

Policy pointers

Innovative approaches are needed to meet the needs and fulfil the rights of migrants and refugees being rapidly transited through a country. Local agencies can learn from Croatia's experience following the influx of refugees from Syria and other countries between September 2015 and April 2016.

The Croatian experience raises the need to review or adapt humanitarian aid standards, such as Sphere, to situations where migrants and refugees are in transit rather than settling indefinitely in camps.

Frameworks for collaboration between state authorities and humanitarian organisations in Croatia should be revised to avoid conflicts where objectives differ. Lessons from managing the crisis in Croatia should be captured and shared with a wider audience.

New synergies, alliances and competencies formed among local and international NGOs and humanitarian agencies during the crisis could now be leveraged to help migrants and refugees who have chosen to resettle in the region.

Addressing the specific challenges of transit migration for local organisations

The influx of migrants and refugees passing through Croatia between September 2015 and April 2016 and the speed of transit meant that refugee and migrants' basic humanitarian needs, as determined by humanitarian actors, were only partially met. Established ways of ensuring rights, protection and offering aid had to be adapted to the transit situation. The Croatian experience reveals the challenges of ensuring efficient targeting of aid resources, and of fulfilling the rights and needs of migrants and refugees over a short time period. Conflicts emerged between objectives that prioritise security in transit and those that focus on rights-based humanitarian relief and protection. The cooperation between local agencies in response to this crisis showed the potential for future collaboration between local and international humanitarian and non-governmental organisations.

In the summer of 2015, Croatia saw a rapid influx in the number of migrants and refugees entering the country en route for other destinations (see Figure 1). The Croatian central government led the response, providing free transport for migrants and establishing a temporary transit centre at Slavonski Brod.¹ But this system created a number of challenges, particularly for humanitarian agencies.

Response standards for transit refugees

During the migrant and refugee crisis, the Croatian authorities mobilised crisis response and temporary protection frameworks to assist the passage of thousands of people on the move. Humanitarian organisations that provided aid and assistance had their own frameworks for action and standards regulating the provision of aid. But

in the context of such a rapid transit (most migrants and refugees spent between four and six hours in the transit centres) few of these international standards could be fully met or applied. Attempts to apply these standards, such as adequate structures for shelter, led to inappropriate and inefficient uses of aid resources. This short timeframe presented unique challenges in terms of ensuring the rights and basic needs of people could be met; that vulnerable groups, such as children, were protected; and that migrants' ambitions to reach other countries, beyond Croatia, could be satisfied. Reflecting on these operational challenges – and the solutions to them – can provide valuable information around the specificities of transit situations in humanitarian emergencies.

Croatia's location on the migrant route to northern and western Europe and the challenges

Most non-governmental organisations offering humanitarian assistance do not have flexible standards

of meeting the needs of migrants and refugees in transit often created a conflict between 'protection' and 'security'. While 'protection' encompasses activities aimed at respecting the rights of all individuals 'in accordance with international law', the security objectives of the state often revolve around ensuring migrants and refugees' safety in transit.² For example, the primary transit centre in Slavonski

Brod (see Figure 2) was designed to incorporate key security measures (such as searches, the use of video cameras, police patrols and accessible evacuation plans), but interviews with different humanitarian organisations revealed that the camp failed to meet certain protection standards for humanitarian shelter (both UNICEF and the Croatian Red Cross said Sphere standards, a voluntary tool adopted by a wide range of international humanitarian organisations that establish minimum standards to ensure the right to dignified life in a humanitarian response, were not met).

Most non-governmental organisations offering humanitarian assistance do not have flexible standards that allow for situations where migrants and refugees spend little time in shelters. This suggests there is a need to review or adapt standards in transit situations, particularly given the potential for similar refugee crises in the future.

Frameworks for closer collaboration between Croatian authorities and humanitarian organisations should also be reviewed so that conflicts between the objectives of protection and security can be avoided.

