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Testimonies of Responders to the Migrant Caravans in Mexico in 2018–2019: Retrospective Study of Topics Considered Relevant to Disaster Management

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Abstract

Mexico's geographic proximity to the United States has made it one of the main routes for mixed migrant flows. Against this backdrop, in October 2018, a public call was made through social networks of individuals in Central America to migrate openly to the United States, triggering a massive caravan. Due to its size and the needs of its members, the caravan triggered a complex response in Mexico, highlighting significant challenges in disaster management and humanitarian response. This study aimed to retrospectively identify critical disaster prevention and management themes in order to address complex mass migration situations. Interviews were conducted with key decision-makers belonging to international, governmental, and civil society organizations involved in the caravan response. The results highlight, for example, the critical role of cultural sensitivity in a transparent and holistic governmental response in which the agendas of different groups of migrants as well as the well-being of local communities are considered, thereby promoting understanding between the two early on.

Key words: migrant caravan, disaster risk management, decision-making, Mexico

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1. Introduction

In the past decades, the world has faced a series of complex developments regarding global risks due to climate change as well as technological, social, and demographic shifts, with no optimistic forecast for the near future. The Global Risk Report (Cavaciuti-Wishart et al., 2024) concludes that the effects of global warming and its impact on earth systems will trigger changes in the size and structure of populations worldwide. In addition, global societal polarization trends and economic instability are among the top drivers of global migration trends.

Migration is a natural outcome of this confluence of unstable social conditions, with “involuntary migration” estimated to be the seventh most severe global risk over the next 10 years (Cavaciuti-Wishart et al., 2024). In response, governments around the globe are working to improve, implement, and rethink their coping mechanisms to prepare for current and imminent challenges regarding mobility.

There is no unique solution to address this problem, even though international efforts have been made to promote safe, organized, and legal migration, including local integration for persons needing protection for humanitarian reasons. Political and social stances play a considerable role in media coverage and governmental responses as well as the security, legal status, and general conditions of migrants, while transit routes, the size and composition of caravans, and migrants’ hopes guide the behavior of migrant groups and their relationship with authorities. Under these challenging conditions, humanitarian workers, organizations, and state and local governments struggle to strike a balance between attending to the needs of migrant caravans and addressing the concerns of local communities affected by the influx of migrants.

To contribute to addressing these circumstances, this study retrospectively reviews the chal-

lenges and relevant disaster risk reduction (DRR) elements involved in the Mexican response to one of the largest and most media-attentive mixed-flow caravans^[1] of the last decade, primarily moving from Central American countries. In this work, the pertinency of international recommendations is contrasted through the testimonies of high-profile individuals actively involved in the response, particularly the passing of the caravans through Mexico City and their stay in the “Palillo” stadium.

2. Migration to the United States

According to The College of the Northern Border (COLEF), the adjacency as well as the economic and political asymmetry between Mexico and the United States have led to Mexicans and other Latin Americans seeking a better life or fleeing persecution to migrate to the United States (Contreras Delgado et al., 2021). In Central America, forced migrations have their roots in the civil wars in Guatemala (1960–1996) and El Salvador (1979–1992), when hundreds of thousands of people fled to Mexico and the United States. This trend has continued into the present as the number of refugee status applications in Mexico increased by more than 5,000%, from 1,296 applicants in 2013 to 70,302 in 2019. Before 2015, most migrants came from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Contreras Delgado et al., 2021). Since 2015, the migrants’ country of origin has diversified, with an increase in applications from Venezuelans as well as Caribbean countries. For example, the number of Haitian applicants skyrocketed from 76 in 2018 to 5,538 in 2019, while the number of Cubans increased from 218 to 8,277. High levels of violence, political unrest, systemic poverty, and lack of opportunities are also drivers of this type of mass migration (COLEF, 2019).

Mexico’s geographic proximity to the United States places it in a strategic position to contain migration and other types of displacement from the



Figure 1 Different routes to the north (UNICEF, 2018).

southern part of North America, subjecting Mexico to significant international pressure influencing public policy development.

The main travel routes begin in Central America and move north along railways and highways in different states in Mexico, from Tapachula to Matamoros (approximately 1,780 km) or through Tijuana (approximately 3,700 km) (see Figure 1).

