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# The arctic migration route: local consequences of global crises

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses peace education focusing on how place-based experiences and collective memories stimulate local mobilisation for refugees fleeing from war. The Arctic Migration Route, located above 69th degree north, became an alternative to dangerous boat trips on the Mediterranean Sea, for people seeking safety and protection in the fall of 2015. During a few months, over 5,500 people from 35 nations, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran came to a municipality in north Norway with 10,000 inhabitants. The paper demonstrates how global conflicts far away, have important local consequences across borders and huge distances. Interviews with local authorities, teachers, voluntary workers constitute the main empirical material. By combining theories of place-based experiences and collective memories with phenomenology of practice, geographical location, collective and cultural memories across generations, are analysed as important driving forces for the local mobilization to help refugees. This approach opens for a wider perspective on learning, showing how climate, culture and history have important role as material and sociocultural education in this arctic border region in the north of Norway. Based on empirical data from a small local school, the paper will document how a local community can find solutions to globally produced problems.

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Migration; Refugees; Schengen border; Local mobilisation; Collective memory; Sociocultural education

## Introduction

This paper takes its cue from a situation that occurred the autumn of 2015 in the north of Norway, a region often termed 'the marginal edge of the northern periphery'. Over a few months, more than 5,500 people from 35 nations, mostly Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, crossed the Russian-Norwegian border, the northernmost Schengen border. The border station is located above 69 degrees north, in the municipality of Sør-Varanger, an area of approximately 10,000 inhabitants. More than 3,000 arrived in one month. This would be numerically equivalent to a monthly arrival of 250,000 refugees in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, and equivalent to 1.2 million in Berlin or 700,000 in Paris during one month.

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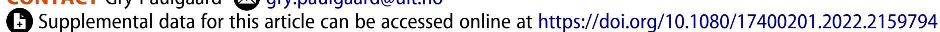

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The situation posed a great challenge to the local authorities and the local community. The Norwegian central authorities did not initially understand its seriousness. It was left to the local police, the border guards, the mayor, the local authorities, and the local population to handle.

The case of Sør-Varanger is a notable example of how remote global conflicts, such as the war in Syria, have important local consequences across borders and over huge distances. Interviews with representatives of the local authorities, border guards, teachers, and local voluntary workers constitute the main empirical material for this paper. We will also draw on publications from scholars pointing to the increased number of people that used the Arctic Corridor as a route to safety in 2015, particularly the human geographer Ekaterina Mikhailova's (2018) study of both sides of the Russian-Norwegian borderland, and the anthropologist Nefissa Naguib's study of humanitarian encounters on the Norwegian side of the border (2017). We are also inspired by Naguib's focus on collective memory.

At the theoretical level, the paper combines theories of place-based experiences and collective memories with a phenomenology of practice, emphasizing how the world's structures are experienced from within. Our approach focuses on how people use their acquired schemes and habits to position themselves and the world around them. This implies acknowledging the importance of place in the shaping of bodily and sensory experiences of daily life, situated in an 'inter world' where meaning and materiality are inseparable (Simonsen 2012, 15). This approach can investigate how geographical surroundings, as well as collective and cultural memories, constitute a basis for learning across generations and function as important driving forces for local mobilization on the Norwegian side of the border. The paper will also discuss how the distribution of responsibility between central and local authorities was experienced locally, and how the situation spurred feelings based on experiences, collective memories and narratives of center and periphery relations embedded in the history of this region.

## Material and methods

This article is based on *The Arctic Migration Route* project, started in autumn 2015. In early September 2015, the authors of this paper, attended a board meeting at the Barents Institute, a department of UiT The Arctic University of Norway, located on the Kirkenes campus, Sør-Varanger. After two days of meeting, the board had dinner at a hotel in Kirkenes. During this dinner, we observed many people coming to the front desk, parents with small children, some with babies, and others, mostly adults or young adults, both males and females. At that time, there had been no information in the news, but we had heard some 'rumors' about Syrian refugees coming from the Russian side of the border. When we observed that the tables in the hotel restaurant had been set to welcome new guests, we asked the headwaiter what was happening. He explained the unexpected refugee situation, that all the

possible places for hosting refugees were full, such that the hotels had to arrange to receive the people arriving, offering meals and places to sleep.

As researchers we became very interested, particularly in the extreme situation which necessitated taking care of people who needed food and a place to stay. We quickly decided to design a project and applied to NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) for certification. After approval from NSD, we started to talk with involved actors, local volunteers, local authorities and refugees coming through the Russian-Norwegian border. The Barents Institute arranged a seminar on the refugee situation in Sør-Varanger in the autumn 2016. Representatives of the local and central police, local school leaders, representatives from local refugee organizations and the political administration etc. contributed their experiences of the situation. The information from this initial phase of the project constitutes important background material for the analyses in this paper.

From the autumn of 2017, the project was expanded to take on a PhD candidate who conducted interviews both in Sør-Varanger and other municipalities in the vicinity. In this paper we use 12–14 interviews with people in Sør-Varanger, who were involved in the situation around the border in 2015–2016, local authorities and volunteers, teachers, police officers and border guards.

The interviews were, for the most part, semi-structured. A few core questions were the same for everyone, e.g. what the interview participant's role was in 2015–16, and how they experienced the situation.

