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IN THE CITY, AT THE BORDER

MOVEMENT AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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MOVEMENT AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES DURING THE PANDEMIC [1]

A political approach to Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a forceful impact across the entire spectrum of human activity, going way further than the direct (and often dramatic) implications for people's health. No aspect of human activity is the same as it was at the end of 2019.

Politics is no exception, and we have seen this in various forms and at different levels. In the ways by which political elites have addressed the pandemic across the world or in the effects of Covid-19 on different policy areas – to mention just two aspects. There are countless examples of the political component to this crisis.

Nation states were the central actors of this pandemic politics, but over the months the limitations of their approach became visible on a global scale. In this perspective, local significant local examples of a political response to the crisis became of great interest, and the particular relevance of two arenas emerged. Cities and borders, for different reasons and in different ways, have proven to be key physical and political spaces to detect and understand the structuring of grassroots, non-institutional resistance to discriminatory and exclusionary responses to Covid-19. In the next few pages, we are going to explore how and why this has been the case. Additionally, we shall delve into specific cases and end by critically reflecting on what this may entail for movements' thinking and actions within and beyond the current pandemic. These concrete considerations will be linked to broader reflections on the right to the city, municipalism and migration.

While keeping a global and intersectional approach throughout, and trying to avoid a Eurocentric narrative, our report will actually offer some specific insights on (Southern) Europe. The

1 I wish to thank Vera Bartolomé, Laura Roth, Yanina Welp, Debbie Bookchin, Cesar Merlín Escorza, Chiara Milan, and Alberto Mallardo for their suggestions and their contribution to this report.

weight given to the region in such an introductory piece on grassroots initiatives under the pandemic mostly arises from: (a) the early outbreak and impact of the pandemic in this geographical area, (b) the relevance of city-based political practices (including municipalism), especially in Spain and Italy, and (c) the topicality and extreme importance of the Mediterranean borders and of related migratory movements.

Lastly, an aspect to be highlighted is that the role of non-institutional actors will be considered mainly from the perspective of governance, while also exemplifying advocacy and protest. In other words, besides opposing the existing policy approach and encouraging change, non-institutional practices have significantly contributed to directly shaping the overall response to Covid-19. These are the practices that will be most discussed in the following pages.

De-institutionalising the pandemic: Introductory readings and food for thought

The amount and diversity of writing on Covid-19 published in recent months should come of little surprise. The global, deep and crosscutting impact of the pandemic has clearly led to an overwhelming amount of published output, addressing its different aspects.

Politically orientated writing also has gained relevant space and attention: some articles and analyses have addressed the politics of the crisis, whereas others have highlighted its social impact; some ad hoc focuses have dealt with specific effects and the first comprehensive and comparative analyses have explored the pandemic from different political angles. There are countless examples. So any attempt to present here an exhaustive state of the art would be at the same time endless and useless, considering also that new interesting analyses are coming out each day and it seems extremely difficult to present an up-to-date list of them. Rather, we look here at some specific studies that explore the politics of the pandemic, as a general introduction to the topic, and progressively move from an institutional to a non-institutional perspective, and from the national to local sphere, grounded in cities and borders. It is widely acknowledged that Covid-19 strengthened the role of formal institutions, and of governments in particular. A preliminary Spain-based study on the initial phase of the pandemic (March 2020), for example, found citizens shared a preference towards national government compared to the EU or international

organisations, as well as supported strong leaderships.[2]

David Harvey, writing from a Marxist perspective, was one of the first observers to highlight the political implications of the pandemic, implying how part of the shortcomings in government responses lay in the structure of society itself. In academia, Matthew M. Kavanaugh and Renu Singh addressed Covid-19 from a comparative-politics perspective, offering one of the first political analyses and problematising aspects of the responses to the pandemic in relation to democracy, authoritarianism and coercion.

