

**SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE**

# Making it “Easy to Help”: The Evolution of Norwegian Volunteer Initiatives for Refugees

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**Abstract**

At the height of the refugee reception crisis in 2015, a large number of volunteers across Norway mobilized to bring assistance in different forms. The two most notable initiatives were Refugees Welcome Norway (RWN) and A Drop in the Ocean (*Dråpen i Havet*, DiH). RWN focused on those arriving in Norway and DiH on those arriving in Greece. Looking at these two initiatives' organizational trajectories together allows us to examine how they managed the transition from the immediate 'crisis' and large volunteer mobilization to finding a role for themselves in the longer-term. Drawing on social movement theory and literature on humanitarian action, the article argues that the two organizations, while adapting in different ways, focused their organizations around 'making it easy' for volunteers to help. The article explores how this allowed to forge their distinct identity in the organizational landscape, while also engaging with volunteers' 'need to do something'.

**INTRODUCTION**

Stories of the volunteer responses at the height of the 2015 refugee crisis have been manifold: media have told stories of youngsters welcoming refugees at train stations in Berlin, while at various crossing points throughout Europe volunteers came to aid stranded refugees. Volunteers helped with everything from bringing warm food and clothes, to making sure newly arrived migrants had charging stations and Wi-Fi access (Chtouris & Miller, 2017; Jumbert et al., 2018; Koca, 2016). Although more remotely located from the main points of arrival, Norway also saw a record-high number of refugees arriving, with over 30,000 asylum applicants in 2015 (to a country with a population of a little over 5 million). This rush initially overwhelmed the existing reception structures (UDI,

2015) and led to a corresponding surge in volunteer mobilization (Bygnes, 2017; Sætrang, 2016). Two of the major volunteer initiatives that emerged were Refugees Welcome Norway (RWN) and A Drop in the Ocean (*Dråpen i Havet*, DiH): the first focused on helping refugees arriving in Norway, and the other developed as an organization sending volunteers to Greece to help those arriving on the islands and, later, the mainland.

At first sight, RWN and DiH (both established in the late summer of 2015) represent a massive solidarity response to the refugees arriving in record numbers. Looking more closely at the initiators' motivations for engaging, it is clear that these initiatives also constituted a reaction to what was seen as a lack of response by the authorities, first and foremost the state but also the established humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross (Jacobsen, 2019; Sætrang, 2016; RWN Interview 1 and 2). Both initiatives are united by references to the political climate as either antagonistic to receiving refugees or merely focused on 'the numbers' (of refugees) that Norway could receive or not, which, in turn, triggered a sense of 'a need to do something'. Upon hearing through the media about the first volunteers at the police registration office at Tøyen in Oslo (Johnsrud, 2015; Sætrang, 2016), many people decided to go there and see what they could do to help – only to discover that many others had done the same and they were all quickly put to work. Similarly, for DiH, a team of sixteen volunteers were ready to go to Greece only a few days after the initiator of the Facebook group had returned to Norway from her first trip, during which she was frequently interviewed in the media. Both initiatives started as small-scale, individual actions that rapidly escalated to large-scale volunteer initiatives, helped initially by media coverage of the refugees' suffering and the first volunteers meeting them and then by rapid social media mobilization. RWN and DiH did not need to actively seek volunteers. Rather it is clear that the initiatives promoted by these individuals came at a moment when their cause hit a powerful nerve in society.

Initial studies of RWN and DiH, mostly in Norwegian, have shown how they emerged and organized (Fladmoe et al., 2016; Homane, 2016; Sætrang, 2016), but less has been said about how they managed the transition from spontaneous response to established organizations with a specific aim – all the while adapting to changing crisis settings. This article follows the trajectories of these two organizations and examines the different strategies of adaptation that each organization chose along the way. The article draws primarily on the literature about changing understandings of humanitarian aid, including discussions of so-called 'grassroots humanitarianism', which reflect on the boundaries between humanitarian aid and politically oriented engagement. More specifically, I interrogate the lines drawn between humanitarian aid and related concepts such as charity, solidarity, hospitality and human rights movements – a literature that has mushroomed in the wake of civil society responses to the European refugee reception crisis (Carpi & Pınar Şenoğuz, 2019; Rozakou, 2017; Sandri, 2018; Sinatti, 2019; Theodossopoulos, 2016). These manifestations of engagement may spring out of different forms of citizen activism prior to the reception crisis in 2015, or, as Sandri has shown studying the volunteers in Calais, there may be a temporal dimension to this, as many became initially involved with an apolitical and 'humanitarian' motivation, only to become politically engaged after witnessing more closely how the authorities treated refugees (Sandri, 2018; see also Sinatti, 2019). Others suggest that political neutrality in refugee assistance is impossible (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Much of the scholarly work on different civil society responses – from initiatives to help refugees in Calais (Sandri, 2018), on the Greek islands (Chtouris & Miller, 2017), in Lampedusa or elsewhere in Italy (Sinatti, 2019; Zamponi, 2017) – have assessed how these initiatives were sparked, the role of emotions (Karakayali, 2017), of visibility (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017), and the dynamics in such engagements and what effects they have had on current policies, practices and relations with refugees and other migrants. While several of these studies have addressed the evolution from more neutral 'apolitical' acts (at least self-defined as such by the volunteers) to more politicized engagement (McGee & Pelham, 2018; Vandevordt, 2019), few of them have sought to understand how the initiatives adapted and 'survived' (or not) with changing forms of crisis and changing access to volunteers.