Participants were recruited with the help of employees at the Barents Institute, who have a vast network in the local community. In some cases, this was complemented by snowballing, as participants would recommend getting in touch with colleagues, other representatives of the authorities, friends or acquaintances. The interviews were recorded on audio tape, and later transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

The interviews and the background material from the initial phase of the project were analyzed first through the use of an open approach, searching for themes across the material. Then more focused thematic analyses were performed, following themes such as the situation at the border, expressions of local mobilization and memories of the history in this area.

## The northernmost Schengen border

Although not a member of the European Union, Norway is within the Schengen passport-free zone. According to Schengen rules, asylum seekers must apply for a visa in the country they first arrive in. For most refugees in 2015, that meant mostly Italy or Greece. Many refugees nonetheless moved on to other countries where they eventually hoped to settle, often in Europe's richer north.

The Norwegian-Russian border is the northernmost border of the Schengen zone, the only border crossing point is the Storskog-Borisgleb checkpoint. The remainder of the 196-km border is barred by a barbed wire fence. FSB (Russian

Federal Security Service) operates special border patrols. Video cameras and alarm systems are installed all the way along. Located above the 69th parallel, the area has arctic climate conditions and sparse population density. This borderland has nevertheless been described as an important exemplar of a good relationship between the West and the East until recently. According to Mikhailova's (2018, 184), the reputation of this relationship is heavily based on the institutional framework of the Barents-Euro-Arctic cooperation, established in 1993, replacing the 'iron curtain' and Cold War confrontation with collaboration.

Since the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the situation has dramatically changed. Before this, a multiple entry border visa for residents on both sides of the border made it easy to cross and resulted in extensive collaboration and joint activities between people, at both private and public levels (Boe & Horsti 2019).

Before 2015, few asylum-seekers transited this border. In 2014, there were 10. During the first eight months of 2015, the number increased substantially, and around 150 asylum-seekers crossed. Despite this fifteen-fold increase, the central authorities did not step in (Mikhailova 2018).

As information about the remote, arctic refugee route was disseminated on social media during the summer of 2015, the number of refugees increased. Scholars describe the arctic route as representing a safer and less expensive alternative for refugees to the dangerous boat trips arranged by human traffickers on the Mediterranean Sea (Piipponen and Virkkunen 2017, 530). A police chief superintendent in Sør-Varanger referred to the Arctic Corridor as 'the fast track to Schengen', describing the possibility of travelling from Damascus to Kirkenes in 48 hours (Møllebakken 2017; Asfeldt et al. 2018).

When the number of refugees increased, a booming business developed on the Russian side of the border to help, and profit from, the flow of people. Taxis and minibuses drove them from Murmansk, the largest city in northern Russia, which most Arctic Corridor users reached by plane or train, on to Nickel, the nearest Russian town to the Norwegian border.

The increasing number of refugees strained the situation on the Russian side of the border. More than two hundred people were settled in a small hotel in the town of Nickel. The hotel did not have enough space, many had to sleep in halls and corridors. Such a large number of foreigners caused fear and worry to spread among the local population. The regional administration of Pechenga region, Sør-Varanger's neighbor on the Russian side, posted a warning on their official website about a possibility of terror attacks due to an increased refugee flow (http://www.patchworkbarents.org/node/209).

For those who made it all the way to the border, the oddness of the arctic route continued to the very end. A Russian ban, from 1947, on pedestrian traffic across the border at Storskog made it illegal to cross the border by foot. When the number of border crossings increased in August, local police in Sør-Varanger started pressing charges against drivers who transported people over the

border. Therefore, the only solution was to cross the border by bicycle. Even young children and infirm people had to use bicycles to complete the last few dozen yards of a route that, in some cases, began thousands of miles away. In the Russian town of Nikel, bicycle selling became big business. Mikhailova's (2018) describes how bicycles suddenly became a new local currency, even old and rusty models became tradable, with the price dictated by the seller. The cost of a bicycle rose from almost nothing to exorbitantly expensive. The bicycles were left on the Norwegian side of the border, at the border station.

**Figure 1.** Photography by Øyvind Nordahl Ness.

As the picture (Figure 1) shows, there were growing 'mountains' of bicycles on the Norwegian side of the border. The mayor of Sør-Varanger was interviewed by Norwegian television in the autumn of 2015, standing in front of one of these 'bicycle mountains'. He described the situation as 'a theatre of the absurd', emphasizing the reality of the situation through visual documentation.

In her study of the two border towns, Nikel and Kirkenes, Mikhailova points out important differences. While Kirkenes represents the destination country, Nickel in the Pechenga region was a transit zone for refugees. Also, importantly, accommodation in Kirkenes was paid for by the local and national authorities, whereas, in Nickel the refugees had to pay for accommodation themselves. The same inflation of prices as happened with bicycles occurred with short-term flat rentals in Nickel. Flat owners in Nickel charged arctic migrants[1] the same amount for a two-day rental as they normally would charge for several months (Mikhailova 2018, 196). Mikhailova refers to a foreign journalist saying that 'the sums did not seem outrageous. However, it still could have been so for people who have nothing to sell or who were spending their last money on bicycles'. As

such, arrival in Kirkenes could represent a relief in many ways, even though it also presented challenges, insecurity and worries for the future and the outcome of the asylum process:

> Until they crossed into Norway, there was 'a hustle to get from one spot to another and constant paying out of money'. In Norway their position was strikingly different – they were given a place to stay without being charged for it. (Mikhailova 2018, 197)

According to Mikhailova, the international transit migrant flow brought back times of 'wild capitalism' on the Russian side of the border. At the same time, she refers to scholars and reporters describing the attitude on the Norwegian side of the border as 'a wave of generosity and volunteering' (Barkouki 2017, Nefissa 2016, 377), where a significant number of residents were involved in the reception of refugees and migrants. Malinkin (2015, 4) points to a problem on the Russian side of the border where Syrians faced negative attitudes, although there were also Russians working hard to help the Syrian refugees with legal assistance, shelter, clothing, food and schools for their children.