New approaches in humanitarian assistance that take into account the time constraints of migrants and refugees on the move should also be further

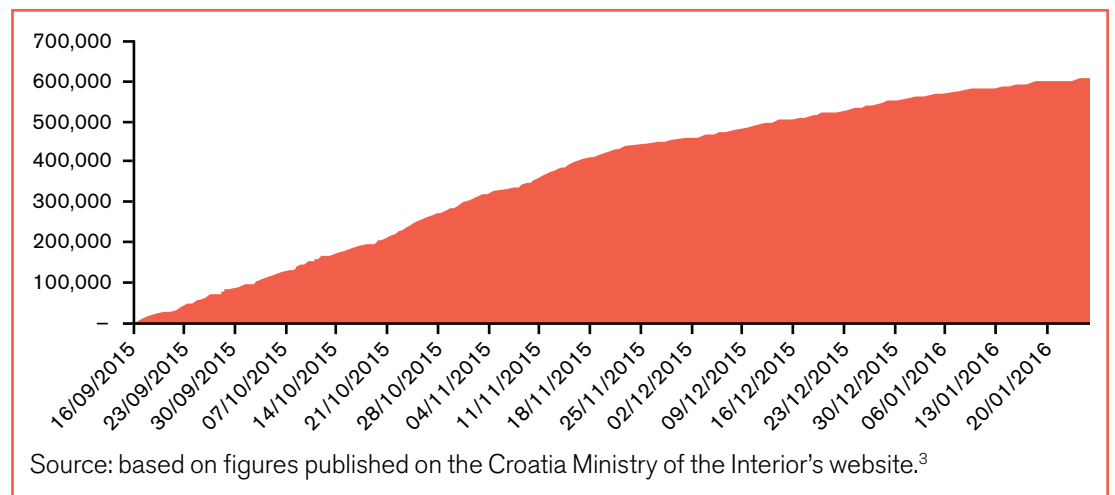
explored. For instance, at the Slavonski Brod transit centre there were long lines of migrants and refugees waiting to be processed, so place-based services such as play areas for children were adapted, with play areas established close to the registration lines so families did not lose their place in the queue. Larger initiatives and new models of assistance present in Croatia, such as the 'Blue Dot' hubs established by UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – child and family support centres providing vital services such as counselling and safe play areas – should be shared with wider audiences as a best practice in mother-baby care during transit.

Collaborating to provide better services

The transit crisis in Croatia resulted in many different local and international humanitarian organisations coming together for the first time. Because Croatia did not formally request international assistance from the United Nations (UN), agencies that would normally play a stronger role in coordination and have direct communication with the central government [such as IOM, UNICEF, and UNHCR] were instead coordinated by the Croatian Red Cross, along with more than 25 other local, regional and international NGOs of various sizes. While this was an unprecedented situation, it created opportunities for various organisations that would not normally work closely together – enabling them to share information and approaches – particularly at the transit centre in Slavonski Brod. After the crisis was over, when some refugees stayed longer in the camp to apply for asylum before being transferred to the Hotel Porin Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Zagreb, many groups continued to cooperate.

As organisations with varied expertise and experience continue to provide services in Hotel Porin – from food and clothing to legal aid

