Activists and volunteers organising amid constraints: the key role of time

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Abstract

Purpose – This article emphasises the role of constraints when humans establish organisations. Previous research explains organisations because of individuals’ motivations. Here, I answer the question regarding the role of constraints in organising/organisations. In this article, the studied individuals face various constraints and want to avoid being targeted. Consequently, they establish horizontal organisations. I discuss the role of time in organising.

Design/methodology/approach – This research builds on an ethnographical study of activists and volunteers at the border between France and Italy where migrants cross the border. The area is mountainous, and the police, the judiciary and the far-right impede the actions of the activists and volunteers.

Findings – I argue that activists and volunteers establish non-hierarchical organisations to circumvent potential obstacles. To achieve this, they dedicated a significant amount of time to facilitate the formation of these horizontal structures. This approach allows them to operate without a designated leader, thereby reducing the risk of being targeted by law enforcement, judicial system or far-right groups. As a result, they successfully welcomed migrants.

Originality/value – This article presents new results on how activists and volunteers organise to welcome migrants.

Keywords Organisation, Constraints, Time, Horizontality, Social movement organisation

Paper type Research paper

Plain language summary

This article examines how volunteers and activists organise to welcome migrants. However, they face adverse challenges while doing so. They adopt efficient, time-consuming, and low-profile strategies and establish skill-based hierarchies for short periods.

1. Introduction

Previous research on social movement organisations that examined how activists establish horizontal or democratic organisations focused on the activists themselves and whether this type of organisation has an effect (Saunders and Rootes, 2013; Yates, 2021). Moreover, political scientists are numerous in this field and tend to focus on the power relationships that one finds in such movements (Augusto, 2021). This article expands the research on Social Movement Organisations (SMO) asking the question “Why do movements choose the organisational forms they do?” (Augusto, 2021, p. 77).

This article analyses how volunteers in the French town of Briançon (pronounced “Bri an son”), located near the border with Italy, have organised to welcome migrants. The number of migrants crossing the border in this area increased from a handful in 2016 to 6,000 in 2018, the year the fieldwork was conducted.

During fieldwork, volunteers faced several challenges because of the climate, topography, police, judiciary, and far-right groups. To avoid being targeted, volunteers aim to establish organisations that do not have leaders: they aim for horizontal organisations. Brown (2002) shows the difficult and time-consuming process of organising horizontally (2002). Brown
distinguishes the “how” of “organising” from “organisation” (Brown, 2002); meaning that there is an action “organising” before there is a structure that can be named “organisation”. This article focuses on organising and the organisations that have been established. This shows that the organising/organisation may depend on constraints, which are defined as human actions that hinder volunteers and activists from accomplishing their desired objective: the welcoming of migrants. I discuss the role of time, and the fact that activists and volunteers have time available tells us that, I argue, capitalism has not subsumed everyone under the clock (Davies, 1994).

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: the Context is provided in the next section, and Section 3 presents the methods, positionality, and participants. Section 4 expands on existing literature. The results are then presented, and Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Context

France and Italy share a high-altitude border. On the French side, the town of Briançon sits 10 kilometres away from the border at an elevation of 1,200–1,400 metres above sea level, and is surrounded by summits at 2–3,000-m altitude. The climate is continental, with an average temperature of 2 C above zero in December, January, and February. Migrants cross a gap to reach the town by car, foot, or helicopter.

When I arrived in Briançon for my ethnographic work, some voluntary organisations were already engaged in assisting migrants. Though the area has a history of migration (Siestrunck, 2001), the recent surge has been a novel experience for many residents who had been living there for less than 20 years. This has led to the need for new organisations and organisational forms.

Briançon is a small town, and the lack of infrastructure to support migrants before 2015 was due to the unprecedented scale of recent migration. There has been a movement against high-speed train lines across the mountains for 20 years. This movement, called NoTav, contributed to the development of the political culture in the area, which was the foundation for the mobilisation of volunteers to support migrants. These two movements are similar in that they seek to challenge the status quo and create a more just society (Tazzioli and Walters, 2019).

In the spring of 2017, migrants began crossing the border between Italy and France in the area around Briançon, weekly and daily. The locals were eager to help, and they had already established organisations to support asylum seekers who had been resettled in Briançon from the Calais Jungle after it was dismantled in 2015–6. In June 2017, a march was organised from Briançon to Gap, the capital of the département, 86 kilometres away. This march was in response to France’s decision to apply the Dublin Agreement, which enabled European Union (EU) countries to return migrants to the country where they initially entered the EU.