Regarding the policy of reducing mobility in order to prevent contagion, some studies discovered the substantial effectiveness of democratic regimes, whereas a recent commentary on the comparative politics of Covid-19 suggested "four key focuses to understand the reasons for Covid-19 responses: social policies" (during "crisis management as well as recovery"), "regime type (democracy or autocracy), formal political institutions (federalism, presidentialism), and state capacity (control over health care systems and public administration)".[3]

At times, however, the central role adopted by national policy-makers, and governments (in particular), has stoked opposition from other actors. One interesting study, for example, explores how populist approaches to Covid-19 in Latin America unintentionally legitimised other actors. Moreover, the piece considers the social and political tensions arising from the limited reach of government responses and sketches possible geopolitical consequences.

The local dimension is the privileged terrain to observe the emergence of alternative policies and practices in response to centralised decision-making, and to the perceived insufficiency of its answers.

Securitising and exclusionary policies have indeed mostly taken place in the intangible arena of national (or supranational or international) politics. On the other hand, the local dimension – that of everyday life – is where the crisis's different effects are felt and responses to them are formulated. This is whether responses are provided by institutions – national or local – or grass-

2 It should be noted how Covid-related political research is still at a very early stage and its conclusions need to be taken with a pinch of salt for two reasons: firstly, because the phenomenon per se is evolving very rapidly and the analysis of one phase (such as the European outbreak) may not be relevant even a few weeks later; secondly, because studies are often preprints or working papers, that need further review, elaboration and discussion. The studies mentioned here form an important contribution to the debate, but the validity of their findings cannot be taken for granted.

3 Greer, S.L./ King, E.J./Massard da Fonseca, E. and Peralta-Santos, A. (2020). 'The comparative politics of COVID-19: The need to understand government responses', Global Public Health, https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1783340

roots non-institutional initiatives. In a way, this is the very premise of the whole municipalist discourse: the idea of measuring and responding locally, in a strategic way, to challenges that are intrinsically systemic, and national, continental, or even global.[4]

Hence the city dimension is taken to be the key political terrain to be able to understand the patterns of change and continuity in the relationship and confrontation between institutional and non-institutional actors.

The second dimension – the border – is, to a certain extent, even more significant. Several studies have considered borders as the place where the murkiness of migration policies becomes visible, where the rhetoric of welcoming the newly arrived clashes with the reality of fences, camps, and people drowning. In fact it is a place of reality and dispute, where some of the most significant action-driven responses take place and their different models are displayed in their full variety. (For a global perspective, see, for example, the diversity of struggles presented in Border Politics).

In a crisis which has affected so deeply, firstly, several aspects of daily life and access to a number of basic services, and, secondly, people's mobility within and across states, the significance of the city and of the border is paradigmatic.

To approach bottom-up, grounded responses to Covid-19, the book Pandemic Solidarity is an interesting starting point. It tells of alternative practices of solidarity and mutual aid from eighteen countries and regions around the world. (A podcast with some of the book's contributors provides an idea of their methods). From a Latin American viewpoint, Movimientos en la pandemia, a repeated section of the Spanish newspaper El Salto, authored by journalist and analyst Raúl Zibechi, is particularly interesting for exploring the response to Covid-19 and related government policies from social movements. (Nevertheless, this if for Spanish readers only).

However, in order to make sense of the variety of existing experiences, rather than proceeding randomly, it is convenient to zoom in on the two dimensions highlighted above: the city and the border.

4 Bertie Russell offers some broader reflections on the strategic value of the 'local' in the municipalist approach.

Seeing the pandemic from the city

There are many geographically dispersed examples of city-based grassroots initiatives becoming paramount in providing articulate and effective responses to the Covid-19 crisis. The reasons for these are indicated, among others, by Kate Shea Baird, while reflecting on the effects of the pandemic on municipalism, drawing from the experience in Barcelona:

> [T]he pandemic and lockdown have put the politics of everyday life on the agenda around the world like never before. Public health and care work have been front and center, but issues like aging, housing inequality, mourning and funeral rites, food security, education, culture, transport, mental health and work-life balance have also generated broad public debate. These are all essentially municipalist — and feminist — concerns, since municipalism focuses on personal and community life.5

Important and interesting accounts of city-based initiatives can be found anywhere in the world, from the UK to Latin America, from the US to Spain. These brief extracts firstly from contributions by Margaret Godoy and Harald Bauder and then from John Krinsky and Hillary Caldwell help us frame the issue:

