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Kimberly Clair

In late February 2016, French authorities entered “the Jungle”—an unofficial migrant settlement in the port town of Calais—equipped with tear gas, water guns, and bulldozers to demolish the southern half of the camp. To protest their eviction, some migrants threw stones or staged a hunger strike. Others took to the roofs of their temporary shelters with hand-made signs that read, “We are not terrorists, so don’t destroy our homes,” and “I am searching for freedom in Europe but I find none.” The stones, the strikes, and the signs had little effect; within three weeks, French authorities succeeded in (re)displacing 3,450 of the camp’s residents. The camp has since been dismantled.

While clashes between migrants and citizens are not always as violent or as well documented as those that occurred in Calais, they typically emerge from a similar discourse that robs migrants of their individual identity and humanity. Whether positioning migrants as “terrorists” who will bring violence and extremist beliefs to the host nation, or as unwelcome “swarms” who will drain national resources, citizens who perpetuate such xenophobic assumptions suggest that migrants are unworthy of basic services and humane treatment. The absence of migrants’ voices from dominant narratives of “the migrant crisis” ensures that these assumptions remain unchallenged.

Two arts-based initiatives to improve the lives of migrants in Za’atari, Jordan and Calais, France are the subjects of this research: The Za’atari Project, which introduced mural-painting and theater performances to Syrian refugees in Za’atari, and the Good Chance Theatre, which brought painting, drawing, theater, dance, poetry, spoken word, music performances, and other arts activities to Calais, offered migrants a rare opportunity for self-expression and self-representation. Arts activities provided by the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre also brought camp residents closer together and created a sense of community in a place where, according to one Calais resident, “we feel as if we live in a chicken pen.”
While arts programs may seem unnecessary or insignificant for populations seeking asylum, work opportunities, or more stable living conditions, the positive impact such programs can have is wide-reaching. When combined with therapy or educational discussions, arts activities can address a variety of migrants’ psychosocial health issues, including isolation, depression, boredom, and the desire to inflict harm on oneself or on others. Activities that encourage collaboration among camp residents and local community members can minimize conflict and facilitate processes of social reconciliation.

But the benefits of arts initiatives like the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre may extend well beyond camp boundaries. The documentation and dissemination of migrant artwork, whether through live performances or photographs posted on social media, give international audiences insight into migrants’ unique personalities, hopes, and desires—details that are often omitted from mainstream media coverage. These individual stories help to disrupt dehumanizing narratives that emphasize helplessness and victimhood on the one hand and violent extremism on the other.

Unfortunately, most efforts to bring the arts into migrant communities are led by volunteers with limited resources. The notion that art-making is a frivolous leisure activity with no measurable value has prevented aid agencies from taking advantage of this inexpensive yet deeply impactful resource. My evaluation of the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre suggests that the arts offer an essential tool for improving migrants’ mental health and well-being, easing tensions among migrants and citizens, and educating international audiences about migrants’ individual histories and aspirations. In this way, arts initiatives open up new discursive possibilities that can in turn effect social change.

The Za’atari refugee camp, which is jointly administered by the Jordanian government and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), first opened in July 2012 for Syrians fleeing civil war. It reached maximum capacity at 60,000 individuals by March 2013, and currently hosts approximately 80,000, making it the world’s second largest refugee camp and the fourth largest “city” in Jordan. While some residents have found work assisting aid agencies or selling goods and services in the camp’s ever-expanding marketplace, many—particularly women, children, and disabled persons—have no livelihood and few activities to help pass the time. The camp contains at least three functioning schools, but a 2014 study found that less than half of the camp’s adolescent residents attend classes. Attendance is also low in the educational and vocational programs that aid agencies have established for adults.

Joel Bergner, a self-described “nomadic artist, educator, and advocate for social change,” traveled to Za’atari in 2013, 2014, and 2015 in order to
address the lack of education, mental health resources, and stimulating activity within the camp. His collaborations with Art (aptART), Mercy Corps, the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) as well as with local artists, including Yusra Ali of Palestine and Ali Kiwan of Syria, resulted in “the Za’atari Project”—a series of murals, theatrical performances, and educational programs that Bergner hoped would allow “refugee voices to reach out to the world in a positive way to tell their own stories.” Bergner drew on his previous work with homeless, displaced, and incarcerated populations to develop activities that addressed the specific needs of Syrian refugees living in Za’atari.

In painting and drawing workshops, Bergner and his colleagues invited participants to create what they missed most from home, what they envisioned for the future, or how they wished to rebuild their communities. For large mural projects, participants played an active role both in determining the design and in spreading awareness about their artwork’s significance. Some murals, for instance, conveyed ideas about water conservation, hygiene, and conflict resolution that participants had discussed in workshops; these murals acted as educational tools to promote health-conscious behaviors and improve social relations within the larger Za’atari community.

