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Multi-Dimensional Crises: The European Refugee Response

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Transboundary Crises and Change: The European Refugee Response

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Abstract

This cross-country study of the European refugee response along the Balkan route highlights the importance of change over time within crises. In 48 interviews and six focus groups with members of public and nonprofit organizations, as well as volunteers, respondents shared a widespread understanding of important changes in activity based on critical turning points in the crisis response. We identified three major phases that involved different stakeholders, or at times, the same stakeholders in different ways. Both formal and informal respondents were bound by these phases, which affected strategic programming, staffing and budgeting within organizations. The effect this had between organizations seemed even more profound, changing the way stakeholders from different sectors viewed each other, which had implications for the nature of learning and partnering across sectors.

Keywords: Collaboration, Crisis, Learning, NGOs, Refugees

Introduction

Public sector agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) respond to unexpected external jolts in dynamic, unpredicatable environments (Ansell et al. 2010; Brändström et al. 2004) that often do not stop at organizational or national boundaries. Managers need skills for adaptation and coordination to work efficiently through such crises and learn from them (Ansell et al. 2010; Garkisch et al. 2017; Meyer and Simsa 2018). The so-called refugee crisis in Europe, with its peak in 2015-2016, represents one such transboundary crisis requiring adaptation and coordination in public, NGO, and in this case, voluntary responses (Francart and Borton 2016; Simsa et al. 2018).

In 2015 and 2016, large numbers of people fled crisis and war in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon or moving on towards Western Europe (UNHCR 2017). One route travelled by many of these people, and the focus of this

study, is the ‘Balkan route’. Refugees moved from Greece through Bulgaria or North Macedonia, to Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and/or Hungary, eventually hoping to reach Germany and other countries in Western Europe. Conditions and context along the route changed quickly over time, including flows of refugees, extensive involvement of spontaneous volunteers (Kaltenbrunner and Reichel 2018; Twigg and Mosel 2017) and an initial explosion of NGO activity (Borton and Collinson 2017; Francart and Borton 2016; Kornberger et al. 2018). Coordination in such rapidly evolving disaster response systems requires learning and change under uncertainty (Andrews et al. 2013; Moynihan 2008).

This study highlights the importance of change within this crisis and the interrelatedness of decision causes and effects across sectors and borders. We seek to understand 1) the evolution of the crisis over time, 2) changes in context and coordination for different stakeholders across the different phases of the response and 3) how stakeholders experienced learning in each phase.

In the following section, we review the relevant literature on crises, cross-sectoral coordination, and learning within crises, and develop our research framework. We present the case in the third section. We then provide the results framed by our research questions, based on a qualitative study of members engaged in managing the response along the Balkan refugee route. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude with implications for practitioners and suggestions for future research.

Cross-Sectoral Coordination in Crises

Extreme context research for management matters (Hallgren et al., 2018), fostering integration of various research streams. We seek here to bridge organization and public and nonprofit management literature with disaster response research to provide insights from an interdisciplinary perspective. A cross-sectoral interorganizational partnering approach serves as a primary perspective to understand multiple stakeholder responses to crisis (Kapucu and Ustun 2018; Martin et al. 2016; Raju and Becker

2013). Coordination within such self-organizing complex systems often proves difficult as stakeholders seek solutions across domains of expertise (Bruns 2013; Comfort 1994). Collective action may have a mitigating effect on service provision and performance, but can also be negatively affected by environmental jolts such as unexpected migration flows (Andrews et al. 2013).

Time and Learning in Crises

Coordination in rapidly evolving crisis response systems requires learning and change under uncertainty (Andrews et al., 2013; Moynihan, 2008), where time proves a critical variable (Fleischer, 2013). Organizational learning from previous crises received much attention in previous studies (Comfort et al. 2004; Moynihan 2008). As a crisis unfolds, practitioners and researchers ask what lessons could be learned over time and across boundaries that could be applied to new situations (Ansell et al., 2000). The environment for learning and change is particularly complex in crises with extreme uncertainty and transboundary characteristics, like the refugee crisis, as they "transcend administrative levels, sectors, and ministerial areas and at the same time are unique, ambiguous, complex, and involve a lot of uncertainty" (Christensen et al. 2016 p. 888). However, crises are also considered a facilitator for learning, as they challenge the status quo and stimulate an environment of change and reform (Stern 1997). To respond to crises, organizations need to find "balance between stability and flexibility" (Meyer and Simsa 2018, p. 1160).