Under the Dublin Agreement, if a migrant enters the EU through Italy, where their fingerprints are recorded and if they try to claim asylum in France, France can send them back to Italy. After the Calais Jungle was dismantled, the French government promised that migrants would be able to apply for asylum in France and that the Dublin Agreement would not be applied. However, in 2017, migrants in Briançon learnt that this promise would not be maintained. They initiated a hunger strike to protest, and a march was organised to raise awareness regarding their situation. According to one interviewee, the march was organised to help “get out of this morbid moment”. The march was a way for the migrants to express their frustration with the French government’s decision to apply the Dublin Agreement, besides providing an opportunity for locals to show their support for the migrants.

Roughly nine out of ten migrants who crossed the border hail from French-speaking countries in West Africa (Guinée Conakry, Mali, Burkina Faso). In 2018, most were under
30 years of age, with half being below 18. One reason cited during the interviews for the surge in migration is the closure of the southernmost border near Nice, approximately 300 kilometres away. However, this only applies to French-speaking migrants. On the shores of the Mediterranean [2], migrants are more likely to speak English and only a small minority are from West Africa. Why Briançon observed an increase in migration between 2017-18 is open to speculation.

Combes (2019) describes the trajectories of migrants and, following Laacher (2007), argues that their trajectories are often random. Migrants decide on their next move, which opens or closes further possibilities. For example, a migrant who goes to Algeria from Morocco for work may be arrested by the Algerian police and brought to the Sahara Desert, where, if the migrant has no money, smugglers may lead him to a private jail in Libya. That journey from Morocco to Algeria led the migrant to cross the sea to Europe to escape Libya, although his intention initially was to seek work in Algeria.

Women constitute a minority among the migrants, with their numbers ranging from 1 to 5 out of a total of 30–60 migrants at the refuge. Furthermore, as described by Laacher (2007), interviewing women migrants as a man (I am a white man) is difficult because men may be perceived as potential predators. Therefore, I did not interview women migrants.

In late July 2017, the city council provided a building for housing the migrants. A local organisation named “Refuge” was formed to manage it, and migrants stayed there for only a few days. Among the volunteers were healthcare professionals who decided to utilise their skills to provide healthcare. Within the building, a small room was converted into a healthcare clinic called “the clinic”, where migrants could consult with physicians and other healthcare professionals.

Volunteers operated the clinic from August 2017 to July 2018. Initially, medical volunteers were present daily; however, over time, the number of volunteers decreased. By March 2018, only one junior doctor and one retired physician visited the clinic on a biweekly or weekly basis. The clinic received financial support from a medical NGO in Marseille [3] that provided guidance on setting up the clinic and accessing medications. The NGO did not recruit volunteers from Briançon. Local volunteers managed the clinic.

Some migrants who decided to stay in Briançon volunteered as night watchmen and their 24-h presence facilitated the arrival of migrants at night. Watchmen were entitled to an indefinite stay, while other migrants were expected to stay for a maximum of three days. However, adherence to this rule is context-dependent. Watchmen and volunteers received training in first aid.

In 2018, the Refuge is located at the bottom of the city, distant from the hospital by 3 kilometres with an altitude difference of 113 metres. On one instance, we arranged two cars for 14 migrants to visit the hospital. According to a hospital manager, at that time of the year (early June), emergency services receive approximately 50–60 patients per day; therefore, 14 additional patients constituted an increase of more than 20%. To avoid police arrest, we returned later in the afternoon to bring the migrants back to the Refuge. The hospital called us back when all the patients were discharged. The hospital relied on (the time of) volunteers, with the phone number of the Refuge being highly visible to front desk employees.

Most volunteers and activists organising for migrants revolved around the Refuge. It is a central place from where roaming begins. Except for a minority, most migrants pass through the Refuge.

3. Materials and methods
I conducted this research by volunteering with the Refuge. The entry point was with a family friend, Henry [4], who advised me to contact a volunteer involved in setting up a medical clinic within the Refuge, Murielle. From there, I got contacts because volunteers trusted me, as I was
a volunteer myself (Johnson et al., 2006). I used my then affiliation [5] to get interviews with hospital managers and employees of the Regional Health Authority. Scholars have found that establishing a participatory role within a research community can help researchers gain rapport within that community (Jordan and Moser, 2020). Activists and volunteers take risks with the police and justice, and therefore, establishing a rapport with them is paramount for interviews.