This article addresses this specific question: How did the two organizations manage the transition to established organizations, balancing between professionalization and the need to adapt to a changing landscape, on the one hand, and preserving their initial purpose and broad appeal to volunteers on the other? To do so, the article

also draws on social movement theory and the different stages of social movements. These are identified in the literature as different stages that most movements go through, and the stage of bureaucratization, following the immediate emergence and consolidation ('coalescence') is of particular interest here (Macionis, 2001). The bureaucratization stage is described as a critical one, where the role of the 'organizers' is central, and in which their ability to continue to mobilize and sustain the members' engagement matters for their ability to survive, all the while institutionalizing and formalizing their way of working (Ibid). This article looks specifically at this bureaucratization stage and the role of the organizers, within the two Norwegian organizations, where a tension arises between 'professionalization' vs. a lean volunteer structure. While there may be broad agreement that some form of professionalization is needed, as part of the bureaucratization process, understood in a Weberian sense, leading to more formal structures, hierarchy, division of labour and reduced elements of favouritism, there is also resistance in the two organizations against the idea of becoming too rigid – as if 'professionalism' could remove the flexible character of their aid, and in particular the easy access for volunteers. I argue that in the two organizations' quests to continue mobilizing, they are not only focused on the problem-issue (i.e. ensuring a proper reception of refugees) but also on continuing to 'make it easy' for volunteers to help. As new initiatives in the organizational landscape, both organizations see 'making it easy' as their core strengths.

The article's findings draw on a set of interviews conducted with leading figures from the two volunteer movements and from a continued tracing of these organizations' activities between 2015–2019. The interviewees – four from RWN and four from DiH – were all either key figures in the initiation of the two organizations or volunteers who have come to occupy key roles during the institutionalization phases.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in person, mainly between June–October 2019, in Oslo, Norway, with one preliminary interview conducted with a coordinator from DiH in Skaramagas outside Athens, Greece, in October 2017. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian and lasted between one and two hours. I have visited DiH's volunteer facilities twice (in Piraeus in April 2016 and in Skaramagas in October 2017) and have followed both organizations' Facebook groups since 2015. The interviews have been used to identify the various strategies pursued, at individual and organizational levels, and the positions of the organizations in the broader landscape of assistance and the politics of refugee reception. The interview data was first organized in a chronological order, in order to make sense of the sequences of events in the emergence of the respective organizations. I then applied 'versus codes' (Saldaña, 2009) in order to identify concepts, values and ideals about the evolution of the organizations that stand in tension with each other, for example the idea about a lean and flexible volunteer structure vs. formal professionalized structures. This served as an analytical framework to better understand the trajectories of the two organizations. Emerging academic work covering the establishment of these two organizations (composed mainly of detailed reports, and a few MA theses) provides a good insight into the first emergence and consolidation of the two groups.

The article starts by describing how the volunteering emerged, and how the organized responses by RWN and DiH in many ways responded to an expressed 'need to do something' in the face of perceived non-response by established actors. In a second section, I show how the two initiatives established themselves as organizations, while seeking to maintain the lean structure and low threshold for helping that led volunteers to join them in the first place. Finally, the article reviews how the two organizations adapted to changing needs 'on the ground' and how they managed the shift from organizing the initial massive volunteer mobilization to maintaining and recruiting new volunteers.