Crises and their coordination mechanisms unfold over time, constraining reaction time as responses must be identified immediately, but do tend to evolve in distinguishable sequences (Fleischer 2013). Fleischer conceptualized three different perceptions of time – political, quantic and episodic. Political time refers to the political capacity of stakeholders to set the agenda, fostering complacency or urgency in a response. Quantic time refers to breaks in the linear progression due to extraordinary events that jolt organizational contexts. Episodic time refers to the time between initial recognition of an event and

its conclusion. These three notions of time inter-relate as social order emerges amongst crisis stakeholders, with different stakeholders likely facing different political understandings and pressures, different weighting of the saliency of external events and different interpretations of time. An additional aspect highlighted by Boin et al. (2005) and expanded upon by Fleischer (2013) is the influence of sequencing and tempo. Actors tend to have a common understanding of the sequencing of events required to address the conflict, and perhaps even developed contingency plans, but crisis can disrupt such routine sequencing. Tempo refers to the pace of response, and the notion that some actors may be delaying responses while others are speeding along.

These time constraints and variability of interpretations by different stakeholders create uncertainty for organizational actors. Learning helps to manage this uncertainty and can even represent a way to measure the success of a crisis response (Moynihan 2008). Unfortunately, as Boin et al. (2005) suggested, when learning is most critical, the institutional capacity of organizations to do so is typically limited. The crisis context hinders reflective learning, as urgent management functions are prioritized (Christensen et al. 2016; Stern 1997). Regardless, as organizations respond to external change, they must overcome their organizational inertia (Christensen et al. 2016). While it is critical that actors inculcate lessons from previous crises, it is even more important that they learn *during* the crisis, despite the obstacles mentioned above. Moynihan (2008) addressed this difference between inter and intra-crisis learning: "During a crisis, actors must engage in sense making under limited time and intense pressure, evaluating the nature and scope of a crisis and searching for an appropriate response" (p. 352).

Research Framework

Our research framework builds on crisis management in organizational studies, in particular, the model developed by Pearson and Mitroff (1993). Their crisis management framework includes four key

variables (systems, stakeholders, phases, and types of crisis) critical to coordination and learning. We expand their framework with two variables introduced by Christensen et al. (2016); uncertainty and transboundary effects. Crises tend not to be singular events, instead, they change over time, ranging from an initial signal detection via preparation/crisis prevention and containment to a final recovery phase. These different phases of a crisis involve different stakeholders, utilizing different organizational systems (e.g. technical, human, cultural, see Figure 1). Stakeholder theory posits that different groups can add value to a situation while balancing the multiple goals of these different stakeholders (Freeman 2010). We concur, adding that goals and perceived value might also change over time.

Stakeholders in the refugee crisis included both formal and informal actors. Formal actors included local and international public, private and nonprofit organizations that provided goods and services. In this case, public agencies and governments involved in legislation and policy making also affected crisis response. Informal actors included spontaneous volunteers, but they also consisted of civilians living or working in host countries along the refugee route, and the refugees themselves. Our focus was on the responders and we did not target local unaffiliated populations or the refugees themselves.

[Figure 1 here]

Coordination and Learning in Different Phases of the European Refugee Crisis

The Setting: Three Phases of the Crisis

Generally, reports suggest 'the European refugee crisis' took place between summer 2015 and winter of 2016/2017 (UNHCR 2018). This is the period we write about below. However, refugees have always been using this route and some organizations had been engaged with them prior to the summer

of 2015, just with a smaller scope. Additionally, refugees continue to arrive to this region, as well as countries like Spain and Italy, as routes change over time.

Phase 1: *Chaos* - In the summer of 2015 massive streams of refugees flowed through borders, receiving extensive media attention. Governments and NGOs relied on volunteer assistance to rescue refugees from boats, distribute food and blankets, and provide other emergency response assistance (Borton and Collinson 2017). The massive influx of refugees along the Balkan route resulted in one of the largest humanitarian actions in Europe since the Balkan Wars in the Nineties.

Phase 2: *Settling in* - During the winter of 2015-2016, transit flows continued, but border closing policies constrained some migrant populations (Cosgrave et al. 2016). This period became dominated by static camp programming after the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 which shut down borders to nearly all refugees and economic migrants (Borton and Collinson 2017). According to this deal, Turkey would prevent refugees from leaving its borders, understanding that Greece would return those who did, in exchange for funding and other political gains from the EU.

Phase 3: *Exit* - By the winter of 2017, refugee populations in formal and informal camps began to decline as transit flows decreased and static beneficiaries were placed, where possible, in housing and programming that relied on existing urban programming within the host country. This phase ended with INGOs turning over their tasks to national actors beginning approximately in the summer of 2017.

Data Collection

In 2017, semi-structured interviews with representatives of a large INGO, their partners (international, local, and governmental) and volunteers were conducted in Greece, Serbia, and North Macedonia. We used purposive sampling, as interviewees directed us to additional stakeholders. We conducted a total of 48 interviews and six focus groups in the field. We also conducted four initial interviews with

headquarter staff to better understand the INGO that provided access (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews with volunteers were shorter, typically conducted spontaneously in the field.

