored previously by Peter Redfield.

Is this what a neutral humanitarian aid should be? Even though neutrality is one of the most cherished values in the charter of MSF, side by side with its independence, it seems that due to its willingness to “speak out” and to act in protest of the EU, the humanitarian action of MSF should be declared “non-neutral”. Charlotte Dany would even describe this “non-neutral” humanitarian aid as “political agency”.

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<sup>90</sup>MSF explaining its decision to reject EU fundings, available from: <https://www.msf-me.org/ar/node/1150/%7B%7Bnetwork.link%7D%7D>

<sup>91</sup>MSF’s Fabrice Weissman criticizing the organization decision to reject EU funds, available from: <https://www.msf-crash.org/en/blog/humanitarian-actors-and-practice/msf-suspension-eu-funds-when-short-memory-meets-moral>

Even though MSF has pride in “not being a political organization”, the organization understands the European “refugee crisis” as a deeply politicized subject, involving negotiations between EU member states as well as between the EU and its foreign neighbours, such as Turkey and Libya. “We can easily understand the power games that are being played on the backs of these vulnerable groups” (Abassi, 2021).

The context of any humanitarian crisis forces MSF to understand its role and limitations. “Denouncing, having a voice, is a core activity, refusing unconditional funding, to preserve our independence and impartiality, so that we can continue to denounce. Vulnerable groups usually don't have a voice, we are happy to be the voice of the oppressed and of the truth about what is happening” (Abassi, 2021).

In the face of the European “refugee crisis”, MSF demands are clear and repetitive. The EU authorities must “stop their efforts of containment”, all asylum seekers “contained” in the Greek islands need to be immediately relocated, European decision makers need to change the migration policies that are responsible for the “violations of human rights” at Europe borders.<sup>92</sup>

Recognizing the limitations of its actions, MSF has resorted to denouncing the reality on the field, refusing to compromise and not focusing exclusively on filling the gap of the immediate needs of the vulnerable population.

Terry’s words, as one of the responsible for the decision of MSF to withdraw from the Rwandan refugee camps in 1994 are also relevant in this situation. Humanitarian organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières should reduce its action to a “technical act” and refuse to be instrumentalized, reclaiming an “activist role, reminding states that failure to meet higher responsibilities is what allows a crisis to unfold in the first place.” (Terry, 2002, p.217). When faced with its own limitations, MSF cannot abdicate from its freedom of speech, as the responsibility to denounce human rights violations, “even at the cost of expulsion” (Terry, 2002, p.21).

### **4.2.3.(Filling a gap). MSF response**

Is humanitarian aid condemned to repeat itself, in its effort to “fill gaps” in the basic services that the authorities can’t provide to its citizens? Papadimitriou goes a step further claiming that “gap” is not the right term, because “a gap, or a failure can happen when you are in an emergency. What we are called upon to respond in Europe is wilful neglect”. EU challenges on managing its external borders are not due to lack of support or lack of funds. “What we see is: investing in strengthening border

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<sup>92</sup>MSF report demanding EU to stop the suffering of refugees in the Aegean islands, available from: <https://www.msf.org/time-stop-cycle-suffering-refugees-greek-islands>

controls, rather than protecting people who have many needs, this is what civil society is covering" (Papadimitriou, 2021).

"It's a bit naive to say that it's about covering gaps, we're responding to deliberate negligence". For Papadimitriou, humanitarian aid creates a paradox. The more successful the initiatives of organizations like MSF, the greater the risk that the European Union's "void" or "deliberate neglect" will grow even further. But there is a solution: "We try to solve it through our human rights advocacy, by having a voice, we cannot abandon these people who are desperate, turning our backs is not possible" (Papadimitriou, 2021).

Despite the difficulties and challenges, Saibene refutes the idea that humanitarian aid is limited to "fill a gap". "We want to be present because we need to challenge the authorities and to provide basic services and filling the gap is the way to be there and speak out", and the only "way to speak out is to be present", on the field, witnessing first-hand the harsh reality of these emergency situations (Saibene, 2021).

Witnessing and speaking out, are for MSF staff in Lesvos the response from humanitarian actors who refuse to be limited in their purpose, who refuse to be instrumentalized by governments who do not fulfil its responsibility to its people. "We don't want to normalize a situation that is not normal. There is a whole system that needs to be challenged and just to be a gap filler is not a solution". Humanitarian actors have one way to challenge the system, "to highlight the gap" by their efforts on advocating for human rights, on witnessing and speaking out about the reality on the field - not to attempt to be a "problem solver", because that responsibility "lies on the shoulder of the authorities" (Saibene, 2021).

The European "refugee crisis" is not a mere humanitarian crisis motivated by incomprehensible factors, it is "created and continued by the migration policies of the European Union". Recognizing that there is a political context to the conditions lived in the field, MSF calls for a political solution to "find humane and dignified solutions for these people". For Sandrone, addressing the problem starts with the distinction of the role of humanitarian actors and governments. "NGOs are filling a void; humanitarian actors shouldn't be there. The system is vicious and the only ones who can put an end to it are politicians" (Sandrone, 2021).

Not a gap, but a void - created by European political negligence in addressing migration influxes. That is the reason that forced MSF to intervene in Europe. "We are filling a void, responding to negligence, to try to stop the suffering of migrants and asylum seekers", Abassi has no doubts that humanitarian action takes place when "the Greek and European authorities do not fulfil their responsibilities to provide services to these people. It is a complete disappointment, and it is frustrating to work in this context, in a country like Greece" (Abassi, 2021).

#### **4.2.4. MSF calls for political responsibility**

In a plea for “No More Morias”<sup>93</sup>, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, announced a new EU plan for migration, a plan where “all member states must play their part”<sup>94</sup> The President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen describes it as an “European solution” capable to “rebuild trust between member states and to restore citizens’ confidence in our capacity to manage migration as a Union”<sup>95</sup>.

However, such promises have not convinced Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). In the voice of its International President, Christos Christou, the organization defines the new Pact as “the same misery for refugees” since it “does not increase safe and legal pathways to Europe. It does not include a clear programme to proactively save people’s lives at sea or concrete measures – rather than public announcements – to ensure that places like Moria never exist again”<sup>96</sup>.

The inherent scepticism of MSF is shared by the members interviewed in this study. Without promising solutions Papadimitriou knows one thing with certainty: “this needs to stop”. “We are not talking about 3 million refugees, like in Turkey and Lebanon; we are talking about 100,000 people in Greece, 15,000 on the islands. This can easily be resolved with a different policy”. This change in policy is a call for humanitarian corridors, a new reception system, which deviates from the creation of “hotspots” to start treating those who come asking for help with “dignity, as human beings” and a system that guarantees a “fair” asylum procedure (Papadimitriou, 2021).