3.1 How the field work changed what I studied
The data were collected by the author, a health economist. Conducting ethnography meant that I spent some time trying to convince myself that what I was practising economic because I focused on organisation. Early on, the field diary stated:

what interests me are how actors organise themselves and what levers they raise? It depends, of course, on the people and their knowledge, and that’s what I’ll probably find. […] It’s an economic question, the organisation. (Field diary, 17/12/2017)

Consequently, as a health economist, during fieldwork, I thought I needed to enter the hospital, which provides care for migrants, and that it was the key place for the organisation of health. To do so, I thought it would be easier to enter the hospital by knocking on volunteers’ doors, for example, getting to meet healthcare workers who were also volunteers and/or activists. However, being employed by one of the universities in France training hospital managers, I only needed to use my affiliation to open the doors of the hospital [6]. I only realised that late in the fieldwork, after 10 months out of 13. In the meantime, I had collected data on volunteers and activists. In the end, this difficulty is a favourable approach to explore why activists and volunteers organise in this manner.

3.2 My position in the field
I am a white male who had been to Briançon many times before, either for holidays with my parents or for skiing, mountaineering, road cycling, and hiking. I was aware of the topography, and I understood the areas described by the informants: the valley, the different towns and villages, and the gaps. I could easily relate to some values that mountain leaders would share with me, such as saving lives in the face of mountain risks. Moreover, when I was a student, I was an activist in social justice, so I felt close to the activists I met. The reader may understand that I am attached to the field. Emotions triggered this fieldwork. In both ethnography (Hale, 2006) and biology (McLaughlin, 2003), research has shown that emotions are an important source of knowledge. Hale argues that “activist research” is a complementary source of knowledge to “cultural critique” (2006). Like Fassin, this research has an affective springs, which are often at [the] origin [of research]. (Fassin, 2015, p. 574)

Therefore, I went to Briançon because it felt like something a researcher should be doing [7]. By observing something being established, I observed human organisation.

My position in the field may have led to bias. For example, tensions among volunteers occurred, either on the strategy to follow, or between different groups; I did not use those tensions as materials. Therefore, my data does not show how tensions among volunteers and activists may shape the organisation/organising. However, this led me to show that the constraints and time available to volunteers have a key role in the type of organisations.

Though I was a student activist myself, I do not share all the beliefs of the activists. I did not manage to talk with no border activists, part of the reason is, I think, being perceived as too much of the elite. Moreover, I do not have a pedigree in “fighting” the state. I often found it difficult to talk to no border activists, and I felt I was intruding when talking to them.
As a researcher specialising in health at a major university training hospital manager, I could easily relate to hospital managers, regional health authority employees, and most healthcare workers. I could easily relate to most volunteers, as I shared similar values; I was an insider in parts of my fieldwork (Innes, 2009). However, what I observed from no border activists was from the outside. Reyes argued that both visible and invisible tools help in entering a field. Being a researcher at a leading university helped open doors and meet medical doctors but may have closed others (Reyes, 2020). The medical doctors I have met share a social justice mindset, and I was able to relate to the concern that not all health is healthcare, and migrants’ health can be cared for outside the hospital.

3.3 Participants
Data were collected through multiple visits to the research field, accounting for a total of 50 days, 150 h of interviews, and 40 days of participation and/or observation. These observations were made between the end of December 2017 and end of December 2018. Another, funded project that started at the end of 2018 led me to stop this field work. When I arrived at the Refuge and requested a formal interview, the participants’ consents were taken. I was recognised as a researcher, with some volunteers referring to me as the “sociologist of Briançon”. The research was conceptualised after talking with Henry about the situation in Briançon. He then mentioned a march organised in Briançon at the end of 2017 [8]. RQDA and QualCoder were used to code the observations and interviews. The interviewees included political and humanitarian activists, medical doctors, mountain guides, and mountain leaders. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 18 to 75 years.

Interviewees shared that they chose Briançon to lead an alternative life, similar to the interviewees in Snikersproge (2023). Some professions in Briançon are seasonal; the jobs are overtime in winter (January–March) and summer (July–August), and for the rest of the year, the workers have time to develop their own activities. Migrants also volunteered in the activities. The job in Briançon as an emergency doctor is noteworthy, [9] as they are trained to intervene in mountaineering accidents, so they are fit and active people. One medical doctor stated the following:

I came here for mountain emergency interventions. (Field diary, 4/12/2018)

