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Navigating Systems of Control as a Humanitarian Worker in Battlegrounds of Migration Governance in Mexico and the United States

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The term 'battleground' (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020) has been adopted as a more realistic conceptualization of the collaborative and conflictual relations between multileveled actors who are involved in the governance of migration (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2021). Humanitarian workers provide care to migrants which governments are unable or unwilling to. Many go beyond offering lifesaving essential aid to perform acts of solidarity, which makes relationships in battlegrounds more complex. Based on virtual qualitative interviews with humanitarian workers at multiple locations in Mexico and the U.S. in addition to document analysis, this research illustrates the relationships between humanitarian workers, government authorities, society, and migrants to gain a deeper understanding of the Americas' migration management regime. It finds that while operating within systems of control which securitize and criminalize migration beyond the physical border, humanitarian workers find themselves at a nexus of protection/promotion. Here, humanitarian protection risks presenting as if it is promoting irregular migration. This research demonstrates how humanitarian workers and international and national NGOs navigate this nexus as well as the 'battlegrounds' of migration governance in Mexico and the U.S. to endure, confront, and/or escape systems of control. While the humanitarian principle of humanity is relevant, upholding the principle of neutrality is a struggle in this context in which migration is perceived as a policy-induced crisis founded upon the idea of national security. It ultimately provides insights into how the humanitarian sector along the U.S. and Mexico borderscape is shifting towards an unprincipled, human-rights based approach to bring about a more human-centered migration system.

Connection to Development Studies

This study is relevant to Development Studies insofar as it involves both the migration-development nexus and humanitarian-development nexus. In the context of the Americas, it is especially important to recognize the exploitation of global north actors such as the U.S., which have contributed to conditions in South America, Central America, and Mexico that lead migrants to make the decision to leave home. As the U.S. has posed migration as an issue of national security, human lives suffer. This research illustrates the initiatives taken by humanitarian actors to respond to the protracted 'crisis' of migration to offer both essential provisions and advocate for a reformed system.

Keywords

migration governance, humanitarianism, battleground, social navigation, arterial border, care/control nexus, solidarity humanitarianism, Americas

List of Acronyms

CAMMI – *El Centro de Apoyo Marista al Migrante* (Marist Migrant Support Center)

CBP – Customs and Border Patrol

COMAR – *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance)

DHS – Department of Homeland Security

JRS/USA – Jesuit Refugee Service, United States of America

KBI – Kino Border Initiative

IFRC – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

IMUMI - *Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración* (Institute for Women in Migration)

INM – *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (National Migration Institute)

INGO - International nongovernmental organization

IOM – International Organization for Migration

IRC – International Rescue Committee

ISS – International Institute of Social Studies

MLG - Multilevel governance

MMC – Mixed Migration Centre

MPP – Migrant Protection Protocols

MSF – *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders)

NGO - Nongovernmental organization

OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

SAR – Search and Rescue

SENAFRONT – *Servicio Nacional de Fronteras* (National Border Service)

SIV - Special Immigrant Visas

UN – United Nations

Chapter 1 | Introduction

1.1   The Research Problem

Restrictive migration management regimes and mobility controls have contributed to more life-threatening border crossings and migrant routes, particularly for those traveling from the global south to the global north. It has become nearly impossible for society to ignore the number of lives lost and harsh conditions endured by migrants: photos of sinking boats[1], perilous jungle treks[2], and decrepit refugee camps[3] seem to be a normal site in news articles and social media posts. As families search for loved ones and migrants search for new ways forward, governing actors point fingers at each other over who is responsible[4].

While governing actors 'at the top' struggle to form agreements and accept responsibility, humanitarian workers respond directly by providing essential aid to human suffering that is an unfortunate and arguably avoidable consequence of harsh immigration policies. In many cases, as Orbinski (1999) claimed, "humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis," and are subsequently mobilized to fill in gaps or wounds left by governments. This has resulted in 'battlegrounds' in which private and local-level actors are taking on more roles in addition to public, national- and international-level actors in the care and governance of migrants (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2021). Each local battleground has inherently complex dynamics between various actors involved, and we must not forget that at the core of what they 'battle' over lies human lives and the right to move.

As borders have been securitized, militarized, and externalized, so too, have they become humanitarianized (Walters, 2011). Here, 'humanitarian borders' emerge when the attempt to access the global north becomes a matter of life and death (Walters, 2011) and the act of saving lives, rooted in humanitarian principles, gets entangled in multi-level migration governance strategies. Humanitarian actors in these contexts, then, must conduct their work while receiving input from various multileveled actors: NGO leaders, government actors, local actors, affected populations

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[1] See, for example, Kitsantonis, N. & Engelbrecht, C. (14 June 2023). At least 79 die as boat carrying migrants sinks near Greece. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/14/world/europe/greece-migrants-boat-sank.html?searchResultPosition=2

[2] See, for example, Walsh, N.P., Gallón, N., Lainé, B., & Villalón, C. (17 April 2023). On one of the world's most danger migrant routes, a cartel makes millions off the American dream. *CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/15/americas/darien-gap-migrants-colombia-panama-whole-story-cmd-intl/index.html

[3] See, for example, Human Rights Watch. (4 April 2022). Bangladesh: New restrictions on Rohingya Camps. *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/04/bangladesh-new-restrictions-rohingya-camps

[4] See Horowitz, J., Stevis-Gridneff, M. & Kitsantonis, N. (19 June 2023). Greek coast guard under scrutiny for response to migrant mass drowning. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/19/world/europe/greece-migrants-ship-sinking.html?smid=url-share

(e.g., migrants), colleagues, public and private donors, etc. As regional and local migration policies change, migrants adapt their routes and societal narratives become polarized. These shifts then require humanitarian organizations to change where and how they do their work. While humanitarian workers attempt to protect migrants, they receive criticism from some of society that they are aiding and abetting irregular migration through their work, while on the other side, scholars criticize the sector for reproducing and strengthening systems of control which repress mobility (see Williams, 2015; Ticktin, 2016; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; 2022).

Taking in various inputs; operating within unstable policies and routes; and coping with criticisms requires frequent adaptation by humanitarian workers as they sit in a precarious position at the intersection of humanitarian and migration governance. However, how exactly they navigate their uncertain and ever-changing contexts is largely unknown. Qualitative interviews and desk research were conducted to investigate current action being carried out in the Americas, as well as the relations between humanitarian workers and other 'battleground' actors. The research brings to light how humanitarian workers in Mexico and the U.S. are themselves confined by frustrating systems of control and uncovers how they operate at a thin line between protection/promotion. It demonstrates how they socially navigate their complex context and multileveled relationships while centering humanity and solidarity. It finds that humanitarian workers in Mexico and the U.S. are using their positions to advocate for more humane treatment for mixed migrant populations, thus testing the relevancy of the humanitarian principles.

1.2   Background to the Study: Migration in Central America, Mexico, and United States

Shifting immigration policy agreements and humanitarian responses can be observed globally, but one relatively understudied context by humanitarian studies scholars is the Americas. The Americas have a rich history of circular migration, and, in more recent history, a migration 'crisis' enmeshed in the war on drugs and trafficking (Vogt, 2015). It is important to note that not all migration happening there would be considered global south-north migration. However, the number of people migrating through Central America into and via Mexico to the United States has increased in recent years as individuals and families escape violence, economic collapse from the COVID pandemic, wars, and disasters. For example, growing numbers of migrants are crossing the treacherous jungle of the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama to move north (IOM, 2023). This includes more 'mixed migrant' populations, which encompasses the diverse statuses, agency, and motivations of people on the move; for example, economic migrants, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking and refugees (MMC, 2019, cited by Migration Data Portal). It also includes

so-called extra-continental migrants from Asian, African, and European countries who settle in South or Central American countries, or transit via them to the U.S. or Canada (IOM, 2017).

The presence of various types of humanitarian actors here is not new; small NGOs, INGOs, faith-based organizations, and advocacy groups at the border and beyond are common. This is needed as migrants' search for a better life in the U.S. has been made more difficult by regional agreements and deterrence measures which have contributed to the criminalization of migration. Recently, such measures have included detention centers in Mexico, the MPP, or 'Remain in Mexico,' which required certain asylum seekers to return to Mexico to await their asylum hearing in U.S. court, and the enactment of Title 42, a COVID-era public health order by the U.S., which allowed for the immediate expulsion of asylum seekers. This year, Title 42 has ended, there is the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Final Rule, also known as the Asylum Ban, which requires a scheduled appointment through the CBP One app to access asylum rights (DHS, 2023). While U.S. Congress fails to deliver immigration reform measures, state governors, such as Greg Abbot in Texas have initiated violent tactics along the state's border with Mexico[5]. The resulted conditions at the U.S.-Mexico border and at places along migrant routes have been labelled humanitarian crises by media and governments (U.S. Mission Chile, 2023), which has contributed to a hostile migration context in the region where humanitarianism gets entangled with securitization, militarization, and xenophobic tactics (Vogt, 2017). There is uncertainty about what will happen next with immigration and asylum policy in the Americas, especially as the U.S. approaches another election campaign cycle where it will be a heated topic of discussion.

1.3   Justification and Relevance of this Research

Humanitarian action is necessary to protect the lives and dignity of migrants in Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., but how exactly its current form fits into existing scholarly debates is relatively unknown. The types of programs that the sector carries out in this precarious context seem to be evolving, and as Dijkzeul and Sandvik (p. 2019) suggest, "the changing ambitions and fortunes of humanitarian governance mean that it is necessary to periodically revisit discussions of the role of states, civil society, and business in humanitarian crises and response..." (p. S101). This research does so by investigating the interactions between humanitarian workers and other actors involved in migration facilitation and control. This is needed as the analysis of relationships between non-governmental actors and governmental actors within the multilevel governance (MLG)

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[5] See https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/abbott-rio-grande-buoys-eagle-pass-operation-lone-star-migrants-border-texas/.

of migration and inquiry into whether NGO actors may influence policies is lacking in current scholarship (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017; Dimitriadis et al., 2021).

Despite comprehensive research related to humanitarian borderwork and MLG of migration, there is a dominant focus on the European context. Dynamics of humanitarian borderwork in transit, or 'via' (Walters, 2015), sites have also been generally underexplored (Phillips, 2023), despite their integral meaning to migrants on the move, local communities, and migration management and care actors. Studying mobility "from the middle" (Walters, 2015, p. 469) and paying attention to who helps, or does not help, them create opportunities for new levels of understanding. Another context in need of further analysis is what occurs with the humanitarianization of borders 'after entry,' or post-reception (Dines, 2023). Thus, this study uses the perspectives of humanitarian workers who work with migrants in via and/or post-reception contexts in Mexico and the U.S. to contribute to migration and humanitarian studies literature.

Additionally, much attention has been paid to how migrants navigate systems of control imposed by state and non-state actors (see Schapendonk, 2018), which is, of course, vital for our understanding of migrants' lived experiences; however, humanitarian workers are also deeply entangled in these systems. They can be caught amongst the political, moral, and capitalist dynamics of migration governance and experience frictions between "the logics of compassion and repression" (Işleyen & Qadim, 2023, p.8) when responding to crises which involve people on the move. Migrant trajectories are highly politicized, which raises the questions of what this means for those who aid them while they are on the move (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). One may perceive that "humanitarianism is marked by a constitutive tension between inequality and solidarity," (Squire, 2015, p. 90) when it is mobilized in borderscapes with changing local, national, and international dynamics. While it is recognized that a humanitarian response is necessary in these contexts, it is also criticized for reproducing colonial, white supremacist border regimes (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). But when humanitarian work shifts into solidarity work with the intention of reforming strict state practices of repression, it can become a target of criminalization, just as migration is criminalized (Fekete, L. et al., 2017; Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Mainwaring, C. & DeBono, D., 2021).