> Solidarity cities differ widely in terms of their local policies and practices, depending on each country's and city's social, historical, and geopolitical context. Nevertheless, they have in common that they typically include both bottom-up initiatives spearheaded by grassroots organizations, activists, and civil society actors as well as top-down policy initiatives enacted by municipalities.6

> In response, the networks have mobilized in ways that combine what geographer, Cindi Katz, has called the "three R's"—resilience, reworking, and resistance. […] These efforts are quite different from charity work: mutual aid both comes from the resources mustered by groups rooted in the communities they are otherwise organizing politically, and, at least in these times, feeds into this work. To be sure, this involves community-based nonprofits reworking their own institutions in order both to meet the immediate needs of their members and even just to show support to their members.7

5 Shea Baird, K. 'Lessons from the pandemic for the municipalists in Spain', ROAR Magazine, 26 June 2020. https://roarmag.org/essays/lessons-from-the-pandemic-for-the-municipalists-in-spain/

6 Godoy, M. and Bauder, H. (2020) 'What can we learn from Latin America's solidarity cities?', openDemocracy, 20 May, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/pandemic-border/what-can-we-learn-from-latin-americas-solidarity-cities/

7 Krinsky, J. and Caldwell, H. (2020) 'New York City's movement networks: resilience, reworking, and resistance in a time of distancing and brutality', openDemocracy, 28 April,. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/new-york-citys-movement-networks-resilience-reworking-and-resistance-in-a-time-of-distancing-and-brutality/

The Latin American and US cases are further interesting because they suggest two other, broader thoughts. The first one relates to the city as refuge, i.e. a welcoming city that challenges mainstream restrictive migration policies by way of local policy-making and heterodox practices. This paradigm was particularly present during the pandemic – with Barcelona being one notable case among many – and anticipates the overlap between cities and borders, which we will briefly consider below.

The second reflection is strongly linked with the evidence coming from pandemic urban politics in the US, a country that has been severely hit by the virus while being one of the global, living symbols of capitalism and its brutality. This is the systemic nature of the Covid-related crisis, which goes way deeper than the global health issue, involving the system we know as a whole. Thus, any viable and sustainable solution needs to depart from the dominant framework of reforming capitalism. This lesson comes from the US but can be applied broadly – on a global scale.

A clear example of said systemic nature of the crisis and of the response needed can be seen in the way by which Airbnb, one of the most powerful symbols of capitalist supremacy in cities, was hit by the crisis. Moves towards a 'new' normality that does not perpetuate the barbarity of consumerist and gentrified cities, can be detected in the political stance of moderately progressive, social-democratic, and non-radical local governments. The recent open letter by the Mayor of Lisbon is an interesting example in this direction, in particular by disseminating a key component of municipalist policies outside municipalist politics; in other words, bringing anti-gentrification and anti-touristification issues into the broader political debate. However, the extent to which promises turn into concrete actions is still to be seen.

Besides the non-institutional city responses to the pandemic that gained media attention, it is also important to acknowledge the existence of many initiatives developed on a micro level. These were created in smaller cities and towns with limited national and international coverage, or even in major cities but without reaching the broader public. Among the many stories are those of the Sister's House in Brussels or the Belgrade-based initiatives Joint Action for a Roof Over Head and Blok 22. These preceded the pandemic but were able to meet th new needs and priorities – both political and social. The list could be endless but it is still important to note how many initiatives there are besides those we see in the media.

There exists a dark side to the story, nonetheless. Because if it is true that much has happened in these last months in cities and towns, it is also true that local and national institutions have not always facilitated these bottom-up initiatives. The case of those people fined in Barcelona while distributing food is but one of many examples from across the world. Another interesting instance is the open confrontation with institutional authorities in Delhi, India, in response to

and within a framework of widespread communal violence and repression.