[Table 1 here]

All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and then coded into different themes and sub-themes, using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. All respondents gave their informed consent to have their interviews recorded and were granted confidentiality and anonymity. Our interview guideline addressed general themes regarding collaboration between different stakeholders. Through coding, these initial themes were divided into sub-themes to learn about specific concepts and characteristics relevant to coordination and learning during the response. The final list of codes was then organized into the three time periods using selected and representative quotations for this manuscript.

Results: The Three Phases

Below we discuss the evolution of each phase in more depth. We then examine stakeholders' perceptions of coordination and learning within each phase. Brackets following each quotation show whether this statement was made by a member of a public organization [PO], international or local non-governmental organization [INGO or LNGO] or volunteer [V], with interviewees numbered in each group of respondents (e.g., INGO1, INGO2, INGO3, …).

Phase 1: Chaos

Many respondents suggested that initially, intense media coverage increased the visibility of the crisis. "[T]hings got really bad and people started to write about it, and then it happened, not sure if it was something more genuine, but that is what it feels like." [INGO25] Respondents involved from the beginning recalled how chaotic it was in the summer of 2015 and into that fall. This represented the apex of the crisis phase for many, and those on the frontlines reported that it was an extremely emotional time period.

> Crazy, I remember my first night we had boats and I was first time here and it was so crazy and you saw people with these boats, they are not even boats, they are balloons with one engine, 50 60 people there, wet, with children, Syrian people, old people, 60-70 years old, women crying, being panicked. [LNGO7]

Countries along the Balkan route were mostly considered countries of transit, but were still overwhelmed. Many humanitarians commented on the massive response, given the relatively minor impact of this crisis, compared with crises they had engaged in elsewhere: "There is no question that there is need for assistance here, especially for kids and I don't think anyone would argue it, it is just the scale of the attention and the number of actors here, compared to the number of refugees that are here." [INGO4] Respondents with experience elsewhere put this into perspective, for example, in South Sudan, "four camps are bigger than the entire Greece response." [INGO8]

Key Stakeholders in Phase 1

Local Government

The local government served as an important partner, though some respondents were frustrated with government and that manifested in different ways. "[P]olicies […] were changing every day, policies

were inconsistently applied." [INGO9] Many pointed to a lack of local government capacity to help coordinate the response during this initial phase of the crisis.

The inability to effectively coordinate proved frustrating to many, and non-governmental representatives found that government would sometimes delay and block project activities. Some respondents pointed specifically to staffing issues, suggesting that governmental stakeholders used their power to control everything going on, giving nonprofit organizations little scope to operate and make use of their expert knowledge.

> You have ridiculous situation with NGO representatives that have finished faculties and lots of experience in the job and then you have decision makers who have no idea about child rights and child protection so it was kind of a clash. [LNGO10]

Some NGOs accused government of not providing enough resources for this crisis, which led to a lack of control from the governmental side, for example, in terms of protection or registration. However, a governmental representative addressed some of the challenges government were facing regarding capacity:

> That is a tough one, I mean, when it comes to security issues, engagement of people from police, ministry of interior, that is something that is paid by the government, of course there are salaries, the fact that at one point you have to transfer a lot of people from Ministry of Interior from other parts of Serbia and send them to Presevo, then you have to of course, accommodate them, pay their meals, because you moved some people, then you have the security risk where you took them from, because you had to move them. [PO4]

INGOs and LNGOs

LNGOs were open to collaboration and reported that international partners could benefit from their knowledge of country-specific issues, such as the culture, law, resources and institutions in the country. However, many INGO representatives reported difficulties working with the few large local organizations and raised concerns regarding efficiency and accountability. "At the very beginning, new to the emergency, we allowed the partners, these two big partners to do pretty much whatever they

wanted, all the project documents were very poorly written, all the reports were poorly submitted, the financial paper was barely intact, and then it has been very hard […] to put them on track." [INGO3] INGOs found the largest most capable local partners and worked with them almost exclusively. Those few large local organizations ended up overcommitted:

> They are overstretched and because there aren't so many, all the international agencies are working with the same two, three NGOs and I think they tried to perhaps increase their services, too quickly without really having their structures in place. [INGO6]

LNGOs also addressed problems with the enormous international response, questioning the real objectives of some of the INGOs. "About that time, there were 80 NGOs [in this area alone]. Some of them they were really really helpful and effective, but unfortunately others were just here to make money, and disappear like this [*snaps finger*] …" [LNGO7] Some local respondents were critical towards the increasing presence of NGOs, in particular since many NGOs seemed to adjust their services in line with existing funding opportunities, rather than focusing on their core competencies:

> 2015-2016 we had a mushrooming of new organizations and everyone was doing referrals and new word in town was first psychological aid, and of course it was nothing close to first psychological aid. [LNGO6]

Volunteers

The massive presence of volunteers who travelled easily to this crisis served as a major difference from typical humanitarian crises and professionals seemed impressed at the volunteer turnout. "All sorts of people were just arriving with their cars full of donations, from all sorts of places, with things they have collected." [INGO11] There was widespread recognition that volunteers were highly responsive and flexible. Volunteers were particularly important in the informal camps and unofficial settings where they had unfettered access as opposed to the formal INGOs.