There is thus a need to explore the intricacies of how humanitarian workers navigate their unique position within complex contexts, dynamics, and (internal and external) critiques. I contend that such an inquiry is meaningful to better understand lived experiences within the contemporary Central American-Mexican-U.S. migration governance regime. The involvement of multiple locations was purposively chosen in attempts of representing and comprehending multiple areas of contestation and/or collaboration which produce and extend the U.S. border with Mexico (Vogt, 2016). This is especially timely in a year when asylum procedures are changing, large numbers of

migrants are taking precarious routes towards the U.S., and the Biden administration and state governments are mobilizing humanitarian organizations to assist migrants who struggle while the U.S. immigration system remains "broken" (U.S. Mission Chile, 2023).

1.4   Research Objectives and Question

This study explores the positions of humanitarian workers within the Americas regional migration management regime and how they navigate its complex dynamics. As described previously, it is quite clear that humanitarianism is entwined in evolving migration management strategies which could impact how humanitarian action is performed. I seek to understand humanitarian border-work processes and investigate individuals' experiences and strategies of social navigation within differing local contexts (i.e., battlegrounds) along migrant trajectories using the following research question:

How do humanitarian workers navigate various 'local battlegrounds' involved in mixed migrant trajectories in Mexico and the United States?

It will be supported by the following sub-questions:

1. What do local battlegrounds in the Americas look like?
2. How do political structures and multi-actor and -level relationships impact humanitarian workers who provide services to migrants?
3. In what ways has the humanitarian sector changed the way it works in the context of the contemporary regional migration management regime and the 'battlegrounds' of the Americas?
4. To what extent do humanitarian principles impact how humanitarian workers perceive their work and how they socially navigate their position within the Americas' migration management regime?

These questions will be framed and answered through first considering current theoretical and conceptual debates about borders, migration management, and humanitarian action. The resulting framework provides guidance into areas of investigation and the need for deeper understanding of humanitarian borderwork and local battlegrounds of migration management from the perspective of humanitarian workers through qualitative research. Social navigation is identified as a valuable analytical tool to explore these individuals and context. Then, the methodology will be explained to show how I collected data, encountered limitations, and reflected on my position as a researcher. Later, the key findings will be discussed in three chapters. Chapter four outlines the battlegrounds and the contentious, collaborative relationships that produce them.

Chapter five discusses how individual workers are impacted by conditions in the battlegrounds, and how they and humanitarian organizations navigate them. Chapter six reflects on the relevancy of the humanitarian principles, with particular attention to the principle of neutrality. All of which demonstrate how the humanitarian sector continues to evolve in such a context. The concluding chapter provides a final summary of the findings and what they could mean for the future of humanitarianism and migration governance.

Chapter 2 | Theoretical Considerations & Conceptual Framework

This section discusses current multidisciplinary theories and concepts which have guided the framing of this study. First, key concepts related to borders are explained to position the study. Next, I discuss multilevel migration governance and the concept of 'battleground' to comprehend the position of humanitarian actors within it as well as the political structures and relationships involved. Relevant concepts and theories from (critical) humanitarian and migration studies then help frame evolutions in humanitarianism regarding current approaches and a shift towards more solidarity work. Lastly, social navigation is defined as a meaningful "analytical optic" (Vigh, 2009) for investigating the lived experiences of humanitarian workers working with mixed migrant populations in the Americas.

2.1   Arterial border

Borders can no longer be considered simply as "the physical demarcation of the nation" (Menjivar, 2014, p. 353) when studying migration. Although the traditional fences and walls which distinguish sovereign territories remain erected, borders are continuously re-spatialized through processes such as border externalization (Casas et al. 2010) and internalization. Border internalization extends border enforcement controls internally to police (non)citizens in especially powerful receiving countries through institutions such as banks and social security (Menjivar, 2014). Enmeshed in the same system is border externalization, which refers to the "stretching of the borderline" (Casas et al., 2010, p. 71) beyond the physical borders of 'destination' countries to increase migration control while (aspiring) migrants are still in their country of citizenship or en-route via another country (Casas et al., 2010, p. 71; Menjivar, 2014; Winters & Izaguirre, 2019; Cuttitta; 2022). Externalization is evident in regional agreements and in some cases through direct funding from 'destination countries' to 'transit countries' to reduce the number of undesired migrants arriving at their borders. For example, the U.S. government provides training and funding to Panama's special police force, SENAFRONT, to enhance border security where migrants enter the country from Colombia (Schmidtke, 2022).

These processes have contributed to the trajectory approach, which both policymakers and humanitarians use to follow migrant routes in order to form a response to migration-related issues (Cuttitta, 2022). This is evident in Central America as humanitarian responses adapt to changing, undefined conditions and decisions of migrants which influenced by border externalization, securitization, militarization agreements, and policies in the region. Such presence of NGOs transforms the borderscape (Cuttitta, 2022). The concept, 'arterial border' (Vogt, 2017) encapsulates each of these processes appropriately by understanding the border "not as a fixed

entity, but as a constantly shifting and dynamic site of state legitimisation, individual agency and contestation" (p. 3). This paper adopts this term as it encapsulates the tendrils of the borders spanning from the U.S. through Mexico and Central America and has no fixed endpoint, just as migrant trajectories have no fixed endpoint. The production of the arterial border involves inter-actions between many stakeholders who politicize, militarize, securitize, and humanitarianize migration in conjunction and disjunction with one another (Vogt, 2017), contributing to a uniquely complex space for all to understand, govern, and/or navigate.

2.2   Multilevel governance as a battleground along the arterial border

"Within Mexico's regimes of mobility, power is produced, embodied and contested by state and non-state actors – migrants, asylum seekers, police, shelter workers, priests, migration authorities, criminals, residents – in local spaces" (Vogt, 2017, p. 4). To discuss the governance that manifests at and across the different levels in which these state and non-state actors lie, the multilevel governance (MLG) theory (Hooghe & Marks, 1992), studied almost primarily in Europe and occasionally in the U.S. (Dimitriadis et al., 2021), can be applied. It argues that decision-making is no longer "monopolized by national governments," (Hooghe & Marks, 1992), but rather, "the power of government is increasingly shaped by and shared between actors operating at multiple levels" (Saito-Jensen, 2015, p. 2). It is a useful way to study migration policy as it incorporates attempts to govern migration from above and below, and by public and private actors (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2017). Despite this utility, it also has its limitations. For instance, MLG tends to be too rigid as its fixed vertical order does not account for a deeper understanding of the more fluctuating relationships between state and non-state actors happening at the horizontal level (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). Scholars argue that conceptualizing the MLG of migration as a 'battleground' consisting of a range of pro- and anti-immigrant actors, with both converging and diverging relational dynamics, is a better representation of reality (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2021).

Local-level and nongovernmental organizations have been stepping up to play a significant role in the governance of asylum and migration to address gaps left by national governments (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2021). This has created a sort of battleground in which various actors interact at different levels in either cooperative or conflictual ways to attempt to manage and care for migrants (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Ambrosini, 2021). Humanitarian organizations, as actors entangled in regional and global migration governance, then, are gaining more governing power in contexts where their traditional life-saving work is needed. While some provide aid through compliance with government policies, others do it

through acts of solidarity, and sometimes both (Ambrosini, 2021; Dimitriadis et al. 2021; Cuttitta, 2022; Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Panter-Brick, 2021; Phillips, 2023).

The battleground as a conceptual tool enhances the MLG approach, to "help us to grasp what happens within fractured political and social landscapes" (Dimitriadis et al., 2021, p.263) and understand dynamics that shape migration governance. A similar concept established in Humanitarian Studies is the 'humanitarian arena', which encapsulates the messy, multileveled, sometimes competitive interactions involved in providing humanitarian action (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). It offers a lens to see how the provision of aid is socially negotiated by the many diverse actors involved, including affected communities (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). This all demonstrates the convoluted position humanitarianism is in as it is nestled between affected populations it is mobilized to care for; the communities it operates in; other humanitarian organizations; local and national governments; as well as within the international gaze.

Although the humanitarian arena is pivotal for an understanding of humanitarianism, it does not quite capture the context and focus of inquiry upon which this study is set. In the humanitarian arena, *aid* is at the center of inquiry. For example, many authors use the arena lens to understand the consequences of aid and to observe how humanitarians play 'the aid game' to gain access to communities (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2012; Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019). This research that I am conducting is not just about aid, but more so about humanitarian actors' positions in fractured and fluctuating landscapes of migration governance and care. It does not focus on how they gain access to communities, but rather, how they are responding to a protracted crisis entangled in and caused by competing and collaborating (political) motives. Within such a context, the battleground is more useful to capture the complex bottom-up (inter)actions between humanitarian workers with state and non-state actors which contribute to the production of the fluctuating, contested arterial border of the Americas (Vogt, 2017; Ambrosini, 2020).

2.3   Humanitarian borderwork & the care/control nexus

As governments make access to the global North a matter of life and death through securitization (Walters, 2011), while de-politicizing South-North migration by labeling it a 'humanitarian crisis,' (Ticktin, 2016, p. 255-56) humanitarian organizations' presence in borderscapes has become important for both saving lives and managing mobility of large groups of people. This care/control nexus (Sahraoui, 2020), where securitization and humanitarianism meet, is where Walters (2011) conceptualizes the birth of the 'humanitarian border'. The term is now used in much scholarly work which critically investigates humanitarianism in contexts related to migration and forced displacement (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Little &Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Novak, 2022; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Phillips, 2023; Sahraoui, 2020; Squire, 2015; Williams, 2015).

Pallister-Wilkins (2017) extends this concept to introduce the concept of 'humanitarian border-work,' to give name to the practices done in response to potentially dangerous border regimes, in which "the enactment of humanitarian principles changes borderwork from work concerned with stopping, defending and securing territory to work concerned with securing lives" (p. 86). Humanitarian borderwork is not a spatially fixed entity, thus fitting into the idea of an arterial border (Walters, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Vogt 2017).

Humanitarian action in migration contexts is often criticized by scholars for (un)intentionally conforming to systems of control. Through humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012, cited in Dines, 2023), humanitarian actors' focus on individual suffering often ignores the need for systemic transformation (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Ticktin, 2016; Dines, 2023) and their work becomes a "simple sticking plaster for the status quo [of inhumane mobility regimes]" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2019). It has been criticized as a tool of border externalization which "increase[s] the reach of the state to govern more bodies and more spaces" (Williams, 2015, p.11), for example by accepting to work in detention centers in Libya (Phillips, 2023). Scholars have asserted that humanitarian borderwork reinforces colonial power hierarchies and racism (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022); represses the mobility of those they offer compassion to through 'armed love' (Ticktin, 2016, p. 255); and can play a part in exploiting migrants' 'post-reception livelihoods' (Dines, 2023; p. 78). This may contribute to the manifestation of the Humanitarian Industrial Complex, where humanitarian work, rooted in colonial history, tends to de-politicize and commodify the lives of those who are meant to benefit from their care (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020). Humanitarian operations may even contribute to this unknowingly through what Cuttitta (2022) calls 'soft externalization,' where although their work is not directly related to border control, it may be supporting government strategies to reduce unwanted migration.

2.4   Resilience and solidarity humanitarianism in borderwork

Pallister-Wilkins (2022) states, "without an end to violent borders, humanitarian borderwork will remain a solution that (re)produces inequalities" (p. 203). This may be true, but it does not account for the "plurality of humanitarianisms" (Pallister-Wilkins et al., 2023) that are emerging: growing groups of humanitarian workers actively trying to change the system (see Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Phillips, 2023). This happens at a time when self-criticism has become a "staple of the humanitarian sector," (Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019) while it shifts from classical to resilience humanitarianism (Hilhorst, 2018). Classical humanitarianism is a traditional, principled approach based on western-centered exceptionalism to alleviate short-term human suffering by upholding the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Hilhorst, 2018; Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019;

Cohee, 2023). Resilience humanitarianism moves beyond this, towards a rights-based approach which emphasizes local capacity strengthening and agency of affected populations to ensure their own survival in long-term normalized crises (Hilhorst, 2018; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019; Cohee, 2023).