These routes cross Mexican states with higher levels of insecurity and violence. In 2018, many migrants were kidnapped and extorted, although there are no precise numbers due to poor follow-up by the authorities (BBC World, 2018). The distance and terrain made the journey extremely challenging, often taking several months to complete (Hale & Ma, 2023).

Many migrants who enter Mexico do so without any official documentation. Some of them apply

for temporary resident or refugee status. According to Mexico’s Senate of the Republic based on information from the Migration Policy Unit of the Ministry of the Interior, the irregular flow of migrants grew from 182,940 in 2019 to 441,409 in 2023, despite a decrease in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Instituto Belisario Domínguez, 2023). It is relevant to mention that, particularly since 2013, the migration pattern of Mexican citizens into the United States has shifted from illegal to legal as a result of temporary working visas (Verduzco e Igartúa, 2022).

In early October 2018, mainly through social media platforms, migrants widely communicated their intentions to displace as a group and started to gather in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, with the intention of migrating openly to the United States. On October 12, 160 people formed a migrant caravan,



Figure 2 Children playing in the Kids Pavilion at the “Palillo” stadium, (Photograph by Ms. Vergara part of UNICEF México, Vergara, 2019).

but information about the caravan traveled so fast that, by October 17, around 4,000 people from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras had joined it (Núñez García & Dávila Pérez, 2022). Migrants from other Central American and Caribbean countries also joined the caravan, traveling together under the slogan, “We are not leaving because we want to; we are driven away by violence and poverty” (COLEF, 2019). Political unrest, systemic poverty, and high levels of violence are drivers of mass migration. These factors are partially the consequences of climate change and exposure to the effects of tropical depressions. A common belief among the migrants was that traveling together in a large group would offer safety and better transit conditions.

Several factors, including weather conditions and political events, influenced the timing of the caravan’s formation (Albicker et al., 2018; The Associated Press, 2018). In Mexico, a proposal to allow free transit and work conditions for one year posed a significant challenge to the Mexican government, which lacked the experience and resources to implement such a policy (Cantalapiedra, 2022). In the

United States, the Baker Institute for Public Policy mentioned that stricter immigration policies triggered a sense of urgency in migrants, contributing to the size and characteristics of the caravan, thereby increasing pressure on lawmakers and responders (Hale & Ma, 2023).

The first caravan crossed Mexico’s southern border on October 19. The caravan included people of all ages and backgrounds, from farmers and laborers to teachers and healthcare workers. There were families and both accompanied and unaccompanied minors (The Conversation, 2018) (Figure 2). By October 22, more than 2,000 children had arrived in the country (Bermejo, 2018), and as the weeks passed, it became difficult to calculate how many persons were in the caravan traveling through Mexico.

The initial reception in Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost state, was characterized by unclear government policies, poor encampment conditions, political pressure, and a lack of preparedness. (Albicker et al., 2018). As the caravans grew and political pressure from the United States increased, Mexican authorities began to take a more restric-



Figure 3 Reception center in Chiapas (Photograph by G.T.C.)

tive approach. The response was mixed, with the authorities breaking up some caravans, offering transit visas to some caravan members, and conducting massive deportations in other cases. Consequently, the migrant station in Tapachula, Chiapas quickly overflowed, and the encampment was forcefully opened.

At each step of the journey, the reception conditions, assistance and transportation conditions changed according to the local authorities' position toward migration. Some states facilitated buses to help the caravans move faster between their state borders; others offered humanitarian support (Figure 3). November 2018 was the final month of Mexican President Peña Nieto's administration. On December 1, 2018, the new government took over, and states aligned with the national ruling party-backed President Obrador's open spirit and declarations began providing legal means to cross through Mexican territory, triggering an exceptional governmental response.

According to an analysis of Twitter posts in October 2018, more than half of Mexican citizens be-

lieved that the migrants should be allowed to pass through the country, a position that changed as the number of migrants increased, further burdening local governments (Cantalapiedra, 2022). In the United States, some studies reported that migrant caravans were considered a threat very early on (Leutert, 2020).