> This organization comes in with a van and somehow is able to cook fresh hot foods and that is something we couldn't do, and so they built up their reputation. We automatically thought the authorities would kick them out in no time, but they didn't. They have been around for months

> providing food, lunch every single day and they have again the flexibility to do that kind of stuff that we don't have. [INGO18]

There was much discussion about the speed with which volunteers were able to operate. This was appreciated by professionals who admitted that although they acted quickly in the early phases, informal volunteers were even faster.

> We were trying to set up a mother baby area, we couldn't get a space, and no one thought it was important enough, and all the NGOs were fighting for a space and we couldn't get on the agenda. A friend brought me to a circus tent in the middle of a field, inside a Dutch doctor, who didn't go through a NGO, so he could do something quick, […] set up exactly as we would have liked to have set it up, we were very jealous, just him and some friends. [INGO11]

Coordination of volunteers happened in an informal and rather unsophisticated and certainly not systematic manner. "Literally WhatsApp groups or you go down to the barracks and you see someone there and you start talking and asking them what they are doing." [INGO18] Facebook and WhatsApp were primary ways for informal actors to communicate, but not effective in linking all the major stakeholders as these vehicles were siloed around response niches.

Learning in Phase 1

In this first phase of the response, there was little time for reflective learning and the experience was too novel to begin drawing insights regarding change.

> To think what we did this time, we had no chance to write it down, we were like a machine, we started in the morning, I start, and I stop when I go home, no emotions, no nothing, we were like zombies. [LNGO2]

Stakeholders who learned lessons elsewhere found the European context to be very different than previous posts in less developed, conflict-laden environments. "You dictate the rules and while it somehow fits and works in other contexts, in East Africa, say, in Greece it is a little bit a problem." [LNGO 11]. This was new terroritory about which INGOs had much to learn. As a result, the main

learning during this first phase consisted of wrapping their minds around this new context and understanding which players were doing what activities for whom – a very basic data gathering learning function.

Phase 2: Settling in

For a time, responders had both transit and static populations to serve, moving to almost entirely static populations after the EU-Turkey deal. Throughout this phase, respondents grappled with how to label this Balkan response, referring to it at this point as a 'protracted crisis', rather than an emergency, which changed how they perceived their work. "It is often clearer in other situations. You either have a long term refugee crisis you are in where you know there is a conflict or a major disaster and it is going to take several years to build things back, or it is a quick emergency and you will be moving quite quickly, but this is somehow stuck in the middle." [INGO6]

Coordination represented a major focus of activity for INGOs and governments in this second phase, highlighted by the fact that many were aware the response seemed to be poorly organized, asking for better organization between stakeholders to align services and avoid duplication.

> Sometimes we overlap and this is a big issue, people started fighting for cases and it is most devastating for the person because he sees many professionals who are actually fighting in front of him. [LNGO5]

Over time, order emerged, as organizations learned the value and importance of coordination mechanisms. Large meetings served as the vehicle for coordination and some learning.

Key Stakeholders in Phase 2

Government

Some respondents spoke of a general reluctance for local ministries to take a lead role in coordinating the response. Regardless, some local governmental agencies stepped up.

> We have the Serbian European Integration Office generally responsible for this donor coordination and there were several high-level donor conferences where ministers were represented, ambassadors of the donor community, and they were discussing, 'this is the plan, this is the money we have, we are lacking this money, how can we find the funds.' [PO4]

The political maneuvering of host and destination governments altered work on the ground substantially. Rules governing which groups of refugees could be accepted by destination countries were the most vexing to many respondents as they had direct implications for work in the camps. Changes as to which nationalities were able to enter certain countries of destination, such as Germany, created tensions amongst refugees from different countries, for example, between Syrians and Afghans. The lack of a cohesive set of policies created a 'domino' effect where rule changes in a destination country reverberated throughout the entire route. This changed with the EU-Turkey deal, which closed the borders. "[W]hen we had this flow of 10,000 people entering, they were leaving immediately. Now we have a situation where we have 8000 people in the country, they are stuck." [PO4]

Governmental decision-making in countries outside the Balkan route also affected the crisis and composition of refugees along the route.

> If you look at how changes of policy in Sweden and Norway happen and you look at the increased number of unaccompanied children in Greece, I don't think they are unrelated. So there has been times when the policy changes in Europe have affected who is coming into Greece. [INGO2]

INGOs and LNGOs

This second phase was marked by the arrival of more bureaucratic arms of INGOs, trained in coordination and mechanisms of accountability. The humanitarian arms of large INGOs began to transition from emergency response to camp management. During this phase, INGOs also embraced more partner-based contracting to build relationships and insure accountability, as opposed to one-off contracts with the large LNGOs tapped in the first phase. INGOs shifted to partnering with smaller LNGOs and began to have more interest in capacity building, as well as the opportunity to have more niched impact.