4. Organising, activism, and time
SMO research has studied the structure of organisations established by activists. Choi-Fitzpatrick (2015) argues that SMO need to find a balance between oligarchic tendencies and attachment to democratic processes to balance values and effectiveness (2015). SMO often strive to embody the change they wish to see in what research has conceptualised as prefigurative movements (Yates, 2021). They are not always organised according to the values they profess (Saunders and Rootes, 2013). Augusto shows that organisations may attempt to be structureless, however, activists who “do” are the ones who have power, leading to a do-ocracy; though most studies do not consider the context in which organisations are established. When research focuses on the context of the SMO and how they organise as a consequence of this context, it focuses on the international context: the different movements that take place in different countries, or on the national context, and the relations between different organisations (Baumgarten, 2013; Calhoun, 2013; Della Porta, 2015; Fominaya, 2020). Few studies have examined the micro-local context. Kumar (2014) focused on a particular setting. Kumar studied the organisation of a local movement against a mining project in India describing the assemblage of individuals and organisations against the mining project thus:
The voluntary nature of participation in the assemblage, and the capacity to withdraw and disengage from the assemblage, discourages concentration of power. (Kumar, 2014, p. 204)

The capacity to withdraw and disengage is a key element in horizontal organisation and avoids the tyranny of structureless groups (Freeman, 1973). Freeman identifies that one key condition for this type of organisation is that people have time (Freeman, 1973). In her study of feminist movements, Brown shows that women with skills had to teach each other so that no one person could accumulate power through possessing knowledge critical for the organisation:

> the production and reproduction of non-hierarchical organisation are not “natural”, but are struggled for and negotiated through shared learning and the development of skills. (Brown, 2002, p. 16)

Because the outside world is hierarchical and formalised, some structures end up with a non-hierarchical structure for the inside and a hierarchical structure for the outside. Moreover, structures that try to organise horizontally tend to persistently question what they try to create, which is even more time-consuming (Brown, 2002).

In a seminal paper, Davies elucidates how time to care for children is sometimes “clock-time” and other times are “process-time”. Learning at a young age is often a process time, the time necessary to figure out how to dress (1994). Letting this time to children to dress themselves up requires at least two caregivers: one caregiver can take those already dressed outside and the other can take care of the children still dressing up. Davies argues that budget cuts reduce the possibility to let children dress up because of the lack of a second caretaker. She states that industrialisation and capitalism have led to workers being increasingly linked to clock time. She argues that caring activities may not be easily “subsumed under the clock” (Davies, 1994, p. 279). Davies argued that budget cuts make the use of process time increasingly difficult.

Snikersproge (2023) studied a mountainous area close to Briançon, where neo-rurals seek a less time-constrained life (2023). Ultimately, individuals fail to lead alternative lives because capitalism is deeply ingrained. However, she argues that they fail to find such a place because capitalism and time discipline are everywhere.

In Briançon, volunteers attempt to create alternatives to the state by welcoming and caring for migrants. They have one resource that capitalism has not taken away from: time. According to Davies and Snikersproge, capitalism changes care and makes the creation of alternatives impossible. I argue that, in Briançon, volunteers and activists are welcoming migrants because they have chosen to allocate time such that they can welcome.

5. Welcoming migrants

5.1 The weather and landscape

Briançon is a mountainous area. The effects of crossing on migrants’ health demonstrate the difficulty of passing this border. Interviews with medical professionals revealed that healthcare professionals must be careful about frostbites and pain from exertion. One of them stated:

> And there’s frostbite. There’s not that much, but that’s one of the things we have to be careful about. And what there is a lot of, it’s probably pain related to the exertion that they went through to get here. Abdominal pain that’s probably a little bit related to the physical and psychological stress that they had: insomnia, a lot of stuff like that. (interview, junior medical doctor, March 2018)

During spring of 2018, migrants walked 20 kilometres downhill after crossing the border. Even with a map and knowledge of the valley, it took me four hours to complete the journey in broad daylight. The path is gentle, and winds through a forest, posing no difficulty for an experienced hiker. However, it was common for migrants to take a full day (24 h) to cover it.
Forests can be disorienting, especially in the dark. Although the path runs above a river that does not need to be crossed, migrants report crossing it at points where there are no bridges, indicating navigation challenges. In Spring, the weather can be harsh, with cold, rainy conditions and a river swollen by melting snow from the mountain peaks. I have seen migrants arriving at the Refuge shoeless, having lost their footwear in the snow.

This challenge is natural and is not linked to volunteers or activists. However, it is well known that the more one engages in high-altitude races, the higher the risk of accidents. This underscores the importance of having a large group to address the following constraints.

During the fieldwork, I met people living in the nearby town of Gap, which is 80 kilometres from Briançon. They told me that they could not live in Briançon because it is steep-sided. Indeed, when going to Briançon for more leisure time, I did not realise that Briançon may have a clear sky in winter, but the sunlight does not appear before 9.30 a.m. in winter and is behind a mountain after 3.30 p.m. However, Gap is flatter, and steep hikes start 5–15 kilometres away from the town, whereas the town of Briançon itself is steep. During winter, road and air connections from Briançon to Gap may be closed for a few days owing to weather conditions. This topographical feature makes it very particular to live in Briançon. Individuals who came to Briançon and those who were not born there, are particular in that respect that they choose that topography. Those kind of regions may attract people who are more likely to be in solidarity with others (Le Fur and Roux, 2014).

