How Europe's charities have responded to the refugee crisis

Unpredictable numbers and erratic route changes are causing many challenges for organisations, staff and volunteers

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While Europe’s politicians debate refugee quotas, civil society organisations across the continent are working to support those who are displaced. Charities in Croatia, Serbia, Germany, Italy and Greece are dealing with unpredictable numbers and erratic route change and as a result, many are being forced to adapt. So, how are these organisations coping? The Guardian Voluntary Sector Network spoke to a number to find out.
Keeping track of the shifting situation
Finding and communicating accurate information has been exceptionally difficult for NGOs in the Balkans in recent weeks, because of constant changes in border controls, camps and bus routes. “It’s a very fluid situation,” says Ileana Radojević, of the Croatian branch of international development charity Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

“Dealing with humanitarian aid is difficult - we have a few scenarios, and we try to assess more than just people’s primary needs.” Radojević also says that NGOs have learned lessons from the region’s May 2014 floods: giving each aid organisation separate tasks to prevent duplication.

Communications have also proved crucial for local NGOs working in migration and asylum, as they have been the focus point for queries from other organisations. “We have the trust of other NGOs because in the last ten years we campaigned to inform others on these topics,” says Julija Kranjec of the Centre for Peace Studies (CMS) in Zagreb, Croatia. “Topics of asylum and migration were not mainstream before: they were really marginalised.”

Deluged with queries and updates, CMS found that its Facebook page was the easiest way to share verified information across its networks. Recognising the need for a specific information channel, it has since launched a dedicated website to answer people’s queries.

![Refugees in Belgrade city park. The Serbian branch of ADRA International supports refugees who are often awaiting transport to Slovenia or Hungary. Photograph: ADRA](image)

The psychological toll
*We have many cases where the volunteers are saying ‘I can’t handle it anymore’*

“Our volunteers are trained to use all the resources in the community that can help make a person feel as safe, healthy and calm as possible,” says Marko Tomašević, of one year-old Serbian NGO Klikaktiv.

Klikaktiv, which works in community health with marginalised groups, has five part-time staff, and a larger group of volunteer psychologists and interning doctors.

When the local authority of Belgrade municipality Savski Venac realised that a continuous transit of people meant that hundreds were sleeping rough near the bus station, it got in touch with Klikaktiv, the ADRA Serbian branch and the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights to set up an asylum information centre.
The centre is used for legal advice, psychological support and internet access, and there is also a private area for mothers with young babies. ADRA’s Croatian branch recently gained a permit to set up another information centre within the Opatovac refugee camp.

As water and food continues to be distributed to refugees, volunteers and charity workers are also hunting for other ways to help using technology. Photograph: ADRA

Klikaktiv’s medical volunteers supply roughly 120 hours of help a week, and Tomašević is concerned that this reliance on volunteer support will be unsustainable if the situation continues to escalate. And there is the emotional impact to consider - voluntary translators of Farsi, Arabic and Urdu perform essential work at the asylum information centre, but can find translating the accounts of people from their own country particularly distressing.

Concerns about volunteer burnout are shared by Stephen Dünnwald of Bayerischen Flüchtlingsrat (Bavarian Refugee Council), an umbrella organisation in southern Germany.

“We have many cases where the volunteers are saying ‘I can’t handle it anymore’; that it’s too heavy a load, psychologically,” says Dünnwald. He says that volunteers in smaller towns and villages, where there is little support, are overwhelmed by the complexity of resettling refugees. Finding a way to help volunteers is a priority for Dünnwald and the Bavarian Refugee Council is working with local broadcasters and companies to create an app that will help volunteers answer questions about the arrival and asylum registration process.

**Trying to find lasting solutions**

*How do you fundraise for a continuous crisis?*

Several technology-focused initiatives have sprung up in Germany over the last year. Kiron, a non-profit university, is offering distance-learning courses to help refugees continue their studies as well as running a crowdfunding campaign to finance students in the coming academic year. Next month, a refugees hackathon will take place in Berlin, aiming to gather ideas for digital tools that could link refugees to useful services and lessen the load on NGOs. “We have thousands of new initiatives in Germany: it’s amazing, it’s a gift,” says Karl Kopp, who represents the German human rights campaigners’ group Pro Asyl.

While the influx of refugesshas gained media prominence in recent weeks, charities in Italy have been working with arrivals from across the Mediterranean for far longer. In Milan - a northern Italian stopover for many Syrian refugees en route to Sweden - the Catholic charity Casa della carità has been part of an emergency shelter programme since October 2013.
How do you fundraise for a continuous crisis? “We didn’t ask for donations when we had funds from the state,” says Casa spokesman Paolo Riva. “This August we decided to run a project without funds, so we made a special campaign.” The Casa joined up with a Milan parish, 150 neighbourhood volunteers and hosted 350 refugees over five weeks, as well as collecting donations of money, clothes and children’s toys.

In countries where little or no state funding is available, civil society organisations are seeking financial support from alternative sources. Greek NGO Praksis has polyclinics, wide-ranging support initiatives and shelter in Athens, Thessaloniki and Lesbos, and wants to develop its programmes on Greece’s islands. “We don’t expect money to flow from the state,” says Ioanna Pertsinidou. “The state is suffering. This is the reason that we are trying very hard to get resources elsewhere, mainly from the private sector, and to really collaborate with international organisations.”

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