> We have tried to shift in the last 6 months or so to working more methodically with small partners to help with new skill sets, case management for example, then gradually expand geographically, as we do that we will look at capacity holistically not just technical skills but operations skills, their capacity to manage logistics, finance and HR. [INGO1]

INGOs took a longer-term perspective in their project management, to also build capacity within local organizations that would make them more independent and capable in future crises. INGOs felt LNGOs were fairly good in programming, though they needed support for refugee-specific programming. But backroom activities, project management and reporting fell short of desired levels of performance, especially given such quick growth.

> When you expand so much and so quickly you have to be careful because you may lose everything, you may collapse, so you have to be very very very careful on what you are doing … and then to find yourself with no money, it's like, a balloon that deflates, a bubble, you have to be very careful, this is what we are trying to do and control all of this, and you have to decrease slowly by slowly, first for the best interest for the children and then for workers that you have, for the NGO, for your values. [LNGO9]

The difference in context from phase 1 to phase 2 played out at the more micro level in terms of skills sets and the power difference between INGOs and local players during the second phase of the response. Qualifications did not prove a major problem in this area, as locals, as well as volunteers, were often highly qualified technically, they just lacked experience in humanitarian response.

> The reality is that many of them have the professional skills and capacity and extremely well qualified, but they haven't experienced this refugee situation and it is quite hard to find that balance of them accepting that they need additional support and of us getting that across in a way that isn't patronizing or belittling their abilities and skills, so that is a bit different to other situations where you have a less well qualified workforce. [INGO6]

Some LNGOs succumbed to mission creep, but these smaller LNGOs reported that they were simply helping wherever they could, even in areas outside their expertise in order to receive funding or in order to remain on good terms with existing partners.

> We are search and rescue team, but now we do not have much work, so we expanded our activities and help everywhere where we can. We are looking for ways to help to expand, provide general support to help people, to help anywhere anytime. Now we are looking maybe to send humanitarian aid to other places. [LNGO7]

Many respondents found that coordination improved with the arrival of INGOs. "It was more organized, there were meetings every day at the local café." [LNGO8] More importantly, "The word 'integration' is becoming more relevant to the discussion." [PO4] INGOs did provide forums for such discussions, offering so-called context meetings, especially to address the changing contexts and policies, which served at times an important function.

Meetings were frequent and large, but obstacles to coordination still emerged. Many interviewees reported that there were simply too many coordination meetings at this point, taking time and energy away from direct service.

Volunteers

Information and communication technologies were also heavily used to assist coordination at this stage of the crisis. Many respondents discussed social media and technological platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. But in contrast to the first phase, they spoke of more detailed, coordinated activity using these platforms.

> There is a big Facebook page for Athens volunteers that is run by these extremely organized women here on the ground. She and some others have set up this huge information portal […] updated for all the volunteer possibilities for short term volunteers and long. They list all the things they know of […] so whoever gets that information can decide for themselves, they don't recommend unless they know something is verified. [V1]

During this phase, concerns that volunteers with even the best of intentions may do harm, albeit unknowingly, emerged. For example, "Rumors in this context spread quickly away, so if you say something wrong you can change really the life of people, it is dangerous, very dangerous, so […] you need to have experience for serious stuff; legal advice, protection, working with people." [INGO7]

> They were, for example, building chimneys and wasting plenty of money on this kind of action in barracks instead of supporting relocation of refugees because refugees should not stay in the barracks, even with a chimney, they should not be there, also they do some kind of directly risky actions. They bought plenty of axes for refugees to cut wood and heat, because that is a serious thing, but 2000 men, consuming alcohol, that was not a good idea. [INGO23]

Perhaps less damning, but concerning to professionals were examples in which media coverage would lead to risky behavior, for example when volunteers would be tempted to buy baby formula when the media would do stories about hungry mothers and babies along the route, unaware of the risks posed by things such as sanitation issues in the camps. Some informal volunteer groups reported maturing over time.

> I don't think we have gotten more bureaucratic, but it got more professional. It started more rock and roll, let's call it that, so just go and do shit and don't look around, it was a totally different situation then, as well, because it was mostly work on the shore, but then it was more like ok, we have money lets buy a boat for the rescue team, and now it is more, I don't know if we are more careful with the money we have but there is a long term plan, instead of only short term solutions. [V8]

Learning in Phase 2

In several of the camps, with refugee numbers down, there was some time for field workers to do the reflection they had been unable to do during the peak of the crisis, though it was still limited.

> I think that now is the moment to think about learning, because before it was not that it was not important, it is just not possible, there was no time for that, now I think that we are in this moment in the phase that things are going quite regular, […] so it is time to reflect. [INGO21]

Case management was a constant theme respondents mentioned as a source of data and potential knowledge sharing and learning across the region. Most acknowledged that it was not as developed as desired, but that steps were being taken to improve it. KoBo (branded) software was seen as a potentially useful technology to accomplish this case management system and knowledge-sharing platform.