On November 5, the first members of the caravan arrived in Mexico City, the capital. The local government was aligned with the National Ruling party, which showed an exceptionally high political and social willingness to help migrants. An integrated state government response was implemented with available personnel, which led to the establishment of a migrant camp in the "Palillo" stadium (Gabriela Rojas, 2018), where shelter, clothing, meals, communication services, security, medical care, water and sanitation facilities, legal assistance, psychological support, childcare, and education activities were provided for as many as 10,000 migrants at its peak (Amnesty international, 2018). The burden on the local government was extraordinary and required both national and international



Figure 4 Children playing soccer at the “Palillo” Stadium in Mexico City (Photograph by G.T.C.)



Figure 5 Members of religious groups cooperated with the general response at the “Palillo” stadium (Photograph by G.T.C.)

cooperation. As shown in **Figure 4**, migrant children were given access to recreational facilities.

It was reported that the city government spent around 660,000 pesos per day on food (approximately USD 33,000). Each meal cost an average of 40 pesos (approximately USD \$2), with the city delivering about 16,500 meals each day (Moreno,

2018). Other costs included maintaining the shelter facilities, daily operations of the center, medical care, transportation, and human resources. In addition to government resources, non-governmental organization (NGOs), international agencies, religious groups (see **Figure 5**), and ordinary citizens also contributed.^[2] **Figures 6** and **7** also show the



Figure 6 A child playing at the “Palillo” stadium in Mexico City (Photograph by G.T.C.).



Figure 7 Migrant meeting at the “Palillo” stadium in Mexico City (Photograph by G.T.C.).

situation in the “Palillo” Stadium.

The shelter at the “Palillo” stadium in Mexico City was the largest governmental response to the caravan, involving the confluence of international, state, and civil society organizations together, event largely covered by media. As such, it represents a research opportunity to retrospectively examine

the most relevant DRR and emergency management issues surrounding this part of the response.

After entering Mexico City, the caravan split into groups and took different routes toward the country’s north depending on members’ circumstances and preferences. Some of them walked through the shorter but more dangerous route to-

ward Tamaulipas, while others walked toward Tijuana, a longer route perceived as a safer.

3. Interviews with decision-makers

As mentioned above, political stances significantly affect how governments interact with migrants. Despite this, there are minimal standards and recommendations such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction that governments should follow when faced with these situations.

The standards born from the humanitarian chart (Sphere Association, 2018) aim to create a minimum benchmark for disaster relief operations. These were later translated into sets of guidelines that were condensed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and other international agencies such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Some of their recommendations are listed here.

- Include migrants in DRR measures as a way to guarantee that their specific needs are being attended to, considering the opinions of community leaders and individuals.
- Provide multilingual information to ensure that information reaches everyone.
- Build trust between migrants and authorities, ensuring that rights are acknowledged and protected.
- Develop clear interagency policies that prevent confusion at all levels, from authorities to migrants.
- Prepare personnel in a timely manner, making them aware of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrants.
- Be ready to deploy safe spaces and shelters with clear mechanisms for monitoring the treatment of migrants during their stay.

- Ensure access to healthcare services, including mental health support and specific services for children.
- Develop community-based communication that reduces xenophobic behaviors and aggression toward migrants.

For this case study, five non-structured interviews were conducted between November and December 2024 with decision-makers from international, governmental, and civil society institutions deeply involved with the migrant caravan in 2018 and 2019. Each interview was recorded in Spanish, and automatic services (Microsoft Word and Copilot) was used to transcribe and translate it into English.

The participants were asked to speak freely about their experience managing the caravan. After 30 minutes of discussion, they were asked to compose a message for future responders identifying the key DRR and management topics they considered to be critical in their retrospective view of their experience.

The full interview was summarized with the intent of developing a comparison table of each interviewee’s main opinions. A specific analysis was developed for the parts corresponding to the message for the future.

An interview was conducted with Mr. Jose Venta, one of the directors for emergency response at the Secretariat for Risk Reduction and Civil Protection of Mexico City (SGIRPC). Mr. Venta was working to organize the disaster relief operations for the migrant caravan at the headquarters of the Mexican Red Cross. Mr. Venta participated in coordinating, implementing, and following up on the activities at the “Palillo” stadium.

Ms. Ximena Arroyo from the UNHCR was also interviewed. The UNHCR played an essential role in following the caravan’s progress since its first arrival at Tapachula. It was one of the few institutions

authorized by the Mexican government to access the first encampments at the start of the caravan's journey.