Although literature on resilience humanitarianism is separate from that on borderwork, it is useful to be aware of the behavioral and mindset shifts happening generally within the humanitarian sector before investigating the realities which exist at the intersections of securitization, militarization, politicization, and humanitarianization in battlegrounds along the arterial border. For instance, more have been choosing to act as advocates and/or allies with people on the move to slowly disrupt the inhume system (Phillips, 2023). Others transform their work into a form of 'anti-externalization,' which is "any act intendedly or unintendedly producing effects contrary to those envisaged by externalising actors" (Cuttitta, 2022, p. 3) such as SAR operations in the Mediterranean. Dadusc and Mudu (2020) argue that there is a clear distinction between solidarity and humanitarian assistance, as the former actively rejects the Humanitarian Industrial Complex, while the latter is complicit in its production. However, with an acknowledgement of the shift towards resilience humanitarianism, it is easier to comprehend that solidarity and humanitarian assistance can be done simultaneously. Rozakou (2017) coined the term 'solidarity humanitarianism' to conceptualize how the two blur together during the response to the 2015 'refugee crisis' in Greece. More recently, Pallister-Wilkins (2022) has come to call this synergy 'grassroots humanitarianism': "a response to what 'grassroots' actors see as failures by state actors and traditional NGOs alike, while simultaneously filling important gaps in the provision of relief and aid to life seekers and challenging border violence" (p. 133-134). Referring to this as 'grassroots' is still up for debate, as this response does not signify a fully bottom-up one, but more so one which diverges from practices of the state and classical humanitarianism (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). For the sake of this paper, particularly since members of INGOs are included, I will refer to such response as solidarity humanitarianism (Rozakou, 2017).

Whether humanitarian workers comply with or reject them, they are clearly entangled in powerful governments' desires to control the mobility of certain populations. Conceptualizing different manifestations of humanitarian borderwork within the battleground perspective is meaningful to unpack intricacies of humanitarianism within migration management – as humanitarian actors are not only performing in the arena to gain access to relieve temporary human suffering but are also cooperating and conflicting with other actors to bring about systemic change.

2.5 Social navigation as an analytical optic

Humanitarian workers are mobilized to provide services in locations where migrants are moving via (unknown) communities, while they wait at borders, and after they have entered the country of destination. Like the migrants they provide aid to, they must navigate complex, unstable migration management regimes which construct the arterial border and risk being criminalized (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020). 'Social navigation' will be used to explore how they do this. Social navigation encapsulates "motion within motion" (Vigh, 2009, p. 425): how individuals adapt and move through a moving, unstable, ever-evolving world. The term may be used to describe "how [people] disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions" (Vigh, 2009, p. 419). Its temporality does not only refer to the present, but also to the future unknown; for example, how people move in relation to their hopes and dreams for the future (Vigh, 2009; p. 425).

The concept is typically used when attempting to understand the lived experiences of populations in marginalized positions, for example, people in contexts of warfare (Vigh, 2006), conflict-induced displacement (Horst & Grabska, 2015) and the "African-European web of facilitation/control" (Schapendonk, 2018). Although humanitarian workers are typically not marginalized, and in fact are quite highly positioned in the hierarchical structure of the global mobility regime, they do indeed operate in an uncertain, changing, 'broken' system. I use social navigation as an analytical optic here to gain empirical understanding of how workers navigate and relate to the moving intricacies of humanitarian borderwork and the battleground at different points in irregular migrant routes. Schapendonk (2018) uses social navigation to investigate how migrants moving from Africa, through Italy, to the Netherlands found their way through the complex nexus of facilitation/control through migration industries. The author indicates that "not only migrants have to navigate the industry and mediate relations, so too do different actors of migration facilitation and control" (Schapendonk, 2018, p.676). Humanitarian workers are part of this system, thus, using this term here seems appropriate to identify unique dynamics involved in the ever-changing, moving, evolving battlegrounds of migration governance along the arterial border.

Chapter 3 | Methodology

This study is guided by a post-positivist, subjectivist epistemology, accepting that the world is made up of chaotic, complex, uncertain entities "that we may never 'capture' [through social research" (O'Leary, 2013, p. 7), but we may attempt to grasp fragmented pieces of societal processes by understanding individuals' lived experiences within them. Subjectivism "accepts that personal experiences are the foundation for factual knowledge" (O'Leary, 2013, p.7). Thus, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were used as they provide a suitable way to access meaning and identify issues from the perspective of participants (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Qualitative interviews and content analysis of documents were performed and will be explained in this section.

3.1 Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured, conversational interviews were conducted online with eleven humanitarian workers located in Mexico and the United States. They come from a range of organizations: Plan International, IRC, MSF, JRS/USA, KBI, IMUMI, and CAMMI and were recruited in various ways. Five interviewees work for INGOs, while the others work for local or national NGOs.

Table 1: Interviewee Profiles

Pseudonym	Type of organization, location	Role
Dan	INGO, Mexico	Country Director
Stephanie	INGO, USA	Casework Supervisor
Audrey	INGO, USA	Vice President of Advocacy & Operations
Sara	INGO, USA	Member of Board of Directors[6]
Mariana	NGO, Mexico	Head Psychologist
Elena	NGO, Mexico	Lawyer
Claudia	NGO, Mexico	Director
Elizabeth	INGO, USA	Employment Specialist
Luis	NGO, USA & Mexico[7]	Director of Advocacy & Education
Marco	NGO, Mexico	Legal Assistance Coordinator

[6] Sara is included as an 'expert' interview.
[7] Although this organization works in both Mexico and the U.S., I do not classify it as an INGO because despite there being a physical border between the two cities they operate in -- Nogales, Sonora, MX and Nogales, Arizona, USA -- Luis said that they view it as one community. They only work in this one area without other international/global scopes.

LinkedIn served as a valuable platform to access respondents who I otherwise would not have been able to directly contact. I subscribed to a month-long premium trial in which I was able to send messages to fifteen people outside of my network. Out of fifteen messages sent, four were replied to, and three led to interviews. My social connections were also useful. One participant was my classmate in high school and connected me to some of her colleagues. An ISS alumna, and my former teaching assistant, works now for a migrant-related organization and gave me the email address of the administrative coordinator of the organization, who allowed me to interview two of their employees. Email was the primary way I reached out to organizations, as almost every organizational website has an email listed as contact. As expected, my requests (and follow-up requests) often went un-replied to, or I received responses saying that they were too busy. I scheduled four interviews with people through email who I had no prior connection with. One of which connected me to two more colleagues in their organization – a successful use of snowball sampling.

Once individuals had volunteered to meet with me, I sent them a link through calendly, which is a service that connects to my calendar and allowed participants to schedule a meeting at their convenience. They were able to choose to meet via Zoom or Microsoft Teams while booking (see screenshot of booking page in Appendix A). In two instances, the 'gatekeepers,' or the ones who granted me permission to meet with their employees (King et al., 2019) scheduled the Zoom meeting themselves with their own accounts and emailed the link to me. The length of interviews ranged from sixteen to sixty-five minutes, and two were conducted in half Spanish/half English. The semi-structured questionnaire, which was informed by existing literature and findings from content analysis of documents (detailed below) can be found in Appendix B.

Content analysis of the transcribed interviews was performed both by hand and with the support of ATLAS.ti 23 software. Inductive coding was used to identify new information which came from the raw data (e.g., navigation strategies) to add to the literature, while deductive coding was used to identify how the empirical data confirms or refutes existing literature and trends in humanitarian action and migration governance.

3.2 Document Analysis

Document analysis is a qualitative research method used to triangulate data and assist in contextualizing interview data (Bowen, 2009). Any type of document, e.g., non-technical literature, may be used to develop empirical knowledge and further insight into a research problem (Merriam 1988 as cited in Bowen, 2009). Here, programs and projects from humanitarian organizations in the Americas were analyzed using content analysis to gather information on prominent approaches

currently being used. Some documents were official detailed reports, while others were project or program descriptions found on the organization's website (this being due to what was accessible). All but one of the documents came from the organizations that the interviewees are part of: Plan International, IRC, MSF, JRS/USA, KBI, IMUMI, and CAMMI. The additional document came from IFRC's Global Route-Based Migration Programme in the Americas because the IFRC is the world's largest humanitarian network, and this program is an important example of how the sector is shifting and reacting to migrants' needs.

Content analysis using deductive coding was performed with the support of ATLAS.ti 23 software. First, open coding was conducted to find themes in the texts, then axial coding was performed by making code groups with concepts from the literature. Through the data collection process, information from document analysis fed into questions I asked in the interviews, while content from interviews also influenced some of the content coded in the documents. This data collection method was also utilized to add details about Central America since I was not able to interview anyone from there. It would be remiss to not include it in this study as what is happening there is closely linked, through the arterial border, to what is occurring within humanitarian borderwork dynamics related to mixed migration to, and through, Mexico and the U.S.

3.3   Ethical Considerations

Respondents' identities were protected as I ensured anonymity and confidentiality were upheld. Voluntary informed consent was obtained before conducting the qualitative interviews. The form was sent to the participants through email to be signed and sent back to the researcher before the interview. In two cases, the forms were not returned, but I discussed it with them at the beginning of the meeting and obtained verbal consent. Time was always provided at the beginning of the video calls for the interviewee to ask any questions and to review the study's purpose. Verbal permission was obtained before recording began, and it was made clear that they could stop the interview at any time and that they did not have to answer questions they did not wish to. Recordings and transcripts were immediately downloaded to my password protected OneDrive and were anonymized using pseudonyms and each videocall meeting required a passcode, which protected against the risk of "Zoom-bombing" (Roberts et al., 2021). Another important consideration was that the participants and I were not in the same time zone (time differences ranged from six to nine hours apart), calendly was useful in this regard as it allowed individuals to set the calendar in their time zone so that they could see at what times their availability matched mine.

3.4   Positionality and Reflexivity

Within the post-positivist paradigm, it is important that the researcher acknowledges their positionality and the values that they bring to the research setting (Hennink et al. 2020). I have a background of briefly volunteering with an organization that performs humanitarian and solidarity work at the U.S.-Mexico border, which fed into my interest in this subject. I also have acquaintances who have experienced migrating irregularly by land from Peru to the United States and have heard about some of their encounters with various actors along their journey. Values and perceptions gained through these life experiences and connections may bias me, but they also were useful in helping me leverage my connection with humanitarian workers and gain their trust. This felt especially important given that I had never met any, but one of them, in person before, and I wanted to limit the extractive feeling of popping in-and-out of their lives simply to get information that I needed.

Although the interviewer is really meant to listen and guide the conversation, there were certain meetings where it was beneficial for me to open up a bit about myself as I had been, understandably, confronted with a bit of skepticism and hesitancy. Through the process, I tried to reflect on how to not reproduce the coloniality of knowledge and figure out ways to do this sort of research *with* humanitarian workers, rather than *on* humanitarian workers. So, I did my best to explain the aims of my research and explain a bit of my personal background in order to foster a comfortable environment in which participants felt that they could lead the conversation if they wanted to and openly share their experiences and feelings. This happened quite naturally in several instances.