> Let me show you, there is the KoBo platform on the web, then there is the app, like a Google form but even easier, and it can do more sophisticated things. You open your account and develop the questions, link it to the application, so basically whatever collects data from application, goes to web. That is good they can do it offline. [INGO21]

But at this stage in the crisis, even though they recognized the need for more sophisticated coordination mechanisms like KoBo, there was a reluctance to begin spending time and money on its implementation. “Had we done that from the beginning it would have made sense, at this point, it doesn’t.” [INGO1] Moreover, just as learning was beginning to take place and stakeholders were considering more sophisticated management coordination systems, a new phase emerged. Certainly some learning took place regarding the players active in various arenas. But respondents characterized ‘learning’ during phase two as stakeholders trying to understand what ‘could be done better’; a needs assessment and audit of current activities.

Phase 3: Exit

The third phase is marked by the beginning of INGO exit and a shift in the type of coordination required: No longer were large information dissemination meetings (often with bullhorns and speaker systems) necessary. At this point coordination became a much more intimate process, with INGOs meeting with relevant local ministries face-to-face to assist with the transition from INGO to local provision of services.

During this third phase, concerns emerged that handing things over to local players could be premature. INGOs raised concerns that it was not clear which governmental agencies would be taking over services and in what ways this would be done and monitored. More importantly, some perceived that value would be lost with international exit. Coupled with this shift to local government as funding agents, service delivery through existing urban providers differed from services delivered in camps. Integration and access to existing services became important concepts during this phase of the crisis.

> In camps you build a mini city, to deliver services. But when people move to the city it is not relevant to do that, because the services are already there, so it is more about inclusion, referrals, the information sharing, the capacity building, awareness, these kinds of things and making sure that people don't inadvertently or intentionally get shut off from particular services, like schools. [INGO1]

The stakeholders changed in the urban context of phase 3. INGOs needed to coordinate with different partners, such as ministries of education, social services, and local municipalities, to be more effective. Volunteers were no longer as vital and the number of INGOs began to decline.

Key Stakeholders in Phase 3

Government, INGOs and LNGOs

By spring 2016, host country governments recognized that they would likely be dealing with the response as the international players exited, and they wanted the funding to do so.

> Now the Greek government they want to get the money to manage the money, the money from ECHO or DFID, they don't want NGOs, they want to manage, but they are lazy, they lack technical skill, they are not professionals, so then there is a lot of politics too. [INGO27]

INGOs recognized this move to integration was part of the overall strategy and that the change would amount to a shift in priorities for INGOs and some changes in programming to help assist the transition.

> There is still going to be the funding coming through the national government, so they will shift, a lot of that will go to local partners to continue implementing these activities, so it could even mean a bigger scale up for some partners if the INGOs are out, then they are going to have more access to the funding. [INGO4]

As funds shifted to national governments, LNGOs would lose the additional value that INGOs provided in terms of organizational strengthening and troubleshooting. Organizations were concerned about oversight, quality standards and advocacy capacity.

> Who will be monitoring that in terms of the quality? One big concern is that the shelters for unaccompanied children are going to be handed over to the government who will provide funding to LNGOs and we know that sometimes with these arrangements that people don't get paid on time and they lose staff, and the quality isn't necessarily going to be there, who will be monitoring these responses if there is this big transition, I don't think we can just say we hand it over and it will be fine. [INGO6]

The decreased funding seemed to have the most direct impact. After building up LNGOs, now it was time to scale down operations as INGOs exited and shifted their programming to existing urban services.

> There are less people, the money goes down, the donors we rely on give less money, we have less money, our partners get less money, so there is a recognition there is less resources, less beneficiaries and the context is becoming more stable so we are scaling down and handing over to partners and local governments. [INGO5]

The reduction of funding and presence affected many international and local hires with practical implications for human resource management. The uncertainty during this phase led to shorter-term contracts and respondents highlighted difficulties filling short-term vacancies. But the scale down

provided an additional impetus for increased capacity building in preparation for the turnover. “We do do a lot with partners already so it might be more of an increase in technical capacity building, and shifting more to advocacy and then probably complete withdrawal of direct implementation.” [INGO4] Some LNGOs also desired human resource management training because of the rapid scale-up and scale-down of activities. “I have no training, it would be nice to have training in this.Many people are hired, like me, by acquaintances, so it will be difficult to let them go. It is hard.” [LNGO8]

Volunteers

Many respondents spoke of the Mixalista resource center in downtown Belgrade, developed out of frustration by local volunteers, supported by INGOs. The center provided a number of different services for refugees, such as medical help, inclusion, integration, a warehouse, as well as safe spaces for vulnerable populations.