However, MSF doesn’t anticipate a change in the European migration policies. European leadership “took their stand when they said that Greece is the shield of Europe”, without advocating for solutions. “We also have a clear mission, migration does not stop, and people will continue to come. It is like trying to stop the summer from coming” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

MSF has no doubts, the path to a solution for the European “refugee crisis” starts with the European Union and decision makers, who MSF calls “to take responsibility to ensure the immediate relocation of all people on the islands” to EU member-states. Decongestion on the islands and immediate relocation of the most vulnerable groups to safe countries is an urgent need. “All the

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<sup>93</sup>European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson intervention in the European Parliament, concerning the fires of Moria, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/johansson/announcements/intervention-european-parliament-plenary-session-debate-need-immediate-and-humanitarian-eu-response\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/johansson/announcements/intervention-european-parliament-plenary-session-debate-need-immediate-and-humanitarian-eu-response_en)

<sup>94</sup>European Commission announcement of task force to resolve the emergency situation in Lesvos, following the fires of Moria, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1728](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1728)

<sup>95</sup>European Commission presentation of the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, available from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1706](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706)

<sup>96</sup>MSF public position on the new EU Migration Pact, available from: <https://www.msf.org/new-pact-same-misery-refugees-trapped-greek-islands>

refugees who are here have fled for their lives. Europe must take the right side to absorb these people and lift the endless suffering” (Abassi, 2021).

When asked where lies the responsibility to find a solution to the European “refugee crisis”, Sandrone answers abruptly “Definitely not the NGOs”. A political problem requires a political solution, the European “refugee crisis” is not a mere humanitarian crisis motivated by incomprehensible factors, it is “created and continued by the migration policies of the European Union” (Sandrone, 2021)

One thing is clear: "European policies are not working" and legal alternatives such as "humanitarian corridors" and "fair redistribution of refugees across 27 member states “are desperately needed (Sandrone, 2021). If the New Migration Pact is the EU's answer to MSF and other NGOs' appeals for a restructured approach to migration, humanitarian actors deemed it insufficient to bring real change.



## **5. Chapter V. Case Study Analysis**

The non-governmental organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was chosen as a case study not only because of its long history of humanitarian work, but also because of its public criticism on how European institutions and governments have addressed this migration flux.

Recognizing that the situation was out of the control of a humanitarian organization, MSF took another step in its public criticism of European authorities. As a response to the EU-Turkey Statement the organization rejected funding from EU member states and withdrew from the refugee camps in Lesvos. Besides MSF public positions, the case study focus on the testimonies of actors present in the field - frontline workers, witnesses and asylum seekers.

The lack of representativity of refugees in humanitarian intervention (Malkki, 1996, p.378) was a gap identified by the current literature. To address it, the present dissertation gives a voice to four asylum seekers that have experienced humanitarian aid and the living conditions in the refugee camps in the Greek island of Lesvos. Their testimonies are addressed during the analysis of the case study. After all, how can we explore the conditions experienced in the refugee camps in Lesvos, without asking those who live it first-hand?

### **Giving refugees a voice**

After following MSF's response to the European "refugee crisis" and the organization's multi-layered approach to address the immediate needs of the asylum seekers in Europe, specifically in the island of Lesvos, the volunteers on the field shared with me their willingness to be the voice of refugees. "We are happy to be the voice of the oppressed and of the truth about what is happening" (Abassi, 2021).

In a parallel way, the asylum seekers interviewed for this research offer the perspective of the ones who were received by humanitarian actors in Europe, since the beginning of the European "refugee crisis"; all experienced the living conditions in the refugee camps in Lesvos. Besides that, all asylum seekers have one thing in common: their own will to speak out by sharing the reality of their experience through social media. This example, of refugees using social media to have a voice shows how social interactions today surpass geography limitations and how deeply the digital world is changing society (Wittel, 2000, p.2).

The 20-year-old Mo, arrived in Greece with his family after 11 months of travelling, on November 21, 2017. "We finally arrived in Europe". But then everything changed when they were sent to the Moria reception center. "We saw the high security of the camp, they kept us there,

prevented us from continuing our journey to Germany, where my father was”. His family was eventually moved to Germany, but Mo could not do the same, because his documents had expired. Since 2019, he has lived separated from his family in and out of the reception centers for asylum seekers in the island. After the fires of Moria, in September 2020 he was given shelter by a friend in the city of Mytilene

Ma arrived in Lesvos in 2019 with two children and her husband from Iran. Only saw her asylum request accepted to Germany after the fires of Moria, one year and six months later. “Germany accepted some refugees from the camp and my family, and I were one of them. We are going to Germany”, she told me. The happiness was inescapable, for the first time in the last few years she will have a full night of rest. Mo and Ma saw their life changing after the fires that destroyed Moria.

He might just be 28 years old, but refugee life was no stranger to A when he arrived in Lesvos, in October 2019. Long before his journey took him to Greece, he fled his home in Burundi to seek shelter in Rwanda. He lived in Moria for three months, until January 2020. The stay was short, he was considered a vulnerable person for what he describes as post-traumatic stress disorder: “because of my experiences, memories, I was always weak and sick”. He was taken from the camp and accommodated in Mytilene.

O and his family fled from Afghanistan and were rescued by the Greek authorities in the Aegean Sea. They stepped onto the shores of Lesvos for the first time on 24 November 2019. Six months later, they would leave Moria and move to an apartment in Mytilene, until today.

### **Refugee’s perception on humanitarian actors**

To not reduce these asylum seekers to “mute victims” (Malkki, 1996, p.378) is important to understand their perception of the humanitarian actors aiding them in Lesvos. Mo doesn’t find hope in the work of humanitarian organizations. “NGOs? They use refugees to make money, they are not honest. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why refugees are unable to leave the camp.” Not every refugee interviewed agrees with the role of humanitarian organizations in Lesvos, the young Mo, who claims to have never received any help from humanitarian organizations, distrusts their purpose to help.

Ma tells a different story. In the camps she was accompanied by several NGOs. Including the Red Cross and MSF. Organizations that “want to help more, but Greece does not allow it, only in emergency situations”, she considers. But the problem goes beyond NGO’s. Refugees like Ma plead for help from the European Union and other state-members: “The aid that has been arriving in Greece is not enough; we have so many refugees here”.



A's experience with MSF was twofold: as a community leader of the Burundi population in the refugee camps and as a patient. He witnessed the organization's efforts with the migrant population. "I saw social workers following up particular cases, I saw MSF organizing vaccinations for children, I had meetings with MSF" to articulate medical care with the Burundi community. As a patient, victim of sexual abuse "they helped me, they gave me support, they examined me, they advised me, they gave me treatment. That's what I got from MSF" (A, 2021). When I questioned him about any word he would like to say to the European decision makers, after long silences, A responded: "They know what they are doing. We are here because it is not safe in our countries. We want to be integrated, to study, to have a job, to live our lives in safety, because it is not possible for us to do it there".

As the founder of a humanitarian organization O provides valuable insight on the needs of the people living in the camps that go beyond the reach of NGOs. "There are some NGOs providing services for people, but it's not enough, not even to cover basic needs." The lack of help leads refugees like O to face the problem directly; that was how, in the first months of the pandemic, he recognized the lack of information and the "hundreds of problems and misery" in the Moria refugee camp made the place "forgotten in the fight against the pandemic".