Some asked how this research would benefit them and the people they care for. I also wanted a way to share the perspectives of people willing to talk to me to a wider audience beyond those that will read this research paper. I believe their voices are valuable and should be heard by more practitioners working on global development and social justice for migrants. So, I offered participants who seemed interested to collaborate with me on an article for Bliss Blog as it is connected to my research institute and attracts readers from around the world. Some received this offer with excitement, while others unfortunately turned it down and did not agree to an interview because they saw no benefit from participating.

3.5   Limitations

I acknowledged since the beginning that the ambitiousness of my research plan would prove to be challenging. Accessibility of both interviewees and official program plan documents proved to be difficult. What I did not anticipate is that, in some cases, I easily received approval and support from 'gatekeepers,' but did not receive replies from individuals I was hoping to meet with. On the other hand, I unfortunately had difficulties connecting with more people who are actively working

in humanitarian operations directly with migrants in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, as I was told by respondents in offices of the organization that they are too busy or that they do not see benefits that my research would give to their work.

Miscommunications sometimes occurred and there were occasional technical issues, but most were minor and most likely inevitable to occur when using data collection techniques which involve only online interactions. The most prominent limitation was that I was not able to travel and meet these people in-person, see the communities with my own eyes, and stay in contact with interviewees for longer than just our one online meeting. As Roberts et al. (2021) suggest, I attempted to compensate for this by exploring the cities where the organizations were located through Google Earth, following them on social media, reading local news and their latest organizational reports. I had originally aimed to keep weekly communication with a few of the participants in order to get ongoing information about how things may have changed since our interview, but this unfortunately did not come to fruition. Aspects of the everyday are missed, thus this study is only a partial picture of the whole, complex context.

Chapter 4 | Battlegrounds and humanitarian borderwork from an insider perspective

This chapter demonstrates how just as the arterial border is an unbound entity due to frequent re-negotiation of migration contexts, political aims, and societal narratives, so are the battlegrounds of migration governance. Despite operating within different localities in Mexico and the U.S., humanitarian workers who I spoke with experience similar entanglements of collaboration and dissent with other multileveled actors involved in migration governance and care. In the attempt of disentangling battleground dynamics, current migration realities in Mexico and the U.S. are discussed. Interactions and relationships between humanitarian workers and different public and non-public actors are then emphasized to understand the dynamics that make MLG a battleground. Lastly, the experiences of humanitarian workers provide an insider perspective of the care/control nexus within humanitarian borderwork in Mexico and the U.S., including the recognition of a nexus of promotion/protection.

4.1   The context: (Un)fixed realities along the arterial border

The current border realities in Mexico and the U.S. are complex as migrant populations are becoming more mixed and migration management practices are present in every community. In Mexico, interviewees mentioned increasing encounters with migrants from countries like Pakistan, Russia, and China, which creates unique challenges such as language barriers. At the same time, according to Dan, the director of the Mexican country office of a large INGO, Mexico is a very violent context in which the government stimulates organized crime, corruption, abuse, and a wide gap between the rich and the poor. As an outcome of this, he says he receives seven to fourteen alerts on his phone each day about young girls and (unaccompanied) youth disappearing and/or being murdered, sometimes including grim details about what has happened to them.

Dan, who began his INGO's regional project on forced mobility in Mexico, indicates that the migratory context has become more complicated as the country has become a 'sending', 'receiving', and 'transit' state at the same time, which has contributed to the government intensifying its bordering tactics. Although national borders continue to serve as crucial sites for the political stage, both physically and symbolically, "bordering practices are increasingly carried out in spaces far removed from external borders" (Vogt, 2017, p. 3). In the Americas context, the Southern border of the United States with Northern Mexico remains a stark site of deterrence and securitization tactics, but it is not the only site at which migrants and communities experience such practices. Marco, the legal care coordinator at a humanitarian NGO in Querétaro, MX with two years of experience in this role and four years of experience in Mexican migration and international refugee

law observes this reality in his role each day. While he is physically far away from it, he recognizes the presence of buoys with barbed wire that have been placed as a deterrence strategy in the Rio Grande River, which demarcates the border between Texas and Mexico, as key evidence of current dangers that migrants face. But this only represents one part of the long trajectory along the arterial border (Vogt, 2017).

Migrants encounter various types of bordering tactics far from physical borders: before they move, while they move, and during integration (Casas et al., 2010). Marco observes the complexities of this in Querétaro, a city located in the middle of Mexico with a diverse migratory context. He interacts with, who he calls, "*origin*" migrants, who are Mexican people from Querétaro who intend to move to the U.S.; "*transit*" migrants who move via Querétaro to the U.S. or Canada; and refugees, international protection seekers, and other migrants who decide to stay in Querétaro. The city sits at a junction where the Western (Pacific), Central, and Eastern (Atlantic) migration corridors converge, so the population he works with

> "…is highly, highly diverse, both in terms of nationalities and in the reason for [migrating]… so here we can see all these policies and all these contacts that are not doing good in Mexico."

He, as well as Dan, are especially concerned with the powerful deployment of the National Guard serving as federal police and working as one entity with the National Migration Institute (INM), which controls and supervises migration. They say its militarized presence is felt in every community from Mexico's Southern border with Guatemala to its Northern border with the U.S., and it amplifies the rhetoric which poses migration as a national security issue.

While border realities in Mexico are unfixed and "*a bit obscure*," as Dan calls it, there are also aspects which are frustratingly stagnant. Although national and regional immigration policies or government administrations may change on the surface, their innate systems of control remain. When asked about changes in policies related to his work with migrants, Dan says "*so far it's more blah blah blah than really changing.*" Luis, the Director of Advocacy and Education at a binational NGO at the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona provides detail,

> "There hasn't been much change: CBP One was the only way to access asylum by the end of Title 42, and it's still the only way that, or like the preferred way, that the government has for people to access [asylum in the U.S.]. There was an asylum ban under Trump's administration, there's an asylum ban under the Biden administration. There was a policy preventing people from accessing asylum and forcing them to wait in Mexico under the Trump administration, there are policies that are preventing people from exercising their right to asylum and having them stuck or stranded in Mexico right now."

To sum up, the context along the arterial border is made up of violent and complex conditions which are simultaneously ever evolving and fixed as the states' notion of controlling migration lies at the core of the issue.

The humanitarian response: Beyond essential lifesaving aid

Grasps for controlling migration are a fixed constant, and they feed into a never-ending, and quite uncontrollable, cycle of diverse needs. Unfixed internalized and externalized bordering tactics influence where and how migrants move, as well as how control actors, community members, and humanitarian actors respond (Vogt, 2017; Cuttitta, 2022). Although people's reasons for migrating, how they choose to move, and where they settle varies, the IFRC (2022) identifies seven common humanitarian needs present across all contexts spanning the Americas: (1) gender-based violence; (2) risky and harmful survival strategies; (3) labor exploitation; (4) child labor; (5) domestic violence; (6) family separation and disappearance; and (7) stigma, xenophobia, and discrimination. Many of these were also mentioned by humanitarian workers in Mexico and the U.S. Of the organizations that interviewees were employees of and whose documents I analyzed, most of them operate in more than one location, as the trajectories of migrants and the bordering practices of the U.S. and Mexican states are not isolated to one route or location. This includes, and is certainly not limited to, the implementation of humanitarian service points at key locations in South American, Central American, and Caribbean countries by the IFRC and Red Cross national societies (IFRC, 2022); provision of shelters and program units in both Tapachula (Southern Mexico) and Ciudad Juarez (Northern Mexico) by an INGO whose main office is in Mexico City; and regular visits by aid workers from their office in Mexico City to migrants in other states in the country[8]. For example, Elena, a lawyer working for a small NGO in Mexico City that works with women migrants, travels to migrant shelters and detention centers in other states where assistance is needed so that she can inform women of their rights.

In reaction to the complex needs that exist, INGOs and NGOs offer a variety of services beyond essential life-saving responses for people on the move and affected communities. For example, program documents explain intentions to offer a range of support,

> "from delivering critical provisions, like food and emergency kits, to facilitating psychosocial services and connecting families to other essential services, such as health care and legal aid" (Plan International, Protected Passage project).

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[8] A table with descriptions of each interviewee's position, role, and other relevant information related to their - and their organization's - position in the battleground of migration management and humanitarian borderwork along the arterial border of the Americas can be found in Appendix C.

And some programs prioritze advocacy work after clearly placing blame on governments for producing the challenges and subsequent suffering that migrants face. Others in the region are not so direct about blame, but still set out to do advocacy work next to their neutral humanitarian action. The IFRC, in its route-based migration program, for example, plans to set up neutral humanitarian service points at key locations, while at the same time, they intend to do advocacy-based work with aims of influencing the creation of policies which promote safe and legal migration pathways among other things.

So, the humanitarian response in the Americas is generally going beyond lifesaving essential aid to provide a more holistic, rights-based approach. Here, unique intersections are then created between humanitarianism, security, violence, and human rights in the battlegrounds that exist along the arterial border (Vogt, 2017). The relationships between actors at such intersections provide insight into the current realities of the U.S.-Mexico migration management regime.

4.2   Battleground Dynamics in Mexico and the U.S.

The multilevel governance of migration in this (un)fixed context consists of a wide range of state and non-state actors. At the supranational level lie regional frameworks and agreements between one or more countries in North America and Latin America. At the national level, the U.S. and Mexican governments pass laws, policies, and regulations to manage migration domestically, which also influence surrounding countries. They also oversee government entities such as the INM and the National Guard in Mexico as well as DHS and CBP border patrol agents in the U.S. Then, there are state level actors such as governors and local, or municipal, governments. Also at the local level are humanitarian organizations; public and private sector agencies; and the (host and/or transit) community and migrants. All actors involved interact directly and indirectly with each other in not so much a hierarchized order, but rather through mixed interplays of cooperation, tolerance, and contestation (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Ambrosini, 2021; Dimitriadis et al., 2021). For humanitarian workers, the variety of services offered in current programs reflect that these interplays often happen at the same time. Several labeled the existence of their organization as both a reaction to and a product of deterrence policies and agreements in the Americas, where they are now "working at the intersection of U.S. and Mexican migration law and policy" (IMUMI Letter, 2023, p. 1). The politics involved makes interactions extremely complex.

A love-hate relationship with government authorities

For Audrey, the Vice President of Advocacy and Operations at a small INGO with years of experience working for a larger INGO, managing advocacy and operational programs creates delicate dynamics that she must be conscious of. As the organization's advocacy piece is in equal

standing with its efforts to serve and accompany refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, she is very careful with her advocacy efforts so that they "do not step on any toes."

> "You know our first question to ourselves is, is this going to cause any harm? Will this put us, our programs, our staff at any risk? And if so, we back off…"

On one hand, multidisciplinary humanitarian work can fill the gaps of the state, while on the other hand, solidarity work "creates cracks," (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020, p. 3) which can cause precarious relationships between humanitarian and government personnel. Although Audrey expressed the need to sometimes back off, others that I spoke with did not disclose such an explicit tension between the work that both supports the government and holds it accountable for its misdoings. For those, it seems that strategies of 'filling gaps' and 'creating cracks' can coexist.

For example, I spoke with Luis, who is a Mexican living in the U.S. and works for a small NGO that operates on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border in the community of Ambos Nogales. He started his career by working with the INM but soon became unhappy with their control policies and became impassioned to do more to help people navigate the complex migration system on both sides of the border. He has been inspired by and has worked within grassroots organizations in Mexico and the U.S. throughout the years, which led him to his current position as Director of Advocacy and Education. His NGO's location in Ambos Nogales is unique since it includes the two cities of Nogales, Sonora, MX and Nogales, AZ, U.S., which they consider as "*the same community divided by the border, but together by its people.*" He says that the NGO embraces its binational identity and has respect from both the Mexican and U.S. governments, despite sometimes having different approaches and views on reality. In the U.S., he emphasizes that it is "*like a love-hate relationship that we have with [government authorities].*" While they collaborate with authorities and will open their shelter to more people if the government requests it, they also write and share critical reports with the public' such as one recently which pointed out a lack of accountability in Border Patrol.