## **VOLUNTEERING AND THE 'NEED TO DO SOMETHING'**

The volunteer responses to refugees arriving in Europe in 2015 have largely been described as different forms of reactions to what was seen as a lack of response by European governments (Rozakou, 2017; Sandri, 2018; Vandevordt, 2019). This sense of a lacking response by authorities is echoed in the interviews carried out with

the Norwegian volunteers, which in turn fomented a 'need to help', as described by Malkki (2015). RWN started with a small group of artists meeting up at the police registration unit ('PU') in the Tøyen section of Oslo, where all newly arrived refugees and other migrants were required to register. The volunteers saw that the refugees didn't have anything else than the clothes they were wearing and began bringing warm food and clothes (Johnsrud, 2015). After these first acts of helping out were described in the Norwegian daily newspaper, *Dagsavisen*, on 31 July 2015, word of mouth began to spread and more people started going to the PU at Tøyen. From these actions, the Facebook group Refugees Welcome Norway was created, replicating the name that similar initiatives had taken in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The number of followers in the group soared from 10,000 to 50,000 and then beyond 100,000 over just a few days in late August (RWN Interview 1). Interviewees describe these early days as chaotic as questions poured in about where to meet and how to help. One interviewee describes the initial days as almost out of control: She took responsibility for managing the Facebook page – from answering requests to deleting inappropriate posts – and found it quickly became a full-time job (Ibid). Then there were groups of volunteers who arrived unannounced at the PU, having driven several hours to Oslo, with their cars packed full of clothes and fresh waffles, ready to hand them out and asking: 'Where are the refugees?' (Ibid). There were also many migrants with severe health issues who required medical attention and several volunteers were suddenly cast into a role beyond their capacities, as they escorted the affected to the emergency unit of the hospital. Soon, an RWN Norway – Health group was established on Facebook, gathering doctors, nurses and health workers to coordinate their volunteering (RWN Interview 2 and 4).

Despite the chaotic feel of these early days, many volunteers describe this time as a period where it was made possible for 'anyone' to do something, and they stressed this aspect as the strength of the initiative. The massive attraction of this volunteering can be explained by the fact that the initial acts of helping, through simple things like bringing food, made people feel a form of personal relief: it showed them there was something they could do. In a complex situation understood as a 'crisis', many recounted having felt at a loss about what they could do. The first volunteers in Tøyen set the example, making it easy to 'do something'. Other volunteers would then follow their lead. Another interviewee, who came to have a leading role in the next phase, also recounts people saying, 'This I can do; this I am good at and can contribute with' (RWN, Interview 2). She describes volunteers as experiencing a sense of relief from the feeling of disempowerment they felt when watching the news about the refugee crisis across Europe.

DiH was also in many ways sparked by a sense of a need to 'do something' and as a protest to the current political climate. Trude Jacobsen, the initiator, recounts hearing a debate on the radio in August 2015 discussing the number of refugees that Norway could receive or not. As she writes on her Facebook page close to four years afterwards:

Admittedly, I had seen some pictures of boats arriving in Greece, but what aroused me was a rather tedious debate on the radio. A debate where I realized that for us, here at home, it was just talk about numbers. 3,000? 8,000? No one? How many refugees, on a scale of 0 to 65 million, can we help? As the debate continued, I realized that there was not a single point about the people behind the numbers.

(Jacobsen, Facebook post, 9 August 2019, authors' translation)

DiH began as a Facebook group, to which Jacobsen invited close friends and family to collect clothes and other items to bring with her to Greece. She then went to Lesbos to see what she could do: She knew Greece well, having lived there for nine years, but it was her first time on the island. In a matter of three days, she had 11,000 members in the group, many asking what they could do and wanting to help. A few days after her return, a team of 16 volunteers followed her footsteps: Jacobsen knew the person who she put in charge of coordinating the team, but the rest of the people she did not know. Witnessing the massive needs in Lesbos, and soon after in Chios, Jacobsen's initiative experienced a massive surge in the number of people wanting to help. She quickly realized she needed to spend more time on facilitating and organizing the volunteers in the best way. She took a leave of absence from her work, and never returned (DiH Interview, Jacobsen).

For RWN and DiH, it appears that not only did the initiators identify a ‘need to do something’ to assist refugees, but they also hit upon a larger ‘need to help’ within the public. Their actions spoke to people who were frustrated by the official discourse and at a loss about ‘what to do’ and felt ‘relief’ when seeing that they could do something in their own neighbourhood, and for others, by way of a plane ticket to Greece (easily accessible from Oslo in the summer months). This easily accessible opportunity (to «do something») appears to have been at the centre of the massive mobilization these initiatives experienced.