On the other hand, another story, from the UK, exemplifies the risk that successful grassroots initiatives get incorporated in underhand outsourcing dynamics in relation to local institutions:

> [W]e have been put in a very difficult situation by the Birmingham city council, which is denying responsibility and relying on the commons to respond to the crisis. Instead of setting a relief operation of sufficient scale that would reach most of the vulnerable population in Birmingham, the city council has been systemically directing people to community efforts like ours. After our second day of operation, the council started referring calls to us, which meant a surge of over 500% in food requests from one day to next. At the same time we received a call from a council worker vaguely offering support to our solidarity kitchen. However, we are aware of the history of cooptation [sic] and institutional intrusion within social movements in the city, so we decided to decline their offer.8

Another challenge is regarding the way in which successful practices and direct action can paradoxically be "a hinderance [sic] for a vision of radical transformation. It remains difficult for social movements to answer because they must practically deal with the immediate problems of communities".9

Going further, more broadly, and more systemically, another dark side has been that "in general [the pandemic] has not been an experience of decentralization, democratization or citizen empowerment".10

Both these and the other major patterns of city-based grassroots initiatives in the pandemic can better be observed by delving for a moment into one such story: the network Cuidados Madrid Centro (Central Madrid Care, CMC), an experience thath indeed could be considered paradigmatic.

CMC is an informal network of mutual support, providing services that range from food collection and distribution to supplying medicines, from making masks to giving legal counselling. The network has been active in Madrid's central district since the beginning of the pandemic and it now has hundreds of activists carrying out multiple tasks. Though informal and to a cer-

8 Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2020) 'Organising a solidarity kitchen: reflections from Cooperation Birmingham', Interface, Vol. 12, No. 1, July, pp. 304–309. https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Interface-12-1-Ruiz-Cayuela.pdf. The entire issue of Interface is devoted to movement struggles during the pandemic. This constitutes a very relevant source of information, which extensively considers several interesting aspects related to movements in the cities, as well as migration issues, and the connection between these two dimensions.

9 Chukunzira, A. (2020) 'Organising under curfew: perspectives from Kenya', Interface, Vol. 12, No. 1, July, pp. 39–42. https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Interface-12-1-Chukunzira.pdf

10 Shea Baird, K. op. cit.

tain extent spontaneous, the network did not come out of nowhere: rather, it is was built through central Madrid's existing social fabric, with other people joining the network on an individual basis. The story (in Spanish) of the network and of its main activities is included on the CMC blog, together with a collection of press articles on the subject. (There are many other good overviews, including here and here also).

From a grassroots and even municipalist perspective, the paradigmatic dimension of CMC – as key to further understanding, comparing and analysing initiatives in other cities – lies, first and foremost, in its new and spontaneous nature. Yet CMC is connected with the rest of the city's social and political networks, to pre-existing struggles and on-going initiatives. An example is CMC's participation in the platform La CuBa, in the central neighbourhood of Lavapiés. An initiative launched by several social and political actors, which provided baskets ('cubas') of food and provisions to more than five hundred families during the lockdown.

CMC is paradigmatic also in its strongly feminist approach, based on and inspired by the "politics of care". It also is one that is contributing to overturning (at least temporarily) processes of consumerisation and commercialisation of life in the city and in increasingly gentrified neighbourhoods, such as Lavapiés.

Another key aspect of this experience is the relationship with the Madrid Town Hall. Providing basic services to the community, CMC has replaced local government and its welfare policies in several cases. The municipality, in turn, has been accused of being disengaged, as well as attempting to politically capitalise on citizens' solidarity initiatives, and even for imitating and competing with them.

From a municipalist perspective, the direct involvement of non-institutional actors in the making and implementation of polices is of the utmost importance, reviving the idea of a "municipalism beyond the town hall". The commonality of this feature, shared by several initiatives explored in this report, is particularly interesting in a city like Madrid, which had a municipalist government until 2019.

Yet, the connection with other political actors, parties and movements – or, more broadly, the political capitalisation of the process – remains a critical aspect that needs to be addressed more thoroughly. And it probably will be a key component in the post-emergency political debate as struggle shifts to a deeper, more-systemic level, after the urgency of providing direct responses and emergency relief on the ground. Dealing with such a complex aspect cannot be done either briefly or superficially. However, it is important that it is mentioned, bearing in mind that similar problems and missed opportunities have arisen in other stories, as cited throughout this report.