In this paper, we will not focus on differences in opinions, but on the situation in the local municipality on the Norwegian side of the border. We will focus on the material, cultural and historical aspects of place and geography, and how these influence the shaping of experiences and practices in daily life.

## Local mobilization, identification and space-based knowledge

The simplified border crossing rules, and the local border traffic permit for people living in this area, made it easy to cross the border. One of our informants said that he used to drive to the Russian side for put fuel in his car. Early in the autumn of 2015, he started to meet many people on bicycles once over the border. He said that the people looked tired and weary, small children, women and men, wearing thin clothes; he thought they were freezing in the cold climate. This was before there was any information in the news, he said. Still, many of the people in Sør-Varanger understood that something was happening. There were 'rumors'; they heard through the 'grapevine' that refugees were coming from the Russian side. A woman involved in the voluntary work said:

> When I heard that the stream of refugees was increasing rapidly and when I saw the first images of refugees on TV, they were wearing thin clothes; what struck me at first was that they could freeze to death. I started to collect winter clothes here in this municipality. I got a lot of clothes as well as some donations of money. Then I started to drive to Nickel, using my local border traffic permit. I delivered clothes to people at the hotel in Nickel and I bought a lot of food on the Russian side that I delivered to the hotel. Some of the people stayed at the hotel for one to two weeks. I got in touch with some of the refugees and that was how my involvement started.

The engagement this woman describes was shared by many local volunteers involved in supporting refugees in Nickel and Kirkenes. We also interviewed

people saying that they had been skeptical about refugees and immigration earlier, but that they changed their opinion. One of them said:

> It is mentally challenging, when you meet people in person, talk with them and listen to the stories they tell, it can be very tough mentally. We got close to them, they came into our lives. You don't get the same impression from newspapers and other media as when their personal histories go straight to your heart. It was tough and made our commitment even stronger.

Another of the volunteers we interviewed reported:

> It affected me strongly, I saw the people coming here, how vulnerable they were, coming here to the arctic climate, how much they have sacrificed. They came with their children, have used up all their savings. It did something to me. I am a mother, what if it had been me and my family. Then I would be glad if someone helped me if I came to a foreign country.

The volunteers organized various activities for the refugees, including a language café and youth club; they said that both activities were very well attended. They also collected baby clothes and equipment, clothes for children at all ages and helped the refugees in some of their daily tasks; meetings with the Norwegian Agency for Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and other institutions, helping with internet and mobile subscriptions.

The arctic refugee route represents a long journey in physical distance, as well as a journey far from a familiar way of life. Simonsen (2012) describes migration as a process of disorientation and reorientation, as people both 'move away' and 'arrive'. Kinkaid (2020) points out that people have different experiences according to how, when and where they grow up, and therefore will encounter space differently depending on their embodied experiences. The volunteers in Sør-Varanger understood that the refugees were in need of both warm clothes and also knowledge of how to dress in a cold climate. Both children and adults came dressed in what they had from home, for instance open shoes or sandals. One of the volunteers said:

> We told them how we dress in this cold climate, how we dress our children with wool underwear. I remember I said that we let our babies sleep outside in 15 degrees below zero, they thought I was mad and regarded this as child abuse. (. . .) I remember one women with a grandchild two years old, thinking that the child had to stay indoors the whole winter. I asked why and she said that she thought the grandchild could freeze to death. So, we spent an incredible amount of time describing how we live here, how we do things, how our society functions, how we dress, yes, – there was a lot of laughter too. It is incredible fun and rewarding to take part in this. (. . .) A kind of private service for refugees.

According to this informant, 'the private refugee service' offered by the volunteers represented an important supplement to the municipal refugee service: 'We explain about habits and activities, that the municipal refugee service doesn't tell them about, and that we think it is important to them to know.'

Kinkaid (2020, 169) uses the term 'contradictions of space', referring to a moment occurring within the experience of a subject, when he or she does not, or cannot, practice space properly. Being a refugee implies that embodied knowledge and competence can be called into question, and acquired schemes and habits one knows from home might not be useful. In such a situation, the engagement and help from local volunteers were of great value. They had the ability to share their embodied knowledge, developed by growing up and living in this northern area, to make the situation a bit easier for the newcomers. According to the volunteers, this benefitted not only the refugees, but also themselves: 'We did what we could to make their situation easier. We also developed friendships between us local inhabitants and the refugees,' one man said.