It was from this need that the "Moria Corona Awareness Team" was born to prevent the disaster "if the virus entered the camp". Since March 2020, its members "put up informational posters, speak and inform people directly in their own language, ask them to be quarantined, and warn of virus symptoms". The social media accounts of the "Moria Corona Awareness Team" also demonstrate other activities, such as collecting garbage and distributing clothes, fixing tents and expanding the electricity network. This is a project, they remember, "made by us, the refugees in the camp" (O, 2021).

### **Everyday living conditions in Lesvos refugee camps**

Mo lived in Moria when the fires destroyed the largest refugee camp in Europe. "All people lost a lot of what they had. The first concern was to find temporary shelter for pregnant women with babies and for children". After the fires, he was moved to the new camp that was built to house the thousands of refugees that lost all in Moria – the temporary camp in Mavrovouni. And even though the camp was new the conditions were not better. "To be honest, conditions are so bad, there are no basic conditions". The camps are seen as prisons by those who live there. "There are so many people who just want to leave, to continue on their way, but the government doesn't let them go." The camp "destroys people, part by part, especially their souls" (Mo, 2021).

Today the young Mo lives in Mytilene, in the capital of the island of Lesvos. "I found someone who was able to help me, but other people did not". That is why he still visits the new camp where he

works today as a volunteer Arabic translator, with the Arab community in the Mavrovouni camp. “I try to do my best for people who have not received any help” (Mo, 2021).

Ma escaped with her family to Lesbos, looking to Europe for safety, but that was not what she found. “I can’t believe this is Europe”, she started. “I’ve been living in Europe for months now, in the countryside, under a tent, whether it’s summer or winter.” The cold days are spent without electricity, among the mud, with no safe place for the children to play and grow. “We have no sanitary conditions, there are problems with the toilets, we cannot eat or drink enough, and most people have skin problems such as scabies”. It was under these conditions that the field of Moria burned. “It was horrible, I cried, it was my house. We were there for a year, and we had so many memories, good and bad” (Ma, 2021).

Neither Moria nor Mavrovouni are places to raise children. The biggest concern is with her sons “my first child had everything before we left home, now he has nothing, he’s depressed, my baby was a month old when we started the trip, he thinks life is just a tent, playing in the mud, no electricity. He doesn’t understand why we are sad or why the brother cries” (Ma, 2021).

A no longer lives in Mavrovouni, but he continues to go there “every morning”, as one of the leaders of the Burundi community in the camp. “We have meetings with other communities, NGOs and those responsible for the camp. I have to be informed to inform my people. It’s my responsibility now” (A, 2021).

He didn’t live in Moria during the fires but received “second by second” information and videos of what was happening. Fires in Moria “wasn’t anything new”, so Mytilene “went back to sleep”, but soon it became a “disaster” and its residents “lost everything”. Then, when those thousands of refugees tried to reach Mytilene, the access was blocked and “clashes with the police began”. (A, 2021).

“In Moria there were even small stores, people sold things, made some money, integrated themselves, made a living and in one day, Moria burned down, and it was all over”. After Moria burned down, some people continued to resist going to Mavrovouni. “They told us it was closed and people didn’t want to be in a prison. In Moria people were free, the camp was not closed, people could come and go as they pleased”, but in Mavrovouni it’s the opposite, “it’s closed, there’s a fence, the refugees who live inside they cannot leave unless it is their time to leave, because they have a specific time to be able to leave” (A, 2021).

Like A, even though O doesn’t live in the refugee camp today, he still visits it “everyday”. It is due to that experience that he is able to compare the camp where he lived, Moria, and its replacement, Mavrovouni or Moria 2.0: “The situation is not very different, it is a little safer, but a lot remains the

same as it was in Moria, the people continue to suffer, living in tents, not having good food, lack of health care” (O, 2021).

Despite the lack of living conditions, the academic debate concerning the role of refugee camps shows that these spaces need to be seen as spaces for political action and not just humanism. If humanitarian workers keep on refusing the political implications of their own action, refugee camps become the “fulfilment of the exceptional treatment of a human ‘waste’, a way of managing the undesirables”, with “no voice and no place in this world” (Agier, 2010, p.43).

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) willingness to speak out can be understood, not only as a pressure mechanism to governments and local authorities, but also as an effort to speak out for those oppressed. After all, no one is in a better position to attest for the respect of human rights at the borders of Europe, than those arriving claiming asylum and are then sent to live in a refugee camp. Collecting these testimonies and sharing them publicly can be the stronger mechanism to pressure the EU and to “challenge the system” (Saibene, 2021).

### **Debating MSF answers to the limitations of Humanitarian Aid**

The state of the art gathered some of the most prominent authors work on MSF history and public positions to allow for a deeper understanding of how the organization measures its actions since its foundation. From the organization's previous decisions and controversies, I developed a framework that was then applied to a more recent challenge, namely - the humanitarian crisis at Europe's doorstep.

Nowadays, a 50-year-old organization, Médecins Sans Frontières emerged as a “contemporary humanitarian actor”, focused on providing emergency aid while being aware of its own limitations: “no international NGO can match the reach of a powerful state” (Redfield, Bornstein, 2011, p.20). Where governance and sovereignty fail, humanitarian actors tend to be called upon to provide welfare services that otherwise would not exist.

The limitations of humanitarian action are one of three themes that mark the history and present of MSF. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, Médecins Sans Frontières left no doubts on its position, when it defined its action as “a citizen's response to political failure”, that however “does not erase the long-term necessity of political responsibility”. MSF connects humanitarianism with political failure. The organization’s action “fill a gap” with temporary relief measures and it refuses to be held accountable for anything else.

In 1994 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) would live through one of the most defining moments in the organization's history: seeing its aid being used to prolong to perpetuate violations of human rights,

MSF proclaimed its helplessness and withdrew its assistance from the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire. Fiona Terry describes this as an example of the paradox humanitarian aid incurs in. By providing care and aid to a population in distress, humanitarian actors allow the transfer of “state responsibilities of the welfare of citizens”. Humanitarian aid should then be reduced to a “technical act” to minimize “the negative consequences of their actions” and not to “exonerate states of their responsibilities” (Terry, 2002, p.245).

Limiting its action does not mean, however, focus on exclusively treating people “without challenging the political and social origins of their exclusion” (Allié, 2011, p.5). MSF sees as its responsibility to “denounce the violence and oppression, even at the cost of expulsion” from refugee camps, regions or countries (Terry, 2002 p.21).

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) willingness to “speak out” was the second theme explored, since the organization's birth until today. From 1979 and onwards, “witnessing had arrived to stay”, and later would emerge as a part of “MSF’s ideology”, in the form of “Human Rights Advocacy” (Redfield, 2013, p.103). Engaging in the public space and being involved with local authorities became the only way to avoid being a “passive instrument in the service of power” (Weissman, 2011, p.197).

