

The impact of Covid-19 on the 'European Dream' of Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Lebanon.

Reflective report

Introduction to the project and methodology

My project aimed to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the arrival of Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Lebanon to Europe. In order to do so, I made a questionnaire divided into two sections, the first one being more general about the impact of the pandemic on refugee movements and the second one focusing on Lebanon more specifically.

The research was based both on secondary research and online interviews with experts on the subject. The 9 interviewees were all working with refugees in either Ireland, Italy, or Cyprus. These three countries were selected for different reasons: Ireland because it is now the only English-speaking country in the European Union and therefore an ideal destination for many refugees, Italy because of the high number of asylum seekers who manage to reach their ports every year and Cyprus because of its proximity to Lebanon and its tangled political situation affected by the increasing number of refugees, especially from Lebanon. The people selected for the interview were coming from a variety of fields, ranging from immigration police officers at airports to directors of NGOs and refugee councils. This allowed me to get different perspectives on the subject discussed and to explore how different stakeholders from the three countries have reacted to the Covid-19 emergency. This reflective report is going to dive into the findings of the research, the difficulties encountered, what did and did not go to plan, and how this six-week experience helped me grow as a researcher and as a leader.

Findings of the research

The six weeks research project gave me the possibility to investigate how different countries reacted to the Covid-19 emergency in relation to refugee movements and what impact this had on people fleeing their own countries. Surprisingly, some of the findings were very different than the initial expectations and the 3 countries selected, although all part of the European Union, had incredibly contrasting policies in response to the situation.

Travel bans and additional Covid-19 procedures resulted in a reduction of 30% of arrivals to European land. However, through interviews and independent research, I found out that the pandemic did not discourage Syrian and Palestinian refugees to move to Europe. The Lebanese population, perceiving refugees as a threat, has not been welcoming in both the labor market and general integration. One of the main reasons is their Sunni religious background which could alter the balance of the local sectarian government. The Palestinian population has always considered Lebanon a temporary stop to go back to their country once the conflict was over. However, since this has not been possible, they are moving to Europe to find a more permanent base where no laws are discriminating against them, an example being the one who prohibits them to own property on Lebanese territory. Contrastingly, Syrians cannot register with the UNHCR, making hard for them to get a residency permit. Additionally, the worsening socio-economic situation of Lebanon has made it almost impossible for its refugee population to survive, seeing 9 out of 10 refugee families living in extreme poverty. The pandemic has made it even worse for Syrian and Palestinian refugees to stay in Lebanon, explaining the rising numbers of asylum-seekers fleeing the country with the easing of restrictions in Europe.

In the reception of refugees throughout the pandemic, the only thing that the three selected European countries had in common was the omission of asylum-seekers from their essential traveller list. However, the policies implemented were very different. In Ireland, asylum-seeking applications were initially closed in December 2020 to then reopen online in March 2021, precluding refugees with no access to the internet connection from applying. Moreover, after the fall of Kabul, Afghan refugees were given priority and considering the housing crisis throughout the country, there was no space left for people fleeing other countries. These were therefore forced to stay in direct provision services for longer periods unless accessing the country through community services, such as Home to Home D6.

Contrastingly, in Italy, asylum-seeking applications never closed. However, to enter the country, refugees had to through more procedures than normal travellers and take a PCR test on arrival. As discussed by one of the directors of the Sant' Egidio Community, vaccines, as well as sanitary equipment, were provided by the Italian military directly in Lebanon and humanitarian flights were still going on throughout the Covid-19 emergency. According to the immigration police at the Fiumicino airport in Rome, the refugees who were not part of a humanitarian program, considering the absence of a direct flight from Beirut throughout the pandemic, would often travel from Turkey as normal tourists and then seek for asylum once they reached Italian territory. However, what Italy was most criticised for was not the treatment of asylum-seekers arriving by

air but the conditions in which the ones getting to the territory by sea were kept during their mandatory 14-day quarantine. They were often kept in the boats they came with without the possibility to go out and get proper medication after the long journey.

In the case of Cyprus, refugees were not given the chance to apply for asylum during the pandemic. Moreover, several boats were sent back to Lebanon because of the 2 party agreement between the countries, which gives Cyprus the right to send back the refugees arriving to their coasts. However, as stated by a member of the Cyprus refugee council during one of the interviews, this led to many refugees (almost 70%) entering the island from the Turkish-regulated North to then get access to the EU member state, the south.