## FORMALIZATION WHILE ‘MAKING IT EASY’ TO HELP

The two initiatives quickly saw the massive volunteer mobilization as not only a way to fill the void left by governmental agencies or established humanitarian actors, but as their core strength as new organizations in the field. They both developed narratives about pursuing an almost unique moment in history, where ‘anyone’, ‘normal citizens’ who had never volunteered before, could engage. This idea is reflected in their mission statements. On DiH’s webpage, it says ‘We make it easy to help refugees’.<sup>2</sup> On RWN’s page, they highlight that ‘it started as a popular movement’.<sup>3</sup> As we will see here, while both initiatives begin formalizing and building their respective organizations, the mantra of ‘making it easy to help’ remained central throughout. The mobilization in this early phase was largely organized through social media – mainly Facebook groups who quickly gathered a high number of members – and then reflected ‘in real life’ by people showing up in given locations to help out. In both instances, they quickly needed to organize the massive amounts of inquiries about helping coming in through the respective groups.

One RWN volunteer recounts having visited the police registration unit once and then deciding to follow the Facebook group. Here, she saw all the messages coming in to the RWN Facebook page and thought ‘These people need someone to organize them, they need a project leader’ (RWN interview 2). As a project leader herself working in the IT sector, she felt she had something to contribute. She began answering the questions in a systematic manner – copy-pasting answers someone else had given. Most questions focused on where people could deliver clothes and where to meet if they wanted to help. She saw a few others doing the same as her, and soon she received a message saying they had created a separate group – the ‘info-group’ – where they could exchange information among themselves. Soon they created a dedicated webpage, buying the domain name (rwtn.no), sorting all the information on this site and creating a system to organize the volunteers. After teaming up with the initiators who were helping in Tøyen, she eventually quit her job to dedicate herself to establishing RWN as an organization (Ibid). The interviews show that the organizers themselves act out of a motivation to help those who want to help: ‘I thought that when you, perhaps for the first time, want to do something for a refugee, you should at least get a response’ (RWN, Interview 2). As another organizer states, a central question in the aftermath of the immediate reception crisis was how to make use of the ‘resource it is, that so many want to do something’, referring to this groundswell of interest in volunteering as a force for societal change (RWN Interview 3).

The initiator behind DiH similarly and rapidly understood that they needed a system for registering volunteers who wanted to go to Greece and to match the volunteers’ availability with the needs and tasks in the two initial locations in Greece. Jacobsen describes her experience from the private sector as highly useful here, as she previously worked in customer relations, facilitating the establishment of a system enabling DiH to quickly respond to those contacting them:

We responded quickly. Some volunteers had contacted other organizations, but didn't get any response. So we came across as more established than we were. We appeared to be professional, to be a grassroots organization.

(DiH Interview, Jacobsen)

Jacobsen also quickly recruited people who were good at communicating through Facebook (DiH, Interview 3). For these volunteers, DiH would also become a largely full-time job (DiH, Interview 1).

In recent years, studies of social movements have shed light on the role of social media, which can be used not only to mobilize attention to a cause, but also to organize meetings and effectively divide tasks (Seegerberg & Bennett, 2011; Lim, 2012). Contrary to some solidarity campaigns on social media that remain merely campaigns, the mobilization in favour of refugees arriving in Europe in 2015 was notable for the way it transcended virtual likes and shares and mobilized people who had never volunteered before. The mobilization was so successful that the task of coordinating the large numbers of people who showed up to help or deliver clothes and other items to the refugees became a central and full-time activity in itself.

In the first months, there were almost no restrictions as to who could volunteer, nor any minimum amount of time required to volunteer. RWN volunteers recount a fundamental idea that said anyone should be able to contribute and with any level of time, even if it was only once a month (RWN Interview 2). According to organizers, the profiles of those volunteering were extremely varied, including 'lawyers, writers, artists, many health workers and people with experience from first aid and ambulance drivers' (DiH Interview, Jacobsen). Jacobsen recounts a point in December 2015 when 'there were too many [volunteers], when there were almost more people on the beach waiting for the refugees than the number of refugees' (Ibid). In early 2016, they introduced a minimum age threshold of 25, in response to seeing many of the youngest volunteers having a hard time 'leaving' their missions, as the needs for refugees continued to grow. Later in the spring of 2016, as DiH's activities evolved from first reception at the beach, where the encounters with the refugees were rather brief, to more sustained activities in the established camps, they introduced a minimum duration of 10 days per volunteer stay to provide more continuity of service to the refugees, while still maintaining a low time threshold for volunteer engagement.

The question of duration continued to be a point of discussion for DiH, because as they professionalized, the project coordinators (whose minimum stays were four months) sought to increase time commitments from volunteers to ensure more stability. However, as one of the volunteer coordinators, based in Oslo, says: 'We have kept this [short duration] because it allows us to reach volunteers who would otherwise not have the possibility to go' (DiH Interview 3) and that conforms to the organization's fundamental idea that 'it should be easy to help' (Ibid). Addressing the question of what ensures the two organizations' continued success in mobilizing volunteers comes back to precisely this: both of them, in their bureaucratization, shape their organizations around volunteer mobilization and develop strategies to make it easy for people to volunteer.