> It is a good model for providing support like this, because refugees have one spot where they come and they have everything and they don’t have to go around the city and look for, and it is good to have comprehensive support in one hub. [INGO23]

Some thought this central hub could also help to manage volunteers and could evolve into a center for the domestic community after the crisis subsides. “Mixalista, they accept volunteers and all people down there […]. I would say that in the long run government should recognize this as an option for servicing the community and who would be, in the future, the provider of such services: Local organizations.” [INGO21] In the end, “[I]t is not rocket science, you have a building you have different services, but there may be a lot of day to day challenges, that if you tried once it might be easier to do again.” [INGO1]

Learning in Phase 3

The Mixalista refugee resource center was known as a potential model for a tangible physical coordination mechanism for this type of response as the crisis moved to urban programming. It came about from an evolution of thinking and learning on the part of various stakeholders. First, responders slowly learned of the number and variety of services available to refugees and became frustrated that they lacked a central resource hub. They eventually set this hub up, with the financial assistance of several large INGOs, which in itself represented organizational learning. But respondents also spoke of the learning that took place once they were all operating together, such as the development of a referral point person so clients didn't interfere with ongoing programming with questions and information requests. "There are people working on activities, if there is a referral problem they just refer to the referral person, they just call her and she is taking over, they don't have to stop their activities." [INGO21] Those who set up this hub thought they might be able to provide insight elsewhere in the region.

Some suggested learning was less than desired and did not occur across borders. However, the potential for cross-border learning was widely recognized.

> I haven't had any exposure that there is any cross-border learning, I mean to be direct, I don't see it, and so to learn that in Serbia they are already experienced [with] this urban stuff […] I would think that would be valuable information for us, and I haven't heard anything about it. [INGO4]

Overall, respondents agreed that more sharing could take place and the timing was right as the crisis and main emergency phase decreased. This is when actionable learning was perhaps most profound, and yet with the crisis and resources dwindling, it resulted in relatively little widespread action.

Discussion

Our interviewees shared a common understanding of the phases mentioned above. The changes that took place across these periods influenced programming, staffing and budgeting, and altered the way stakeholders viewed each other and partnered.

The extreme context of this case provides multiple insights into stakeholder perceptions of cross-sectoral collaboration, coordination, and its role in and reliance upon organizational learning. The nature of time, conceptualized in multiple ways, proved powerful in this case, changing the nature of coordination as the crisis unfolded. We found substantial differences with respect to our research questions across the three phases, summarized in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

Moynihan's (2008) discussion of intra versus inter-crisis learning proves particularly salient in this work. INGOs were interested in learning more about how this crisis unfolded in order to better respond to similar flows afterwards in Italy or Spain. In fact, that was why we were provided with access. The focus on *intra*-crisis learning proved much more difficult and was the source of constant discussion by our respondents. During both the first and second phases of this crisis, just as reflection and redesign could begin, the situation changed. This changing context hampered learning. Lessons that were learned during phase one were largely irrelevant in phase two. And those learned in phase two proved minimally helpful in phase three. INGOs adapted to the changing conditions on the ground, but they tended to do so internally, through the arrival of different types of short-term staff changes. This turnover of personnel, coupled with extensive changes on the ground, made the situation in later

phases almost unrecognizable to those who operated earlier in the crisis. This personnel turnover also prohibited effective learning.

Fleischer's (2013) discussion of time and crisis is helpful here, particularly the different conceptualizations of time. Vastly different political, quantic and episodic understanding of time characterized each phase which came to be seen as three different types of crisis, each with different systems and stakeholders (Pearson and Mitroff 1993). The critical variables crisis management research explores such as knowledge creation, information dissemination, sense making and trust, seemed to start anew with different types of stakeholders in each phase, making learning difficult and preventing such learning from significantly improving later coordination. Certainly some learning occurred - but not about coordination. The three phases might be better characterized as three separate crises. Respondents did not talk of evolution over time, or incremental changes and improvements, instead referring to extreme external jolts that changed the nature of the crisis periodically.

Conclusion

In this study, we highlight the importance of taking time to reflect during a crisis, stressing intra-crisis learning. Using the case of the Balkan refugee route, we analyse different stakeholders' perceptions and their affects on learning and coordination over time. Formal learning and documentation is difficult at the height of the crisis but more time was available as the crisis subsided. Organizational actors might work on conserving and spreading knowledge gained during the different phases of the crisis and recognize the value of their lessons learned, as other crises emerge. Stakeholders could more effectively use their 'down' time to pilot case management and KoBo-like platforms to improve coordination. INGOs might also develop an information clearinghouse, like USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse, where INGOs can share written experiences and reports with local NGOs and host country governmental agencies.

Changes in context and stakeholders throughout a crisis might require different forms of coordination. "Context meetings" seemed a useful best practice for constant communication and information about the setting and tangential concerns to programming, as did Mixalista as a physical coordination center. Finally, trainings need to change over the course of a crisis. INGOs might support LNGOs regarding human resource management capacity to manage build-ups and scale-downs, grant writing, fund procurement and watchdog or advocacy roles long before exit programming in crises.