Witnessing may have emerged as a secondary effect of the medical humanitarian action, like a “by-product” but it evolved into a “strategic resource”. Témoignage is the answer the organization found to the “need to justify the obvious incompleteness of MSF’s medical interventions with a sense of the wider effects of action” (Redfield, 2013, p.111).

The third and final theme addressed was the debate between Médecins Sans Frontières willingness to “speak out” and its core value of neutrality. Since its foundation MSF has debated the role of neutrality and “speaking out” in its humanitarian action. “We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill”, these were the words of the organization during the acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Being neutral constitutes an “impossible problem”, a problem that becomes evident when “humanitarianism reaches a limit” (Redfield, 2011, p.67) and the organization is faced with its own limitations. When that happens there is only one solution: speaking out, taking a side. Fiona Terry understands that there is a clear contradiction between neutrality and speaking out, and easily takes a side: MSF should put “the needs of victims above concerns of state sovereignty and neutrality” and “informing the public of the causes of suffering is part of its responsibility”.

Following this academic debate, the case study sets out to answer the research questions that motivated this dissertation, and it does so by giving a voice to the humanitarian actors and asylum seekers who live the reality of the European “refugee crisis”.

The dissertation starts by placing the question: *“What is the role of humanitarian aid during the European “Refugee Crisis”?* Specifically: *“What is the role of Médecins Sans Frontières, during the European “Refugee Crisis”?*

During the European “refugee crisis”, the relation between the Greek State and humanitarian organizations is described as “Hybrid Shadow State”, when NGOs stand up to address the immediate needs of the migrant population in Greece and by doing so “serve the Greek state’s interests” and shoulder social responsibilities of the public sector (Skleparis, 2015, p.152). Even being independent from institutional funding, MSF is no different as their efforts end up “filling a gap”.

The civil society in the form of volunteers and NGOs, was called to respond to the European “refugee crisis” to “compensate for states failure”, by doing so the civil society “filled a gap left by state authorities that were not able or willing to guarantee refugee protection” (Pries, 2019, p.2). By filling a gap, instead of “addressing the system itself” humanitarian actors risk becoming “a living apology for their governments” and actually “weaken the political support for more stringent government action” (Vandevoordt, Verschraegen, 2019, p.123).

The role of humanitarian actors during the European “refugee crisis” was to address the immediate needs of the refugee population and to compensate for the public failure across European countries. Civil society fills a gap as a “Shadow State”, but it refuses to be anointed responsible for the asylum seekers arriving in Europe and understanding the political context that emerged in Europe. In this, MSF has not been an exception. However, their increasingly outspoken and “confrontational strategies” address “core political issues” by constantly accusing the EU and individual member states of “being responsible for the humanitarian crisis” (Danny, 2019, p.192).

By understanding the role of humanitarian actors in this specific context it is also important to discuss the limitations of aid. For this reason, the research questions asked in the beginning were: *Does the European “Refugee Crisis” reveal the limits of Humanitarian Aid? How do humanitarian actors, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, answer this limitation?* And also due to their increasingly critical and confrontational strategies it is also important to understand if *humanitarian actors, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, remained neutral during the European “Refugee Crisis”?*

The case study demonstrates that MSF humanitarian action during the European “refugee crisis” is “non-neutral”. MSF takes a side, in this case the side of asylum seekers arriving at the shores of Europe. The organization and its staff members don’t follow the value of neutrality to its core since

they are not indifferent towards the political context of this humanitarian crisis. They chose the role of “active witnesses” instead of “merely spectators” (Terry, 2000, p.4).

The willingness to “speak out” and to advocate for human rights is MSF's way to avoid being “instrumentalized” by governments and local authorities. In other words, being “non-neutral” and vocal about their humanitarian aid and the context in which they work in, is the organization’s answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid. With a constant call for political responsibility and even the accusation that the European “refugee crisis” was “created and continued by migration politics of the European Union” (Sandrone, 2021), MSF refuses to be confined to a role and to exonerate states from their responsibilities.

The case study explores testimonies of MSF staff members who don’t limit its role to just health care for asylum seekers who arrive in Lesbos. They are open about its purpose to challenge the political and social origins of the asylum seekers' lack of care. *Témoignage*, as argued by Peter Redfield, is the answer to the “incompleteness” of MSF’s medical interventions.

In the words of Alessandra Saibene, the current project coordinator: “We want to be present because we need to challenge the authorities and to provide basic services. Filling the gap is the way to be there and speak out”. This is MSF’s answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid: speaking out, to avoid being limited to “fill a gap”.

For Liza Papadimitriou, the Advocacy Manager for MSF in Greece, filling a gap is not the right term. “It is a bit naive. A gap can happen when you are in an emergency. What we are called upon to respond in Europe is wilful neglect”. “Having a voice” and advocating for human rights is MSF’s only answer (Papadimitriou, 2021).

“Neglect” was the most common word in all the interviews. Ihab Abassi, assistant project coordinator acknowledges that MSF action takes place when “Greek and European authorities do not fulfil their responsibilities to these people”. And yet, former project coordinator, Marco Sandrone is clear that the role and the limitations of humanitarian actors should not be confused with the ones of governments. “NGOs are filling a void; humanitarian actors shouldn't be there. The system is vicious and the only ones who can put an end to it are politicians”.

And yet, criticism without action was not enough. More than 20 years after the withdrawal from the Rwandan refugee camps, MSF withdrew its staff and assistance from the refugee camps in Lesbos. To this day the organization continues to operate with the migrant population in the island, but it refuses to work inside the refugee camps, in order to avoid giving the “European Union any more reasons to escape its responsibilities” and not to be “exploited or instrumentalized by European

policies that lead to the suffering of more and more people” (Abassi, 2021). This was the response in 2016, after the EU-Turkey signed an agreement for migration policy.

The present research also proposes to find an answer to the following research question: *“What are the challenges and difficulties faced by humanitarian actors who work with the migrant community in Lesvos, such as Médecins Sans Frontières?”* The interviews and the primary data collected shows that during the time period in analysis, from 2019 and 2021, humanitarian actors lived in Lesvos the most challenging times, and never doubted where the responsibility lay. Beyond overpopulation in the refugee camps in Lesvos, these testimonies point to the emergence of other challenges, such as the “discriminatory restrictions” during the pandemic of COVID-19 with the purpose to increase “the control of this population” (Sandrone, 2021); a rise in of xenophobia in the “island of solidarity” and violence against humanitarian workers (Papadimitriou, 2021) and the difficulties in working with Greek authorities with a “very high level of negligence and indifference” towards migrants (Abassi, 2021).