## ADAPTATION STRATEGIES: SPECIALIZATION WITH VOLUNTEERS AS KEY ASSETS

The central, almost existential, dilemma for many humanitarian organizations is their desire to survive and grow as organizations – to gather more funding to conduct larger and more important interventions, to close the 'humanitarian gap' – all while aiming to eliminate the need for their activities (i.e. that the crisis they are responding to has been resolved). Once RWN and DiH had established as organizations, both also sought to expand their areas of responsibility, and to find more sustainable ways to gather funding. The bureaucratization phase necessarily entailed the formalization of practices and organization. Meanwhile, both organizations maintained their early success in mobilization and carve out a space for themselves in the larger organizational landscape by keeping a low threshold for volunteer engagement and focusing on the needs of volunteers. As multiple RWN interviewees stress, volunteers came to them because there were not 'plenty of courses to take' prior to volunteering, nor were there 'many rules and guidelines' that would constrain their opportunities to contribute to the cause at hand (RWN Interview 2).

Meanwhile, the needs on the ground were changing. In Norway, increased border control, the returning of asylum seekers to Russia, and increased restrictions on family reunification led to quick and sharp decrease in the

number of refugees arriving in 2016 and onwards.<sup>4</sup> In Oslo, the first ‘emergency phase’ outside the registration office lasted only a few weeks, until a new reception and registration centre was opened in Råde (just outside Oslo) in mid-October. The reception efforts were then taken over by the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI), who, in addition to registration, would distribute simple packages of clothes. The local health services were in charge of health checks and emergency needs. The local civil defence unit built the reception facilities, and was in charge of the daily operations of the centre in the beginning.<sup>5</sup> A few weeks earlier, the Norwegian Red Cross had been asked by UDI to step in and help with housing the refugees.<sup>6</sup>

This meant that RWN’s efforts in Tøyen were no longer needed. RWN then pivoted to provide support to the respective reception centres across the country (established and new), focusing on clothes distribution, language training, cooking course (many of which were provided by refugees), and groups for outdoor activities (RWN Interview 2 and 3). In parallel, those volunteers who had been centrally involved in coordinating the efforts during the first few weeks now focused on building the organization. RWN had already established a board in August 2015, although most of its initial members had changed since then (RWN Interview 1). In this new phase, the RWN board ensured proper representation from all regions of Norway within its ranks and established routines for meetings and communication between the central board and the local chapters (RWN Interview 2).

In Greece, although refugee arrivals declined sharply after the signing of the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, boats continued to cross in a steady flow.<sup>7</sup> For the broader European audience, the reduced press coverage after this time presented a false sense that the ‘situation’ in the Aegean Sea was under control. The work in Greece shifted from reception of refugees on the beaches of Lesbos and Chios to working with refugees in the established camps. At the same time, responses from more established humanitarian organizations<sup>8</sup> and several Greek organizations and authorities increased (Tsitselikis, 2019). Nevertheless, DiH felt its support was still needed.

These changes in their respective situations (Norway and Greece) naturally affected the number of volunteers presenting themselves to the two organizations. As DiH observed in 2018, there were fewer volunteers approaching them while they continued to see a growing set of needs. In a magazine interview in 2018, Jacobsen stated that while their areas of responsibility were growing, it is becoming more and more difficult for them to gather the funding necessary to do the job. She added, ‘We have a wish to go into more areas where there is a need, and to do that, we have to focus on getting enough volunteers’.<sup>9</sup> In Greece, DiH had established itself as a key actor in several of the camps. In some instances, they were asked to fill certain roles, while in others they had to request access to the camps. While their activities have shifted to a focus on creating meeting places for mothers, activities for children, language courses (in English mostly), and maintaining a ‘Drop shop’ for clothing donations<sup>10</sup> (DiH Interview 1), they see a continuing need to develop specific recruitment strategies for new volunteers who are no longer, or to a lesser degree, spontaneously joining the organization.

The recruitment strategies of DiH demonstrate that they know what we can call their ‘market of volunteers’. They received most volunteers from Norway in the start-up phase, but quickly drew recruits from many other countries. Mostly likely these latter volunteers surfed the wave of volunteer engagement across Europe, and found DiH to be one of the more accessible organizations for volunteers who wanted to work in Greece. To draw even more from this pool of potential volunteers, DiH signed onto international web platforms, such as Indiegogo, where aspiring volunteers go looking for opportunities. This recruitment work gave DiH steady inflow of new recruits (DiH Interview 3). The organization continued to grow, and in early 2019, the organization hired a part-time volunteer coordinator.