5.2 Typology
A rough typology of volunteers and activists may be established. One can easily identify four major groups: humanitarian, political activists, radicals and those who came for the mountains. The first group comprises humanitarian individuals who can be divided into two subgroups. The first subgroup comprises individuals previously involved in organising meals and day centres for homeless people; within the Refuge, they are involved in around food: storing food and making meals. The second subgroup comprises medical doctors and healthcare workers. Some of them worked with medical NGOs while others were involved in the early establishment of the Refuge. Humanitarian individuals want to provide help, they have “the desire to help others” (Verna, 2007, p. 37). Irène, who was involved in the fight against scabies, explained her job to the clothes team at the Refuge:

You talk a little more, because you’re making [their] bed: “where are you from? Do you have pain there?” Yes, you have a more. [. . . ] You are a bit in life. (interview, May 2018)

The second group of individuals that are working to help migrants in Briançon are “old style” political activists. These individuals are typically part of unions or other organisations that pressurise governments by advocating for their causes (e.g. Amnesty International). The ones I interviewed have opted to stay on in Briançon for the quality of life.

The third group of individuals comprises radical young people. These people are close to “no border” organisations, which are groups that advocate for the free movement of people across borders. Some of these young people were also opposed to the airport proposed in western France. They have set up a squat for migrants, which can accommodate 14 people, 7 of whom are migrants and 7 of whom are non-migrants (in their words, “welcomers” and “welcomees”). They are typically involved in roaming and are not very involved in the Refuge, except for the reception activity [11].

Finally, the last group comprises people either making a living from, or who came to live in Briançon out of fondness for the mountains. Henry and Flora exemplify the latter. Henry came to live in Briançon for the love of mountains and mountaineering. He is involved in helping migrants as a political activist, as he is a former conscientious objector; in the 70s, he was an activist in the Movement for a Non-Violent Alternative (MAN). Others share their love
for mountains and political activism. Part of the year, Flora is involved in the organisation of mountain refuges. The rest of the year, she volunteers at the Refuge. Flora and Henry are pensioners. The former receives revenue from the landscape; they are Mountain Guides or Mountain Leaders (guides in the rest of the article; the difference between the two professions is that the former engages in activities such as skiing, climbing, and glacier travel (Cousquer and Beames, 2013)). These individuals were among the first to be mobilised as the first migrants arrived at time, and in conditions that were unsafe and accident-prone, guides were mobilised to avoid such events. Mountain leaders have in their code that they should not expose their group to abnormal or excessive risk (Cousquer and Beames, 2013). In a survey among Mountain Guides, the professionals mentioned that they have a responsibility to others, showing an ethic that goes further than “exposing” clients to “excessive risks” (Long et al., 2012). The first demonstration I attended was on 17th of December 2017 and was organised by the guides (AFP, 2017; Heller and Biaggio, 2017).

The categorisation is not rigid or mutually exclusive; some people can be in different groups at different times. The interviewees share a common trait in that they have time to care for migrants, either because they choose to, they are pensioners, their activity is very seasonal (e.g. guides), or because it is political and they make time for it.

5.3 The constraints faced by volunteers and activists
5.3.1 The police and the judiciary. Migrants, and activists, face the police. Officially, the police do not pursue migrants, but recently, one migrant stated the opposite (Brahim and Mathieu, 2022). In spring 2018, a woman died in fear of the police and drowned in the river (AFP, 2018). A volunteer was arrested by the police in March 2018 (Orange avec AFP, 2018). Another example is that of two migrants who fell 40 metres because they felt threatened by the police (Le Dauphine, 2017). These examples do not aim to show that the police pose a threat to migrants, volunteers and activists on a daily basis, but to demonstrate that these groups perceive a threat at whatever they do. For example, one volunteer explained that they did not want to be too exposed because some volunteers had already been targeted by the police:

there are already a few of us who are well targeted. (Volunteer, June 2018)

The judiciary was also prosecuting volunteers. Seven volunteers made headlines (Le Monde avec AFP, 2021) but others were summoned by the police for investigations that did not lead to court cases. The arrest of some migrants, volunteers and activists is enough to threaten everyone involved.