Additionally, Ms. Paola Gómez was interviewed. She is an education officer at the UNICEF office in Mexico. During that time, she was in charge of the education-in-emergencies response. Ms. Gómez played an important role in designing and implementing response activities, particularly in the educational sector.

Mr. Gerardo Talavera was interviewed to shed light on the views of civil society. He shared his experience working for the NGO Casa Refugiados, which collaborates closely with other organizations involved in relief response and humanitarian assistance for refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, and displaced persons.

The final interview was conducted with Ms. Mariana Mendoza, who works for the SGIRPC of Mexico City and was deployed for the entire duration of the relief response in Mexico City and focused on mental health support and general supervision of the shelter. The complexity and size of the caravan necessitated the participation of thousands of people across government agencies and civil society organizations. Accordingly, the viewpoint of a single person will reflect only a tiny part of the overall experience. Nevertheless, gathering the testimony of key decision-makers from various agencies is expected to provide a more profound comprehension of the tensions and challenges their organizations experienced.

It should be noted that the views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the interviews belong solely to the participants and do not necessarily represent the interviewees' employer or organization.

4. Results

The complete interviews and transcripts of the interviews are available online.^[3] The body of this document contains only the comparison table and

the messages for the future. Based on the interviews, the authors extracted key messages and divided them into the eight components: general impressions and challenges; training and preparedness for responders; reception of aid; health and sanitation; government and organizational response; future challenges and recommendations; cultural sensitivity and community engagement; and long-term solutions. See **Table 1**.

The comparison table shows the overlap among the five interviewees' opinions on the importance of having prepared personnel, preparedness regarding policies and resources, and coordination between agencies for managing migrant caravans. All the interviewees emphasized the need for specific training to promote awareness of the geopolitical conditions and cultural contexts of migrants. Better planning, coordination, and risk management are relevant transversal claims across agencies. Effective coordination among stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and civil society organizations, is needed to ensure a unified and efficient response to migrant crises, but it is the most challenging issue because of the conditions.

As expected, different priorities regarding specific challenges and solutions arose according to each interviewee's main activities and organizational concerns. For example, some interviewees focused on psychological and cultural aspects, highlighting the need to understand migrants' cultural backgrounds and desires for aid provision, while others emphasized the importance of strengthening governmental capacities and inter-institutional coordination. Interestingly, some interviewees pointed out the critical need for accurate data and information tracking mechanisms as a prerequisite for delivering quality support, for example, on the educational side. However, interviewees belonging to agencies deeply involved in disaster relief stressed more operational aspects, such as the rapid deployment of resources and compliance at the

