

Humanitarianism in Crisis: The Violence and Promise of Care

Research Workshop

11–12 June 2026

Tampere University

Location: EDU's Café, Virta Building (3rd Floor), Kalevantie 4, 33100 Tampere.

Description

The workshop critically examines the geographies of humanitarianism, exploring the relationship between labor, care, and governance. We engage the concept of “precarious humanitarianism” (Saltsman 2022) to interrogate how humanitarian care—mobilized through both paid and unpaid labor by refugees, migrants, volunteers, aid workers, and professionals in contexts of displacement and the diaspora—operates within systems of extraction and control while also offering possibilities for meaningful integration, resistance and transformation. Precarious humanitarianism explores the entanglement of humanitarian efforts with colonial and neoliberal power structures, including the racialized and gendered division of care work (Fluri & Lehr 2017; Pascucci 2018; Ramsay 2020; Avgeri 2024). Humanitarianism often depends on intimate, affective, and relational forms of care, offering a countertopography to aid. Yet, these same relations are frequently instrumentalized to sustain aid and arrival infrastructures that reproduce global inequalities and uphold hierarchies of race, citizenship, and labor. Deploying the concept of “salvage accumulation” (Tsing, 2015), we identify the interfaces where noncapitalist relations of help and care are appropriated within capitalist aid and integration regimes. We also look critically at humanitarian governance in terms of increasingly hostile border and migration management policy frameworks and institutional practices, broader shifts in the political economy, and the possibilities for pushing alternative human and mobility-centered approaches to aid that are rooted in a politics of solidarity.

References

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Abstracts

The European Union as a Humanitarian Border: How the New Pact on Migration and Asylum Produces Vulnerability through Care, Control, and Conditional Protection

Jouni Häkli, *Tampere University*

This presentation examines the European Union’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum through the conceptual lens of the humanitarian border, highlighting how humanitarian rationalities and securitized border control are mutually constitutive in contemporary migration governance. Drawing on critical border and migration studies, the paper argues that the New Pact does not merely respond to migrant vulnerability but actively produces it. Empirically, the analysis is based on a critical discourse analysis of the European Commission’s key legislative proposals underpinning the New Pact, including regulations on screening, asylum procedures, migration management, crisis governance, and biometric data collection. These documents are analysed to assess how the EU discursively reconciles commitments to human rights and the protection of vulnerable persons with intensified border control and security objectives. The paper identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which vulnerability is produced. First, the securitization of migration legitimizes restrictive border practices, pre entry screening, externalization, and crisis derogations, exposing asylum seekers to legal, physical, and temporal precarity. Second, vulnerability operates as an administrative sorting category, selectively distributing care while excluding those whose suffering is not immediately visible or legible within predefined criteria. Third, asylum seekers face pressure to perform vulnerability in order to access protection, fostering conditional recognition and reinforcing hierarchies of deservingness. Conceptually, the paper contributes to debates on humanitarian bordering by demonstrating how vulnerability functions as a conditional and performative category rather than a universal basis for protection. It shows how humanitarian discourse enables the EU to maintain a liberal self image while institutionalizing exclusionary practices that deepen

migrant precarity. The findings underline the paradoxical role of humanitarianism in legitimizing restrictive migration governance and call for closer scrutiny of how care, control, and vulnerability intersect in contemporary asylum policy.

How voluntary is voluntary return? The precarious humanitarianism of return counseling amidst the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum

Austin Crane, *University of South Carolina*

EU policymakers and national governments have long seen Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) policies as a tool for managing migration – particularly to facilitate the return of irregularized migrants residing within Europe. However, for implementing AVR, governments tend to paradoxically rely on humanitarian NGOs to provide outreach and counseling for migrants about their decision to ‘voluntarily’ return. Despite the attempted integration of their labor into governing migration via return, many NGO practitioners maintain a strong humanitarian commitment to offer caring, non-directive, and confidential counseling to migrants. This paper, therefore, engages with NGO practitioners’ understandings of – and struggles with – the notion of ‘voluntariness’ in implementing voluntary return counseling with migrants. I contextualize these individual humanitarian dilemmas within larger-scale policy evolutions, where the EU’s new Returns Directive and Pact on Migration and Asylum explicitly focus on enforcing ‘efficient’ returns. This analysis draws on data from my longitudinal qualitative study of AVR with government and humanitarian practitioners in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Empirically, these perspectives from practitioners and policymakers illuminate the precarious spaces and politics of humanitarian assistance for migrants amidst Europe’s right-ward turn on migration and growing emphasis on returns. As such, this paper contributes to scholarship on changing geographies of humanitarianism, asylum, and migrant return through a relational attention to precarious negotiations, discourses, and practices of the humanitarian border.

Laboring for Change: A political economic analysis of the paid and unpaid labor of diaspora humanitarianism

Adam Saltsman, *Worcester State University*

Beyond simply a life-saving enterprise, the humanitarian aid industry reflects a governing logic, discourse, and a global infrastructure in the management of vulnerable life under advanced capitalism. When refugees themselves are the ones organizing international aid from the diaspora—and are working extra shifts of low-wage labor to do so—there’s a need to rethink what humanitarianism can look like. This paper builds on more than a year of ethnography and qualitative data collection as part of a research collaborative with Burmese activists exiled in North America. Relying on a feminist geopolitical perspective, this paper applies a counter-topographical lens to ask how unpaid diaspora aid work reveals linkages between precarious refugee labor and the changing political economy of humanitarianism (Katz 2004). This framework helps us explore the relationship between

refugees' unpaid care work, social reproduction, and low-wage labor on the one hand and the kinds of humanitarian intervention they organize from exile in the United States. As well, we consider how aspects of this relationship that are “noncapitalist” become sites for the kinds of accumulation that yoke the humanitarian aid industry to capitalism and its dynamics. This reflects Ana Tsing’s (2015) notion of “salvage accumulation,” which we argue is a significant process embedded in the political economy of aid and the translocal lives of activists in exile.