Voluntary work supporting the refugees made it possible to contribute in this chaotic and unpredictable situation. The 'private refugee service' offered by voluntary workers represented a kind of practical and cultural 'education'; a preparation for and introduction to the life and habits in this arctic area for people 'educated' in other areas and circumstances. Growing up in the arctic, as in other areas, implies forms of learning connected to the social, cultural and material circumstances of one's location. This emphasizes how learning and knowledge are located and have to be adjusted when moving to other climatic areas, for instance.

## The concept of 'crisis' and the context of Sør-Varanger

We use the concept of 'crisis' in this paper, describing the situation in the autumn and winter of 2015 and early 2016. The concept may be appropriate for those who arrived in the arctic north of Norway across the Russian border. Refugees, fleeing war, might well experience deep crisis. The concept is also appropriate in a situation where millions of persons are helping to provide children, youth and adults who are fleeing war with a safe place to live. However, in this paper, we will use the concept at another level. The situation in autumn 2015 was experienced as a crisis by the local authorities and the local population in Sør-Varanger and the town of Kirkenes.

'Crisis' refers to a situation that is limited in time, often causing instability and unpredictability. A crisis passes, it does not last. The 'Crisis' as viewed from Sør-Varanger and Norway represents a passing moment of instability. Still, as the Norwegian anthropologist Hylland Eriksen points out, our global interconnected world ' … may be described through its tendency to generate chronic crisis, being complex in such a way as to be ungovernable, volatile and replete with unintended consequences' (Eriksen 2016, 471). According to Zygmunt Bauman (2004), one of the consequences of what he terms'modernity's global triumph' is that growing numbers of human beings are deprived of adequate ways of making a living, confronted with the need to seek *local solutions* to

*globally produced problems*. This was also the case in Sør-Varanger; when refugees arrived through the Arctic Corridor, local authorities and local inhabitants had to act in order to provide assistance; they had to find local solutions to this globally produced problem.

The situation was truly exceptional on both sides of the border. The border municipality of Pechenga and the town of Nickel, on the Russian side, together with Sør-Varanger and the town of Kirkenes, on the Norwegian side, were brought to the brink of a humanitarian crisis by the sudden emergence of the arctic migrant passage (Mikhailova 2018, 200). A member of the local authority working at the Norwegian border control characterized the situation as a crisis; 'undoubtedly, a crisis for the local community', even though the control of the border carried on as usual. He emphasized that the central authorities reacted too late to the rise in the number of people crossing the border.

Sør-Varanger had received refugees before the autumn of 2015. Kirkenes had accommodated refugees from Sri-Lanka in the late 1980s, refugees from Bosnia in 1993 and from Kosovo in 1999 (Asfeldt et al. 2018; Mikhailova 2018). But the municipality was not prepared to receive such a large number in such a short time in the fall of 2015. The influx of refugees arriving at the Norwegian border station in Storskog caused a lot of chaos for the Norwegian police service. While the number of refugees arriving at the border was relatively low, those who came were sent to Oslo for interviews and registration. As the number escalated, this was no longer possible, so registration and temporary reception had to be carried out locally. On orders from the Department of Justice, registration was performed at the border, in order to 'set an example' for the refugees. The department emphasized that it was important that all processing and registration of people took place at Storskog border station, in order to dispel the idea that people could enter the country easily (NOAS 2017, 14).

On 9 September 2015, the border police at Storskog alerted the National Police Directorate (POD) in Oslo about the critical situation, asking for immediate help at the border. They did not feel confident that the registration of the refugees was adequate, and that security was properly safeguarded. The department sent only one police officer to remedy the critical situation. Only on 12 October did the national police authorities and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) realize and acknowledge that the situation was a national crisis. After that, 24 new officers were hired to work on registrations at the border (VG 11.04.2016).

When the number of people escalated, there was insufficient accommodation at the border for the registration process and the weather was rapidly becoming colder. The local authorities had to contact the civil defense service for help in housing people during the registration process. The civil defense service managed to erect four heated tents at the border. But the situation remained very challenging because of a dramatic shortage of staff at the border,

with the few people available having to work nearly around the clock to process the influx of refugees and migrants.

The opening hours at the border station were from 7 in the morning to 21 in the evening. One border registration worker said that, during one month, he worked up to 22 hours a day, without a single day off. He worked like a 'zombie', he said, observing that it takes from two to four hours to register one individual. 'When 200 people arrive in two hours for registration, it is madness. The number of people escalated rapidly and we did not know how this would end'. The situation was considered to be completely unpredictable. Even though the border was closed between 21 and 7, it was necessary to work during the night to process the people through the system:

> We were too few and received little understanding from the central authorities in Oslo (the Norwegian capital) of how chaotic the situation was here. The local police authorities alerted the national authorities, but nobody heard what they said. We (who worked at the border) made telephone calls, said we needed more staff and that it was a crisis, but we were not heard. This is the impression I have, and I share this impression with a number of other people.

One of the persons working at the border claimed that history was written during the critical months there. He said that there had not been such a migration flow since World War II: 'I am particularly interested in World War II', he said:

> I have read a lot about the war, and I see what happened then, with the lack of understanding and listening by central authorities. We had the same impression as locals had back then.