In response to the European “refugee crisis” MSF keeps evolving into more than a medical humanitarian organization, without ever losing its main responsibility of saving lives and providing healthcare to the more vulnerable populations. Advocacy of human rights and a critical perspective about the action and inaction of states and European authorities is ever more present. The organization never closed its eyes to the reality on the field, assures Papadimitriou: “We are addressing the consequences of containment policies, not the consequences of a bad winter”. Marco Sandrone has no doubts; this reality was a “symptom of the failure of the EU's foreign policy”

Today, in Lesvos, MSF has a supply and logistics department alongside medical ones. Its clinics operate side by side social and legal support operations and data analysis departments. One of the organization’s main objectives is to promote “a synergy between legal and medical help” with their patients as a way to give a comprehensive response to a crisis created by “the European policies of containment” (Papadimitriou, 2021).





## **6. Chapter VI. Conclusion**

The research faced some limitations from the beginning. The restrictions to travel that were in place during the pandemic of COVID-19 challenged the traditional way to do fieldwork. The case study had to be built upon online interviews with MSF staff members in Lesvos and asylum seekers who lived in the refugee camps in the island. These primary sources were complemented with reports from the field, press releases and public statements that the organization shared for this research.

In order to do any ethnographic work, the field research had to be done online, so the concept of online ethnography and its opportunities was also explored during this investigation. Specifically, how social media can be used as a means of communication amongst volunteers, migrants and organizations. Online ethnography allowed this dissertation to surpass geographical limitations, bringing “flexibility and innovative potential” to the field work (Robinson, Schulz, 2011, p.182).

Social media allowed me to find and interview volunteers and refugees. While the humanitarian actors were easy to find due to their former public statements or interviews, asylum seekers were only found due to their active presence in social media networks such as Instagram and Facebook. Their willingness to have a voice, to use social media as a tool to share with the outside world the reality through their eyes in the refugee camps in Lesvos was impressive and moving.

Recalling the words of A, who created his own Instagram page, The Humans of Moria, with a purpose “to raise awareness through personal refugee stories, to change people's perceptions of refugees” and a long-term vision to “appeal to European decision-makers for greater integration and more opportunities for all asylum seekers”.

The case study demonstrates that the response of MSF to the European “refugee crisis” has been to this point “non-neutral”; the organization has consecutively taken the side of the refugees arriving at the shores of Europe. The case study explores testimonies of MSF staff members who don't limit its role to just health care for asylum seekers who arrive in Lesvos; instead, they are open about its purpose to challenge the political and social origins of the asylum seekers' lack of care. These humanitarian workers chose the role of “active witnesses” instead of “merely spectators” (Terry, 2000, p.4), to avoid being “instrumentalized” by governments and local authorities. In other words, the choice of being “non-neutral” and publicly vocal about the context and challenges they face, is MSF answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid. The organization willingness to “speak out” and to denounce publicly the reality on the field is the answer to the “incompleteness” of MSF's medical interventions.

Alessandra Saibene was the most vocal of the volunteers interviewed in this dissertation, stating that MSF wants to be present on the field in order to “challenge the authorities and to provide basic services. Filling the gap is the way to be there and speak out”. “Having a voice” and advocating for human rights is MSF’s only answer to the limitations of humanitarian aid (Papadimitriou, 2021). “Neglect” was the most common word in all the interviews. Ihab Abassi, points the finger to “Greek and European authorities” who force humanitarian actors to action by not “fulfilling their responsibilities to these people”.

Like the organization, the time period was not an accident. The case study also shows that from 2019 to 2021, volunteers faced the most challenging times since their presence on the island. By April 2020, while the Aegean islands had capacity for 6,000 people, they accommodate over 36,000 (see figure nr: 8), only in Moria were 21,000 people living in a camp with room for less than 3,000; beyond over population other challenges emerged such as the “discriminatory restrictions” during the pandemic of COVID-19 (Sandrone, 2021); a rise in of xenophobia violence against humanitarian workers (Papadimitriou, 2021); and the bureaucratic difficulties in working with Greek authorities (Abassi, 2021).

In September 2020, Moria burned down, 13,000 people lost everything – the little they had left. The European Union promised “no more Morias” and the Commissioner Johansson gave a heartfelt speech: *“The pictures and reports remind us that the people in Moria are just like us. People who already had little, now have nothing. Families torn apart. People sleeping on the burnt ground under the sky. One of the goals I’ve been working on, to find and present a new pact on Migration and Asylum, one important aim is: no more Morias”*. One year has passed since the fires of Moria and has anything changed? In the report “Constructing Crisis At Europe’s Borders”, MSF denounces that the Moria “blueprint” is being used to build new camps in Greece, commonly referred as “closed centers” designed to “reinforce the ability to contain, detain and deport people arriving in Europe”. The hotspot approach is constantly “renewed” and even “intensified”.

In Lesbos, the challenges and hardships for asylum seekers remain today. A month after the Moria fires, in October 2020 the “community-run” PIKPA was cleared by Greek authorities<sup>97</sup>. In April 2021, the refugee camp of Kara Tepe “one of the few places that guaranteed security and dignity to men,

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<sup>97</sup>Info Migrants report on the closure of PIKPA camp in Lesbos, available from: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/28238/police-clear-pikpa-camp-on-lesbos>

women and children” was closed<sup>98</sup> and the promises of a new camp to replace the temporary Mavrovouni camp remain underway<sup>99</sup>.

To address the challenges that emerged from 2015 were aggravated in 2019 and don’t show signs of fading in 2021, MSF keeps evolving into more than a medical humanitarian organization. A medical organization is now more than ever engaged in human rights advocacy and a critical perspective about the action and inaction of states and European authorities. For that, today, in Lesvos, MSF clinics operate side by side social and legal support operations and data analysis departments in order to give a comprehensive response to this humanitarian that they see as created by European policies. “We are addressing the consequences of containment policies, not the consequences of a bad winter” (Papadimitriou, 2021).

Since “refugee crisis” and the suffering caused at European borders will be a reality for the years to come, the continuation of the academic debate concerning this topic is of paramount importance. There are still endless possibilities that this dissertation could not cover. The case study presented and debated in this dissertation focuses on a specific reality with specific challenges – from 2019 to 2021, in the so called “hotspot” of Lesvos, home to the largest refugee camp in Europe, Moria - of one single humanitarian organization, Médecins Sans Frontières.

Moria was not the only refugee camp in Europe with dire conditions and the limitations of humanitarian aid didn’t start in 2019 and will not end in 2021. This research opens the door to a more comprehensive study of all the action of MSF during the European “refugee crisis”, not only in two years and not only in one region. Similar research could be carried out by examining MSF projects in different countries, different refugee camps, in different years. Different case studies could be built and compared to understand the role MSF had to play and the limitations it found during the entirety of this crisis – a crisis that is still not over.

The importance of how MSF has answered to the European “refugee crisis” is indisputable. This dissertation argues that the decision to withdraw MSF clinics from the refugee camps in Lesvos, to avoid “being exploited or instrumentalized by European policies”, can be compared to the withdrawal from the Rwandan refugee camps, nearly 30 years ago – a landmark in the organization history. Médecins Sans Frontières answer to the ongoing European “refugee crisis” will be one of the most defining moments of the organization history, and its decisions will serve as a point of comparison not only with previous crisis, but also to future ones.