This love-hate relationship can get more complicated depending on which government entity it is they are working with. For instance, I had a conversation with Mariana, the head psychologist and lead responsible for the psychosocial area at a small NGO based in Mexico City, and her colleague, Elena, who is the lawyer responsible for providing legal advice related to asylum petitions. Their organization consists of a 30-member multidisciplinary team and works in several states in the Republic of Mexico to assist women migrants and their families who seek protection in Mexico or in the U.S. Beyond their main clinic in Mexico City, they visit

women in shelters in other states and Elena sometimes visits detention centers to provide information to women who are arbitrarily detained. When asked about their relationships with government actors, they smiled and laughed. Elena says:

> "It depends on what part of the government we are talking about. If you ask about the National Migration Institute [INM], then no, they don't want to… they don't like the work we do because we always highlight the systematic errors they make. But, for example, with the Mexican Refugee Aid Commission [COMAR], it is different because they consider us allies."

Similar experiences were shared by others, such as Marco, who says that the INM and National Guard are very hostile towards his NGO in Querétaro because,

> "we frequently engage in discussions and legal disputes due to their lack of respect for the rights of migrants and refugees. On some occasions they commit serious offenses such as arbitrary detentions… so the work we do with the National Institute of Immigration is the hardest part because our lawyers and I are frequently in a fight with them and it's really hard, but that's the way we have to… I like to say that you cannot negotiate with human rights, yeah? It's a fact and you have to respect it."

These experiences show that the relations may really depend on the aims and capacities of the particular government agency that they are dealing with. For example, Mariana who works with Elena expanded on how they maintain a good alliance with COMAR, which is a small refugee authority that is separate from the INM that oversees and aids refugees, by saying,

> "we always try to have a good relationship, because we know that us as an organization cannot do all the work that the government should do, no? But we know that sometimes the government needs a little bit of help because, for example, there is a lot to do, or the budget is like really tiny."

She says that since COMAR started in 2011 and is still quite new and underfunded, many public institutions such as health and education, do not know that they must attend to refugees according to the law of COMAR. So, their NGO supports them by visiting institutions to inform them of the law. This confirms what Dimitriadis et al. (2021) claim about non-state actors taking a more active role in migration governance, especially when they observe human rights violations. However, power hierarchies still exist, so their influence is limited. According to Claudia, who has worked as a humanitarian for seven years and is the director of Marco's NGO in Querétaro, humanitarians "*try to fill the void*," but politics and resource constraints make it difficult. The government is too stubborn and set in its ways of trying to control, and strategic litigation requires a lot of time and money. So, she says, that although they attempt to bring about change through things such as proposals and pacts, in the end, "*they [the government] always win.*"

Complex relationships with a polarized society

Humanitarian workers recognize their position at the meso-level between migrants and local communities. I have identified three dimensions that impact dynamics here: a practical, personal, and normative dimension.

At the practical, or programmatic dimension, this involves informing public institutions of laws surrounding migrant and refugee rights, as demonstrated by the previously mentioned example of Mariana and Elena's NGO informing health and education institutions of COMAR laws. In some cases, it involves acting more directly as a mediator between migrants and residents of the host community, e.g., employers of local businesses. Elizabeth worked for two years as an employment specialist in a city office of a large humanitarian INGO to help refugees and SIVs resettling in Richmond, VA, U.S. obtain jobs. While her main task was to help her clients find jobs, she often had to teach local employers practicalities such as how to work with an interpreter and ensure that they provided fair wages and safe working conditions. After she helped a client obtain a job, she had to keep managing employers' expectations, for example,

> "I remember one time I had an employer call me, and it was just like, 'this is really uncomfortable to have to say,' but like the client that I had just gotten a job there, like, basically, 'I don't think he's wearing deodorant. And it's a problem, like I think you need to follow up on that,' and I was like, 'will do,' just like trying to not embarrass the client, but also, like, whatever the thing is on the employer side, respect that, especially because it was a nicer-end hotel… so it could be anything, you just never know what the situation is gonna be."

Next, the personal dimension involves tensions that some humanitarian workers feel between themselves and their own family members and friends. Marco describes his and his colleagues' positions as

> "a really hard role in the society in general, because even our families sometimes say that 'no you don't have to help like all the people, you have to help Mexican people, you have to help your own family.'"

These challenges encountered at the practical and personal dimensions are connected to those at the normative dimension of relations with society. This dimension encompasses battlegrounds' complexities that Dimitriadis et al. (2021) point out in which there is opposition between pro- and anti-immigrant viewpoints. This friction often erects barriers in the way of supporting migration and integration as well as bringing about change in policies. For instance, Marco says that the tension he feels in his personal relationships is probably rooted in the conservative ideology of society in Querétaro. Elizabeth, on the other hand, worked in a city that was quite liberal and open to learning how to accept and support refugees. However, when she would try to explain her job

to her grandfather who lives in rural, conservative Ohio, the best way for her to get him to understand her job was by highlighting the situation of Afghan SIVs. Afghans who were employed by and were faithful to the U.S. government, or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), or a successor mission between 2001 and 2023 can receive lawful permanent residence in the U.S. through this program (U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs, n.d.). This group constituted many clients that Elizabeth worked with during her time at the INGO in Richmond, because there is no cap on the number of SIVs to be admitted per year as there is with refugees. She was working there during the years that the Trump administration had significantly reduced the U.S.' cap on refugee admissions. Conservatives such as her grandfather have an easier time sympathizing with SIVs over other refugees because they can sympathize with the notion that they had sacrificed their lives for the U.S.

Each community has instances of anti-immigrant rhetoric, discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. Claudia, who works in the same city as Marco, believes that much of this is rooted in misinformation, which both criminalizes and victimizes people on the move. She claims that the language of local municipal governments saying things such as "*we don't have space*" feeds into such rhetoric and can make it difficult for NGOs to receive support from the community. All three of these relational dimensions between humanitarian workers and society have implications on outcomes of migrants' rights to mobility and integration.

Protectors and informers: Relationships with migrants

At the center of political and societal debates are, of course, migrants, who can often be used as "*bargaining chips*" by governments and other members of society, says Marco. So, humanitarian workers find it important to build trusting relationships with migrants where they feel that their experiences are understood. Ultimately, transparent relationships between humanitarian workers and migrants they care for is vital so that people on the move are humanized and may have their needs fulfilled. For example, Mariana spoke about supporting women who go through emotional struggles as they attempt to integrate into the Mexican community while still dealing with traumas from the place they left and/or precarious encounters on the move. Psychological support has become a common aspect of humanitarian action in this context as they recognize the emotional needs of migrants. Several humanitarian workers view fostering relationships through emotional support as an important way of serving migrants more holistically, beyond just physical essentials.

Humanitarian workers here view themselves as protectors and informers. On one hand, their duty is to protect migrants (especially unaccompanied minors, women, and girls) from harm while they experience the migratory context, while on the other hand, they cannot stop them from deciding to take a dangerous route. Luis, for instance, says that he provides information about

possible dangers and outcomes so that individuals who he encounters can make informed decisions knowing that they face potential consequences. He emphasizes that it is not his role to prevent or encourage any decision; he can orient decisions but must not coerce them into making a particular choice.

Respect for agency can also be personally tough for humanitarian workers because it also means that they respect migrants' choice to not stay in communication after they have received support from an organization. When speaking on this, Dan says,

> "It's difficult…We want to be in contact with these persons, because through communication you can actually better protect them, but they feel that communication puts them in a very difficult and dangerous place. So although they have their mobile phones and all that, and we try to communicate, they they often decide not to do so… and I think also… 90, 98% try to cross the border, and they think that we somehow are connected with local government, so that we will intervene when they try to do this. So it is also a point where they decide not to contact us."

This indicates that relationships with migrants, and with all actors within the MLG of migration cannot really be isolated from each other, but they are all entangled in some way or another in battlegrounds. Humanitarian workers who, at the nexus of care/control (Sahraoui, 2020), break patterns of dependency and domination that typically result from humanitarian protection and 'provider-beneficiary' relationships (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), by more explicitly supporting migrant agency, then find themselves in quite precarious entanglements between migrants, society, and government.

4.4   Walking a Thin Line: The Nexus of Protection/Promotion

From the perspective of a humanitarian worker, the relational entanglements in an unstable, polarized context has them tip toeing a fine line as they perform work beyond essential aid. Further elaborating on how he recognizes the decision-making power of migrants, Luis makes it clear that he is not coaching, but rather informing migrants of conditions and threats in regards to attempting to cross the Mexico-U.S. border. However, this can be misunderstood by members of society and government entities. He says,

> "With the U.S. authorities, I think most of them understand and value our work, but I do think that at certain levels or sectors, particularly low of DHS, there might be some understanding that groups like ours, organizations like ours, are trying to coach people into or calling people into coming here."

Similar concerns were raised by others who work with people on the move into or via Mexico. Dan, who has worked for INGOs in the humanitarian sector for between thirty-five to forty years, labeled it as a "*very bipolar position*" between protection and promotion:

"We have to be very careful as an organization. We do not promote irregular migration, but as an organization in the field of protection, we have to assure that these people, by what they do, they are protected, and they don't fall into the hands of criminal organizations. So, this is a very bipolar position of an organization such as us because we, somehow, we support that they can cross safely the border. But we do not do that... You understand what I'm saying?

It is a very thin line and, and you know, with the United States it's very difficult to talk about that, because when you support migrant populations, the United States feels that we are promoting and supporting them in crossing... irregularly."

This nexus of protection/promotion demonstrates another intersection that is manifested along the humanitarian border besides, or inside, the care/control nexus which scholars typically dig into to analyze how systems of control are engendered by aid work (e.g., Pallister-Wilkins, Sahraoui & Ticktin). As solidarity, advocacy-based, and anti-externalization work becomes more prominent with attempts to lean into care over control and transform the system (Rozakou, 2017; Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Phillips, 2023), they find themselves with new challenges. Although the criminalization of solidarity humanitarianism was not mentioned by interviewees, it is an important background to understanding this nexus. The battlegrounds are situated in a context with limited pathways for legal migration, which results in high irregular migration. While irregular migration is criminalized, so is support for irregular migrants (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021). As such, the legitimacy of (especially INGOs such as Dan's) is at play here because if they are labeled as promoters, their services can be criminalized, and they risk losing their ability to be present in these contexts to fulfill their role as protectors.

Balancing the thin line of this nexus and each relationship therein for the benefit of those they care for and for themselves, as I will delve further into in chapter 5, requires multiple levels of navigation.

Chapter 5 | Navigating Battleground Politics: Enduring, Confronting, Escaping

The social world is moving (Vigh, 2006), as it is impacted by evolving policies, decisions, relationships, etc. as discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will present how humanitarian workers who support mixed migrant populations in Mexico and the U.S. socially navigate their (un)fixed environment. First, the impacts of political structures and multi-actor and -level relationships on humanitarian workers and their work with mixed migrant populations will be discussed. Then, I will identify strategies which were disclosed by individuals as important ways to navigate such a complex environment at the nexuses of care/control and protection/promotion. I will conclude by showing how the impacts of the current context and navigation strategies of individual workers influence what kinds of actions the sector carries out, ultimately demonstrating how the humanitarian sector has shifted its ways of working within the context of the contemporary regional migration management regime and the 'battlegrounds' of the Americas.