The murals also promoted meaningful relationships among Za’atari residents. Bergner explains, “For many kids, the actual human connections and the relationships they build through these projects are just as therapeutic as the art itself, so I always include team-building exercises and plenty of activities that allow for bonding.” Most of the murals Za’atari residents created under Bergner’s guidance are giant, colorful pieces that depict a single camp resident or an animal comprised of overlapping geometric shapes or traditional Islamic patterns. Inside the patterns, artists left their individual marks, painting houses, trees, or phrases that represent their memories of the past or their hopes for the future. Viewed from up close, the murals showcase the painters’ diversity; from afar, these personalized expressions form a cohesive image that represents solidarity and creative possibility.

The significance of the Za’atari Project is not merely symbolic; its art-centered programs directly address a number of mental health issues that have been identified within the Za’atari camp community. A study conducted by the International Medical Corps (IMC) in 2013 found that Syrian adolescent refugees were primarily affected by “feelings of loss and longing for their homes [in Syria], perceptions of being discriminated against by host populations, and cases of bullying and intimidation.” By painting scenes or memories of Syria throughout the camp, Za’atari residents reshape negative feelings of homesickness or distress into positive imagery that infuses the camp with color and life. At the same time, their artwork physically transforms the dull
surroundings into a place where they belong. Other activities, such as a theatrical production that Syrian refugees and Jordanian youth co-created, gave members of both communities a chance to share their stories of frustration, hardship, and hope. Such activities paved the way for mutual understanding and helped reduce conflict between the two communities.

In concluding their report, IMC recommended psychosocial group workshops, narrative therapy, and activities that facilitate creative expression and collaboration among participants. Not only does the Za’atari project meet these objectives, it also strategically avoids any formal association with “therapy” or “mental health care”—terms that may carry negative meaning. For Bergner, “The youth, as well as the adults who participate, will often begin to discuss their experiences and open up emotionally once they feel comfortable. This is especially important in cultures that stigmatize therapy as being for ‘crazy people,’ so it’s crucial to find ways of providing therapy without calling it such.” With an emphasis on art-making, the Za’atari Project is accessible to residents who may have shied away from traditional therapy or other structured activities provided by aid agencies.

Most residents of the Za’atari refugee camp find that their lives are defined by their status as refugees; their immediate surroundings, daily activities, and interactions with aid workers serve as constant reminders of their displacement. The Za’atari project carves out a space for self-(re)definition, allowing camp residents to connect as individuals and as artists—not merely as migrants or survivors of violence. Documentation of the residents’ artwork, including the photos and stories Bergner shares on his website, extends this nuanced depiction of refugee life into the global community. Images of girls smiling with paint-streaked faces and boys proudly displaying decorated wheelbarrows—instruments they use to smuggle goods into the camp—disrupt an articulation of displacement as an exclusively victimizing process. Through art, the Za’atari camp residents become the authors of their own stories, centering their voices within the global discourse on migration.

Unlike Za’atari, the Calais migrant settlement is relatively small, with a population that has fluctuated between 4,000 and 7,000 individuals, although recent estimates put the camp’s population at 8,000. Those living in the camp have come from at least twenty different nations, and have fled for a variety of reasons, including political persecution, violence, famine, and poverty. Most of the migrants are trying to get to the United Kingdom, but strict immigration laws and a near-impossible process for obtaining asylum have left them stranded in France.

As an unofficial settlement that emerged gradually with the closure of other encampments and nearby facilities, the Calais migrant camp has received little government assistance. Aside from a day center, which has limited accommodations, and shipping containers, which are available only
to individuals who are willing to be finger-printed, all other services, including food, clothing, healthcare, and educational activities, have been provided by volunteers and charity organizations. The substandard living conditions of the Calais settlement have been well documented in both mainstream media and public health reports. A 2015 study conducted by the University of Birmingham found that migrants were living in “perilous conditions” that could have “detrimental long-term health consequences.”

Beyond the challenges of surviving without adequate shelter, sanitation services, and regular access to food and water, migrants living in Calais also suffer from mental health issues. Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World), the only organization providing psychosocial support within the camp, described the situation as “a humanitarian emergency,” and estimated that 90 percent of the camp’s residents live with a mental health condition. The increasingly aggressive tactics French authorities use to evict camp residents have undoubtedly amplified feelings of emotional distress and concerns for personal safety. Some residents have made plans to return to their countries of origin rather than face the camp’s inhospitable living conditions and dehumanizing treatment from French officials. Others have resolved to stay in a settlement they nicknamed “the Jungle”—a place that is “just for animals, not for human beings.”

