Archiving border(ing) knowledge through networking

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Apart from legal categories and physical markers delineating the limits of nation states and transnational configurations, borders are also socially productive places (Green 2010) fostering experimentations with collaborative models of coexistence. These often develop through cross-cultural, agentive practices that shape, challenge and reconfigure their effects. What kind of knowledge is being produced in borderscapes and how can it support more inclusive and sustainable futures? How and why is it threatened? How can we collect and use this knowledge to inform better migration policies and refugee reception?

Given that population displacement due to conflict and climate change is increasing, a qualitative analysis of borderwork is imperative for future planning. In the Hotspot action-research project[1] we seek to answer these questions by drawing from the experience of five Greek islands close to Turkey, where the life of inhabitants has been shaped by the humanitarian reception crisis that developed within their shores. Following the arrival of over 1 million people escaping conflict, violence and unsafe living conditions in 2015, the islands of Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos and Samos (Figure 1) were designated as 'Hotspots' by the EU, becoming one of Europe's more securitized borderfronts. Approaching the five islands as a comparative interactive system and involving independent care practitioners working in them as project partners, we attempt to map the evolution of border processes and practices, using participatory research methodologies that focus on reflexivity and interconnection.

Figure 1: Map of five Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos) designated as hotspots

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Bordermaking, innovation and displacement of knowledge

Bordermaking is a process in constant flux, marked by violence, enclosures, shifts in notions and practices of care and hospitality, of legal concepts and categories such as internationally defined rights, as well as by resistance and social innovation. As a new mode of governance in the Aegean, it has had profound social, political, and environmental consequences for local societies, and for the neoliberal management of migration more broadly. Historically, the Aegean islands have been loci of transnational encounter, and in the past seven years they have fostered multiple experimentations with innovative, sustainable, and re-humanising care practices in response to insufficient humanitarian/governmental aid and increasing bordering restrictions.

The care innovations that have been identified by our project partners in the research (Figure 2), share five key characteristics that are important for designing care provision in wider contexts : (1) **inclusivity** - connected with the ability to both provide for communities and include them in decision making; (2) **equitable and fair participation** of recipients in the care initiative; (3) **embeddedness** in the physical, economic, and social environment to benefit the local context – wellbeing, economy, and ecosystem; (4) **capacity building**, both short- and long-term of stakeholders involved; and (5) **sustainability**, by centring flexibility and adaptation capacity to overcome challenges and remain operative over time. Understanding how these characteristics are maintained within an increasingly hostile environment and how people in the Aegean experience and mitigate the effects of the EU's evolving border policies, hold broader lessons for socially sustainable practices of living with migration.

01 SMH provided medical assistance during boat landings and inside Souda camp. Expanded to mental health and psychiatric care across the island, including the quarantine house in Lefkonia. **2015**

03 Chios Solidarity provides food, clothes, support in court and hospital settings, children's activities in camps. While no longer operating at the 2017-18 level of 60-70 volunteers and are now with 10-15 volunteers, they collaborate with other local organisations providing aid for refugees and migrants. **2016**

05 Action for Education provided language and other subject classes to migrant children; also offered IT courses, sports, a safe space for relaxing while accessing Wifi, social work meetings, and clean showers & bathrooms. Had to close due to Covid restrictions and transportation issues. **2018-22**

2015-21 Chios People's Kitchen, run by a local man with volunteers, supplied nutritious vegan food to thousands daily. Migrants were otherwise provided spoiled or low quality food by government, leading to hunger and conflict. The project ended after operational challenges due to Covid. **02**

2017 RBB distributes food packets fairly, supports displaced men through campaigns and volunteers schemes, and provides psycho-social support. The team is 85% from the migrant community, creating an inclusive environment responsive to the needs of refugees. **04**
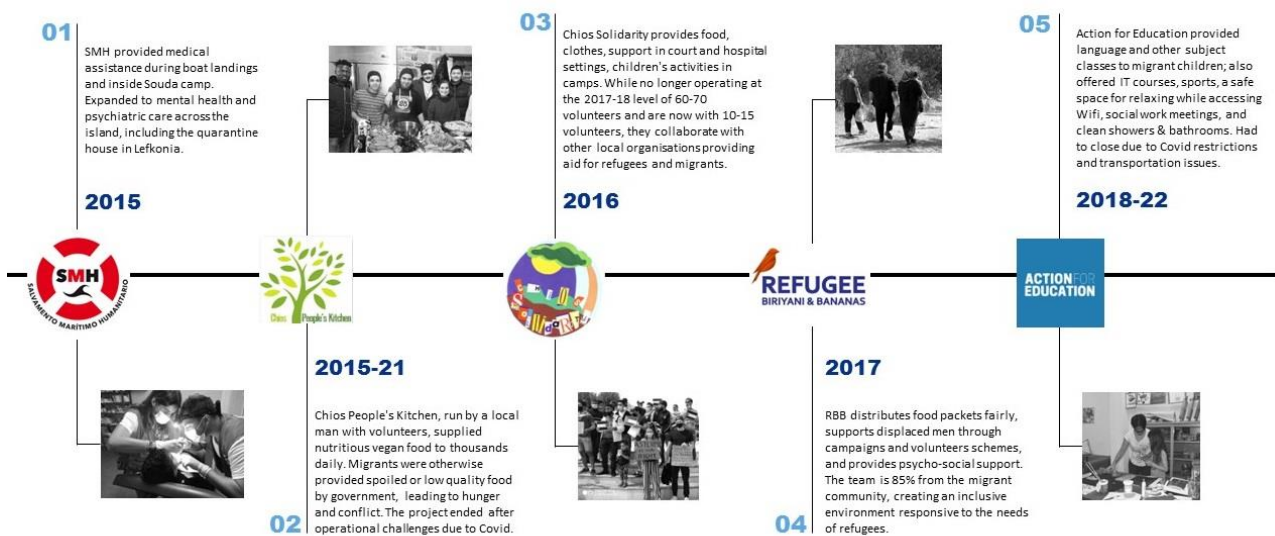
Figure 2: Extract from selected initiatives in the island of Chios