Among their volunteers, many were from younger age brackets (25- to 30-year-olds) often ‘seeking a first experience’ in the humanitarian sector, but DiH also recruited many senior volunteers (50+ and retirees) with ‘several volunteers above 70 years old’ (DiH Interview 2). DiH developed two initiatives to match these needs of these groups. For younger volunteers, they launched an internship programme in the summer of 2019. In this programme, volunteers work for nine months at different DiH locations on a variety of tasks. In this way, the organization fills two needs: they tap into a broad group of students who are seeking a first professional experience

they can have approved by their universities.<sup>11</sup> The internship programme also ensures longer-term engagements (nine months split over three locations) for purposes of continuity. Second, the organization is in the process of developing a special introduction course for more senior volunteers, focusing on the use of social media, smartphone 'apps', and web-based solutions used by DiH, tailored for the senior volunteers who often ask for additional follow up for these tools (DiH Interview, Jacobsen).

For DiH, professionalizing their activities while maintaining their accessibility has been a central focus. Jacobsen says: 'It has become more difficult to become a volunteer. We do require more' (Ibid). As relief efforts have become more organized in Greece, they also need to comply with standards from Greek authorities. These requirements include proving their volunteers are registered in Greece, and that DiH has procedures for requiring police certificates. Jacobsen continues, 'We still want to make it easy to volunteer, that's the fundamental idea' (Ibid). The attentiveness to volunteer needs while formalizing certain practices is also reflected in DiH's move to develop an online preparatory course (launched in summer 2019), which includes ethical guidelines on how to act 'in the field'. A staff member says this course was introduced to allow *the volunteers* to be better prepared for what they will see and experience, and to provide guidance for avoiding undesired behaviour (DiH Interview 3). These developments at DiH appear to come with requirements for formalization from outside (from Greek authorities) and from within (resulting from the necessary bureaucratization phase, once the organization reaches a certain size). The innovative recruitment methods and attention to the needs of different volunteer groups help to maintain the volunteer mass already mobilized and to continue making it easy for new ones to contribute their time and efforts.

In addition to changing their recruitment strategies and volunteer accommodations, both organizations also needed to adopt different strategies in response to changing needs on the ground. As sharply fewer refugees arrived in Norway from 2016 onward, RWN continued to work in reception centres where there were refugees. But as these centres began to close, RWN shifted its focus to more integration-oriented activities organized by the various local chapters, while more centrally placed leaders organized political campaigns, notably against the government's policy of forced returns to Russia from northern Norway (RWN Interview 3). Its Facebook page began to feature more content regarding how refugees are treated in Norway and elsewhere. At the time of writing, RWN still has an active board, and one of its members has indicated that the local chapters constitute a form of 'preparedness' should a new and large inflow of asylum seekers appear in the future (RWN Interview 4). For DiH, although fewer refugees arrived in Greece in 2016 and after, those arriving were mainly stuck there, and as mentioned above, despite other organizations also entering the field, DiH has seen a need for its continued presence. Its adaptation strategy has mainly been to professionalize its aid, specialize in some areas like activities for unaccompanied minors, and coordinate its activities with the other organizations present (DiH Interview 1 and Jacobsen).

## FROM 'BARE HELP' TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

It is relevant to this discussion to follow how both organizations define their roles, in relation to the state and to the broader field of engaged activism and humanitarian action. While RWN goes in the direction of engaging in political campaigns, while developing local spin-off initiatives, DiH has moved to professionalizing their volunteers, while also engaging in some political lobbying in Norway. The choice of engaging in political campaigns reflects a tension, raised by scholars and practitioners, in humanitarian assistance to refugees: Can humanitarian aid be neutral and impartial, while also aware of the imbalances between the aid provider and recipient (Redfield, 2011; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Vandevoordt, 2019)? This tension can be seen in RWN's development, from a desire to be apolitical to a later sense of impossibility to maintain that stance. The RWN volunteer who was in charge of the Facebook group in its early days reflected on the political landscape of the time, and recounts

how, in the early days, it was important to maintain the organization as an apolitical initiative because they wanted everyone to feel they could contribute, regardless of their political orientation or feelings about the refugee crisis. For this volunteer, that aspect of RWN was also part of the reason he came forward (RWN Interview 1).