Table 1 Results of the interviews

	Mr. Venta (Mexican Red Cross)	Ms. Arroyo (UNHCR)	Ms. Gómez (UNICEF)	Mr. Talavera (Casa Refugiados)	Ms. Mendoza (SGIRPC)
General Impressions and Challenges	Highlighted the need for psychological training for first responders.	Noted the mass detention of migrants. Highlighted family separation and health issues.	Noted the need to improve coordination between federal and local authorities, as well as the need to strengthen capacities for shelter setup.	Emphasized the need for better coordination. Highlighted the lack of accurate mechanisms for tracking and information management.	Emphasized the importance of socio-emotional support and the challenges in governance.
Training and Preparedness for Responders	Stressed the importance of training first responders in geopolitical and cultural contexts.	Emphasized the need for better planning and risk management, including psychological support and health screenings.	Highlighted the need for training on risk reduction, human rights, and health, including psychosocial health and education.	Emphasized the need for training humanitarian workers on the specific needs of migrants.	Stressed the importance of training on migration, human rights, and cultural sensitivity.
Reception of Aid	Noted the high expectations of migrants and the importance of cultural sensitivity in aid delivery.	Highlighted the chaotic implementation of humanitarian visas and the need for clear policies.	Emphasized the need for better coordination and resources for shelters.	Highlighted the role of civil society organizations in providing immediate assistance.	Emphasized the need for better follow-up mechanisms to ensure continuous support.
Health and Sanitation	Emphasized the relevance of following international standards for health, water, and sanitation needs (WASH).	Highlighted outbreaks of diseases and inadequate health facilities.	Noted that sanitation facilities and health facilities were insufficient for the demand.	Emphasized the need for proper health screenings and medical care.	Highlighted the importance of socio-emotional support and recreational activities.
Government and Organizational Response	Emphasized the need for better societal education and language barrier solutions.	Noted the involvement of multiple government agencies and the lack of coordination.	Highlighted the need for better coordination mechanisms and better preparedness for future events.	Emphasized the role of the Foreign Ministry and the need for better coordination.	Noted the challenges in governance and the need for efficient decision-making.
Future Challenges and Recommendations	Highlighted the need to develop cultural awareness in first responders to prevent conflicts with migrant groups.	Emphasized the need for comprehensive risk management, considering local community engagement, as well as nearby communities that could face the same problem in the near future.	Stressed the importance of strengthening government capacities and inter-institutional coordination.	Highlighted the need for accurate data management as well as medium- and long-term solutions.	Emphasized the importance of empathy, understanding, and continuous improvement in institutional capabilities and personnel development.
Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement	Emphasized the importance of capturing migrants' attention and providing helpful information.	Highlighted the need for understanding cultural backgrounds and involving local communities.	Highlighted the need to develop specific training that considers cultural sensitivity in order to promote integrated and organized responses.	Emphasized the need to tackle xenophobia by promoting cultural sensitivity and effective inclusion strategies.	Highlighted the importance of creating trust and understanding with migrants.
Long-Term Solutions	Suggested societal education and better integration strategies.	Emphasized working to address root causes of migration and consider that Mexico will change from a travel route to a final destination, which will necessitate better governmental strategies.	Advocated for medium- and long-term views toward strengthening the system to prevent compartmental responses.	Highlighted the need to integrate migrants into local communities.	Emphasized the need for follow-up mechanisms and continuous support.

shelters according to international recommendations like the Humanitarian Charter and minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (Sphere Project). These differences reflect the interviewees' varied experiences and participation in responding to the migrant caravans, but taken together, they provide a unique and comprehensive view of the relationship between international pressures and local needs, highlighting the challenges faced as well as potential solutions.

5. Some typical stories

In general, the opinions of the interviewees were in line with international frameworks and recommendations from the International Organization for Migration (Guadagno et al., 2017), particularly regarding preparedness and inter-agency coordination. Nevertheless, the interviews provided rich content that added "meaning" to the general recommendations. For example, according to the testimonies, the change in government from one party to another triggered a significant change in governmental policies, which generated substantial complications for the authorities on the ground during the adaptation period as well as for migrants, not only in terms of procedures but also operational issues.

"The big issue with the humanitarian card is that it allows free transit through the country, but it is a contradictory procedure [regarding asylum], because, for example, if your request for asylum is made in Chiapas, then you have to stay in Chiapas. You cannot travel to another place. However, if you have this card, you can travel elsewhere, so sometimes it is a key where people look for the card to be able to move,"

One interviewee mentioned the following regarding operational aspects.

"these caravans were on international bridges and they settled there because they were not allowed to cross since the authorities were going to issue visitor's cards for everyone. The problem, of course, was that

there were no means. There were not enough printers (for paperwork demands) or immigration agents because suddenly one day, there were 100 people, and the next day, there were 2,000 because word had spread and everyone found out. Everyone realized then that it was a totally uncontrolled procedure."

The cascade of effects later made it challenging to follow up and control the caravans, which comprised different groups with different agendas, including political ones, complicating the governmental response. If clear and broad national policies are not well established or if the response varies by agency, confusion and lack of trust will taint the migrants' perception of the authorities. The inadequacy of encampments and shelters makes groups more vulnerable, particularly toward social risk, with long-lasting negative outcomes such as the creation of links among criminals from different countries, increasing their capabilities. Elements rarely touched on general discussions and management recommendations. An interviewee mentioned the following.

"There was a lot of theft. We even had an incident where people were hiring migrants as laborers without our knowledge, a truck arrived to offer jobs outside the stadium and was picking them up. It was night, and a nun went and got the people out of the cars (from the suspicious persons). But people needed money, and they were going to leave, right. It's like all the criminal groups said, these people are cannon fodder. They then began to start businesses where local cartels, local violent criminals are connecting with foreign groups, opening the door for links between local crime and extra-Mexican crimes, from other countries."

