

Main Discussion

Border control in times of crisis: Through the Eyes of practitioners


Emergencies are complex. This truism is the crux of the issue and something clarified at the offset by discussion moderator Gervaise Apave, Special Policy Advisor at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The devil is in the details as the old saying goes, and in crisis management the details depend on one over-riding question: Where will the next emergency come from?

First to step up to that challenging question was Frontex Executive Director Ilkka Laitinen. Reflecting an overarching theme from the opening lecture, that of uncertainty, Mr. Laitinen alluded to the title of one of the other discussions, calling the answer, “one of the great known unknowns.” For this reason, he said, it is essential to create realistic scenarios for all possible eventualities and to have contingency plans in place. The key word, he said, was “preparedness.”

The creation of realistic and constantly updated scenarios was the key to managing the unpredictable flows in the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings and subsequent migrant flows across the Mediterranean towards Europe.

Angela Pria, Head of the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration at the Italian ministry of the Interior, concurred, adding that the involvement of civil society and its effective coordination with border control measures proved a vital element in handling mass arrivals from North Africa during that period. The need for accurate and timely information was paramount, she asserted, as was a balance of human rights measures and effective border control working hand in hand.

“Is it possible to predict emergencies?” Mr Apave asked Ioanna Kotsiori of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF). “We are already in a crisis,” came the surprise answer. The reference was to Syria and its “massive refugee flows seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.” The priority there, she said, was to ensure that there is an escape route for fleeing people to use and that there is sufficient contingency planning in European countries like Cyprus and Greece, that could start receiving sizable influxes.





In answer to the question of whether there is sufficient contingency planning, Henry Bolton, a leading expert on borders from the European External Action Service, also surprised the audience. While preferring the term ‘increased risk’ over ‘crisis’ he said the factors affecting stability risk were well established – political, military, economic and the rule of law – all determining the level of risk at a given time.

He said had addressed NATO planners as early as 2007 over risk-level assessment in North Africa, the Sahel region and Maghreb countries, where he believed it was already possible to identify increased risk. However he conceded that the precise nature and character of those risks remained unknown and that the consequences of those drivers were not limited to migration, security also being an important factor at borders, a theme to be explored again later. As Mr Apave concluded, “the art of preparedness is an extremely difficult one.”

The challenge of the level and type of preparedness was one embraced by the moderator, who invited the other speakers to identify the challenges from their various perspectives.

Ilkka Laitinen was first to take the baton. The issue was not so much about Frontex but about border guards, he said, as they are often the first authorities to come into contact with migrants. Control remained the watchword, he maintained, but should always be dominated by values and with the over-riding priority of saving lives firmly in first place.

Angela Pria identified the key policy area as the need to envisage a consolidated reception system with the needs of those that stay in the destination country being paramount.

MSF’s Ioanna Kotsiori gave the view from civil society that, “what we’ve already witnessed several times is that even when a crisis is ongoing the biggest problem is usually the lack of political willingness to do something about it.” While admitting that the response to the 2011 Libya crisis was good and financial assistance was relatively quick, she asserted that the planning is often too slow, that old models do not always apply and that new tools are needed, particularly when crises are protracted, as they increasingly are.

These gaps, she said, included identifying and managing vulnerable groups and handling mixed migratory flows in which people are fleeing but don’t always fit in to the traditional classifications of the Geneva Convention.



Henry Bolton emphasised that a common vision and approach was needed between agencies and countries as well as a firm framework for the two to cooperate, together with NGOs and International Organisations with a strategy delineating who can bring what to the table. “We are part of a team,” he said. “And we need to bring that team together.”

He went on to explain that at the national level, border guards, police, civil society and NGOs need to step outside their comfort zones and refrain from “dogmatic” and “stove-piped” thinking over things like, “ego, power and budgetary control [...] if we want to secure European borders and if we want to move upstream, outside Europe, to deal with the threats that might come at us.”

New and Old Thinking

In answer to the question of whether the traditional distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ still had currency, MSF’s Ioanna Kotsiori gave the example of Ethiopian migrants arriving in Yemen. Although ostensibly economic migrants, they are often forced to flee by government policies. They are then often subject to torture or kidnap for ransom and become an example of “complex vulnerabilities” she said. Most migrants have suffered some form of criminal abuse and “border guards need to be aware of that.”

Ilkka Laitinen concurred that the Libya crisis was handled well at EU level although Frontex was one of the few EU practitioners involved. “The EU is expected to deliver,” he observed, noting that individual Member States often considered the EU the primary actor, which affected their level of commitment. Despite that, monitoring and information exchange went very well at the EU level in his view. He went on to emphasise the importance of identification when many crossing the border were undocumented, but also the need to balance this with sufficient regard for security.

Angela Pria picked up on the identification issue, pointing out the challenge to reception services: Who to detain and who to release into the wider society? This is helped she said, by initial identification, on Lampedusa through the Presidium project in the case of flows from Libya.

The issue of unaccompanied minors was raised from the floor, specifically, those escaping from reception centres in Italy, turning up elsewhere in the EU and being returned under the Dublin regulation. Ioanna Kotsiori admitted that due to age-assessment problems and insufficient medical expertise, minors in Greece were often kept together with adults for several months.



To sum up and close the discussion, Gervaise Apave asked the speakers: If there was one single need in terms of capacity building to increase crisis preparedness, what would it be?

Ilkka Laitinen said that from the border-control perspective, “whether a crisis or not, the most important thing is increased trust in, and more positive perception of, border guards.”

Ioanna Kotsiori agreed that trust of border guards was important but stressed the value of improved preparedness, particularly in southern EU states, including emergency funding, which currently can take several months to mobilise.

Angela Pria focused on the importance of greater synergies between border guards, police and what she called “new actors” being closer to migrant arrivals.

Henry Bolton concluded that a more strategic vision was needed at a “higher level” enabling greater information sharing and that Frontex’s role in that should be as a repository of best practice and a focus on providing Member States with necessary and timely information.