Our informant refers to the lack of acknowledgement of the problems the population in this area experienced in the last part of the World War II. The Norwegian authorities in exile in London expected British or American soldiers to be liberating Eastern Finnmark from the German occupants. The situation became problematic for the Norwegian authorities when they realized that this would not happen. Without informing the Norwegian authorities, Soviet troops liberated Eastern Finnmark in October 1944. The number of Norwegian soldiers sent from Great Britain to Sør-Varanger to participate in the liberation was small, only 233 soldiers, and the local population was dissatisfied with the Norwegian contribution to the liberation of Eastern Finnmark (Grimnes 2018, 468–473). When more supplies arrived from the Norwegian authorities, the situation gradually improved and the local population was more satisfied after receiving help from the Norwegian soldiers and authorities.

The experience of misrecognition concerning the critical situation at the border awakened feelings deeply embedded in the history of this area. Civilians in Kirkenes experienced a traumatic situation during World War II, and those who were volunteers in 2015 explain that some of their response might be inspired by their grandparents' experiences with the destruction of

Kirkenes during World War II (Boe and Horsti 2019, 192). According to Shields (1991, 261), the process of misrecognition between center and periphery underlines how geographical distinction becomes an origin for other distinctions, and more importantly economic divisions and segregations.[2] In the case of Sør-Varanger, the uneven distribution of responsibility between central and local authorities confirmed how geographical differences implied other important differences, such as lack of understanding and acknowledgment of the need for assistance in handling the situation.

## Collective memory and the phenomenology of practice

> This area experienced forced migration during the Second World War. I think therefore the local inhabitants handled this situation so well. It is well worth valuing.

The above quotation is from a previous mayor of Sør-Varanger. She said that the local experience, history and narratives from World War II 'helped us' in the refugee situation; the inhabitants in Sør-Varanger could relate the ongoing refugee situation to something familiar. Several of the local people we met, talked with, and interviewed during this project, referred to what happened in this area during World War II, emphasizing the identification with people fleeing from war.

During the years 1940–1944, Kirkenes was the battleground for the German army when north-eastern Norway became the staging area for the German assault on the Soviet Union in June 1941. It is calculated that about 27,500 German and Austrian soldiers were sent from Sør-Varanger (Historielag 1997, 185). Kirkenes is described as the place with the second most air raid warnings and air attacks in Europe during World War II, with more than 300 attacks (Jaklin 2006, 190). In the autumn of 1944, all the inhabitants of Nord-Troms and Finnmark were forced to leave their homes, when the German army retreated. The German army used scorched earth tactics, and all residents were supposed to be forcibly evacuated. The Nazi regime ordered that those who did not comply were to be shot. In Sør-Varanger, many inhabitants were left behind and managed to hide during the fighting between German and Soviet troops in October 1944 (Grimnes 2018, 464–470). The local population expected to be liberated soon by Soviet or Norwegian soldiers and they felt that evacuation by sea could be more dangerous because of the risk of them being attacked.

Our informants' references to memories of World War II are supported by other studies of the voluntary work supporting refugees in Kirkenes. Boe and Horsti (2019) refers to the same narrative " … everyone in Kirkenes knows this story and part of the narrative is that the villagers were saved only because they took care of one another (Boe and Horsti 2019, 193).

The Syrian refugees who came to Norway across the Russian border at Storskog were fleeing war. They came to an area that had been occupied by

the Germans in 1940–1944. Memories from World War II were still alive, and the consciousness of the past, even among the generations of people who were born later, gained relevance when the refugee situation occurred. According to the local inhabitants, the collective memory of a traumatic historic moment in this area was an important aspect of the local mobilization to aid the refugees coming from war on the other side of the globe. The anthropologist Nefissa Naguib (2017) uses the concept of humanitarian encounter, to emphasize the recognition of human interdependency and the ability of individuals and communities to respond and invest personally or collectively in moments of face-to-face encounters. She describes the role of collective memory in shaping the collective efforts towards Syrians (and other refugees) in arctic Norway, drawing on events that took place seventy years ago to explain their actions towards the refugees.

We use this as one example of 'How Societies Remember', as Paul Connerton (1989) puts it in the title of his book. Connerton defines collective memory as recollections of a shared past which are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration, calling upon a common heritage as a central component. Such processes are as much physical and emotional as they are cognitive, in that the past is both embodied and recalled through cultural practices. Here individual memory is conceived as derivative of collective memory. From such a perspective, it is the collective memory which orients a group, providing the temporal and cognitive map for action.

This relates to the understanding of the phenomenology of practice focusing on how 'active bodies' use the acquired schemes and habits to position their world around themselves. Phenomenology of practice stresses the insufficiency of describing the world's structures without also paying attention to the way they are experienced from within, and this is not independent of where in the world one is located. The experience of the present depends largely on the knowledge of the past according to Connerton (1989), and people experience their present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which they can connect that present.

Hence the difficulty of extracting the past from the present, not simply because present factors tend to influence our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present. This process, Connerton claims, reaches into the most minute and everyday details of our lives: 'images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order.' (Connerton 1989, 3).

Based on such a close connection between memories and incorporated practices, it is possible to understand and analyze how memories can 'travel', be transmitted from 'the first-hand experience' of one generation in a direct sense, to the next generation who do not have first-hand experiences of the events. This links collective memory to the formation of collective identity and makes the lines between the discipline of history, learning and collective

memory sharp and distinct. From this perspective, the past is collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced: a temporal reference point, which is formative of a collective identity and which serves to orient those individuals within it.

