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Nonprofit Organizations and Public Policy in Refugee and Other Migrant Crises: Concepts and Frameworks

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Abstract: This article introduces the special issue of Nonprofit Policy Forum exploring the relationship between nonprofit organizations, (conceptualized broadly to include NGOs, civil society actors, and other third sector actors), public policy actors, and migration crises. We have three overarching goals with our introductory article. One is to conceptualize migration crises vis-a-vis the third sector, better illuminating how the nonprofit sector intervenes in and interacts with migration crises. We consider this at the individual/family, community, and regional/national levels, and also attempt to distinguish between real (empirical) crises and manufactured (e.g. solely politically useful) "crises". Our second goal is to present a framework categorizing third sector-state relationships in contexts of migration, with an eye toward broadening the field's focus beyond the interactions we commonly observe in the global North. We do this by categorizing types of government-nonprofit relationships based on where they fall among two intersecting continua of state capacity and relationship quality. Finally, we present a framework of four ideal types of state-third sector interactions in migration crises, providing a case-based application in each category. Our hope is that scholars can move toward using this framework for assessing state capacity and third-sector relationships in migration crises. We illustrate our concepts and framework with examples from the articles in this special issue of Nonprofit Policy Forum as well as other extant research and practical examples. We tie each of our concepts and frameworks to real world scenarios, and ultimately hope to work toward practical applications that may be of use to future researchers, practitioners, and at some endpoint benefit the lives of migrants themselves.

Keywords: migrant; refugee; migration; NGO; nonprofit; state capacity

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1 Introduction

Many parts of the world are experiencing crises of migration. Nonprofits, NGOs, and other civil society actors-referred to as third sector organizations in this paper-play active roles in these situations, both participating in and being affected by migration crises in a variety of ways. These groups often interact with the state and other policy participants as they navigate the migration scene in myriad ways that are yet under-identified (Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann 2017). Nonprofits may advocate for and against public policy related to migration at national, international, and local levels. NGOs may participate in collaborative policymaking and cooperative service provision for migrants, or they may provide services for migrants without the support of, or even against the wishes of, the state. We often observe the third sector working in solidarity with migrant communities, but we must be mindful of civil society actors that do not support migration and may actively work to prevent migration, even taking on state-like tasks to do so (see for example Angulo-Pasel's 2023 examination of border vigilante and militia groups). This special issue of *Nonprofit Policy Forum* explores the relationship between nonprofit organizations (conceptualized broadly to include NGOs, civil society actors, and other third sector actors), public policy actors, and migration crises.

Our introductory article has three overarching goals. One goal is to analyze the migration crisis through the lens of the third sector, better illuminating how the nonprofit sector intervenes in and interacts with migration crises. We consider this at the individual/family, community, and regional/national levels, and also attempt to distinguish between real (empirical) crises and manufactured or constructed migration "crises"; for example, those exaggerated for political gains. Our second goal is to present a framework categorizing third sector-state relationships in contexts of migration, with an eye toward broadening the field's focus beyond interactions we commonly observe in the global North. We achieve this by classifying types of government-nonprofit relationships based on their position along two intersecting continua of state capacity and relationship quality. Finally, we present a framework of ideal types of state-third sector interactions during migration crises, offering a case-based application for each category. We hope that scholars may adopt this framework for assessing state capacity and third-sector relationships in migration crises.

This paper is divided into three parts, each corresponding to our overarching goals. The first section explores migration crises and the third sector, examining its role and involvement at various levels while distinguishing between genuine and constructed crises. The second section introduces a framework for categorizing third sector-state relationships in migration contexts, expanding the field's focus beyond

the global North by assessing these relationships along two key dimensions: state capacity and relationship quality. Finally, the third section presents a typology of state-third sector interactions during migration crises, applying this framework through case-based examples. We illustrate our concepts and framework with examples from the articles in this special issue of *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, as well as other extant research and practical examples. With each goal, we aim to tie our concepts and frameworks to real-world scenarios, and ultimately hope to move toward practical applications that are of use to future researchers, practitioners, and culminate in benefiting the lives of migrants themselves.

