

Protecting and assisting migrants caught in crises

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The 2011 Libya crisis brought into sharp focus how global migration patterns are re-defining the range and type of needs and vulnerabilities of persons affected by a humanitarian crisis.

The migration dimension of the Libya crisis has engaged with a growing debate over the crisis-migration nexus. A 'migration crisis' – that is, a disaster creating large-scale population movements that are complex in terms of the persons affected and the routes taken to places of safety and survival – can significantly challenge existing humanitarian systems that were designed for refugee or IDP response, as it brings to light different categories, needs and vulnerabilities of a wider range of persons who are affected by a crisis situation.

The requirement for immediate or predictable responses to crises is certainly nothing new to the humanitarian discussion. However, if the populations in question are migrants (whose safest haven is in most cases their countries of origin), achieving rapid, predictable, efficient and appropriate responses requires us to re-consider some aspects of meeting humanitarian needs, including roles, coordination and the institutional architecture.

States bear the primary responsibility to protect and assist crisis-affected persons residing on their territory in a manner consistent with international humanitarian and human rights law. Where needed, states should allow humanitarian access to crisis-affected persons so that humanitarian assistance can be provided by

other states, including those whose nationals have been affected, and other relevant actors. Modern-day crises have often overwhelmed the resources and capacities of states to provide this protection and assistance to their nationals in times of crisis. As a result of its mandate, operational resources, experience and expertise in movement management, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has come to be relied upon as the lead agency to support states in acting upon their obligations to crisis-affected migrant populations. The integration of migration management and humanitarian approaches when dealing with a crisis situation that is generating complex patterns of human mobility has been particularly important in developing an efficient referral system to assist migrants – with a variety of vulnerabilities and protection needs – when fleeing in large numbers across an international border.

In the crisis

In the first six weeks of the humanitarian crisis in Libya, on average a total of more than 7,000 persons a day were arriving at the borders of Tunisia, Egypt, Chad, Niger and Algeria – and by sea into Malta and Italy. Those fleeing to Libya's neighbouring countries and beyond included migrant workers and their families, refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, trafficked victims, and



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others with special vulnerabilities. A number of migrants remained trapped inside the conflict zone; IOM extracted 35,000 such migrants from high-risk environments.

IOM was requested by 46 governments to protect and assist affected migrant populations. In the beginning of the response, however, a number of discussions and advocacy efforts were required within the international community to re-orient the initial humanitarian strategy. Eventually camps were used mainly as transit facilities to support timely evacuation, instead of as places to receive protection and assistance as in a prolonged displacement crisis.

An evacuation operation for migrants from multiple origins is a demanding exercise and required devising new types of coordination between governments, international humanitarian actors, migration management authorities, consular officials, military actors and transportation companies. The Libya crisis response illustrates a remarkable level of international cooperation and drive by countries of origin and transit, and those providing external assistance.

In addition, the necessity for migration management services – in order, for example, to manage the movement of populations crossing the border, ensure a robust referral mechanism for persons with special vulnerabilities or protection needs, and provide travel documents and Laissez-Passers to migrants without documentation – has also emerged as a central and often disregarded aspect of such a crisis response.

While only 3% of the crisis-affected migrants stranded in Libya made their way to Europe – often on unseaworthy vessels – it is widely speculated that, without the ability to accept immediate assistance to return home, a much larger number of migrants would have been vulnerable to human trafficking and smuggling rings promising a route out of the crisis area and into Europe and beyond.

Looking ahead

Clearly, a ‘migration crisis’ such as that which developed in Libya has the potential to produce patterns of forced migration that do not show the typical characteristics of movement anticipated and prepared for in international humanitarian responses. Elaborating upon the vulnerabilities of migrants naturally raises questions about the general preparedness of states to provide protection and assistance to all of their nationals residing abroad in the event of a crisis. In the aftermath of the Libya crisis a number of Asian countries have acknowledged the need to better manage humanitarian evacuations at the national and regional level and, just as importantly, the need to support the reintegration of their nationals who return home to situations of unemployment and possibly even debt from having funded a long migration journey.

The Libya crisis highlighted how understanding global migration patterns can assist in crafting a more efficient and humane response, since the plight and special needs of migrants add significant complexity to crisis responses. It also demonstrated the broad challenges faced by migration management systems inside a humanitarian response. Among the different migration management tools that are relevant to ensure a humane and effective response to populations on the move are emergency consular services, referral systems for persons with special protection needs, and temporary protection of migrants crossing an international border. IOM will continue to encourage and support efforts to discuss and explore the migration dimension of crises within the international community.

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