Lastly, leaving the Central Madrid Care network behind, we might consider some stories that are particularly interesting with regards to the role during the crisis of local governments, regional presidents and mayors. Some of these cases have been positive, especially when institutional actors have been willing and able to work alongside movements. Yet, on the other hand, some of the authorities, appear mainly to have tried to take advantage of the situation, exacerbating existing tensions with national governments in order to gain visibility and capitalise on conflicts politically:

> Local governments and communities are once again the first responders, although often lacking adequate resources and in many cases confronting reluctant – and even authoritarian – national authorities. Even within limited budgets, several local and regional actors have been taking rapid and bold measures to address the current crisis. By mobilizing a wide network of in-kind support and de-commodifying access to essential goods and services, they are seeking to guarantee housing, water, food and electricity to everyone.11

Focusing on Europe, examples abound: the case of Frome, in the UK, is a story of mutual empowerment and support, where "it has been those institutions closest to us that have counted the most".12 The different attitudes and behaviours of Italian mayors that sought and gained extreme visibility during the pandemic, "occupying" major political spaces, show the extreme relevance of local institutions. Great diversity was also shown in political discourse and outcomes. Extreme behaviour by particular right-wing populist mayors has also caused the unwanted effect of stimulating new grassroots coalitions and initiatives. This, in the case of some localities, is taking place within a context in which new forms of municipalist convergence are developing. In Messina, for example, an innovative political dialogue began through public agorae, involving several left-wing and social-democratic parties as well as the municipalist platform that had led the local government from 2013 to 2018. Finally, some Spanish reflections highlight the contradictions of leaving local institutions alone on the frontline, bearing extreme responsibilities and substantial expenses, without even easing the Maastricht-driven fiscal burden on them.

These final aspects make visible the existence of a double divide in the politics of the pandemic. The first is between institutional and non-institutional actors; the second, between national and local institutions – particularly bearing in mind the shortcomings, criticisms and tensions towards states' approaches, as mentioned in the previous sections. The way in which these two divides combine with one another leads to different results and to a complex governance which, besides Covid-19, touches the core of the municipalist discourse and its multi-layer intersectionality.

11 Zarate, L. (2020) 'Pandemic lessons, progressive politics: Right to the city and new municipalism in times of COVID-19', Mínim Magazine, 19 May. https://minim-municipalism.org/magazine/pandemic-lessons

12 Frey, G. (2020) "After Covid-19, the flood", Mínim Magazine, 2 June. https://minim-municipalism.org/magazine/after-covid-19-the-flood

Lockdown borders

Borders have been closed, applying for asylum has been suspended, detention and deportations have led to a further spread of Covid-19, there have been raids and arrests of undocumented migrants, migrant workers and migrant communities have faced job losses, unsafe working and living conditions and a lack of access to medical and other support. In many cases, migrants and settled communities have been vilified and blamed for the spread of the virus, targetted [sic] by the xenophobic attacks of governments, far-right parties and parts of the public and social media. Only when they are needed as underpaid and undervalued workers to keep economies and health services running are they reluctantly offered to stay for the time being.[13]

In short, this is what has happened in the migration area since the beginning of the pandemic. From the Mexico-US border to the situation in the Greek-island camps, from migrant people[14] trying to access Uganda, to South East Asia or the Mediterranean Sea, "migrants embody in the harshest way the contradictions and tensions surrounding the freedom of movement and its denial today".[15]

This trend exists globally and fuels an already existing practice of targeting migration, as well as those who contribute to it or assist migrant people on their journeys. The European 'policing humanitarianism' approach in the Mediterranean is one of the clearest examples of this. Moreover, as often happens, restrictions have not been uniformly implemented and certain situations have been particularly hit: undocumented and smuggled migrant people, as well as small-scale facilitators, are among those who risk paying the highest price for this reduced and even more dangerous mobility.