5.3.2 Institutions and perceived threats. Institutions also deal with the perceived threats. Some institutions may be more inclined to assist volunteers if their involvement is not acknowledged publicly. For instance, the Regional Health Agency (RHA) has recognised the professionalism of volunteers from the Refuge in their efforts to prevent scabies. Consequently, the RHA allocated a portion of its funding to the hospital to support volunteers. However, funding does not go directly from the RHA to the Refuge. According to an interviewee at the RHA, the agency could not interact directly with the Refuge because the Préfecture [12], which oversees the police, would object. The Refuge was seen as a hub for activists and anarchists to gather and confront the police. Therefore, the RHA needed a cover to implement public health measures. This situation is reminiscent of Brown’s findings, which suggest that organisations may present a hierarchical structure while maintaining an internal horizontal structure (2002). In this case, the official structure (the money goes from the RHA to the hospital) differs from the actual structure: the RHA assists the Refuge in disease prevention. Establishing such an organisation takes more time and can be disrupted by even minor staff changes at the RHA.
5.3.3 The extreme right. Volunteers and migrants encounter another group that is less visible than the border police: the extreme right-wing group “Defend Europe”, also known as “Génération Identitaire”. This group staged a demonstration at Col de l’Echelle, 10 kilometres from the border, where they erected a symbolic border for a weekend (Willsher, 2019). Besides this highly publicised event, the group also distributed leaflets in markets. While the extreme right is not as prevalent here as it might be in larger cities, it does not require many individuals to pose a threat much like the police. In the spring of 2018, they assisted the police in arresting migrants. Because of their identical blue clothing, some migrants mistook them as police officers.

In response to these real or perceived challenges, volunteers prefer to maintain an organisation that may be perceived as disorganised from the outside, as one interviewee put it: “[volunteers want to] stay a little messy” (Interview, June 2018). Consequently, they establish more horizontally structured organisations that are less dependent on one or two individuals. This approach allows organisations to endure longer, but also requires more time to implement.

5.4 Organising
This section focuses on organising performed by activists and volunteers.

(1) Prevention of scabies, a formally organised public health intervention

Volunteers at the Refuge organised the washing of bedsheets to prevent scabies. Though scabies is not particularly dangerous it is very contagious and would attract journalists (Rédaction, 2017).

there was a lot of panic in the population [...] with: the migrants = the scabies, and we will all be infested. (Interview, May 2018)

The volunteers did not want this publicity. Consequently, Hélène, a volunteer, trained herself. First, she conducted awareness sessions for people to understand that it is not dangerous.

We drew up a small protocol, [with images], with really concrete data, and at the beginning we passed it around, in a rather informal way, in rooms at the [social and cultural centre], so that people could have a little training, for all the volunteers. They were quite interested. We had several sessions, sessions with ten, fifteen people who came to be trained on this, because there was still, of course, a little anxiety [...] will we take it home?” (Interview, May 2018)

Volunteers washed some of the laundry using their own washing machines. They established a rigorous method for cleaning bedsheets.

[Y]ou can’t wash [the laundry] below 60°, to be sure that the scabies are eradicated, because at 60, it’s good. Above 60, it is good, but below 60, it is not good. (Interview, May 2018).

And if the clothes could not be washed at 60° then

leave it for four days in closed [sealed] plastic bags. And then, we could pass it on to the volunteers without risk. That way, scabies, after four days, in a closed bag, are completely absent from the clothing. (Interview, May 2018).

Activities against scabies must be formalised, yet they remain horizontal. The organisation is formalised and passed on to new volunteers as a trainee learns a new job. The organisation is specialised, but no volunteer is indispensable; it is easy for new volunteers to learn quickly. Again, in this setting, no one was the chief.

there is no one who will be the leader of anyone (Interview Hélène, team clothes, May 2018).
There were enough people trained for the organisation to prevent depending on one person. I got trained to be able to do this. This is not very difficult, but skills need to be passed on to remain horizontal (Brown, 2002).

Procedures and formal organisations are necessary to fight diseases. In the next section, we will see that formal organisation is less necessary at times but can be more vertical.

(2) Roaming, a non-formal hierarchy

In the spring of 2017, migrants crossed the border at various locations around the Briançon area. The practice of roaming was initially established by guides as migrants were crossing areas that were snowy and/or dangerous. Even when the border was close to a road, crossing involved steep hikes (Le Dauphiné, 2017). As the Refuge was being established, volunteers asked migrants to use social networks to inform other migrants still in Italy that coaches were available to bring them to the easiest route. There is a gap between France and Italy that remains open throughout the year. This gap, although slightly higher than the smallest one, is considered “easy” because a bus can take you there, and the border crossing can be reached in a 20-min walk in daylight with snowshoes. In the winter of 2018, migrants changed their routes and passed through the easiest gap. Until March 2018, roaming was organised every evening by a team of volunteers who would leave the Refuge by car to go to the final bus stop in Italy. The last bus arrived there at 8p.m. I personally witnessed roaming in this setting.