5.1   Operating Amid "*hope, distress, stress, and frustration*"

Managing relationships and performing a job in which stakeholders have various negative, positive, and demanding inputs is already a challenge. This challenge is amplified when one is working in a politicized context where procedures and policies laid out by governments are often changing. Especially when the changes are happening in a direction which intensifies control tactics and furthers the misalignment between policies and migrants' realities, says Marco. Border externalization, for example, impacts the ability for humanitarian workers to effectively support people on the move. Mariana and Elena in Mexico City say that any changes that the U.S. makes regarding immigration and asylum policy,

> "has a really big consequence on how the politics and policy in Mexico are going to be, you know, and for example, how the migration officers are going to treat the community [of migrants]."

So, they are challenged with the difficult task of staying informed on what is happening in not only their own country, but with other countries as well. Mariana, in Mexico City, says that when they go to the migrant community, migrants always ask about the current situation, so workers in her organization "*need to be really sharp on that.*" Marco, in Querétaro, finds this especially difficult when attempting to support migrants moving via his city. He identifies information sharing as the first duty of humanitarian workers who work in the context of migration, but this is challenging, he says, because (1) he, and most people in Mexico, are educated on Mexican immigration and refugee law, not U.S. immigration law., and (2) U.S. border procedures frequently change with little notice, leading to disorder:

> "Every single day the information [from the U.S.] is different, so the people in Mexico and in Latin America maybe this week [heard] that the border is open or this program of CBP One is giving some facilities or some things…but when they arrive to the border, the things are changing."

On top of this, humanitarian work, especially psychosocial work, is round-the-clock. For example, Mariana got a phone call from one of her clients who was experiencing psychological distress in the middle of our interview. She had to take a few minutes away to connect them to the proper support. She says that they are always supporting women deal with trauma related to violence, which can make burnout complicated and common amongst her colleagues.

Connected to this, Claudia expresses that in her seven years as a humanitarian worker in Mexico, the feelings that frequently arise are "*hope, distress, stress, and frustration.*"

> "From the position of a humanitarian, you are able to hear the life experiences of those you interact with and then you can not only see the realities of the host country, but also the realities of the country where they came from."

From her position, she can empathize with migrants and acknowledge their humanity. She finds hope in the voices of the people on the move she supports. She also finds it in her colleagues' collective efforts to try transform the system. But she finds it upsetting that people do not feel safe in their home, and that they are politicized and dehumanized by the system which gives them limited options to reach safety and a dignified life. The politicization, criminalization, victimization, and misinformation which ultimately dehumanizes migrants causes a lot of anger amongst humanitarian workers. For instance, Marco says that it is frustrating that policies continue to pose migration as a national security issue because that rhetoric will not manage it. Migration is an inevitable reality that you cannot stop, he argues. Thus, the continued use of these narratives will keep policies disconnected from the real needs of migrants and continue the necessity for a humanitarian response.

Interviewees in Mexico accused their federal government of being an abuser and human rights violator. Interviewees in the U.S. criticized their federal government for setting out an unsympathetic and constricting system. They use their position to point out injustices and human rights violations and help governmental institutions, but are limited since government entities and systems are set in their ways of grasping for control. For example, Stephanie describes the resettlement program as an "*awful, awful program*" that does not provide refugees the proper time and resources that they need to humanely resettle with ease:

> "I mean we have had clients like you know that have really found the process to be challenging. And if they maybe are SIVs and they are able to travel, unlike refugees, to the country they've left, sometimes they leave. Sometimes they literally go back to Afghanistan. They're like 'it's too hard here. My war-torn country is a little bit easier to handle.' And I just feel like that should kind of be all the feedback we need because

it hasn't happened once or twice, it's happened a handful of times… It's just really hard to feel like you're still contributing to this idea of resettlement that a lot of people think it is."

Despite this stark example that the system is not working, she does not see much hope in transformations being made to it. The compounding nature of all the above, justifiably, causes mental and emotional tolls as well as motivation to fight for and influence change.

5.2 Enduring the Existing System

Before changing the system, humanitarian workers must endure it long enough to understand how and in what ways they can use their position to do so. Besides, since the system is so set on the idea of control, enduring it from within might be the only way to ensure that migrants at least receive some level of support and are not totally abandoned. As Dan says, "*somebody has to do it.*" Two main ways of navigating the system were identified here: (psycho)social support and staying updated on policy changes while purposively centering humanity.

Interviewees mention that being able to navigate working within entangled systems of control is a difficult effort; it gets cumulatively easier over time, according to Dan and Audrey who have both worked in the INGO sector for decades. Stephanie is much newer to the sector, yet still finds this a crucial way to endure her environment. Working for an INGO in the U.S. resettlement system was her first job post-university starting in 2019. For her, building up '*tough skin*' is especially important because clients can be mean and project intense emotions onto people in her position as they struggle navigate resettlement.

Seeking out professional psychological support may help with developing skills which build up that so-called tough skin. It was indicated by several interviewees as an important coping mechanism to endure the frequent hardships and frustrations they experience in their jobs. When asked how they navigate working in such a complex environment, several sighed and laughed, saying they go to a lot of therapy. Dan, has grown quite accustomed to working in violent contexts throughout his career and describes his story as "*very complicated*" since he lived and worked in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. He describes the kind of psychological support he has received to heal from traumatic experiences of the job:

> "If you say 'no, I can manage it,' and all that, then you're lying to yourself because you cannot, and you need to somehow -- not to disconnect -- but to…what they do, actually, when they treat you is they get you to re-live the situation… they try like not to put it away in a place here somewhere (*points to head*), but to re-live it again, so you can better deal and cope with it, and it will not emerge again when you are 60-70 years-old and you do not work anymore."

In addition to professional psychotherapy such as this, informal social support amongst colleagues and friends is valued by many. This includes venting to personal friends as well as connecting with colleagues. For example, Elizabeth says she built camaraderie with her colleagues over the stress of the job, and when they would spend time outside of work together, "*sometimes we set timers for each other just like for time to rant, just so that it wasn't like three hours later and we're still talking about hard stuff.*"

As policies and national and regional agreements are often changing, staying informed is vital for humanitarian workers to fulfill the roles as service and information providers for people on the move. Marco, for example, says he reads the global news every day, especially now that he is encountering migrants that do not only come from the Americas. He also is connected to networks of legal teams and migrants shelters in Mexico as well as the UN which fosters communication between people in different locations, e.g., at the Northern and Southern border. By staying informed about policy changes "*we adapt our job to the reality,*" says Marco. This is an important strategy to be able to navigate the moving world and perform their duty as both protectors and informers for migrants.

5.3 Confronting and Escaping Systems of Control: No Longer a "simple sticking plaster for the status quo"

Next to the above strategies for navigating and maintaining motivation in the present system, several interviewees indicate how they socially navigate the system in relation to their goals for the future. This is typically done by challenging conditions in attempts to make migration management more just and humane for all involved. This refutes Pallister-Wilkins' (2019) claim that humanitarian response to violent borders supplements the status quo of restrictive mobility regimes by not addressing the structural causes at the root of the suffering and adds to Rozakou's (2017) idea of solidarity humanitarianism. Although humanitarian workers along the arterial border of U.S. and Mexico provide essential provisions such as food and shelter which constitute classical humanitarianism, many will not do so without also fighting to transform the system. Some indicate that acting in forms of solidarity is the only way they feel that they can morally work on issues related to migration because they do not want to be complicit in inhumane, disingenuous practices which can result from the entanglement of securitization and humanitarianization. Dan and Luis, for example, mention that the way the sector has been doing things is not going to address the fact that governments are producing the crisis where there should be none. Dan emphasizes that it is crucial to stand in solidarity with local groups and reinforce their capacities so that they may take

the lead in pressuring the "*crappy government*" to change its inhumane control tactics. Several interviewees mention that performing acts of solidarity is a strategy for them to feel hope despite constant frustrations.

Opting out as a form of solidarity?

Social navigation involves breaking away from confines in order to better position oneself in an unstable, moving world (Vigh, 2009). For some, socially navigating the care/control nexus involves leaving the organization they are working for. Dadusc and Mudu (2020) define a part of autonomous solidarity as, "resistance to the control and commodification of migrant lives" (p.3). It seems that this sort of resistance could involve abandoning or opting out of the job completely in order to avoid being complicit to an unjust system.

Elizabeth, for example, took advantage of therapy sessions that her INGO offered employees, commonly vented to friends, and was able to let things roll off her back, but eventually decided that the best thing to do for herself was to leave.

> "when you're in such a heart-driven position, I think that can be taken advantage of a lot. And I had experiences where I just felt like exploited, for like by management, for the role of the job, it's just kind of like, well, this is the way it is like, that's what the job you signed up for, and it's like, but it doesn't have to be."

Not only did she feel exploited within the organization, but she also feels that the refugee reception and care system in the U.S. is restrictive, patronizing, and rushed. She has since moved on to a less heart-driven job, but strives to join a community-, refugee-led organization someday which works to transform the system to meet the needs of refugees genuinely and humanely. Her criticisms and desires represent the unrest that many have with traditional professional humanitarianism and align with the growth of solidarity humanitarianism in borderlands (Rozakou, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Her position also demonstrates that the shift is happening in post-reception contexts in addition to 'via' contexts where it has mostly been studied.

5.4 Adapting the Approach at the Organizational Level: Multidisciplinary strategies to Promote Solidarity

The humanitarian border and nexus of care/control has been manifested through "combining violent deterrence with forms of care" (Sahraoui, 2020, p. 906), and as the humanitarian sector has come to criticize itself (Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019) and the consequences of its work in these contexts, it has evolved. The above outlined personal motivations and actions taken by individuals to tolerate, challenge, and disrupt systems of control that are disconnected from the realities of migrants' needs are reflected in how the humanitarian sector adapts its strategies. Despite different locations and organizational compositions, organizations shared common themes which reflect

sectoral shifts. These include localization and engagement with communities; route-based and accompaniment programs; and strategic action with multidisciplinary teams.

First, working together with local partners and forming consortiums is identified as an important strategy to navigate battlegrounds and ensure that migrants' needs are met. Localization, as a key approach within resilience humanitarianism (Hilhorst, 2018) emphasizes strengthening capacities and respecting or returning ownership to local actors (Barbelet, 2018). This term and ideas related to it frequently appeared in documents and were mentioned in interviews as an approach to properly address issues. INGOs have especially come to recognize that individuals that come from the context are the most equipped to change it, reflecting what Dan says in the previous section. Local NGOs, such as Claudia and Marco's, also form alliances with other local and international NGOs to be stronger together to holistically meet the needs of migrants and move towards the future they strive to achieve.

In alignment with prioritizing the local, organizations engage communities in hopes of educating, sensitizing, and changing harmful societal narratives as presented in chapter four. Mariana and Elena's NGO in Mexico City, for example, hosted a workshop for Mexican journalists a few years ago to discuss topics of gender, race, violence, and international protection. It brought awareness to journalists so that they recognize the power of their voice in influencing the views of society: *"'if we put the news in a very awful way, the Mexican community is going to pull back and that are not going to help them.'"* So, this is one step in changing mis-led beliefs about migrants.

Luis' duty in the education component of his job is similar, yet takes this relational dimension one step further. His NGO use their unique binational identity to go beyond simple education, to promote solidarity amongst society locally and state(s)- and nation(s)-wide:

> "So whenever we talk about education, it's not about teaching something, or schooling, no, it's more about… fighting narratives, engaging the community. So, we see it more as facilitating these encounters between migrants and the rest of the community because we know we have proven experience that this helps humanize the border reality…this helped awaken solidarity. But understanding solidarity not as these big feelings of compassion towards the other, like, 'ohh, poor thing,' no, no, solidarity means, you know, fighting shoulder by shoulder for common good."

This reflects that localized approaches that engage communities are used to promote solidarity actions which have been adopted by many humanitarian workers.