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13 Akkerman, M. (2020) COVID-19 and border politics, Transnational Institute & Stop Wapenhandel, Amsterdam, July, p. 17. https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/tni-covid-19-and-border-politics-brief.pdf

14 In the context of this report, 'migrant people' is used as a comprehensive expression that includes 'migrants', 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', etc. Even though in legal frameworks a clear distinction exists between those categories, this differentiation shall not be endorsed in this practice-orientated report. This would indeed potentially and indirectly support the idea that not everyone enjoys a right to move or that they do so only to a degree. Also, the use of fixed categories and labels – as 'migrant' itself would be – is avoided, because these end up attributing a permanent quality to an individual, rather than merely describing a process, so entailing the risk of further exclusionary perceptions and practices.

15 Mezzadra, S. and Stierl, M. (2020) 'What happens to freedom of movement during a pandemic?', openDemocracy, 24 March. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/what-happens-freedom-movement-during-pandemic/. See also Akkerman's polic briefing cited above for a broader and comprehensive understanding of border politics during the pandemic.

Yet, these worldwide restrictive border and migration policies have not been meant "to protect public health, but are part of a trend in recent years, especially in Europe and the United States, of governments trying to limit access to asylum and prevent mobility[16]." On the contrary, and almost paradoxically, the real concrete steps that governments could have taken in order to contain the global spread of Covid-19, are those that acknowledge and include migrant people in national response plans, so as to not jeopardise the overall fight against the virus. The pandemic will not disappear by just closing a border or pretending that people will not resort to any possible way to cross it, in search for a safe harbour.

The precarious and inhumane living conditions that most migrant people experience when crossing borders only make the crisis worse, as has happened in migration camps. But similar problems exist regarding those detained in migration centres in Europe, awaiting regularising their legal status or being deported. In these instances, Italy did some progressive releases of migrant detainees, since the Covid-19 outbreak. Spain did even more: "a collaborative process involving both institutional and civil society actors in the organisation of a relatively orderly and safe release of migration detainees".[17] Besides their concrete and direct importance, such experiences can also stimulate, taking a broader perspective, "alternative approaches to immigration detention based on cooperation between institutional actors and civil society, and on the active involvement of migrants".[18]

The centrality of borders – and of the concept of border itself – during the pandemic goes beyond the above. Besides bordering and border strengthening, borders are indeed also constantly relocated, through the social and spatial construction of divides between those who have rights and those that do not. Those who are in and those who are out. This is what happens in migration camps and centres but also what happens with undocumented migrant people in the city (who essentially need to 'cross a border' each time they are stopped by the police and asked for ID). It is the social stigma directed against those national citizens who moved within 'their own' country during the pandemic, accused of some sort of 'betrayal', as contributing to the virus's circulation. From the opposite perspective, borders are (fortunately) relocated through transnational solidarity, reducing spatial, cultural and political distances and facilitating processes of mutual exchange and interaction, as in the well-known case of the Cuban medical brigades.

16 Reidy, E. (2020) 'The COVID-19 excuse? How migration policies are hardening around the globe', The New Humanitarian, 17 April. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/04/17/coronavirus-global-migration-policies-exploited

17 Roman, E. (2020) 'Rethinking immigration detention during and after Covid-19: Insights from Italy', Border Criminologies, 10 June. https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/06/rethinking. That said, the overall situation in this area is far from acceptable, as is shown in an interesting Spanish report on the topic.

18 Ibid.

However, as has been shown already in relation to the situation in cities, also in the migration and border spheres non-institutional initiatives have integrated, substituted or opposed the shortcomings and failures of the institutional approach.

In the Balkan route to Europe, for example, existing solidarity initiatives were not stopped by the spread of Covid-19, but rather were redefined and adapted.[19] New initiatives have also emerged, such as the Transbalkan Solidarity Network, formed in March 2020 and which "gathers hundreds of activists from all over the region (North Macedonia, Serbia, BiH, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy), striving to respond to the immobility of institutions as regards the situation of the most vulnerable under the pandemic, the migrants".[20]

A variety of stories from across the globe, in terms of constructing solidarity-based practices in the migration area, both at borders and migration camps and centres. Furthermore, from an advocacy perspective, there also are important examples of direct opposition to government policies, such as in Italy, Mexico and Malta.