Within and beyond technocratic infrastructures: labour in “projectified” international aid

Giacomo Guizzardi, *University of Bologna* & Elisa Pascucci, *Tampere University*

Aid and development projects have been shown to act as commodities that produce forms of exchange value prioritized by donors and other decision-making actors in the Global North, often to the neglect of the use value of “actually-existing” aid reaching so-called beneficiaries in poor and conflict-affected countries. Bringing sciences and technology studies (STS)-oriented theorizations of technocratic knowledge infrastructures in a dialogue with feminist, decolonial and indigenous approaches, this article conceptualizes aid projects as technocratic infrastructures that produce multilayered and shifting configurations of labour politics. Drawing on extensive field research with aid workers conducted between 2018 and 2025 in the context of two multi-year, multi-sited research projects, the empirical sections examine three interrelated dimensions that characterize such infrastructures. First, we consider the structural precarity of project temporalities, and the paradoxical working conditions resulting from it. Second, focusing on the production of written reports with specific language requirements, we explore how project infrastructures sort labour along hierarchies that privilege the international/remote and abstract dimensions, resulting in racialized inequalities affecting workers classified as “local”. In the last section, we highlight the dissonances that characterize workers’ relation to technocratic infrastructure. In doing so, we show that aid as labour remains irreducible to technocratic spaces and times, and that labouring bodies can constitute infrastructures in themselves that make up for the failures of liberal internationalist technocracies.

Cultivating Otherwise: Gardening, Care, and Belonging in a Refugee Community Garden

Banu Gökarkınel, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

This paper examines a participatory gardening project at the New Arrivals Institute (NAI), a refugee resettlement organization in Greensboro, North Carolina, as a site through which to interrogate the promises and failures of humanitarian care. Drawing on critical humanitarian studies, feminist geographies of care, and scholarship on food, gardening, and

displacement, we argue that the garden and related workshops constitute what we call an "otherwise" space: a site of practice that neither reproduces humanitarian paternalism wholesale nor escapes the institutional constraints that frame it, but instead cultivates, slowly and imperfectly, the conditions for mutual recognition, cultural continuity, and collective wellbeing. The paper develops three analytical claims. First, it situates the project within critiques of humanitarian care that center the coloniality of the caregiver/care-receiver binary, the extractive temporality of the self-sufficiency ideal, and the structural positioning of refugees as passive objects of benevolent intervention. Second, it draws on a growing body of literature on refugee gardening and foodways to argue that cultivating food is not only therapeutic or nutritional but epistemological and political: a way of asserting expertise, memory, and place-making in hostile environments. Third, through analysis of four workshops conducted in spring 2026, the paper traces how participants' knowledge, practices, and desires exceeded and quietly transformed the institutional logics of the program as well as research practices. We conclude by theorizing 'slow care' as a methodological and political orientation that takes seriously the temporalities of plants, of trust, and of belonging that participatory and community-centered research must learn to follow rather than foreclose.

Connective labour of volunteer mediation: enacting homestay accommodation for displaced people beyond hosting households

Olga Tkach, *University of Helsinki*

Employing the concept of 'connective labour', this paper analyses the role of volunteer mediators in enacting homestay accommodation as a form of vernacular humanitarian response to war-caused displacement. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland, in 2023-2024, particularly, 27 in-depth interviews with hosts, who offered their homes to Ukrainian refugees after 24 February 2022, as well as with volunteer mediators who facilitated home accommodation within and beyond the domestic sphere. The paper shows that, based on their Ukrainian and Russian language skills and lived experience in the post-socialist countries, the mediators provide language and 'cultural' translation, as well as necessary practical assistance to displaced people. The analysis revealed that the weakly formalised homestay accommodation is sustained through the two-way connective labour of volunteer mediators, who balance the interests of Finnish hosts and their Ukrainian temporary residents, thereby compensating for scarce institutional support for both and adding personal dimension to humanitarian aid.

Educational spaces as arrival infrastructures: education, socialization, and the significance of (un)caring relationships

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, *Tampere University*

In the humanitarian context, care work and labor is typically connected with actors involved in the so called 'aid infrastructure', including refugees, migrants, volunteers, and aid workers with more or less close ties to different kinds of organizations and grassroots groups. When aid infrastructures are understood as part of what Meeus, Arnaut and van Heur (2019) have termed "arrival infrastructures", the spectrum of actors and venues broadens, to include people working in institutional contexts as well as local people whom refugees encounter in public and private mundane spaces. One significant context of integration and 'humanitarian bordering' thus exposed is education. In this presentation I will reflect upon the results from two separate studies where educational spaces were analyzed as part of arrival infrastructures, including ethnographic research with adult migrants (largely asylum seekers) and participatory research with child migrants (Ukrainian refugees). The results show that educational institutions are 1) spaces of socialization that may involve assimilation requests or be more respectful of the idea of two-way integration, 2) learning environments where the students' own aspirations are variably considered, and 3) mundane political spaces where caring and uncaring relationships between the students and with teachers and other staff are in a key role regarding how well the space works as a welcoming arrival infrastructure.