Despite the depth of knowledge and experience that exists in this context, we observe that this valuable knowledge is being displaced. Analysing the interaction between top-down and bottom-up practices by plotting them on a timeline spanning from 2015 until now, the research evidenced how the institutionalisation of **the hotspot approach goes hand in hand with increasing bureaucratisation and criminalisation of solidarity networks and other independent care initiatives**. In parallel, we also observe that the presence of Frontex - the EU Border Agency - on the islands since 2015 has not prevented border-crossing deaths and illegal pushbacks, which have instead radically increased since 2019, highlighting the crucial role of independent practitioners in monitoring legal violations.

Prior to 2015, migrant detention facilities operated on some of the islands. Border-crossers were largely treated by authorities as illegal and were swiftly transported to the mainland, where they had a chance to apply for asylum, work undocumented until they were able to apply for residency papers, or continue their journey into Northern Europe at their own risk. While the islands acted as the physical EU border and entry

point, the legal border defining the first country of entry in the EU as the one a person could legally claim asylum in was instituted in Brussels,[2] and was implemented in Athens. Following the arrival of an unprecedented number of refugees in 2015, local authorities and the few international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) operating on the islands at the time, were unequipped and unable to effectively respond to their multiple needs (Rozakou, 2017). Civil society stepped in to provide emergency care, organising projects in solidarity with border-crossers, that further diversified with the arrival of international volunteers. Dozens, if not hundreds of independent non-profit organisations mobilised or were created for this purpose. The European Commission responded to this infrastructural gap with the introduction of the hotspot approach, coming into effect in 2016 with the opening of five Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos and Samos. It was coupled with the release of humanitarian funds through set contracts with listed INGOs and a selected number of national NGOs, that subsequently begun operating on the islands.

The hotspot was conceived as a camp structure and a legal mechanism for the registration of people on the move, where all relevant EU agencies – Frontex, EASO, Europol and Eurojust – were concentrated. While its proposed purpose was a more effective and humane approach to migration management, the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 recognising Turkey as a 'safe third country' for the return non-Syrian nationals, imposed illegal geographical movement restrictions to incoming migrants, turning RICs into captivity devices and the islands into a liminal territory through the suspension of their rights (Papoutsi et al. 2018). This led to the subsequent entrapment of thousands of people in dehumanizing and lethal living conditions in camps such as Moria for indeterminate periods of time, paving the way for a systemic adoption of illegal pushback tactics[3], and more recently, for the construction of prison-like closed camp facilities.

Through state-enforced institutionalisation of care provision, the role of independent NGOs and civil society groups is intentionally diminished, though many recognised needs are still not covered. Moreover, several independent aid workers supporting refugees were criminalised as 'human traffickers'. As a result of increasing criminalisation and restricted access to the new closed camps, many independent NGOs have recently stopped operating. These escalating hostile conditions have created an anti-social environment where migrants, volunteers, and local people on the hotspot islands have become less able to work together sustainably, with vital knowledge about service provision and the migration experience of the hotspot approach being 'lost' with each person who moves away or moves on.

Participatory archiving through networking

A qualitative analysis of the evolution of the securitization/care border nexus does not only salvage a piece of transnational world history, but also allows us to envision more sustainable futures rooted in the praxis of the present. Beyond documenting institutional and policy shifts, it is imperative to record the multiple perspectives and experiences of the social actors involved in them overtime, to recognise their long-term social effects. Archiving and critically analysing this transient knowledge can, in turn, inform the design of better policy and care provision. However, conducting research in situations in constant flux, such as this one, presents several **methodological and ethical challenges**. The continuous turn-around of people on the move and many of the care actors themselves, puts knowledge on innovative practices that carry important leanings, at risk. The increasing criminalisation of both refugees and independent civic actors adds extra pressure to an already volatile context, pushing us to think beyond the notion of 'doing no harm', towards devising methodologies that promote sustainable and supportive research practices.

