

Doing migrant solidarity at the time of Covid-19

Anitta Kynsilehto (30th May 2020)

This paper discusses migrant solidarity in Morocco, drawing on long-term work with migrants of different nationalities from Western and Central African countries residing in Morocco as well as on migrant solidarity activism in the country. Many of these people on the move have arrived in Morocco with a plan on continuing their journeys to the European continent and ended up staying in Morocco because of enhanced border control measures and outsourcing of the European Union's borders to the African continent (e.g. Andersson 2014; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias & Pickles 2015). Along these 'fragmented journeys' (Colley 2007), people on the move have organised in different ways developing practices of 'circumstantial solidarities' (Bredeloup 2013) based on the shared condition of precarity mounting to daily struggles for survival, including shared places of residence in makeshift campsites and crowded apartments. Since the beginning of visible migrant protest from 2005 onwards, they have also formed more established associations and organisations (e.g. Üstübici 2016). These latter have been able to influence the new migration policy in Morocco, in the making since 2013, as active and indispensable contributors in public debate and different specialized commissions as well as through their direct contacts with broader migrant community. However, since August 2018 there has been a severe backlash against migrants' rights activism in the country (e.g. Kynsilehto 2019). It is this evolving context where the global pandemic has posed additional challenges, both immediately and potentially in the long-term: highlighted some of the persistent structural issues related to migrants' access to rights such as healthcare, food and accommodation that have become all the more precarious during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also as regards to the migrant solidarity movement's possibility to testify and denounce violations by the authorities in a societal climate where these forms of solidarity are increasingly criminalized.

Global health crisis contributing to broader social crisis

With the outbreak of Covid-19 in Morocco, all country was locked down. The sudden closing of the whole country created uncertainty as regards to what could happen, how to best survive in the midst of global health crisis now affecting also the immediate proximity and, very simply, where and how to find relevant information as regards to measures in place. Migrant communities were particularly affected by this uncertainty as at first relevant information was distributed in Arabic, such as in the government web page devoted to the pandemic (<http://covid19.interieur.gov.ma/>). This was where migrant organisations stepped in by seeking to map those in need of specific support, such as lone mothers, families with small children and pregnant women. At the same time, information on the pandemic and the measures in place to contain it was quickly translated into different languages in order to inform everyone, and

Serge Aimé Guemou, the president of the French-speaking umbrella organisation Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc (CMSM), distributed a video and written message on the measures everyone needs to remember during the pandemic (Guemou 2020). An important one of these was the permission needed to justify any outdoors activity such as grocery shopping or visit to a health centre. Earlier Mr. Guemou had also reminded migrant community leaders of this possibility when seeking to reach out to the most vulnerable individuals (personal communication, 21 March 2020). Hence, the first obstacle to be mounted was the overall restriction on mobility and understanding what reasons for moving about could still be permitted under these restrictive measures.

Despite different projects and measures put in place over the years in order to enable migrants' access to health care, this remains problematic not only in terms of the present pandemic but also during times of the 'old normal'. Regular check-ups on permanent diseases or follow-up of pregnancies have been halted. Registered migrants have, in paper, access to universal healthcare RAMED reserved for all those with low income (see, e.g., Akhnif, Macq & Meessen 2019). This system has, however, been unevenly accessible for migrants even in normal times, prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic: for example, health care centres may have asked for a valid residence permit in the original version and refused entry for prospective patients whose residence permits were undergoing renewal, which is a notoriously lengthy process. Moreover, according to Moroccan sociologist and migrants' rights activist Mehdi Alioua, the specific support measure of some 800 to 1200 dirhams for low income families during the Covid-19 lockdown and resulting practical unemployment concerns only those migrants who had been able to have a valid RAMED card at the end of 2019 (El Ouardighi 2020).

Access to work has become impossible for many daily laborers during the lockdown resulting in de facto unemployment and complete lack of revenue. It has thus impacted in many ways migrants and the communities they form. The direct consequence of lack of income is that it has become difficult, even impossible to pay rent for the shared apartments and rooms, and created shortages of food, leading to hunger crisis (El Ouardighi 2020) that migrant solidarity groups try to alleviate the best they can. Moroccan associations mobilized swiftly to come in support of migrants (Yabiladi 2020). Soup kitchens and other forms of collectively organised solidarity put in place in times of crisis prior to the present pandemic, for example in Greece under the austerity measures and the so-called refugee crisis in Europe (e.g. Rozakou 2016), have needed to adapt to the changed context of social distancing.

For migrant groups, some of which organised according to nationality, lack of income has created an additional problem. The activities of these community groups rely largely on small contributions (cotisations) of all members, and alongside other shortages, it has become extremely difficult for the members to contribute. For this reason, independent allies and funders stepping in from outside would be warmly welcome.

Health emergency enabling further criminalisation of solidarity

The context of Morocco also provides unfortunate examples of how emergency measures undertaken because of the global pandemic can serve as an excuse for restricting individual freedoms beyond the necessary precautions due to the need to contain and stop the global health crisis. In the context of migrant solidarity, the case of human rights activist Omar Naji provides an important example. Resident of Nador, the emblematic border town shouldering the Spanish city of Melilla, Naji has been involved in migrants' rights activism for many years, reminding Moroccan authorities for their duties vis-à-vis foreigners and denouncing publicly their excessive use of force during frequent raids and mass arrests and subsequent forced removals, for example. This time he was arrested and accused for posting this kind of information in social media, under the pretext of recent regulation forbidding such activity. This regulation was passed in haste and in secrecy under the state of emergency due to Covid-19. It has remained unclear what possible connection this interdiction would have for doing anything to the health crisis; however, it has been immediately implemented. What is clear, however, is that this example of Moroccan authorities' attack on a well-known migrants' rights activist attests to the need for solidarity activists and critical civil society to remain alert to states' attempts to use the health emergency to implement control measures that go beyond health concerns in order to silence critical voices.

Concluding remarks

As the above suggests, the present pandemic highlights the inequality among different populations and persisting structural problems people on the move face in their country of settlement. As a first step forward, there is a collective call from migrant activists across North Africa and beyond: being able to access a regular residence status is a primordial requirement for accessing other fundamental rights. This became clear, for example, in the webinar organised by Maghreb Social Forum on the 30 May, 2020, addressing the additional challenges Covid-19 poses to migrants without regular migration status in the country they reside. This event was one amongst many recent collective online meetings that offer possibilities for exchange across countries and regions to collective mobilisations in times of crisis that impedes international mobility also of those who usually have access to regular and orderly travel channels. At the same time of being a necessity for this period of global health emergency, they may also offer further learning opportunities for movements that rely on in person meetings but, in so doing, render it difficult for those with limited access to (international) mobility to take part.

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About the author

Anitta Kynsilehto is Senior Researcher at the New Social Research -programme and Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University, Finland. She works on global mobility and solidarity activism with people on the move, and her publications include *Gender and Mobility: A Critical Introduction* (with Elina Penttinen), published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2017. In 2012-2018, she served as board member of EuroMed Rights -network as the person in charge of migration and asylum. [anitta.kynsilehto AT tuni.fi](mailto:anitta.kynsilehto@tuni.fi)