We left for the roaming, the plan was decided by the three people (out of five) who had experience in roaming, they had three telephones dedicated to the roaming; these are telephones avoiding police interception. (Field notes, 7/03/2018)

First, information was shared such that only those familiar with the system could understand it. Therefore, an overall organisation was established among those with experience. Briefly put, some of us travelled to Italy, while others stayed behind to observe the police. We also received assistance from two Italians.

Despite the vertical structure of the organisation, no one issued orders to others, and no one claimed to be the leader of the roaming. This hierarchy is based on skill and experience. It was evident that if someone participated more frequently, they might have been entrusted with more responsibility. However, there are no benefits associated with these responsibilities, and the hierarchy is only temporary.

The next section describes the overall organisation of not wanting to have chiefs, which suggests that such organisations are more stable over time.

(3) Activists and volunteer structures strive to function without chiefs

The Refuge was established as an association. According to French law, this type of organisation should have a president, treasurer, and secretary. However, the formal structure is not strictly regulated, and associations have some freedom to organise as they wish. The only requirement is that the three positions are registered with the Préfecture. In practice, a board meets regularly, but each sector of the Refuge: clothing, reception, food, and healthcare, operates autonomously from the board. Each sector is organised horizontally with no designated leaders. Mailing lists for each sector are maintained to ensure that there are enough volunteers each day, and reminders may be sent by those who are most often on-site. However, individuals are not obligated to volunteer for a specific number of days or meals per week, and no one has authority over another person.

In a village called Névache, located just beyond one of the gaps used by migrants to cross the border, an organisation was established because many migrants knocked on residents’ doors when passing through this gap. In this organisation, individuals become known to the police; therefore, they try not to assume leadership roles. Serge, a local resident, told me in an interview in May 2018:
Activists prefer to remain invisible in roaming organisations. They do not have websites; daily activities are conducted through word of mouth, and a secure email and forum is used by anarchist organisations (riseup). However, general meetings were necessary. I attended one of these meetings in May 2018, organised by two key volunteers involved in roaming. They initiated the meeting but deliberately refrained from speaking first to see if others would. When no one else spoke up, they asked the group to say that there were not enough volunteers to keep the roaming operation going and that they did not consider themselves leaders; they wanted other people to speak up.

Such an organisation, with leaders who do not want to be leaders and a preference for remaining invisible, allows the assemblage to be maintained. In a study on mobilisation against mining, Kumar (2014) showed that an adjustable assemblage of people provides flexibility and prevents power imbalances as anyone can walk out. Such a setting is possible even when formal procedures are required (see the points on scabies).

5.5 Time
The previous subsections demonstrated that organisations are diverse and can adapt to various constraints. Time plays a crucial role in these organisations. Augusto (2021) suggested that the more time individuals invest in a movement, the more power they gain. This concept is referred to as a “do-ocracy”, where power is taken by those who take action (Augusto, 2021). Freeman (1973) proposes that formal structures are beneficial for overworked individuals. When time is scarce, it is more practical to organise formally. Brown argued that organising in a hierarchical manner requires less time than organising horizontally. At the group level, a horizontal organisation requires more individuals, as the prerequisite for such an organisation is to have many people capable of performing the same task (Freeman, 1973). As the example of scabies shows, when more people are dedicated to an activity, more time becomes available. This is a characteristic of the people moving to Briançon. Guides have seasonal activities, whereas others choose to move to Briançon because of time constraints. Murielle, who moved to Briançon a year before the fieldwork, said:

> I arrived a year ago in [.] in Briançon, and my life project was to spend more time on things that fulfilled me, and I had some free time available (Murielle, interview, Dec 2017)

The volunteer sector often struggles to recruit and retain volunteers to sustain its activities (O’Dwyer and Timonen, 2009; Warburton et al., 2018), making volunteers a necessity. In Briançon, the organisation is structured in such a way that it attempts to operate so that volunteers are not “indispensable”. Murielle, who played a central role in establishing the clinic, told me:

> if there was someone who let go, there was always someone who took over; we can tell ourselves that we are not indispensable. (Murielle, interview, Dec 2017)

Being replaceable is one of the four conditions that Freeman (1973) highlighted for unstructured organisations to avoid failure: if someone is missing, the group tries to replace that person, initially by each member investing additional time and then trying to persuade more people to contribute some of their time. The ability to replace someone makes the structure more stable when people move away from it. It also gives people the freedom to move away if necessary. However, this is not always possible. The lack of volunteers triggered the meeting mentioned earlier, demonstrating that time was a limited resource. Nevertheless, volunteers establish organisations that are time intensive.
**Snikersproge (2023)** showed that neo-rurals in Southeast France strive to maintain a life balance in which work does not consume all of their time. Snikersproge highlights that neo-rurals fail to establish an alternative to the capitalist economy because they are still constrained by the capitalist “alienating time discipline” (Snikersproge, 2023, p. 10). In Briançon, volunteers and activists manage to avoid being too alienated; thus, they have time to welcome migrants.