The collective memory of the traumatic historic moment in Sør-Varanger during World War II have been transmitted to new generations. Since the 1950s there has been a tradition of commemorating the Red Army liberation of Eastern Finnmark, with events held every five years. These have given the older generation a good opportunity to talk about their experiences during and after the war, and to transfer their memories of trauma, war and forced migration to the next generation. People in Sør-Varanger referred to this traumatic historic moments and the experience of receiving refugees of different nationalities during the 1980s and 1990s, describing the reasons for local mobilization to provide assistance to the refugees coming from war on the other side of the globe. These memories and experiences functioned as important force and made it possible to identify with the refugees fleeing from war and see them as desperate individuals braving danger in their pursuit of security and shelter.

People coming from remote traumatic war experiences, people in need of help, in need of local solutions to globally produced problems. In this case, it is possible to show how images and memories of the past legitimate the present social order. Researchers have pointed out that experiences of history transmitted through local narratives might not always be in accordance with mainstream narratives in school curricula and media, but collective memories remain an important part of the local curriculum in this area (Boe and Horsti 2019, 193). This is also relevant for the curriculum in Norwegian schools. Collective memories can as such represent a kind of local embedded curriculum.

## Geographical location, history and local mobilization

The geographical location of Kirkenes on the border with Russia has had an important impact on the history, experiences and memories of the people living here, on images, narratives and collective identities. On 31 October 2015, the Norwegian broadcasting company (NRK) reported that Kirkenes had prepared for the worst migrant crisis in more than 30 years. The journalist (Gullvik 2015) wrote that, despite Kirkenes being almost as far overland from Syria as it is possible to be, the town still acquired Norway's second transit camp for refugees, opened in the autumn 2015. The large number of people coming made it necessary to have accommodation available.

A representative of Sør-Varanger municipality explained that people were first accommodated in hotels and on a camping site, but these places were soon overcrowded. She says that it is not a municipal responsibility to establish transit reception centers, although the local council proposed establishing one to the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI). She says:

> It was autumn, and a lot of people were coming, the local police asked for help with accommodation, we did not have any, the hotels were full, and we anticipated that even larger numbers of refugees could come, and they did

. As a result, Sør-Varanger local council saw no alternative than to use what local resources were available by opening Fjellhallen transit reception:

> We have done this before. We contacted UDI and made an agreement on what to do. We had to upgrade the place and establish infrastructure, internet etc. We felt that we were a little alone here, we felt that this was a crisis we initially had to handle at our local level, and it took some time before the central authorities took charge and understood the seriousness of the situation.

Kirkenes and Sør-Varanger municipality have a long history of 'being prepared for everything, usually for the worst', according to the journalist Gullvik. Almost 30 years ago, the local authorities had prepared a plan for handling potential crises, mainly because of the proximity of Russia, which has deeply influenced the history of this area, notably through the Russian liberation of the area in the World War II as well as the uneasiness caused by the Cold War (Asfeldt et al. 2018). This proximity has also been characterized by increased cross-border collaboration through the cooperation between individuals and through the Barents-Euro-Arctic cooperation.

The transit camp established in 'Fjellhallen', a revamped World War II bunker, which had functioned as a sports, concert and dance hall, is located in downtown Kirkenes. It had been designated and prepared not only for leisure use, but also as an air raid shelter from the time of the Cold War. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, the government assessed the possibility of a flow of Russian migrants, and prepared contingency plans for a scenario involving 3,000 migrants weekly. 'The migrants never arrived. The contingency plans were used during the Balkan War, when 950 Kosovo Albanians were airlifted from Skopje to Kirkenes and accommodated in Fjellhallen' (Asfeldt et al. 2018).

When the number of refugees increased unexpectedly in 2015, the Sør-Varanger local council was able to retrieve the plans for refugee reception from earlier. Fjellhallen was once again set up as a refugee camp, with 150 beds. Kirkenes and Sør-Varanger were prepared, but the number of people coming was more than Fjellhallen was able to accommodate. Soon after the camp was opened in September in 2015, capacity was exhausted. In November 2015, a second transit center, the Vestleiren, was opened. Management of that center was carried out by Hero, the largest operator of reception centers in Norway. The center had capacity to accommodate 600 refugees.

One of our communal administrative informants says that, when this camp was opened, they felt relief: 'OK, now the Government is taking over and things are very good. I have to say this, it is how we experienced it.' Before this, the local council had to handle the unexpected influx of people, while still undertaking the

daily responsibilities of running the municipality: 'This demands experience and an ability to manage a crisis', says one communal representative, stating:

> I feel we had good control and the coordination between the political and administrative levels in the municipality, as well as the coordination with the local police and the local governance level, went very well.

Even though this center was run by the central authorities, the situation here was chaotic. Compared to the situation at the local refugee camp, Fjellhallen, where there were no conflicts, the Vestleiren national camp also had conflicts about lack of information for the refugees as to where they were to be transported to, and a scarcity of facilities for the number of refugees and insufficient food.

## Local mobilization at Neiden and Fossheim school

In October 2015, Norway's largest newspaper wrote: 'Inhabitants in the small east Sami village, Neiden, opened their doors and their hearts, when the stream of refugees at Storskog exploded' (VG 19.10.15). Neiden, a small multicultural village in Sør-Varanger municipality, is located very close to the Russian border and has been home to Sami, Kven and Norwegian inhabitants for generations. In September 2015, a refugee center was established here, because the municipality's capacity to accommodate refugees was in danger of collapsing.