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<sup>98</sup>Info Migrants reporting on MSF criticism of Kara Tepe camp closure, available from: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/31806/lesbos-msf-condemns-closure-of-kara-tepe-refugee-camp>

<sup>99</sup>Info Migrants report on the delay of the new camp to replace Moria, available from: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/32850/9-months-after-moria-fire-work-on-new-lesbos-migrant-camp-still-hasnt-begun>



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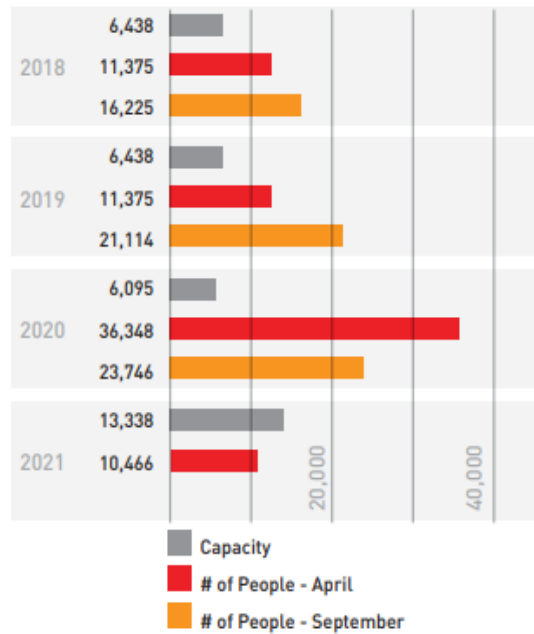
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## Attachments

### 1. Figures

**Graph 8: Overcrowding in the five hotspots (2018-2021)**



**Figure 1** - MSF graphic showing the capacity in the five Aegean islands being surpassed by the number of migrants, from 2018-2021, available from MSF’s report of June 2021 “Constructing Crisis at Europe’s Borders: The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands”

**68%**  
originate from just five countries

More than two thirds of all refugees under UNHCR's mandate and Venezuelans displaced abroad come from just five countries (as of end-2020).

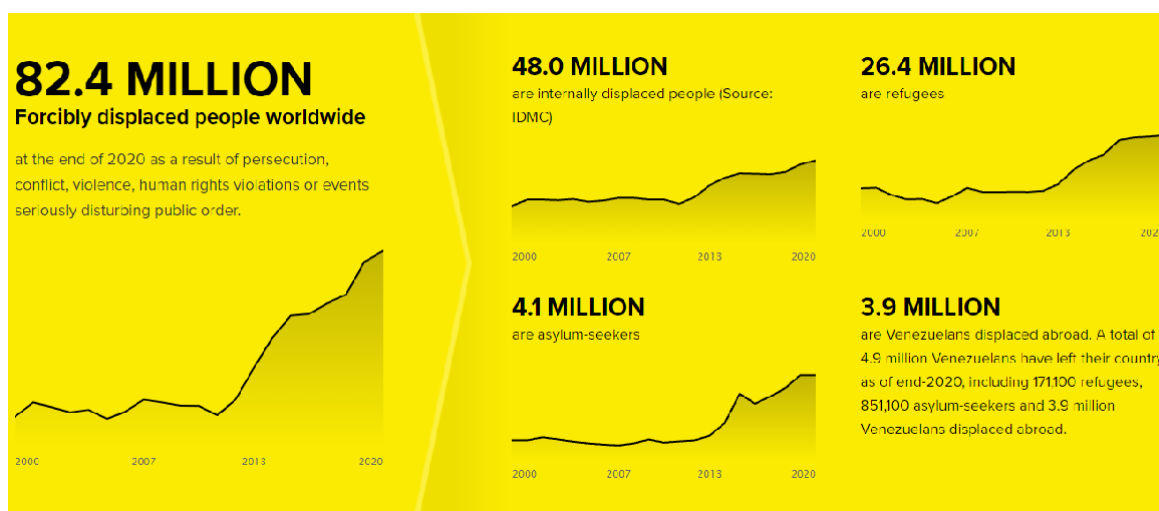
Syrian Arab Republic	6.7 million
Venezuela	4.0 million
Afghanistan	2.6 million
South Sudan	2.2 million
Myanmar	1.1 million

**39%**  
hosted in five countries

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, with nearly 3.7 million people. Colombia is second with 1.7 million, including Venezuelans displaced abroad (as of end-2020).

Turkey	3.7 million
Colombia	1.7 million
Pakistan	1.4 million
Uganda	1.4 million
Germany	1.2 million

**Figure 2** - Where the majority of refugees originate from and where are they hosted, numbers available from UNHCR



**Figure 3** - Worldwide numbers of refugees, asylum seekers and forcibly displaced people, available from UNHCR

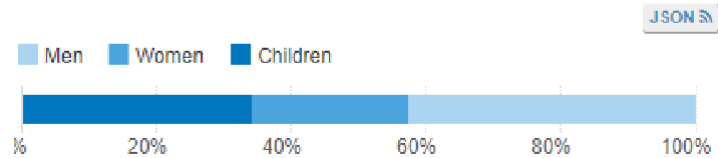
Previous years	Arrivals *	Dead and missing
2020	95,031	1,401
2019	123,663	1,335
2018	141,472	2,270
2017	185,139	3,139
2016	373,652	5,096
2015	1,032,408	3,771
2014	225,455	3,538

\* Include sea arrivals to Italy, Cyprus, and Malta, and both sea and land arrivals to Greece and Spain (including the Canary Islands). Data are as of 31 December 2020 for all countries except Cyprus for which last available data are as of 31 August 2020.

**Figure 4** – Migrant arrivals and deaths in Europe, from 2014 to 2020, data from 31 December 2020, available from UNCHR

Previous years	Sea arrivals	Land arrivals	Dead and missing
2020	9,714	5,982	102
2019	59,726	14,887	71
2018	32,494	18,014	174
2017	29,718	6,592	59
2016	173,450	3,784	441
2015	856,723	4,907	799
2014	41,038	2,280	405

**Demographics (based on data from January 2020)**



**Figure 5** – Migrant arrivals and deaths in Greece, from 2014 to 2020, data from 31 December 2020, available from UNCHR





HELLENIC REPUBLIC  
 MINISTRY OF CITIZEN PROTECTION  
 NATIONAL COORDINATION CENTER FOR  
 BORDER CONTROL, IMMIGRATION AND  
 ASYLUM (N.C.C.B.C.I.A.)