Regarding cultural differences, cooking and regional ingredients can trigger substantial emotional responses. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned the following.

"'Lady Beans,' a Honduran woman from the caravan, who rejected the food at the 'Palillo' stadium be-

cause she says 'it's what pigs eat'^[4] but what no one in Mexico knows is that 90% of the food in Honduras is beans, they mainly eat red beans and beans of the color she received in Mexico are given to domestic animals. In the end, this lady became somewhat infamous because people said, 'See, we are helping them and look how she repays us. She's rejecting our help, isn't she?.'

Another example was about chili.

"When the migrants come, the cook puts chili on the food. These little actions have an impact. They make people not want to eat food. It stays or spoils."

To reduce conflicts with caravan migrants, it is critical to appropriately train responders. For example, the following was mentioned about the critical issue of family separation: *"There were literally siblings, children, cousins who were lost."* Children in particular need to be closely followed. There were cases in which migrants exploited the presence of minors to apply for faster travel. *"They were using children because they can get to the U.S. faster with children."*

Gender differences also need to be taken into account *"They made this mass detention site and divided it into two areas so there were families with children on one side, and LGBTIQ+ people and at-risk women on the other side. There were people who were all alone. The issue is that there were around 8,000 to 12,000 people at that time."*

6. Message for the future

According to the participants, future first responders must adopt an integrated and inclusive approach when managing migrant caravans and mass migration. As Mr. Venta noted, "prepared personnel and institutional preparedness are crucial," emphasizing the need for awareness of the cultural contexts of migrants. Ms. Arroyo highlighted the importance of "better planning and risk management," including psychological support, adequate health screenings, and policies regarding manage-

ment and treatment. Ms. Gómez stressed the need for "strengthening government capacities and both inter- and intra-institutional coordination," advocating for medium- and long-term solutions by strengthening national systems. Mr. Talavera pointed out the necessity of "accurate data and information management," as well as better coordination between government agencies and civil society organizations, emphasizing that inappropriate shelter responses on top of weak public policies make migrants more vulnerable to social hazards. Finally, Ms. Mendoza stressed the importance of "effective governance and preparedness" to ensure the safety and security of both migrants and responders.

7. Conclusions

This case study showed that using a retrospective view based on the testimonies of decision-makers provides good real-world examples for scenario construction, providing practical input for the creation of international guidelines.

The cases reported here exhibited many similarities with the complex problems involved in managing evacuation shelters in large-scale natural disasters in that there were a large number of evacuees, necessitating the provision of well-balanced nutritious foods, a sanitary environment, gender considerations, and so on. Furthermore, considering the increasing number of foreign residents in Japan, culturally sensitive management is one of the most important findings of this case study.

A training approach using past cases can facilitate discussion of sensitive topics such as political stances, trust issues, adverse effects due to inadequate responses, and lack of training and compliance with minimum standards without burdening specific political figures or current government authorities.

Case reviews can also help to identify critical issues regarding human and material-specific re-

source preparations, the qualities and implications of policies, and the procedures and outcomes pertaining to the relationship between authorities and vulnerable groups.

As for the retrieval of the historical event, the interviews provided a global and integrated view of the situation from a variety of perspectives, providing important lessons that may be unique to international frameworks, making it a worthwhile approach.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the interview participants, who kindly shared their experiences. This work was partially supported by Science and Technology Research Partnership for Sustainable Development (SATREPS) "The project for Compound Disaster Risk Reduction associated with Large Earthquakes and Tsunamis (JPMJSA2310)".

Notes

- [1] A mixed flow can be composed of migrants, refugees, and stateless people, among others.
- [2] The amount of resources coming from the social sector remain unquantified.
- [3] This includes the audio recordings (<https://1drv.ms/f/s!Ao44UxUfxpjCjop5D9kULf8V2-TCNg?e=VEao2M>) and the translated transcripts (https://1drv.ms/f/s!Ao44UxUfxpjCjop_hQwhbCDyz8T76g?e=soysIB).
- [4] The video can be seen in the following url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpUmPpKegCA>

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(Received April 30, 2025)