Both the need and local willingness to mobilize to welcome refugees to this village can be embedded in its history and narratives. One of Neidan's inhabitants says:

'This village is actually inhibited by people fleeing from hunger, need, poor and unsafe conditions, as well as an unsustainable future in Finland 150 years ago'.

When the number of refugees coming through the Storskog border escalated, Neiden once again became a place to accommodate people in need of help. At Christmas 2015, there were around 15 families with children accommodated in the refugee center. All of them were expected to be in Norway for more than three months. Children and youth arriving in Norway who will be staying more than three months have the same rights and obligations as their Norwegian peers. Everybody aged 6 to 15 has an equal right to education in the mandatory school system regardless of his or her legal status.

Because of Neiden's declining population, and also the declining number of pupils, the local school, Fossheim, was in danger of being closed. In August 2015, the school had only 5 pupils, all with Norwegian as their mother tongue. At the end of December of the same year, the school's headteacher received a message that around 30 new pupils were to be provided with educational facilities.

For a school with 5 pupils, two teachers, one headteacher and one assistant employed for before- and after-school care, this entailed a lot of preparations. The headteacher said that their remit as a school was to provide dedicated, reliable, and good education to all the children and young people in the school

district, and they accepted the challenge. She emphasized that this acceptance was not without underlying concerns: 'How to be able to give well-organized and good education to all the pupils, given the resources we had and the potential support from the regional and national governments'.

The school was opened in 1905 as a boarding school in the northern Norwegian border region extending to Russia and Finland, with pupils from different ethnic groups: eastern Sami, northern Sami, Finnish and Norwegian. The school was originally built to take more than 100 pupils from a variety of cultural backgrounds. A multicultural population and pupils were not a new phenomenon in this area. The new situation nevertheless brought other cultural, social and health challenges. The experiences that families and children from Syria, Afghanistan, and Lebanon had gone through, both before and on arriving in Sør-Varanger presented new challenges. The headteacher describes very busy days with the involvement of men, women and children alike:

The five local pupils made plans for welcoming their new schoolmates, preparing shared games, organizing and making images of themselves with Norwegian and English words for the different parts of the body, head, shoulders, knees and toes – in line with the Norwegian song. The porter and the cleaner checked and cleaned all the possible rooms, checked water taps that had not been used for several years, provided clean curtains and new blackboards.

More equipment was needed, for the classrooms, for the gym and the arts and crafts rooms. 15 of the fathers from the Neiden refugee center volunteered to help. They worked, carried furniture, washed, had coffee and worked more. They were not paid, but were grateful for the opportunity to enable their children to go to school. When they had finished, the school had five new classrooms and a kitchen, and it was ready to welcome the new pupils.

Short of time, with minimal staff and old equipment, there were also other challenges according to the headteacher: 'Did we have teachers? Did we have interpreters?' She says they had to 'dust down' some retired teachers and call them back to work. Many of these were very enthusiastic to return and eager to contribute.

The cooperation with refugees already settled in the community, working as translators and voluntary cultural workers in leisure hours, was of great importance. Translating to Arabic and Dari was important, to give the children visibility and self-expression, to ask questions and get answers in their own language. This was also important for sharing information, to ensure that essential messages were imparted and received.

Despite the short time available for preparations and limited resources, the school was able to organize 'Project Welcome'. The hospitality of the local population in the village and the municipality was demonstrated through the effort of welcoming new pupils to the school.

For a local school, growing from 5 to almost 40 pupils in such a short time is rather drastic. Many of the pupils and their families had carried a rather heavy

mental load from war and conflict areas, over a long and demanding journey. Expertise from the local health authorities was required. Local nurses and doctors established an office at Fossheim school, which was open on two days a week. The headteacher observes that the mobilization of the local authorities, and not least of the local community, made it possible to meet the needs that arose and have the school ready in time:

> I experience Neiden as generous, creative and well-meaning. I think that the inhabitants showed impressive qualities. They also started to talk about the problems of not having a shop in the village, and that if we got a permanent transit center we might also have a shop.

Here the mobilization was embedded in the local experience of multicultural encounters in this area over generations, together with a hope for the future. The opening of a transit camp for refugees and the increased number of pupils in the school created hope for the future, for more inhabitants, more possibilities for work and employment, and more activity in this village.

Researchers have pointed out that settling of refugees to rural areas characterized by depopulation may enhance rural resilience by providing a new supply of labor, helping to sustain essential services and mobilizing new forms of civil society engagement (Lundsfryd, Klarup, and Bundgaard 2017; Naguib 2017). In Neiden, there was hope for new growth in the village as a result of the potential for welcoming new inhabitants and new pupils. This did not happen; the refugee center was closed down in March 2015 and the school once again had only 5 pupils.

The hope for long-term rural resilience was not met in Neiden, the school was closed in 2017 and the population continues to decrease. Nonetheless, the experience of resilience, in respect of the ability of a small local community to find local solutions to globally produced problems, was verified. The local population did a marvelous job, both in Neiden and Kirkenes, and the focus was on the refugees, one local authority said.