Athens, 1/1/2020

NATIONAL SITUATIONAL PICTURE REGARDING THE ISLANDS AT EASTERN AEGEAN SEA (31/12/2019)

PLACE/LOCATION	LESVOS		CHIOS		SAMOS		LEROS		KOS		OTHER ISLANDS		TOTAL	
	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.	OCC.	CAP.
R.I.C.	18615	2840	5782	1014	7765	648	2496	860	3765	816			38423	6178
OTHER ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES	1218						142	120					1360	
HELLENIC POLICE FACILITIES	P.D.C.	79	210						161	474			240	684
	DETENTION FACILITIES	1		6		9		6		4		39	65	
U.N.H.C.R.	658	765	278	288	275	282	113	136	189	213	56	81	1569	1765
N.C.S.S.	140	146	12	18	15	18							167	182
OTHER N.G.O.s	74	100											74	
MAKESHIFT CAMPS	0		0		0		0		0		1		1	
<b>MIGRANTS PRESENT ON THE ISLAND</b>	<b>20785</b>		<b>6078</b>		<b>8064</b>		<b>2757</b>		<b>4119</b>		<b>96</b>		<b>41899</b>	
ARRIVALS	134		0		0		0		0		0		134	
TRANSPORTS TO THE MAINLAND	47		10		0		38		12		0		107	
DEPARTURES (EU-TURKEY STATEMENT)	0		0		0		0		0		0		0	
DEPARTURES (I.O.M.)	0		0		0		0		0		0		0	
<b>TOTAL DEPARTURES FROM THE ISLAND</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>	

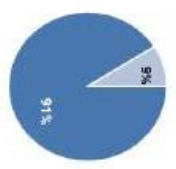
CAP. CAPACITY  
 OCC. OCCUPANCY  
 R.I.C. RECEPTION AND IDENTIFICATION CENTRE  
 N.C.S.S. NATIONAL CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SOLIDARITY  
 P.D.C. PREDEPARTURE DETENTION CENTRE

**Figure 6** – New arrivals during 2019 in the Aegean Islands, months prior to the fires of September 2020, in Moria, available from Hellenic Republic Ministry of Citizen Protection

Displacement in Lesvos

Thematic series – 22 September 2020

Unaccompanied Minors (approx. 4000)



**Disclaimer** Due to a lack of data, the exact number of people in need in Lesvos island is unknown

COVID-19

- Prior to the fire, 35 people tested positive and were self-isolating in Moria.
- 17 mobile public health units are testing everyone entering Kara Tepe Two.
- As of 21 September, 214 people have tested positive and are currently self-isolating in the new camp in isolation tents behind barbed wire.

Health

- There are only two health facilities in the camp providing health and reproductive care.
- Over 300 people with underlying health conditions require special attention and care.
- NGOs are providing mental health support for people traumatised by the fire and extreme living conditions.

WASH

- Since Kara Tepe Two is a former archaeological and military site, WASH infrastructure can only be built under specific procedures and interventions.
- For the time being, until the municipality connects running water to Kara Tepe Two, NGOs are providing water tanks and hygiene stations.
- As of 18 September, 400 portable chemical latrines were installed in the camp. Priority is given to women. Currently no latrine maintenance is provided.

Figure 7 - Infographic explaining the impact of the displacement of refugees after the fires of Moria, in September 2020, image available from NGO Assessment Capacities Project, in the website of UNCHR

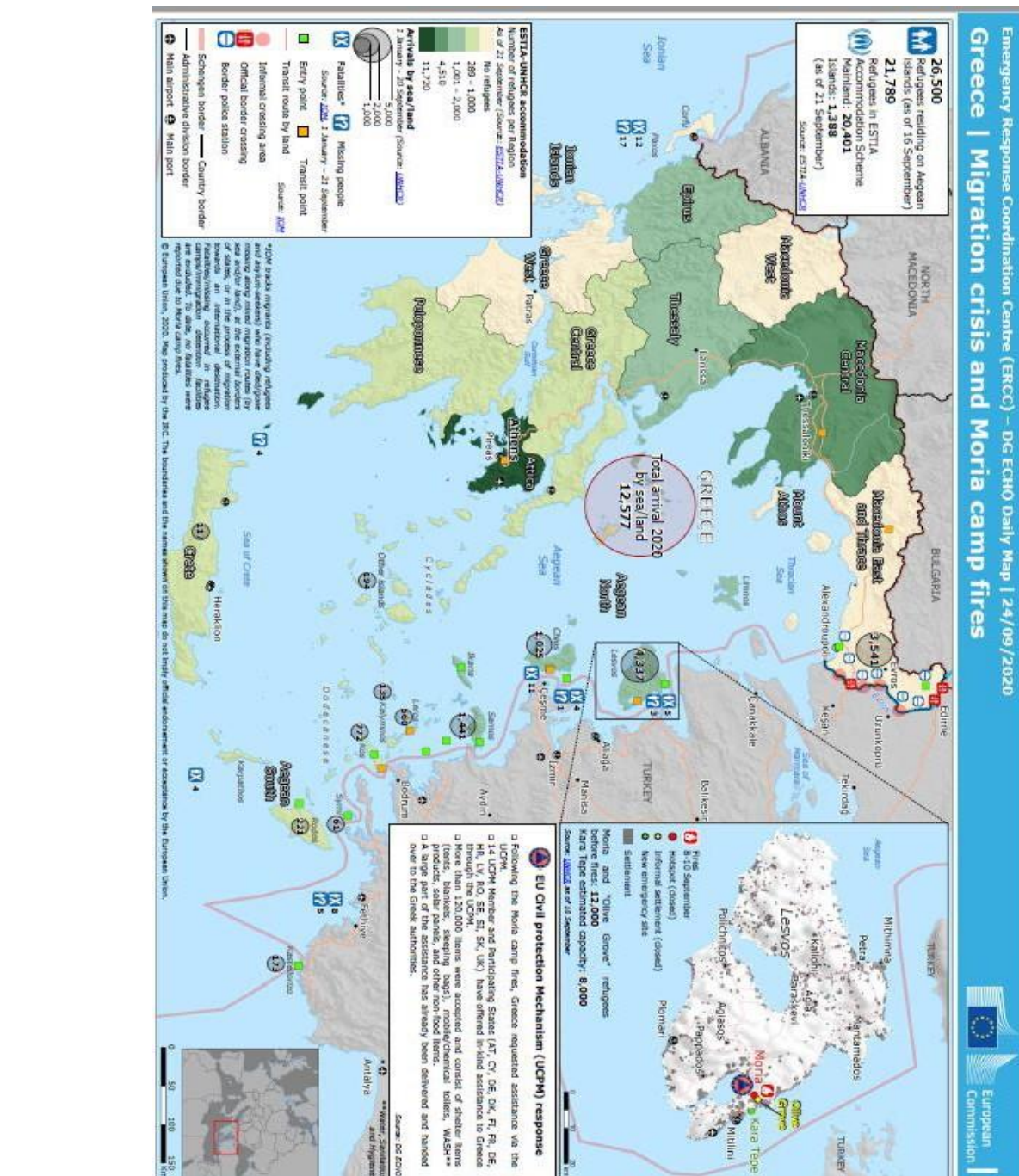
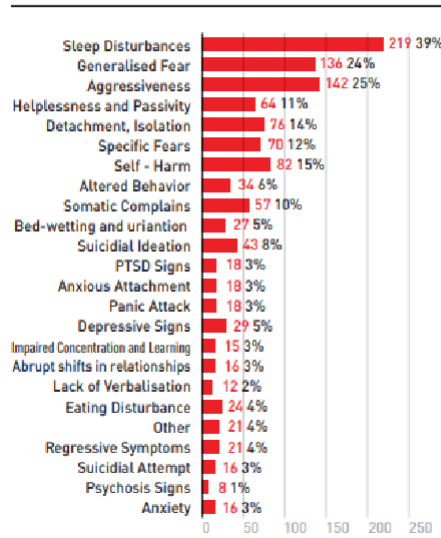