On the other hand, however, it is also true that "the coronavirus emergency and the rules of social distancing are leading to the rarefaction – and often the complete disappearance – of the practices of direct solidarity that characterised the 2015-2018 reception crisis", which in several cases had become "a fundamental component of the reception and integration network in Europe".[21]

The EU central Mediterranean border represents, according to this perspective, an insightful fraction of the global grassroots dynamics in border areas. As was hinted above, confrontational practices between governmental policies and non-institutional practices have been characterising this area for several years. In a nutshell, this has been the result of the harsh border policies of the EU and specific member states (primarily Italy and Malta), of an overall governmental hostility to search and rescue (SAR) at sea and, on the other hand, of the proactive role played by several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and initiatives to save lives.

Since the global outbreak of Covid-19, its impact on migration policies, border management and SAR activities in the Mediterranean has been substantial. To begin with, at the end of Febru-

19 Italian speakers can listen to a very interesting podcast in which the Lesvos Calling campaign talks to Radio Melting Pot – a project devoted entirely to migratory issues and different solidarity initiatives.

20 Milan, C. (2020) 'Refugee solidarity along the Western Balkans route: New challenges and a change of strategy in times of COVID-19', Organising amidst Covid: Sharing stories of struggle, Interface, 15 May. https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Chiara-Milan.pdf

21 Mazzola, A. (2020) 'How Covid-19 breaks down solidarity with migrants', The Conversation, 7 April. https://theconversation.com/how-covid-19-breaks-down-solidarity-with-migrants-135355

ary 2020, while cruise ships were still free to disembark people in Italy, NGO vessels started to be forcibly quarantined in Italian harbours. This was further aggravated by the dangerous situation in the Mediterranean Sea, where disengagement by the EU and national governments in SAR activities had been taking place for a long time.

The situation in the following weeks became even more difficult, with greater border closure, the further disengagement by the authorities of Italy, Malta, Libya and the EU from SAR, and with more limitations imposed on NGOs. Besides formal prohibitions, humanitarian actors had also to deal with the unpredictability of future scenarios, due the pandemic. These included, for example, considering "also from an ethical and moral point of view" how to not "overload the national health system further and yet continuing to ensure assistance to people in distress in the Mediterranean Sea[22]".

A significant example of this critical situation is represented by the Italian decision to declare its harbours unsafe, which was considered by some grassroots activists as a "propaganda tool". This was "paradoxical", being implemented selectively, allowing much discretion, but also had very significant political effects.[23] A similar approach was then adopted by Malta, which also decided to quarantine migrant people on daytrip boats off the Maltese coast (an example more recently followed also by Italy). Other examples of such policies were the Maltese outsourcing to private contractors of push-backs to Libya or the armed intervention to send migrant people to Italy. Or, returning again to Italy, the administrative seizures of NGO boats.

Notwithstanding this situation and the broader policing of humanitarian actors, grassroots responses to this approach have been powerful. NGOs' and other initiatives' vessels were back at sea as soon as they were allowed. Sea-Watch 3 resumed operations in June 2020 after weeks in which there was a complete lack of SAR vessels in the Mediterranean Sea, due to EU and member states' policies, regulations and legal activity. In addition, a new Italian SAR civic initiative was launched in July, after months of preparatory work.

Meanwhile, grassroots actors continued to play a major role through other initiatives, and the pandemic made their role even more central.

Alarm Phone, the activist-led initiative that supports rescue operations, urging responsible authorities to take action and shining a light on boats in distress, is an example of that. In the recent months of complete governmental disengagement, during the Covid-19 crisis, this hotline has more than ever become a kind of de facto Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. It has tried to ensure timely and effective rescue and to stand in the way of push-back attempts to Libya, as

22 Interview with Alberto Mallardo, Sea-Watch officer, 4 August 2020.
23 Ibid.

much as is possible.

The German NGO Sea-Watch has just added a second airplane to its fleet for reconnaissance missions. These are crucial to be able to alert authorities in case of people in distress as well as to provide detailed evidence and transparent accounts of the situation at sea, including in situations where national authorities are unwilling to co-operate (regardless of their legal obligations).[24] Remarkably, however, the first Sea-Watch reconnaissance airplane – Moonbird – was forcibly grounded by Italy at the beginning of September 2020.