2 Nonprofits and Migration Crises

In many locales, the term "migration crisis" has become overwrought, and this concept is academically underexplored in relation to the nonprofit sector. Individuals and families making choices about migrating often do so due to crises of climate and environment (Ghosh and Orchiston 2022), government stability and quality, poverty, war, or other violence (Aslany et al. 2021). Migrant sending communities can experience crises as they navigate loss of population and migrant return, and migrant hosting communities can face crises during efforts with reception and integration. When thousands or even millions of migrants enter a country with little migrant-hosting infrastructure, as we saw in the countries of East Africa with the Sudanese civil war in 2023 (UNHCR 2025), in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (UNHCR 2024a), and the countries of the Middle East at the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (UNHCR 2024b), true national-level crises are possible. Yet, we are acutely aware that in many countries around the world migration has become a controversial political issue, and hyperbole around "migration crises" is a rallying point for anti-immigrant political movements. For our purposes, we use the term to capture situations of migration whereby migrants, which may include refugees, internally displaced persons, and other individuals, are migrating at risk and in vulnerable circumstances.[1]

2.1 Defining Migration Crises in Policy Circles

Lindley (2014) reminds us of some of the conceptual challenges one must take into account when considering the concept of crisis in relation to migration. Lindley

1 See Carling's (2023) important commentary on why the terminology one uses for migrants is important and should be chosen with care.

asserts that crisis as a concept is "both loud and vague" (p.2). The term signals that things are both bad and out of the norm; yet crisis is also highly subjective, since deep-seated vulnerability is often highly political, and one group's "normal times" may simply conceal another group's entrenched inequality and critical situation. Crisis and migration have a long history of association in policy circles and in the popular press. There is a general sense among some that migration itself is a crisis and staying in one place is a preferred human state, despite millennia of human activity suggesting otherwise. Considering crisis as it relates to migration, McAdam (2014) more directly defines crisis as "any situation in which there is a widespread threat to life, physical safety, health or subsistence that is beyond the coping capacity of individuals and the communities in which they reside" (p. 29).

In scholarly and policy circles, there is a growing consensus that it is appropriate to group some types of migration based on a nuanced understanding of structure and agency (or lack thereof) in processes of displacement, a lack of state guarantees of protection to citizens, and other protection gaps (Lindley 2014). As McAdam (2014) explains, "crisis migration" is best understood as a decision made in response to a complex combination of factors, including possible social, economic, political, and environmental factors. The decision to migrate may be triggered by an extreme event, though not necessarily. In many cases, a set of cumulative pressures make life at home unsustainable for an individual or household, until such a point that people believe leaving is a better option than staying (McAdam 2014).

Put differently, clearly not all types of migration; decisions to migrate; or conditions from, through and to which one migrates are equal, and it makes sense to categorize these differently. It is based on a combined assessment of vulnerabilities, rather than simply a dichotomous designation of voluntary/economic migration versus forced migration, that we would encourage scholars to assess situations as crises of migration. Furthermore, while McAdam (2014) describes an individual or family level decision, and many crises of migration are at the individual level, we assert that crises of migration can also be experienced at community, regional, and national or international levels.

2.2 Levels of Crisis

In addition to individual and family-level crises that may lead one to make a decision to migrate, or additional crises that one might experience at the individual or family level during the process of migration, arrival, or integration, we assert that contexts of migration can cause experiences of crisis at the community or regional level, and at the national or international level. Massive loss of population due to out-migration as well as massive influx of population, and the economic, cultural, and demographic

challenges that accompany these shifts can cause real challenges that can be experienced as crises at the community, regional, national, and international level.

2.2.1 Individual and Family

Scholarship focused on individual or family-level migration crisis, or crisis at the personal level, prioritizes approaches that foreground the personal experiences of people on the move (Lindley 2014). NGOs and third-sector organizations are crucial in-service providers during such crises (Haddad 2022, 2020, 2018, 2017). The third sector plays a significant role in supporting migrants at the individual level. Third sector organizations can play a role in providing essential services for migrants, such as shelter, food, and legal assistance in the absence of the state; they can also play an advocacy role in shaping migration policy to provide migrants with an inclusive environment. However, these organizations can also face challenges, often from limited resources, political opposition, and a highly bureaucratic environment.

Many of NGOs assisting migrants from Ukraine that were the subject of analysis in this special issue provided aid to individual migrants in crisis, such as basic needs assistance and psychological support to migrants in Poland (Trochymiak and Wróblewska 2024) or legal and social counseling to migrants in the Czech Republic (Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochranaet 2024). Immigrant-serving organizations researched in the United States provided migrants with direct legal services (Cooper, Atouba, and Wang 2024; Ferris et al. 2024; Hawes, Chand, and Calderon 2024; Paarlberg 2024), and assistance with basic needs, educational, health, and social services (Cooper, Atouba, and Wang 2024; Ferris et al. 2024, Paarlberg 2024). In Latin America and the Caribbean nonprofit organizations provided migrants from Venezuela and Haiti with assistance with direct basic needs, educational services, and psychosocial services, and engaged in "accompaniment" with migrants as they navigated various service processes (Appe, Araque, and Telch 2024; Peralta 2024). In providing for individual and family needs, nonprofit organizations often intervene with bureaucracies and advocate for community-wide needs, assisting with community integration, and in doing so shape the implementation of public policy at community, regional, and even national levels.