## Conflict, misrecognition and local dignity

The Sør-Varanger local council managed to open a transit camp in almost no time, hired people to work there and had significant support from volunteers in the municipality. The local council, together with the school staff and Neiden's local population, also managed to provide educational facilities to new pupils at Fossheim school at very short notice. Since it is the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) that is responsible for running asylum reception centers, Sør-Varanger council applied to UDI for full reimbursement of the municipality's costs of operating the Fjellhallen transit camp. This resulted in a conflict between Sør-Varanger municipality and UDI, due to UDI's unwillingness to fully reimburse the Norwegian municipality for the work done. 'UDI paid only half of the bill – NOK 8.7 million of the requested NOK 16.5 million' (Mikhailova

2018, 192). Mikhailova states that the dispute between Sør-Varanger and UDI simmered for several months, and the municipality intended to pursue the case in court. The scandal was resolved peacefully because the municipality finally accepted a lower reimbursement sum for operating Fjellhallen.

After that conflict was resolved, the mayor of Sør-Varanger, Rune Rafaelsen, declared to the media: 'If this happens again, we will do the same.' In an interview with us, he also said: 'I have never experienced anything so humiliating; a small municipality took on responsibility and managed to handle the very difficult situation, but UDI and the national authorities did not take responsibility. This is very unworthy of Norway as a nation.' He continued rather ironically: 'On the positive side, the rest of the Norwegian nation was made aware that Norway has a border with Russia.' He says that the nation should be expected to have understood what was happening at the border, and that the nation had opportunities, systems, and resources to react with, but the national authorities were completely dependent on the local authorities. 'There was absolutely no national understanding of what was occurring at the border', he says.

The conflict with UDI confirmed the misrecognition of the situation as a local and not a national responsibility. It also confirmed that people in Sør-Varanger could be proud of living in such a warm and welcoming area of the world, of being able to find local solutions to global problems. According to the mayor, it also confirmed a lack of understanding from national authorities of what it meant to live in this border area. As such, the local experience of misrecognition aligned with collective memories of the relationship between national and local authorities embedded in the history of this region. Once again, images and collective memories legitimated and confirmed the present social order.

The history of being 'prepared for the worst' also included the history of not being overly dependent on relying on national support:

> We are a small municipality of 10,000 inhabitants, we managed to help, we managed something great that made me really proud. We who did the voluntary work, would never have managed to do this without support from the top (the political and administrative authorities in the municipality) and a mayor that said "let's go for this". We had two majors who opened their arms, and both have done a formidable job. I am sure that, without political support, we would never have been able to do what we did, that's for certain.

One of the two mayors referred to above said:

> I find it important to express the dignity that the local population showed in this difficult situation, which is the complete opposite of the inadequate understanding shown by the central authorities. Without hesitation, I mean the local council, the local police, the hospital, and the local inhabitants here saved the Norwegian nation in this difficult situation.

These examples illustrate how the local mobilization was supported and dependent on both the local political and administrative authorities, as well as the

local volunteers. They supported each other and acknowledged the importance of their work, even though the local need for action and engagement was not fully recognized nationally.

## Conclusion

This paper shows how remote global conflicts, such as the war in Syria, have important consequences across borders and over huge distances, among local authorities and inhabitants in a municipality at the northernmost Schengen border of Europe. Theoretically, the paper combines theories of collective memories with the phenomenology of practice, emphasizing how geographical location is important for understanding how 'the world's structures' are experienced from within.

The paper has pointed out how geographical location in this border area, far from the national center, as well as collective and cultural memories across generations, were important driving forces for the local mobilization on the Norwegian side of the border. A traumatic historical moment in Sør-Varanger during World War II and experiences of receiving refugees of different nationalities in the 1990s functioned as drivers for local mobilization in receiving refugees from war on the other side of the globe. These memories and experiences made it possible to identify with these refugees and see them as desperate individuals braving danger in their pursuit of security and shelter.

Refugees who migrate into an unknown context, climatically, culturally and socially, need to learn many things fast. Our analyses show how the local mobilization and voluntary work function as practical and cultural education, a preparation to life, climate and habits in the arctic area of Norway. Based on empirical data from a small local school, the paper points out the importance of a school as a community center in welcoming new inhabitants.

The paper also points out how the misrecognition of the situation by the central authorities, and the necessity to handle the situation locally, spurred feelings deeply embedded in experiences and memories of the history of this area transmitted through generations. It took time before the situation was recognized as a national crisis and the national responsibility was accepted. It could be said that it was never fully recognized, since the municipality was not fully reimbursed for the work done. The misrecognition by national authorities might underline how geographical distances between center and periphery also entail other distinctions of power and economic segregation.

Related to a phenomenology of practices, this illuminates how meaning and materiality are connected, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to how the world is experienced from within. This is not independent of where one is located, whether it concerns local or national authorities. As such, the local experience of misrecognition aligned with collective memories and narratives of the relationship between national and local authorities embedded in the history of this region. Once again, images and memories of the past legitimated and

confirmed the present social order. The history of being 'prepared for the worst' included also the history of not over relying on national support, and showed how a small local community could handle globally produced problems in a critical situation when needed.

## Notes

1. Mikhailova uses the term migrant here. She writes that 'Russians did not look at them as refugees, they are more like immigrants . . . ' (Mikhailova 2018, 196).
2. The distance by road between Kirkenes and Oslo is 1829.9 kilometers.

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