In the context of an increasingly difficult and tense situation, such as that witnessed in southern Italy and Malta, besides concretely acting on the ground (or rather at sea), non-institutional actors have been crucial due to their advocacy and for making visible a number of situations and potential violations of international law, as recalled above.

Another concrete and significant step, allowing greater reach, is that of the legal route, as a way to directly influence specific situations and, more broadly, governance of the phenomenon as a whole.

One example is the recent complaint filed with the United Nations' Human Rights Committee against Italy, Malta and Libya. The complaint was presented by ASGI, the Italian Association for Juridical Studies on Migration, and CIHRS, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, on the grounds of violation of the non refoulement principle, and it was supported by Alarm Phone, Mediterranea – Saving Humans and Sea-Watch.

The legal path is not new and has taken different forms over the years. These range from the criminal charges against Matteo Salvini, former Italian Interior Minister, pressed by the NGO Open Arms, to administrative rulings that overturned governmental decrees (including in the Open Arms-Salvini case), plus cases of violation of financial regulations.

In times in which the voice of grassroots actors is rarely heard by policy-makers, the legal route (and, more specifically, strategic litigation) is undeniably another way to try to change the status quo, if performed alongside direct action on the ground. But, as one practitioner warns regarding borders, "the issue is mostly political" and what really matters, besides the establishment of a judicial truth, is the development of a "historic and political awareness"[25].

24 Ibid.

25 Interview with A. Mallardo, Ibid.

Looking to the future (with municipalist politics in mind)

The political response to Covid-19 has included a variety of grassroots actors and non-institutional approaches, and ranges from their integration into existing governmental programmes to full opposition against securitising and discriminatory measures. In many cases, advocacy and protest have been complemented by direct action, and there has been a significant degree of intervention by informal actors in the making of policies and the shaping of practices.

This was most clearly seen in two spatial and political terrains, which for a long time were significant in terms of the perspective described: cities and borders. It is the case that many of the associated practices considered are not the result of sudden initiatives, nor are they epiphenomena of evanescent improvisations. On the contrary, they are mostly grounded in already-existing initiatives and have some – albeit varying – degrees of structure and continuity. Some existing practices suffered major problems due to the crisis and disappeared, while new actions were launched and other initiatives merged. Yet the connection between the most significant recent initiatives and existing social and political fabrics is noticeable. This association is at odds with a certain rhetoric, at times widely voiced, of action's pure 'spontaneity' . Of course spontaneity has been present, fuelled by a sense of solidarity, but the most substantial and far-reaching actions considered in this report, undoubtedly have been rooted in a longer-term and deeper commitment.

In turn, their grounded nature has reinforced the political essence of these processes, which have tended to go way beyond 'simple' humanitarianism, being able to address both root causes and power imbalances.[26]

Yet undoubtedly the more intense focus on providing concrete relief and doing immediate actions has had some negative repercussions on the ability for these practices to have a broader systemic and political impact – beyond the specific instances highlighted. This seems to have been particularly so at the city level, where initiatives have faced the perennial issue of (long-term) scaling up – i.e., the possibility to share and replicate individual local examples and affect and engage other governance levels, all with a view to achieving systemic change. Also for structural reasons, border-orientated activity appears to have offered a less-fragmented alternative framework.

26 French readers may find this article on the tension between political and humanitarian inspiring, even though it deals with the world of international NGOs and not to the grassroots initiatives explored in this report.

To a certain degree, the municipalist approach is the key to making sense of all this complexity and imagine future avenues. Putting some municipalist content (the 'politics of care') and municipalist strategies (reshaping institutional practices) back at the centre might encourage interesting developments in the coming phases of this global emergency. How this will happen is not for us to say – and even more so in such a short, introductory report – but the space definitely exists for this to take place. And the political overcoming of the boundary between cities and borders, which we mentioned in terms of border relocations and refuge cities, among other things, may be one of the most promising perspectives to keep, also (and especially) from the point of view of grassroots, non-institutional actors.