To navigate changing policies, diverse cases that they encounter, and varying needs that appear along the trajectories of people on the move, humanitarian organizations have designed routes-based and accompaniment programs. In Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., accompaniment and routes-based programs have become common, where they follow migrant trajectories and

commit to holistically "walking" with those seeking a safe and dignified life. Routes-based programs, such as that of IFRC discussed earlier adapt their response to how and where migrants are moving. Accompaniment programs, such as *Caminar Contigo* [Walk with you]: JRS/USA Binational Border Program, commit to attend to migrants' needs physically, spiritually, and psychologically as they provide them legal information and assistance (JRS/USA, n.d.). Luis' organization also emphasizes the importance of holistically accompanying migrants in this way.

Hiring more specialized employees is important for conducting the above programs and navigating the complex context. For example, Mariana and Elena's organization has hired a lawyer from the U.S. to help them understand changes within the U.S. asylum and immigration system. Recently, this colleague helped them to grasp what the ending of Title 42 meant. In addition to this, their organization has found multidisciplinary teams to be an important approach in supporting the complexities of migrant struggles as they try to integrate into Mexican communities, apply for asylum, await decisions on whether they will receive international protection status, and/or figure out where to go next. They have found it especially important as they have adapted their methods to integrate a permanent psychosocial area, which Mariana established in 2020, that transverses with their other areas of work. So, although they have different specializations, Mariana and Elena often work together as they "*walk with the women towards their international protection or their refugee status.*"

Multidisciplinary teams are also important for conducting strategic action to move in relation to future ambitions. Advocacy for a better immigration system is prioritized, and in the case of Audrey's INGO, being placed at an equal level of importance as traditional humanitarian aid services. This aligns with Phillips (2023) finding of humanitarians as advocates. Organizations are conducting strategic action in solidarity with and to advocate for a better system on behalf of people on the move to the government, as several humanitarian workers express their belief that they have a role in influencing governmental policy. And there have been recent successes in this. For example, Claudia and Marco's NGO is the only organization in Querétaro that works on migrant and refugee issues, and they recently went to their state's Congress to help make changes to the local law regarding treatment and care of migrants in their state. Elena also started a successful lawsuit against the government and worked with other organizations to fight for the rights for migrants without documents to get the COVID vaccine in Mexico. These successes refute Dijkzeul and Sandvik's (2019) claim that "humanitarians play a role in the policies and practices of other actors but can rarely steer them" (S101).

To sum up, localization and engagement with communities; route-based and accompaniment programs; and strategic action with multidisciplinary teams are vital strategies for humanitarian

organizations to socially navigate their present circumstances and future uncertainties. They are connected to the goals of individuals within them to break away from systems of control while offering essential humanitarian provisions.

Chapter 6 | Realities of Humanitarianism in a Policy-induced Crisis

As humanitarian workers and organizations make adaptations to the ways they respond to the migration 'crisis', it is meaningful to reflect on the principles upon which their sector is founded. This chapter further discusses what contemporary humanitarian actions looks like and addresses the relevancy of humanitarian principles for humanitarian workers navigating battlegrounds along the arterial border of U.S. and Mexico. It also shares internal criticism which could foreshadow upcoming shifts in the sector.

6.1   Principles in Action: The Struggle to Remain Neutral

As discussed in previous chapters, humanitarian workers simultaneously fill gaps in essential service provision and create cracks in the unjust governance of migration in Mexico and the U.S. This confirms both Dimitriadis et al.'s (2021) claim that non-state actors are stepping up to protect migrants when governments are unable or unwilling to, and Rozakou's (2017) idea of 'solidarity humanitarianism.' It also fits into the ongoing shift towards resilience humanitarianism which includes moves away from principled work to an approach that more centralizes human rights (Hilhorst, 2018; Dijkzeul & Sandvik, 2019). These dynamics and shifts thus raise questions about the relevancy of the humanitarian principles in such a context. The four humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – are meant to be upheld at all times by humanitarians (OCHA, 2012). While the principle of humanity is identified to be central to their work, several interviewees disclose that the principle of neutrality, which asserts that "humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in conroversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature" (OCHA, 2012, p. 1), is challenging to adhere to because migration in the Americas has become a policy-induced crisis. Claudia says that discrimination, criminalization, victimization, xenophobia, and misinformation have segregated migrants in Mexico and the U.S., and it is "*all in the name of national security.*" Marco says this framing of the issue is not the reality and only amplifies unnecessary suffering.

Several interviewees mention that their motivation to work in the sector specifically with migrants was a political choice. For example, Luis joined due to not liking the actions and control policies of the INM. While he has now established himself at a small organization which allows him to be a bit political as it prioritizes solidarity and advocacy in addition to its humanitarian work, Elizabeth explains the frictions she encountered while working for an INGO:

> "We weren't supposed to associate [the organization] with any of our specific political views, which always felt a little bit ironic, because… for me, working for them felt so politically motivated, so…

> [I was] motivated by being anti-Trump, but I also understood that unless you're like safe… unless you're just in a private conversation with an employer or something, I understood just trying to minimize your personal opinions just for the sake of like… um I don't want to say attracting, but like appealing, to as many people as possible. Because I think it's like, yeah, it's a very politicized topic…"

This demonstrates the difficulty of being neutral as a humanitarian worker within a political battleground in which other actors that you must cooperate with can have different pro- and anti-immigrant views. So, she says that she "*followed the rules*" to not jeopardize her position or the organization's relations with (also conservative) donors, but internally it "*sometimes just starts to sound like HR fluff.*"

This type of sentiment towards humanitarian principles is also held by Dan. That they are not so relevant is evident in that I had to remind him, a person who has worked in the sector for thirty-five to forty years, what the principles are. Once reminded, he claims, "*you can't operate without them,*" but "*it's not that you have a banner, you know, like 'we are neutral, and we are non-religious, and we are whatever, and we are of no political party!*'" He also says,

> "it's very difficult to be in favor of the present administration in Mexico… but when you deal directly with the population itself, you do not say anything about that. I mean you demonstrate your humanitarian face, and you do what you say you will do and if you can… and you'd be transparent in what you can and what you cannot [do]. Yeah, and you must be completely open… but never move on the political side or the religious side."

This idea of a 'humanitarian face' illustrates the tenuous position that humanitarian workers must balance between their personal identity and their working identity as they navigate their tenuous position between government authorities, migrants, and society. Many of them wrestle with the idea of remaining neutral and apolitical in a politically-charged context in which they feel that one of their duties is to humanize the people on the move that they work with, but also must not veer too far away from their scope and abilities that they have from their position.

6.2 How does this present at the nexus of protection/promotion?

Although many of the humanitarian workers I spoke with are not entirely neutral, they recognize that dilemmas arise as they are placed at the nexus of protection/promotion along the arterial border. How to protect migrants without being charged with breaking the law and promoting irregular migration is a difficult task which requires reflection and compromise. Two important strategies to manage relationships here have been identified: diplomacy with government authorities and transparency with migrants.

Diplomacy is crucial: "You attract more bees with honey, right?"

Despite being unapologetically political, some interviewees suggest that there must be some form of diplomatic compromise to meet migrants' needs and maintain legitimacy, credibility, and a good reputation in their work. Although they might be against the actions of certain government authorities, in the end, they also need them. For example, Marco says that the government in Querétaro is xenophobic, but since he is part of a social organization, they must work with the local government, INM, and National Guard. He notes that they need these government entities because it is difficult to do this work without them: it is a reality that migrants and refugees will settle, leave, or travel via their state to the U.S. So, in order to address that reality, each of these entities must work together whether they share perspectives or not. He says that his NGO, despite not being neutral when it comes to working on migrant-related issues, is "*not really radical.*" They are diplomatic to achieve their goals. When they see violations such as arbitrary detentions, they "*cannot ask permission*" to combat them, but, he says, it is it is more efficient to have allies than enemies to create change, so they *"appear first for the dialogue and then fight."*

Luis experiences this as well, especially while trying to collaborate with U.S. authorities, he says,

> "We have credibility but sometimes, you know, it might be complicated, considering that, you know, we just had this report about complaints against the CBP and Border Patrol, and the lack of accountability… because of my prior roles, I know how to get things with diplomacy. We have this saying in Mexico… 'you attract more bees with honey', right? So that's kind of like our approach. At the same time, we are not afraid of escalating things whenever it's needed."

To sum this up, maintaining diplomatic dialogue with government authorities in this context, even if you cannot interact with them neutrally, is crucial to be able to meet migrants' needs. It can also be interpreted as a strategy to ensure that acts of solidarity, advocacy, and protection are not perceived as promotion of irregular migration.

Being realistic: Transparency with people on the move

Relationships that exist between humanitarian workers and people on the move at the nexus of promotion/protection must also be reflected upon as neutrality is tested. As Dan mentions in his quote in the previous section regarding neutrality, ensuring transparency with migrants and staying within the scope of what is possible from their position is a necessary part of his work. Although he does not agree with the policies of the Mexican government, he is still limited in what he can do, so he cannot give migrants false hope. Luis shares a similar concern as he works at the U.S.-Mexico border in Ambos Nogales. For example, he says that some people misunderstood his NGO's work to be part of the asylum process, so he must explain that to people on the move who he encounters:

"We are nongovernmental organization, which means that for good or for worse, we don't have anything to do with the government of Mexico or the US or any other... And I say for good or for worse, because this also means that we have no say in asylum. Asylum is something that only a government gives, and you know, so that's kind of like how we explain things."

Recognizing and sharing the limits of their abilities within their role to migrants is an important part of ethically doing their job. Yet, it also raises questions and critiques amongst humanitarian workers of their own presence in borderscapes. They may reject and influence systems of control, but they are restrained and still entangled in them as they attend to migrant communities who need support.

6.3 Problematization of Own Existence: Humanitarianizing the Arterial Border is Not a Solution

The humanitarian workers I spoke with view the suffering faced by migrants as an unjust consequence of deterrence policies set out by governments. Each of them are aware that a humanitarian response is not the solution to such a crisis, which is why many of them have tried to escape the system through solidarity and community-led work.

For example, the initial response I received from Claudia was: "*the first thing you should ask is, why do we exist?*" This sentiment that migration and mobility should not require a humanitarian response was shared by many interviewees. While governments have securitized and militarized borderscapes, they have also humanitarianized them (Walters, 2011). And while different actors in mobility regimes sustain each other (Vogt, 2016 in Winters & Izaguirre, 2019, p. 5), it seems that humanitarian workers here reject their existence as a reaction to policy-induced human suffering. Several wish that there was no need for organizations like their own.

When asked about their ideal vision for the future of migration management and humanitarianism, several participants express practical wishes. For example, Marco says he hopes for better recognition in Mexican cities of the entire migrant context: 'origin,' 'transit,' and refugees. He and others also mention a vision of stronger partnerships with the government and other local and international NGOs. Several also express a desire for more funding, recognition of migrant populations that do not receive news coverage, and access to health, education, and security.

Beyond these desires which may be attainable in the existing system, many "ideal" futures involve migration not being an issue. As Luis says,

"They want to sell us the idea of a crisis where there is none... as long as we continue to see migration as a problem that needs to be solved and contained, then that's all it's ever gonna be."

So, he envisions a future with more legal pathways in the U.S. and less deterrence policies. Some have gone deeper in problematizing the systems of migration and humanitarianism to bring up anti-capitalist and decolonial themes. Elizabeth and Stephanie mention how they feel that the resettlement system in the U.S. is founded upon "*the worst parts of capitalism.*" It forces newly arrived refugees to obtain a job and contribute to society as quickly as possible without considering that many individuals arrive with serious trauma and/or other issues. Additionally, four interviewees in Mexico brought up decolonial themes. Dan, for example, is critical of the antiquated ways that his INGO operates and acknowledges his position as a "*gray Dutch guy, who is a representation often of people who are the cause of the problem.*" So, he wants to return ownership to locals and the younger generation to be changemakers in Mexico.