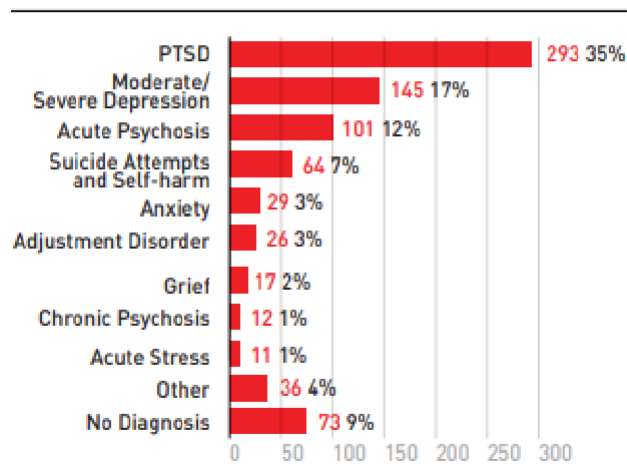
Figure 8 – Snapshot of the migrant crisis and Moria Camp fires in Greece, available from European Commission

**Graph 7: Most common mental health symptoms among patients attending the Moria Paediatric Clinic (2019-2020)**



**Figure 9** – MSF number of mental health symptoms among patients attending the Moria Paediatric Clinic, from 2019 to 2020, available from MSF’s report of June 2021 “Constructing Crisis at Europe's Borders: The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands”

**Graph 4: Mental health diagnoses among patients in Mytilene clinic on Lesbos, Samos and Chios mental health projects (2019-2020)**



**Figure 10**–Mental health diagnoses among patients in MSF clinics in Lesbos, Samos and Chios, available from MSF’s report of June 2021 “Constructing Crisis at Europe's Borders: The EU plan to intensify its dangerous hotspot approach on Greek islands”



**Figure 11** - The Humans of Moria using social media to show the living conditions on the refugee camp of Mavrovouni, describing it as "hell", available from The Humans of Moria Instagram account



**Figure 12** - The Humans of Moria telling the story of the humans living in the refugee camps, available from The Humans of Moria Instagram account



**Figure 13** - Moria Corona Awareness Team distributing masks, hand disinfectant and flyers to the Kara Tepe Camp residents, available from Moria Corona Awareness Team Instagram account



**Figure 14** - Moria Corona Awareness Team, a refugee organization using social media to appeal for a shift in European migration policies, available from Moria Corona Awareness Team Instagram account

## **2. Interview scripts**

### **Interviews with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff members in Lesvos - Script**

João Miguel Gomes de Almeida Gama Costa nº 92152

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#### **First chapter - humanitarian work in Lesvos**

1. When did you come to Lesvos and why did you choose to work on this project?
2. How long have you been in Lesvos and what are your responsibilities as a member of the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)?
3. How would you describe your experience in Lesvos?
4. How has the situation evolved since 2015 to 2021? When did the island hit its peak capacity of refugees living in the refugee camps?
5. How would you describe the living conditions in the refugee camps in Lesvos, Moria, Mavrovouni and Kara Tepe? How are they different?
6. In September 2020, Moria's refugee camp - the largest in Europe - was destroyed with fires. What are the reasons for this to have happened? Humanitarian aid had to adjust to this tragedy? What changed?
7. In March 2020, Greece took restrictive measures to control COVID-19 pandemic. How did this affect the living conditions of the refugee population in Lesvos?
8. MSF reports alert to increasing violence and attacks of anti-migrant groups against NGO and refugees. To the extent of your knowledge, how dangerous is the situation on the island?
9. MSF also reported the mandate that led the organization to close its isolation centre in Lesvos for COVID-19 patients. Do humanitarian actors feel targeted by Greek authorities?
10. What are the main challenges and difficulties of humanitarian actors in Lesvos?

#### **Second chapter - Human rights advocacy, criticism of EU's migration policies and denouncing the living conditions in the refugee camps**

11. How would you describe the EU's response to this migration crisis?
12. MSF has been publicly critical of the EU migration policies to tackle this humanitarian crisis. Is the reality you experience on the field a political consequence of EU decision makers?
13. Do EU policies have an impact on the health of your patients in Lesvos?
14. MSF describes the EU-Turkey Statement as a decisive moment during the European "refugee crisis". What were the effects of this agreement?
15. MSF claims not to be a political organization, but always had a commitment to independence and outspokenness. How so? And how does this affect MSF work with refugees in Lesvos?

16. Since the EU-Turkey Statement, MSF has refused to work directly inside the refugee camps in Lesvos and also rejects funding from EU member states and institutions. What is the purpose of these actions?
17. Humanitarian action faces some limitations while addressing the European “refugee crisis”. Is humanitarian aid just “filling a gap” and how can that change European governments attitude towards refugees?
18. Is there a paradox in humanitarian aid? How successful are your efforts? Do you risk this temporary response becoming the norm, taking that responsibility away from sovereign states?
19. Where lies the responsibility to find a solution for this migration influx? The EU and its member-states or the civil society and NGOs?
20. What solutions do you call to be implemented by the EU? The creation of a humanitarian passport or the creation of humanitarian corridors?
21. How would you evaluate the response of the European authorities after the fires of Moria? A New Migration Pact has been promised. How will it change the reality on the field?

### **Interviews with asylum seekers in Lesvos - Script**

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1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Nationality:
4. Date of arrival to Lesvos:
5. How was your journey to Europe? Did you come with your family or alone?
6. How long was your stay in Lesvos:
7. In Lesvos do you currently live or have lived in one of the refugee camps in the island? Such as Moria, Kara Tepe or Mavrovouni?
8. If you answered yes to the last question, in what conditions did you live in the refugee camps? (please be as descriptive as possible)
9. If you answered yes to the last question, how do/did you feel while living in the refugee camps?
10. If you lived in more than one of these refugee camps, please compare the conditions of the camps (concerning the living conditions, the enclosure measures, and the relation with refugees)?



11. Did you live through the fires that burned Moria to the ground? Can you share that experience?
12. What sort of humanitarian aid helped you during your stay in Lesvos? Did you receive any health care from Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)?
13. Did it shock you the way you were received by Europe?
14. What words would you like to share with European law makers?
15. You use your social media accounts to share your life and conditions in the refugee camp. What is your purpose?