Disturbed by news coverage of the harsh conditions in “the Jungle,” Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, two playwrights from London, traveled to Calais in August 2015 in order to learn more about the migrants who lived there. When they discovered that residents were willing and eager to talk, Murphy and Robertson decided to create additional opportunities for migrants to share their stories and express themselves creatively. For both playwrights, “expression is a basic human right for all. In a situation as terrible as this, it is essential.” With help from volunteers and private donors, Murphy and Robertson constructed a geodesic dome inside the camp that could hold up to two hundred people. Besides offering shelter from the cold, the dome also held yoga classes, circus workshops, poetry readings, musical performances, rap battles, discos, and discussions.

The Good Chance Theatre operated from October 2015 to March 2016 and attracted hundreds of local and international volunteers who led workshops, staged performances, and shared their artistic abilities. In turn, camp residents showcased their talents in writing, drumming, dancing, and singing. Izmail Nazari, a musician from Afghanistan, welcomed the opportunity to play the dombura he had brought from home. Others performed Iranian pop songs or traditional Somali dance. Sharing these cultural practices with the diverse Calais community allowed performers to strengthen ties to their homeland and express national pride. Like the flags residents hung from their tents or painted on walls throughout the encampment, music and dance func-
tion as identity emblems that signify citizenship and belonging beyond geographical borders. Connecting with symbols of home can alleviate feelings of isolation and depression in individuals who had no choice but to flee their countries of origin.

Writing exercises and storytelling workshops provided another means for migrants to connect with their community members while expressing their individual struggles, goals, and wishes. In one writing workshop, participants drafted letters to “the people of Europe” or “the British government” in order to explain their unique circumstances and what they hoped to achieve after resettling in the United Kingdom. Many wrote of the inhumane treatment they have experienced as refugees and urged listeners to view them instead as “children, women, fathers and brothers [who] just want to live.” These letters were translated and read aloud by volunteers and camp residents to help spread awareness of the diversity of migrants’ experiences. When language barriers impeded communication, migrants resorted to miming, gesturing, and other forms of physical storytelling. Médecins du Monde describes this kind of social activity as “potentially life-saving human contact” for individuals who have been ignored, discredited, and denied opportunities for self-expression.

The Good Chance Theatre was forced to close during the March evictions, but by then, Murphy and Robertson had attracted considerable attention from numerous international arts organizations. In August, they partnered with dozens of other artists to present “Encampment”—nine consecutive days of free performances, workshops, installations, and discussions held at the Southbank Centre in London. The program featured both new works (including poetry from exiled writers now living in London and lectures on gender and migration) and re-enactments of activities conducted in Calais, for which performers reconstructed the dome. John Martin, the artistic director of Pan Intercultural Arts who worked with the Good Chance Theatre in Calais, believed that re-staging their performances was a necessary step toward combating the anti-migrant attitudes he has observed in England. For Martin, “The argument that refugees are humans and not aliens is vital to get out there.”

Although “Encampment” was limited to London audiences, the Good Chance Theatre has collaborated with hundreds of volunteers and amassed over four thousand followers on its Twitter account, which shares up-to-date information about ongoing political efforts to push Calais migrants further to the margins of society. Exposing international audiences to the lesser-known aspects of migrants’ lives, the Good Chance Theatre, like the Za’atari Project, encourages audiences to critique flattened narratives of migrants’ experiences and to contest the discriminatory attitudes and dehumanizing practices that have emerged in conjunction with the global migrant crisis.
Although some may view the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre as arts programs that offered migrants little more than a temporary distraction from their daily hardships, these programs have had a profoundly positive impact on both migrants and the larger communities in which they reside. Fostering a safe and supportive environment, the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre provided an invaluable mental health resource for individuals who have experienced acute and/or prolonged psychosocial distress. Activities that encourage uninhibited self-expression—whether through verbal, physical, or visual means—and allow participants to explore their hopes and goals for the future, can minimize anxiety and depression. Activities that facilitate collective decision making, such as mural projects and collaborative theater productions, generate trust and solidarity among participants, which can reduce tensions and instances of violence within migrant settlements.

The Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre also offered a unique form of humanitarian assistance that emerged out of, and actively nurtured, residents’ inherent talents and strengths. Rather than position themselves as experts, Bergner, Murphy, and Robertson worked alongside migrants and local artists to honor the creative energies already present within the encampments. This human-centered approach, which stands in direct contrast to a deficit- or problem-based model of trauma recovery, allows refugees to see themselves as complex individuals—not merely as victims, displaced persons, or burdens on the host nation-state.

But migrants are not the only ones who stand to benefit from the opportunities that the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre afforded. When shared with international audiences, migrants’ murals, poems, and performances tell a different story of the migrant “crisis,” showcasing the diversity of migrants’ personalities, perspectives, and reasons for leaving home. Creating the conditions in which migrants can represent themselves, reconstruct their identities, and transform their temporary living spaces into communities that foster a sense of belonging, the Za’atari Project and the Good Chance Theatre fulfilled a larger social justice mission, foregrounding the humanity that thrives within inhumane conditions.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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