However, this quickly became difficult to maintain. Among the volunteers who joined after the first couple of weeks, several saw the situation itself as one in which it was impossible to not also be deeply politically engaged. Some among the first group of volunteers then began to ‘fall off’ and disengage, seeing the ‘political turn’ the organization took (RWN Interview 1). Other interviewees who came onboard RWN shortly afterwards do not recount it having been difficult to navigate to find the appropriate (a)political position. One interviewee says their mission in assisting migrants was to ‘receive them with respect’ (RWN Interview 2), whether the migrants they were helping had a right to stay or even would stay. Although the interviewees said this position was easy to agree with, this is also where RWN’s resistance to the state-led reception structure is expressed. As one interviewee explains, even if their mission was simple and straightforward, providing support to refugees made it extremely difficult to ‘stay in this’ mode of volunteering *without* becoming political (RWN Interview 3). Overall, RWN’s turn to invest in political campaigns, and broader efforts to raise awareness about the refugee reception conditions, corresponds with the point in time when their assistance was needed less for the reception refugees. In this light, this might be understood as RWN’s tactic to carve out a role for itself.

At the same time, the volunteer mobilization from late summer 2015 laid the ground for a series of new spin-off initiatives. Several of the interviewees mention the RWN chapter in Søndre Nordstrand, where the local chapter has maintained an RWN shop that receives, sorts, and displays donations of clothing for those in need; they are open to anyone in need, not only refugees (RWN Interview 3). One interviewee, no longer active in RWN, is involved in an initiative in her city that offers children the opportunity to participate in a sports activity outside of school (RWN Interview 2). One of the most direct spin-offs from RWN is a Neighbourhood Oslo project, which seeks volunteers to be the point of contact for newly installed refugees in their neighbourhoods (RWN Interview 3).

Facing continuing needs in Greece, DiH has evolved in the direction of professionalizing its volunteers. For example, the organization has increasingly begun to refer to the volunteers as ‘humanitarians’ (Jacobsen, Facebook post, 21 August 2019). Jacobsen explains this labelling as a conscious choice, which began in summer 2019 and was a way to recognize their efforts: ‘[The term humanitarian] makes it more professional, volunteering is so broad, but what they are doing is humanitarian aid’ (DiH Interview, Jacobsen). Perhaps aided by the geographical distance between DiH’s headquarters and the field operations, there appears to be a division of labour between the two, where campaigns directed at Norwegian politicians are developed at the HQ to inform them about the squalid conditions in the refugee camps in Greece and to advocate for Norway to take a larger share of relocated refugees, while fieldworkers evolve into professionalized humanitarians. These changes can also be read as an assimilation over time into a field with the larger and more established humanitarian organizations active in Greece to appear at the same ‘level’ as these other groups while also cultivating their brand as a volunteer-based organization.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The idea of ‘cultural framing’ is central to understanding how emerging social movements define the problem they wish to confront (McAdam et al., 1996). Among those mobilizing in Norway, many who volunteered ‘framed’ the situation as a result of the state’s inadequate response to the refugee crisis, and, by extension, the lacking response of established humanitarian organizations, whether international or national ones. This lack of adequate response from established authorities (state and non-state) has been described elsewhere in the humanitarian literature, most prominently in Malkki’s study of humanitarians working for the Finnish Red Cross (2015). Her contribution situates the concept of ‘humanitarian assistance’ in the societies sending humanitarian aid workers,

to understand what she sees as the 'need to help', thereby moving the gaze away from the intended recipients of aid – who are in different ways merely 'imagined' by the aid workers. In the case of the volunteers who mobilized in Norway in 2015, many were moved precisely by the easily accessible means to help, satisfying different 'needs to help' and to 'do something' for the newly arrived refugees. The idea that those needing assistance are no longer far away, but 'here' (whether in their own Norwegian neighbourhood or 'here' as in Europe), was also a strong mobilizing element.

As the two organizations sought to establish and outlast the immediate spontaneous mobilization phase, they also had to adapt to changing needs 'on the ground'. Despite a drastic reduction in the number of refugee arrivals and public authorities or state-mandated organizations such as the Norwegian Red Cross stepping up taking charge of the reception infrastructure, RWN sought to pursue its activities, just taking different forms – moving from emergency oriented assistance to integration activities on the one hand and political lobbying on the other. And despite the increased role of more established humanitarian organizations, along with the reduced, but still continued arrival of refugees and other migrants, DiH also saw a continued need for its presence and services. Professionalizing became a strategy for DiH to gain legitimacy among other humanitarian actors and local authorities, while its flexible and volunteer-oriented character allowed it to both to continue recruiting volunteers – essential for the operation of their activities, but also to develop its distinct character, filling a role that few others did. While RWN and DiH quickly filled a gap that exists at the start of the crisis, the organizers saw there was something in their way of responding that had a broad appeal: a low threshold for helping, accessible to almost anyone. Their initiatives were thus not only a reaction and a critique to an unresponsive formal system of humanitarian aid, but also served as a response to what was being felt among many as a sense of being at a loss about 'what to do' and a 'need to do something'. These initiatives provided an easily accessible way of 'doing something', by opening up for untrained and short-time engagement. While some showed this engagement by travelling to Greece for different time periods, others could engage 'at home', in their own city and even neighbourhood, contributing with their own time and resources, by as little or as much as they could. The very idea that every little contribution counts then becomes a core value, where the added value is more than the sum of every benevolent act: as RWN says, it is 'a popular movement', reflecting the broader societal change that is hoped for through this engagement. DiH on its side has conducted an internal assessment studying previous volunteers' changed behaviour and attitudes upon return to Norway, showing that many of them continue mobilizing others to also engage, and several have started new local initiatives or become politically involved (Mogstad & Haugan, 2020).

