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Migration

There is no universally accepted definition of human migration. Consequently, multiple interpretations of the term “migrant” coexist. In its most basic sense, migration can refer to physical movement from one place to another. According to the United Nations, “most experts agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status” (UN 2019). Often, both spatial and temporal dimensions are included in definitions of migration. While people can migrate from a rural town to a nearby metropolis or frequently travel back and forth between two places, migrants are commonly described as people who cross international borders and change their habitual place of residence for a limited period or longer stay.

If an element of coercion exists, the act of migration is generally referred to as forced. Similarly, if individuals cross national borders unauthorized, they are commonly referred to as irregular migrants. However, migration can occur anywhere on the spectrum of experiences between forced and voluntary (Erdal and Oeppen 2018) and regular and irregular (Kubal 2013). While migration can be defined as voluntary and/or irregular by state agencies, it may be experienced differently by the individual migrant and other actors. Therefore, migrant labels and categories are frequently contested. Following the 2015

migration reception crisis in Europe, for example, debates concerning refugees versus migrants soared. While humanitarian actors mostly argued that “refugees are not migrants” (UNHCR 2016), advocates for an inclusive understanding of migrants highlighted refugees as a type of migrants (Carling 2017). While some migrants are victimized and granted protection as refugees under the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, others are not. However, anyone on the move may be in need of humanitarian assistance and protection—regardless their legal status.

The relationship between migration and humanitarianism is not clear cut. In humanitarian crises, affected populations are commonly displaced owing to conflicts or natural disasters, but are not necessarily labeled internal or international migrants. Migrants have no legal protection in international humanitarian law, but they may be protected in their capacity as refugees or as civilians (Gieseken and Ouellet-Décoste 2018). This could be the case in contexts of armed conflict, where international humanitarian law regulates the limits of acceptable conduct. Migrants may also be entitled to protection through international human rights law or even national legislation as, for example, workers, residents, or citizens (ILO 2016).

Yet, as part of its core responsibility to “leave no one behind,” the Agenda for Humanity (OCHA 2019) aims to integrate the specific vulnerabilities of migrations “into humanitarian and other response plans.” Likewise, the International Committee of the Red Cross response to vulnerable migrants is based on the “needs of migrants.” It is not conditioned by the migrants’ status (ICRC 2019). Indeed, a diversity of internal and international migrants can find themselves in precarious situations and in need of shelter, support, or assistance. The range of vulnerable migrants includes, but is not limited to, people who leave their home owing to poverty or climate change, victims of trafficking, internally displaced people, exploited child workers, irregular migrants who are criminalized in host societies, stateless people, failed asylum seekers who cannot re-enter their origin countries, forcefully evicted migrant workers, and low-skilled migrants performing dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work for low wages and with few rights.

As manifested by the diversity of migrants’ precariousness, migrants can affect or be affected by humanitarian crises throughout all stages of migration: before, during, and after the journey. Prospective migrants can choose or be forced to leave owing to humanitarian crises, migrants en route are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuse as they are outside their countries of citizenship or residency, and immigrants who reside as foreigners can lack basic rights or services as they do not have citizenship. Migrants can also influence humanitarian crises, both by intensifying or abating conflicts. Emigrants,

for instance through diaspora networks, can engage before, during, and after conflicts. By returning, transferring money, or engaging in national and international politics, they may alter the humanitarian, or developmental, state of affairs in their countries of origin.

In sum, the relationship between migration and humanitarianism is manifold. It is also in constant development. While refugee movement has long been high on the humanitarian agenda, migration and vulnerable migrants have more recently come to the fore of the discourse. Whether stuck in inhumane detention camps, displaced in the wake of natural disasters, or packed in leaky boats, migrants have taken center stage on the global humanitarian scene.

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