Adopting an engaged, participatory approach to archiving that involves local actors as knowledge producers can help us identify knowledge gaps, co-design locally relevant research categories and produce spaces for collective reflection that are often lacking in emergency contexts. Research approached in this way can contribute to better archiving practices in rapidly shifting contexts and to processes of healing

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[2] For a critical approach to the Dublin regulations, see
https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/MPIe-Asylum-DublinReg.pdf
[3] https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/07/04/violent-and-illegal-migrant-pushacks-must-end-now-eu-warns-greece

through collective remembrance centring marginalised voices. It can also support resilience, allowing for challenging experiences to be unpacked and reflected upon in a controlled and caring environment. This engaged approach to knowledge production can lead to the creation of sustainable practitioner networks by connecting actors through continuous knowledge exchange, action and advocacy coordination across islands, civic society, humanitarian and academic spaces.

Archiving through networking was a central research method from the start of the Hotspot action-research project; from the initial stage of identifying relevant analytical categories, through to data collection and analysis. The core research team network involved foreign and native cross-disciplinary academic researchers and independent care practitioners working on the five islands. The latter were selected based on the independent and holistic nature of the projects they worked in and their current knowledge of the bordering context. We subsequently met regularly online over several weeks to share experiences, ideas and epistemological lenses and co-establish the research framework. In order to document the evolution of the hotspot approach we adopted a longitudinal, essentially decolonising, method that materialised in the collective construction of a timeline spanning from 2015 until the spring of 2022, that included the different organisations that operated on the islands, alongside key local, regional and national events, policy and political shifts and human rights violations (Video 1).

Video found here: https://ucl.zoom.us/rec/play/6xxfa8s6IJYZB8__eTPaoZ6iV54ameZE5-UHnRUfpUIU5Ztb1cINJzqq3QwPiv8GIUSCsKR1RJxRtys.Xk9OIq5BCf3uiiCu?startTime=1665394827000

Video 1: Extract from timeline showing main events in each of the five islands and the evolution of the hotspot approach and changes to RICs.

For data collection on each island, project partners mobilised active and former local care networks and networked across boundaries, acting as and reaching through other gate keepers, former care practitioners and displaced people, populating the timeline with multiple and diverse temporal accounts. In that way, **the timeline acts both as a reconstruction of the evolution of bordering processes and as a space of shared memory for each island**, including local voices and those of people that have lived and worked on them, that have shaped and have been shaped by the bordering experience. Although certainly incomplete, it allows for a cross-comparison between islands and a **reading of the dialectical interaction between policy shifts and their on-the-ground effects over time**, which can be analysed in several ways. For the purpose of this project, we focused on a qualitative analysis of the development of care provision, colour-coding data based on the type of care provided and their organisational form; solidarity, grassroots humanitarian, EU-funded, governmental, etc. This allowed us to understand the kind of needs that were identified by the different actors, the various ways that care provision was organised and how it was affected by subsequent policy changes.

The feedback on the method of collecting data and archiving through networking from each island, was overwhelmingly positive. New care providers had the chance to familiarise themselves with older practices and care actors, bringing them together into a fertile dialogue that validated previously 'silenced' experiences and allowed healing through collective reflection. An expanded network focusing on alliance-building across islands and partners was established during our physical workshops in Athens, where we invited academics from the Aegean Observatory into the conversation, that have the capacity to actively maintain and strengthen this alliance for the future. Our discussions focused on new learnings from collected data and on how we can work together to mitigate the effects of increasing bordering hostility through coordinated monitoring and advocacy.

Figure 3: April 2022 workshop in Athens with the five NGOs (Samos Volunteers, Zaporeak, Echo100 Plus, Glocal Roots and Refugee Biriyani and Bananas) to presenting selected initiatives in their island.

Conclusion

Exposing the unorthodox colonial practices that continue to disenfranchise refugees, local people and territories becomes pertinent, as displacement defines the future. Placing particular attention on how knowledge erasures occur unintentionally, but also as part and parcel of a bordering strategy that institutionalizes the hotspot approach, is key for exposing and understanding 'colonial' tactics and raising awareness on what is at stake. In the case of the Aegean islands, at stake is the loss of a wealth of knowledge for doing things differently – more humanely, equitably, and sustainably. Recovering, protecting and continuously learning from this knowledge requires methodologies that feed into live archives, fostering and strengthening knowledge exchange networks and the inclusion of multiple voices, especially of those that are typically excluded or less heard in decision making. Beyond drawing learnings for policy design and care provision, such methodologies can also better support the reconstruction of the long-term social memory of contested and multifaceted governance periods marked by violent separation, as well as by cross-cultural contact, collective resistances and social ingenuity. Equally important when conducting research in such contexts, is the need to move beyond 'doing no harm', by conceiving research processes as healing and empowering for the different actors dealing with the effects of bordering on a daily basis.

References

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