Mariana stresses the need for developed countries, e.g., the U.S., to recognize what they have done to contribute to harm in less developed countries like those in Central America which has contributed to the causes of forced migration:

> "The main problem, I think, with migration is on how, for example, the U.S. or other countries more developed, you know, than Central America or Mexico have done to the countries. And I think that it means saying that a lot of the intervention that these countries do to the countries with less development have an impact. And that impact means less security, less access to health, so I think that the problem is really structural. And if we don't face that or maybe these countries don't start to own or recognize the harm that they do, or that they did in the past, we cannot move forward…
>
> And I connect that to the idea of having no borders… and I think that all the community understands that when a person is trying to flee their country, it's not because they want to…"

These assertions align with considerations of decolonizing humanitarianism to reject the reproduction of violence (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022) as well as the idea of 'migration as decolonization' (Achiume, 2019). Delving deeper into this topic does not fit into the scope of this study, yet it demonstrates possible shifts that are to come at the intersections of humanitarianism and migration governance in the Americas as individuals challenge systemic issues.

Chapter 7 | Conclusion

Through qualitative methodology, this study sought to understand the positions of humanitarian workers in the Americas' migration management regime, particularly in the U.S. and Mexico. The research adds to literature which has conceptualized the MLG of migration as a 'battleground' (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Ambrosini, 2021; Dimitriadis et al., 2021) by illustrating the relationships between humanitarian workers and other state and non-state actors. Caught in systems of control from governments that try to manage migration at different points along the arterial border, humanitarian workers provide a range of services beyond essential lifesaving aid to people on the move. They perform more advocacy and solidarity work to demand change in a system which prioritizes national security over human lives, confirming Rozakou's (2017) idea of 'solidarity humanitarianism.' Perspectives of humanitarian workers who participate diversely in such work offer a new viewpoint of the care/control nexus (Sahraoui, 2020) in humanitarian borderwork. Their complex relations with government authorities, migrants, and society place them at a *nexus of protection/promotion*. Here, where securitization, criminalization, human rights, violence, and humanitarianism meet, they find themselves in a tenuous position where they must balance a thin line of protecting migrants' lives without promoting irregular migration.

Using 'social navigation' (Vigh, 2009), the study uncovered how humanitarian workers (1) endure the existing (un)fixed context through (psycho)social support and staying updated on frequent policy changes; and (2) challenge the system through (strategic) acts of solidarity. These are reflected in how INGOs and NGOs have adapted to the context through prioritizing approaches such as localization and engagement with communities; route-based and accompaniment programs; and strategic action with multidisciplinary teams. While carrying out solidarity humanitarian work in a policy-induced crisis, the principle of humanity is centered, while there is a struggle to remain neutral. Despite this, humanitarian workers recognize their position and relations at the nexus of promotion/protection, so they maintain diplomacy with government actors and transparency with migrants.

I do not refute the existence of the nexus of care/control (Sahraoui, 2020) or the Humanitarian Industrial Complex (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020), but the perspectives and actions here demonstrate that many humanitarian workers along the arterial border of U.S. and Mexico refuse to take part in reproducing or extending systems of control to mixed migrant populations. Rather, they lean into care and social justice. Pallister-Wilkins et al. (2023) consider whether humanitarianism could be on a "path… of recognizing simultaneously the dynamics of care and those of injustice, aiming to provide the first while eliminating the latter" (p. 297). The way they navigate their context and mention decolonial and anti-capitalist themes indicates that this may indeed be the trajectory

that the sector is currently on. Overall, it has been made clear, from the perspectives of humanitarian workers, that the way migration is governed is not working and we must work towards a future in which policies do not make it a humanitarian issue.

Recognizing limitations of scope, time, and virtual interviews, other data collection methods such as ethnography, in-person interviews and observation could be useful ways to better understand the bigger picture of humanitarian borderwork in the Americas. It would also be meaningful to include respondents from Central and South America as the tendrils of the arterial border (Vogt, 2017) extend through them as well. Future research should also compare how individuals in INGOs versus NGOs navigate battlegrounds of migration governance and perhaps focus on managerial structures within organizations. Perspectives of migrants, civilians, and government authorities are also needed to fully grasp the dynamics of the migration management regime. Inquiry into solidarity humanitarianism in settings of conflict, refugee camps, and disasters would also be interesting, especially in regard to how the principle of neutrality is upheld.

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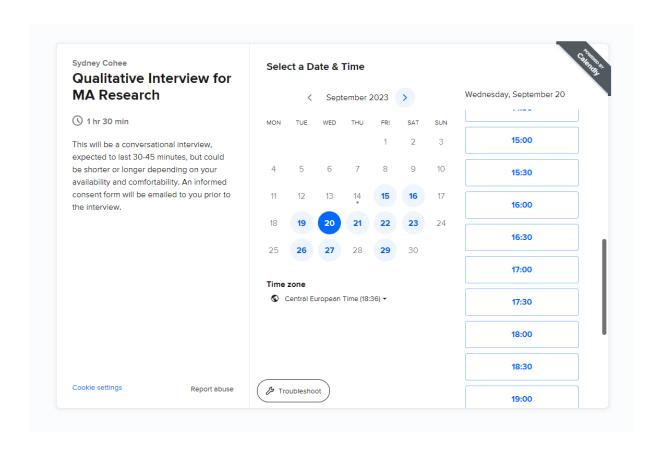
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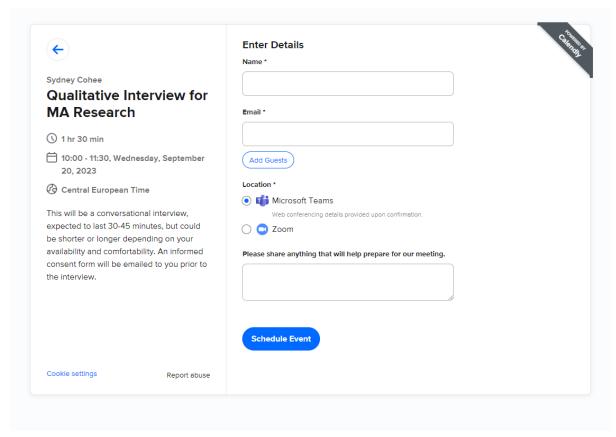
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Appendix A: Calendly Booking Page

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduce a little bit about yourself and what led to this research interest. Ask if they had any questions about the informed consent form. Assure of confidentiality, anonymity, and secured storage of data.

Ask if you can start the video/audio recording.

1) Introduction
    a. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (e.g., where are you from, what led you to where you are now)

    b. What is the name of the organization you work for and where is it located?

    c. What is your position/job title?
        i. What is required of this role?

    d. How do you relate to the organization's mission?

    e. Do you have particular expertise which made you an attractive candidate for this role?

    f. How do you describe yourself?

        i. Nationality, race, gender, age, ability, citizenship status, political affiliation, religion, etc.

            >>> *judge for yourself whether this is an appropriate time to ask this question – maybe better to ask at the end or not at all.*

2) Local context/battleground

    a. How do you describe the local context where you are working?

        i. Direct/indirect interactions

        ii. Current migrant conditions

        iii. Any major current events

        iv. Current/most impactful policies in relation to migration

    b. How do you feel about your work there?

    c. How do you think others perceive your work/presence?

    d. How would you describe your relationship with other actors involved with migrant-related issues (including migrants)?

    e. How would you describe a typical day of work?

    f.   How do you cope with receiving various inputs from multiple different sources/actors?

        i.   Example?

3) Migration management regime in Americas

    a.   How do changing migration management strategies and agreements in the Americas impact your work?

        i.   Can you give an example?

    b.   How do you view your role, and/or the role of humanitarian work, within migration management?

    c.   How do you personally adapt to and deal with changing immigration-related policies in the region and conditions impacted by them?

        i.   Example?

    d.   How do humanitarian principles impact how you navigate and perform your work which is tied to a highly politicized issue?

        i.   Do you feel particularly attached to the principles?

4) Critiques of humanitarianism

    a.   How aware are you of scholarly and societal critiques about humanitarianism in borderscapes?

        i.   How do you feel about them?

        ii.   Is there anything you think is missing from them?

        iii.   How have they changed how you perceive your work?

5) How do you envision the future of humanitarianism and migration governance?

6) Is there anything more you would like to share? Or something you would like to ask me?

Ask if they'd like to stay in touch or perhaps be interested in giving weekly updates over email or whatsapp.
Ask if they want a copy of the RP.

Appendix C: Interviewees Positions and Roles

Pseudonym	Type of organization, Location	Role	Responsibilities	Other important notes
Dan	INGO, Mexico	Country Director	Based in small office in Mexico City and manages 'field teams' of the migration program in Tapachula and Ciudad Juarez. Legal Responsible for program and fundraising strategies.	• He has about 35 to 40 years of experience in the sector. • INGO has 50 country offices around the world. • Dutch national with a Mexican wife and children.
Stephanie	INGO, USA	Casework Supervisor	Oversees the initial reception and placement period of refugees, SIVs, and asylees in Richmond, Virginia.	• She started as an employment specialist (like Elizabeth) when she finished her undergraduate degree three years ago. • INGO operates in over 40 countries and 29 U.S. cities. • U.S. nationality.
Audrey	INGO, USA	Vice President of Advocacy and Operations	Based in Washington, D.C., she works on advocacy, overseas and domestically, and manages institutional operations.	• Past experience being part of a much larger INGO. • Her current INGO is small yet operates in about 58 countries. • U.S. nationality.
Sara	INGO, USA	Member Board of Directors[9]	Takes part in the governance and decision-making of the organization.	• Many years of experience working for operations of INGO in Latin America and other regions. • Now serves on BoD and is an academic in the field of migration.
Mariana	NGO, Mexico	Head Psychologist	Based in Mexico City, she is the head psychologist and lead responsible for the psychosocial area at their clinic.	• She started the psychological area of the organization about three years ago. • The organization has a small, interdisciplinary staff. • Mexican nationality.
Elena	NGO, Mexico	Lawyer	She is an asylum lawyer based at their clinic in Mexico City but travels to other states to visit migrants in shelters and detention centers.	• The organization has a small, interdisciplinary staff. • Mexican nationality.

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[9] Sara is included as an 'expert' interview.

Claudia	NGO, Mexico	Director	Based in Queretaro, MX, she handles operational and administrative work of the organization's different focus areas.	7 years of experience as a humanitarian worker. - The organization is reliant on volunteers and a small staff. - Mexican nationality.
Elizabeth	INGO, USA	Employment Specialist	Based in Richmond, VA, she helped clients (refugees and SIVs) obtain and maintain jobs.	- This was her first job after her undergraduate degree. - U.S. nationality
Luis	NGO, USA & Mexico [10]	Director of Advocacy & Education	Works in Nogales, AZ, U.S. and Nogales, Sonora, MX. He is responsible for the advocacy strategy in MX and U.S. and engaging the community through their education strategy.	- The organization is reliant on volunteers and small staff. - His background is in law. - He is a Mexican immigrant in the U.S.
Marco	NGO, Mexico	Legal Assistance Coordinator	Works at the legal center of the NGO in Queretaro.	4 years of experience in international refugee and Mexican migration law. Mexican nationality.

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[10] Although this organization works in both Mexico and the U.S., I do not classify it as an INGO because despite there being a physical border between the two cities they operate in -- Nogales, Sonora, MX and Nogales, Arizona, USA -- Luis said that they view it as one community. They only work in this one area without other international/global scopes.