### 6. Conclusion

The materials presented here provide insights into how humans organise themselves. Briançon is unique in that its residents have chosen to live there for reasons beyond just work. They face certain constraints and have time (or have chosen to make time available), which allows them to establish an organisation best suited to handle these constraints. These constraints often lead volunteers to aim for horizontal organisations that require time. This study contributes to the literature on Social Movements and, more broadly, to the general literature on organisations by demonstrating that organisations depend on time and constraints. When the constraints change, volunteers adapt, and they can do so because they have time.

Capitalist time undermines alternative ways of life because it imposes constraints on individuals. Briançon is unique in that some people are attracted to the area because it offers more meaning than working in cities, and its residents resemble those in Snikersproge’s study. By having more time, they may not be able to find alternative lives, but they manage to create organisations that ultimately welcome migrants, which is quite an alternative considering Europe’s political climate. In Briançon, capitalism does not always consume the time volunteers and activists have at their disposal; therefore, they manage to create a welcoming environment for migrants.

Further research on the motivations of activists and volunteers in Briançon who dedicate their time to welcoming migrants should focus on the motivations for living in Briançon. One of the main limitations of this study is the short duration of stay at the site.

Why activists and volunteers in Briançon, in particular, have more time should be the focus of further research. Some initial thoughts are that the people I have met have values that are about “giving back” some of their comfort. These motivations would need to be discussed with research on volunteer work (Simonet, 2021).

This article uses qualitative data to show how humans establish organisations to help migrants. In future research, identifying larger cities facing similar constraints and comparing the actions of activists and volunteers in both contexts could shed light on activists’ adaptations. “Nice”, in France, is particularly suitable. It is located at the border with Italy and has several – far-right groups. However, I know only of studies on tziganes/roms in that area (Potot, 2018) or a special issue of a French-speaking journal on proximal migration around Nice (Escallier, 1999). Others have studied the police and control of migrants at the border (Vergnano, 2021) or the identity at the border in film studies (Caquot Baggett, 2013).

Though the fieldwork lasted only one year, I remained in contact, first by supervising two students for their master’s theses in the area (Cellier, 2019; Palvadeau, 2020), and then by visiting Briançon for more leisure time. My friend Henry also provided me with some information. So, I know that the Refuge and roaming remains operational. The pandemic disrupted the organisations, but then, especially during the first lockdown, everything came to a standstill.

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Notes

1. But France is not obliged to do so.
2. Where this border is.
3. The second (or third depending on the statistic) largest town, after Paris (and Lyon), in France.
4. All names have been changed. I used a combination of checking the first names of the approximated date of birth of participant for French people. I picked a name that was similarly frequent at time of birth. For non-French I assumed an ethnic origin based on the first name, whether Christian or Muslim and changed the name trying to respect an assumed identity.
5. My job then was to be a lecturer at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sante (Ehesp), a leading university in public health and well-known for training hospital managers in France.
6. I worked at the School of Public Health at the University of Rennes (https://www.ehesp.fr/en/).
7. Also, through my family I could easily have an accommodation for free. Therefore, I did not get any funding but for transcribing interviews and travels. I got from funds within my university.
8. Back then, I worked at Ehesp where ethical committees are less or not at all developed for qualitative work using ethnography. I did not anticipate writing about this field, therefore I did not set out aims. I ensured that my actions did not harm any volunteers, activists, or migrants. The article does not disclose any interviewee’s identity and is completely anonymised. I believe that my conduct and the article did not violate any ethical guidelines, making it suitable for publication.
9. Only two hospitals in France have a setting for mountain rescue service.
10. Close as some activists in Briançon are coming from there, and the area is less than 200 kilometres away (but through a mountain road so it takes nearly 3 h by car) © OpenStreetMaps Distance from Die to Briançon https://osm.org/go/xXVJLV
11. An activity that is mainly about registering migrants when they arrive to help them with their next stages of their journey. The activity implies talking to migrants to understand what they to do and then advise them about the next steps (take a train, a bus or if a minor go to the police to have their age assessed by the département).
12. Préfecture is the state administration at a local level.
References


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