One important aspect of my research was to find out which categories of refugees were part of the 30% that did not make it to Europe and why this was the case. A big part of this 30% was made up of illegal refugees who, due to restrictions and the increased border control, did not manage to access Europe through community service or a governmental scheme. Moreover, because of the emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine, refugees from these countries were given priority over Syrians and Palestinians from Lebanon. Because the Syrian refugee crisis has been going on since the breakout of the civil war in 2011, in Europe there is a general perception that the situation has stabilised and it is now safer for Syrians to go back to their country and give priority to other asylum-seekers. Middle eastern refugees, compared to their Ukrainian counterparts, are often considered by right-wing European conservatives as 'used to war', promoting an ideology based on Orientalism and racial segregation. Many of the conflicts that force Middle Eastern refugees to flee their countries were fomented by the Western world and public acknowledgment of these issues can be seen as an admission of culpability.

Issues with the methodology

As discussed in the introduction, the research was based on both secondary research and online interviews. However, the topic the research project was dealing with was very new and I found it hard to find academic work discussing these specific matters. Therefore, I often found myself wasting time on studies that only slightly contributed to my research and were not focusing on the countries that were specifically selected. I initially had the plan to confirm the information received from the interviewees with secondary work on the subject but this was not always possible due to lack of material. Additionally, secondary studies mainly focused on the Syrian population in

Lebanon and their mass migration to Europe during the pandemic, very little was found regarding their Palestinian counterparts. This was mainly due to the fact that Palestinian refugees, having been in Lebanon since the 1960s, are not the focus of secondary research anymore.

The interview-based side of the research was also very challenging. This was mainly due to the fact that being dependent on other people often creates issues of reliability. As stated in the consent form which had to be signed by every participant, they all had the right to cancel their interview at any point or not to answer some of the questions. The experts were firstly contacted months before the 6 weeks research project started and therefore, when I got in touch with the ones who initially showed interest again, some were not able to participate. This meant that right before the start of the research I had to find new people who were willing to help. Moreover, since this was not their project and they were essentially just helping me, some of the interviewees did not come particularly prepared for the online meetings. However, their knowledge and expertise on the subject was still important for my findings and helped me shape my approach to the research material. Nevertheless, even though some aspects were challenging, the research went beyond my expectations and I found out truths that I did not even know existed. Additionally, the project helped me to network with people who work directly with refugees and to find myself a place in the academic side of it.

Growth as a leader

This experience helped me grow as a researcher and as a leader because I learned how to manage myself and my relationship with other professionals, how to organise work over a set time period, and most importantly how to engage with sensitive and sometimes private material. This also helped me to open up my eyes in regards to my future career as I understood I want to keep working with refugees and focus on the human rights side of it to make sure those are not violated at any stage during the asylum-seeking process.

Over the 6-week project, I have also learned a lot about leadership and what type of leader I am and want to be. One of the main things that I have learned is to compromise and focus on the final result instead of obsessing over the original plan and how things were supposed to be according to the initial schedule. Not everything is going to go to plan but a good leader needs to compromise in order to find a new way to reach the final result. Additionally, I have also understood that there is no need to limit yourself on the findings and although it is good to know what you have to find

out, an ambitious leader needs to be open to expanding knowledge on the prefixed topics instead of settling for the mere outcome. Finally, I believe that one challenging aspect to manage in my research as a leader was the emotional factor as a consequence of dealing with such delicate topics. For the research to be unbiased I also had to put my beliefs aside and not let them take over my report.

This research project motivated me to start new leadership projects and apply what I have learned to different areas of my academic life. Managing to explore the topic more in depth than I expected motivated me to push myself to get involved in more activities and explore things that are out of my comfort zone. In order to convince the interviewees to take part in the project I have had to explain what my research was and why I was so motivated to investigate this topic, which gave me confidence in my opinions and capabilities, pushing me to apply for positions and opportunities I never thought I was suited for. Moreover, the knowledge that I have acquired has made me more comfortable to deal with vulnerable communities and delicate topics, therefore expanding my horizons for my future career. Many of the experts I have met, as well as my supervisors, set a role model in my life and made me look at my future career from a different perspective.