The results of this study highlight the need for future research on inter-sectoral cooperation during crisis. While this study focuses on a subset of the refugee route to Europe, future research on countries with different political and cultural environments (e.g. Colombia and the United States) or emerging refugee routes (e.g. Spain and Italy) can help to further increase our understanding of learning and coordination in transboundary crises.

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Figure 1: Research framework

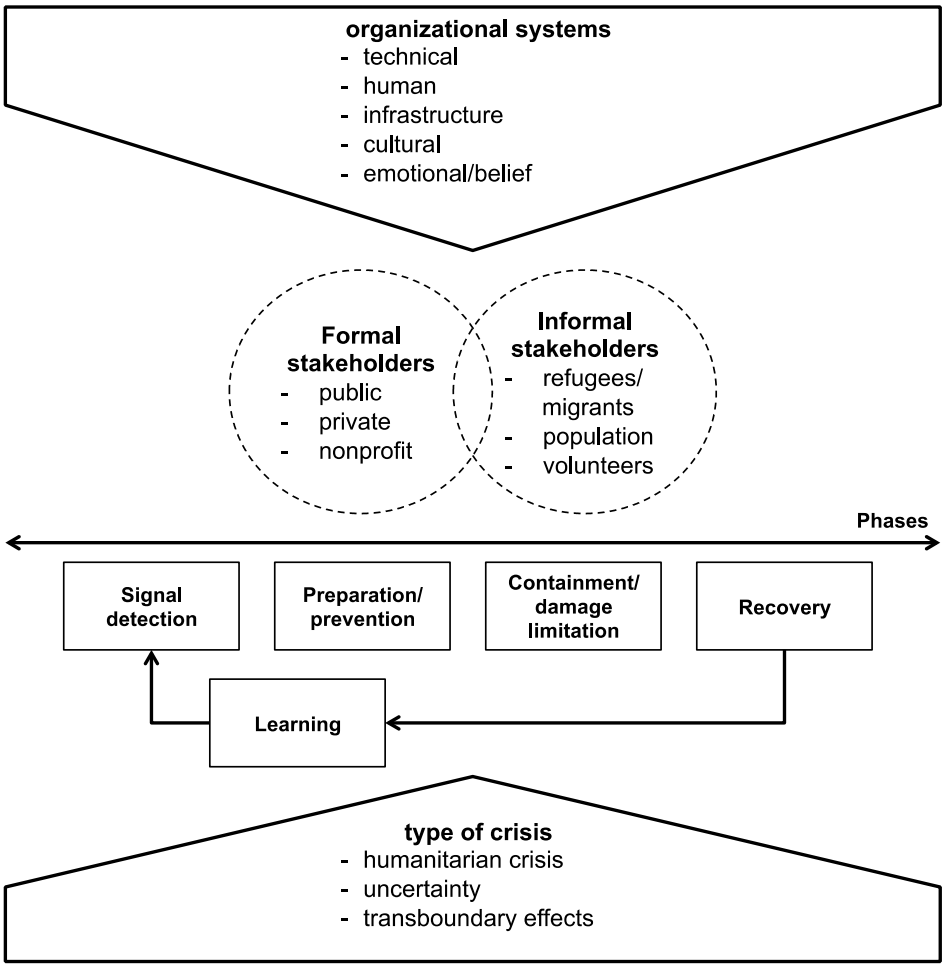

Table 1: Number of interviews and focus groups

Interviews in the field	
Organization type	**Number**
Government	6
local NGO	9
INGO	24
Volunteer	9
Total interviews	*48*
Focus groups	
Organization type	**Number**
local NGO	2
INGO	4
Total focus groups	*6*
Interviews with headquarter staff	
INGO	4

Table 2: Stakeholders, coordination, and learning across the three phases

	Phase 1: Chaos	**Phase 2: Settling in**	**Phase 3: Exit**
What caused the start of the phase?	Media and massive volunteer presence	Border closings	Host nations seeking funding directly
Perception of major stakeholders			
Perception of Government	Ignoring the issue; overwhelmed	Struggling to coordinate	Important player
Perception of LNGOs	Weaker than expected	Good programming, weaker accountability and management	Need to improve capacity for them to take a more critical role, and advocacy
Perception of INGOs	Helpful but a bit slow	Too bureaucratic	Leaving; exit strategies
Perception of Volunteers	Helpful; huge presence	Too risky, unaccountable	Not helpful, leaving
Coordination			
Why coordination?	To organize the chaos; information dissemination	For more effective programming, through trainings, to integrate and adapt	To insure INGOs could support local agencies as they take over responsibility
Coordination mechanisms used	WhatsApp and Facebook	Large frequent meetings	One on one discussions, relationship building
Learning	Context and stakeholders	Learning what should have been done	Best practices, preparing future engagement