Figure 1. Running total of migrant and refugee entries into Croatia



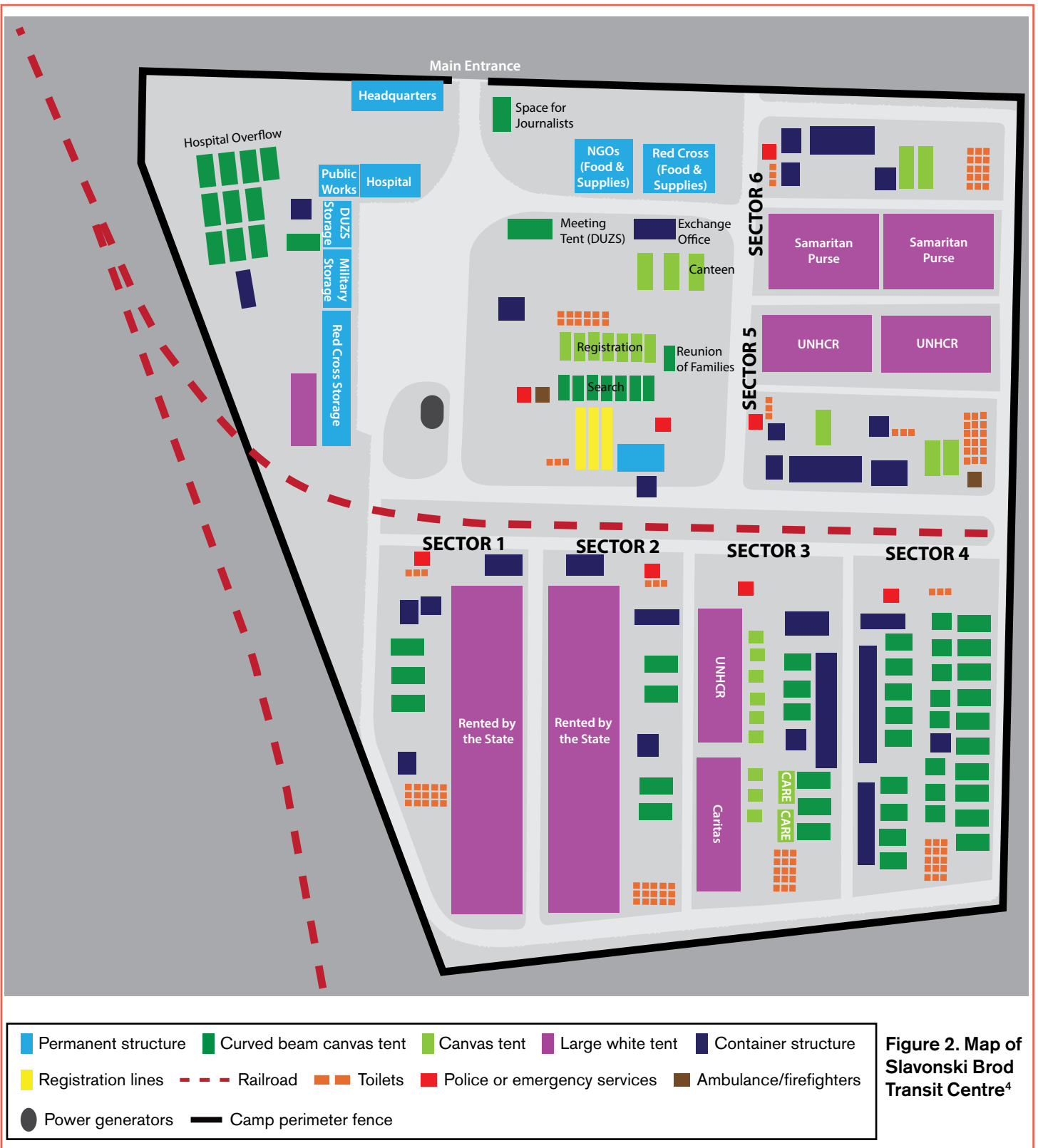


Figure 2. Map of Slavonski Brod Transit Centre⁴

— there are opportunities to work together, building knowledge and sharing experiences. International agencies with offices in Croatia – for instance, UNHCR, UNICEF and the International Organisation for Migration – could expand their in-country programming to collaborate with new partners from this crisis and with local authorities to enhance their

capacity to meet the specific needs of resettled refugees in the months to come.

Awareness raising, education and mutual learning. The National Crisis Headquarters, which was set up to deal with the crisis, coordinated the efforts of several government ministries but this meant local authorities had

little decision-making power. Through education, training and learning new skills there are opportunities to expand the role of some ministries and other Croatian authorities (including local government) in issues relevant to migration and humanitarian assistance.

There is now a unique opportunity to capture the lessons learnt during the migrant and refugee crisis from the perspective of diverse agencies and institutions, and particularly to raise awareness among Croatian authorities of humanitarian standards. This learning process should go both ways, with humanitarian organisations also drawing lessons from the Croatian experience to adapt standards and practices in response to high-volume, time-constrained transit situations. For instance, the Croatian authorities could develop shelter standards so that any future transit centres are not designed and implemented ad hoc. This should involve, for example, humanitarian organisations that are familiar with the Sphere standards for shelter.

It is important to consider that greater coordination and the involvement of local and

urban authorities in highly centralised government responses that focus on rapid transit and passage has limitations. Organisations seeking to collaborate with urban authorities and local governments should be aware that central governments typically prioritise 'security' over 'protection'; their concerns regarding towns and cities that are affected, or likely to be affected, in a humanitarian emergency include potential impacts on the local economy, or security concerns. Political tensions with local administrations could also colour the central response. An understanding of the larger urban system (for instance, Zagreb's demographic and economic weight) was likely factored into the Croatian government's response to ensure migrants and refugees did not transit through the capital and should be considered by organisations involved to better understand the geography of assistance.

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Knowledge Products

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Notes

¹ Croatian Ministry of the Interior's website www.mup.hr / ² Larsen M *et al.* (2016) Humanitarian responses by local actors: Lessons learned from managing the transit of migrants and refugees through Croatia. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/10795IIED> / ³ OCHA (2012) OCHA on Message: Protection. <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/120405%20OOM%20Protection%20final%20draft.pdf> / ⁴ The design of the camp was dynamic and constantly evolving. This depiction represents one of the last iterations of the camp. It is based on conversations with and drawings by M. Kovačević, the deputy commander of the camp, during a personal interview at Hotel Central, Slavonski Brod, on 16 April 2016.