While adopting different strategies in their bureaucratization processes, they also address their individual needs by coordinating with or complementing other, more established actors. As such, RWN and DiH, in different respects, become part of the larger 'system' they were initially formed in reaction to. This balance between institutionalization and maintaining a broad appeal towards volunteers is sometimes presented as requiring a choice between mobilizing against the established system, or becoming part of it, a tension which appeared in several interviews for this article and also appears in the literature (Rozakou, 2017; Sætrang, 2016; Sandri, 2018). These two Norwegian organizations show us that they can gradually become entrenched in the larger system, while operating based on volunteers, and create a new element in the organizational landscape, carving out their own space in the process. In other words, while absorbed in the larger system and reception infrastructure, volunteering is not only their trademark, it is also what distinguishes them from other organizations, and as such, becomes their survival strategy. As a scope for further studies, this point raises the question of the extent to which they contribute to uphold the systems of care and control (Ticktin, 2011), which they initially mobilized in reaction to. Whether this is the case or not, preserving the focus on volunteering, nevertheless, has the effect of maintaining an image of organizations resisting the system.

## Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12805>.

## ENDNOTES

1. The interview subjects have all been anonymized, except for the leader of A Drop in the Ocean, for whom it would be impossible to anonymize due to the visibility of her role. She has also approved using her name in citations here. The RWN movement is different, with different leaders involved in different rounds. The focus was set on interviewing those who have played central roles in the organization of the two movements and are able to speak about the strategies of adaptation and survival, which is my central focus. The various motivations of volunteers have for joining have been covered in some of the initial studies, and also merit becoming the focus of a broader mapping, which is beyond the scope of this article.
2. <https://www.drapenhavet.no> (accessed 25 October 2019) – The English version of the webpage says: 'We help people help refugees', but the Norwegian version includes the idea of 'making it easy'.
3. <http://rwtn.no> (accessed 25 October 2019).
4. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration reported an 89 per cent decrease in the number of asylum applications in 2016, compared to the previous year. The number of applications in 2016 was the lowest since 1997. <https://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/annual-reports/tall-og-fakta-2016/faktaskriv-2016/hvor-mange-sokte-om-beskyttels-e/>.
5. N. Johnsrud, N. Fredriksen, K. and Strømnes, K.T., 'Her skal flyktningene tas imot' (**Here is where the refugees will be received**), *Dagsavisen*, 7 October 2015, <https://www.dagsavisen.no/oslo/her-skal-flyktningene-tas-imot-1.418215>
6. Sigurjonsdottir, S. 'UDI har bedt Røde Kors i Oslo huse 60 asylsøkere i natt' (**UDI has asked the Red Cross to house 60 asylum seekers tonight**), *Aftenposten*, 7 October 2015.
7. While 1 million arrived on the Aegean islands in the 12 months before 18 March 2016, 26,000 arrived on the islands in the 12 months after, and a total of 84,210 in the 33 months after. ESI Core Facts, <https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/ESI%20core%20facts%20-%20EU-Turkey%20Statement%20three%20years%20on%20-%202015%20April%202019.pdf>
8. For example, to name a few: UNHCR, UNICEF, Doctors without Borders – MSF, Doctors of the World – MDM, the Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee.
9. Helgesen, S., 'Det er viktig at folk ikke glemmer at vi fortsatt finnes' (**It is important that people do not forget that we still exist**), KK, 4 March 2018 (authors' own translation of the quote in text) <https://www.kk.no/livet/det-er-viktig-at-folk-ikke-glemmer-at-vi-fortsatt-finnes/69431079>
10. Organized as a regular clothing shop, with clothes donations, where camp residents can shop for a given credit.
11. Interview with coordinator at the Oslo office explains that there has been an increase in those seeking to do an internship with them.

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