2.2.2 Community and Regional

As Loescher and colleagues (2008) note, large numbers of migrants, especially as related to conflict and displacement, increasingly are perceived as potential reasons for community and regional instability as they have the potential to create pressure on employment, natural resources, and public services. This in turn, can fuel negative perceptions of and political movements surrounding migrants; in its worst

iterations, we may see anti-immigration movements and social tensions such as demonstrations and street violence, or the rise of anti-immigrant parties challenging the existing political order (Gebremedhin and Mavisakalyan 2013). Communities can experience crises as they deal with issues of longer-term integration of migrants, and in this special issue, NGOs are shown to play an important role in the transition from crisis management to mainstream governance, as we see in the example of the integration of Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic (e.g. Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochranaet 2024). We observe other important examples of community and regional-level impacts of migration governance and the roles that nonprofit organizations can play in these community dynamics. In U.S. communities where deportation and threat of deportation is higher, academic performance is lower for both undocumented students and documented students due to the fear and anxiety produced by aggressive enforcement regimes. The presence of immigrant-serving community organizations seems to provide undocumented students a safety net, help alleviate anxiety, and improve performance (Hawes, Chand, and Calderon 2024). In the Dominican Republic, deportation threats caused nonprofit organizations to step into new advocacy roles (Peralta 2024), and for many nonprofit organizations, community-level crises of migration caused them to become newly involved in policy advocacy (Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochranaet 2024; Sorrell-Medina 2024).

2.2.3 National and International

In 2014, Lindley asserted that the key aspects of political scientist Myron Weiner's (1995) "global migration crisis" were salient concerns among many policy makers, and a decade later, we contend that these arguments continue to be espoused by many leaders globally. Crucial aspects of this argument are perceptions of weakened (and weakening) control over entry to territories, problems with "absorbing" incoming migrants, tensions over migration in international relations, and intense dilemmas between human rights and national interests. In these debates, migration is poised as a crisis of national and international proportions, such as a crisis of "Europeanization" (Trasciani 2024), in which nonprofit organizations also have an important role to play. In her commentary in this special issue, Paarlberg (2024) describes the burdens that nonprofits in the United States bear due to detrimental shifts in national-level policies between the United States and the people of Afghanistan following the August 2021 collapse of Kabul. This resulted in a true international migration crisis, as the world watched individuals cling to the wheels of planes as aspiring migrants hoped to depart the country. Cooper, Atouba, and Wang (2024) explain refugee crises as substantive enough that they must be addressed by national-level policy at the United States federal level, though the authors acknowledge that refugee-serving organizations navigate relationships with

government agencies at multiple levels of government; these findings are echoed by Ferris and colleagues (2024). As negative hostility around migration infuses national political rhetoric it is increasingly directed toward migrant-serving NGOs. This was documented in the Czech Republic, where migrant-serving NGOs were called hostile by politicians and the media and their representatives were targeted with hateful speech (Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochranaet 2024), and in other national contexts including the Dominican Republic (Peralta 2024) and the United States (Cooper, Atouba, and Wang 2024).

2.3 Real versus Manufactured Crisis

The concept of "crisis" is socially constructed, conveying a potent idea of an emergency that demands an urgent response (McAdam 2014). Crises capture public attention and demand immediate attention, and with this crises often become politically useful. Migrants are particularly effective at drawing attention to crises; as Calhoun (2010) notes, "One scholar has even described refugees as the "prototypical face of the emergency" (p. 33)." Because of this, it is important to ask questions about who drives crisis migration narratives and who crisis migration narratives serve (McAdam 2014).

Thinking along these lines, we believe it is important to add an additional conceptual layer to our analysis of crisis by differentiating between real versus manufactured crises. We admit these descriptors themselves invite subjective assessment, and that there is likely a continuum that exists between them. Nonetheless, we propose the following definitions:

- *Real Crisis*: Empirically verifiable, such as war-induced refugee flows or those caused by natural disasters.
- *Manufactured Crisis*: Politically constructed narratives that exaggerate or distort migration crises for political purposes.

By differentiating between these types of crises, analysts can examine how states respond to perceived/manufactured versus real/empirical migration pressures, and the role of political rhetoric in shaping policy and third-sector relationships and responses. This is important because we argue that states can and will respond to both real and manufactured crises. As such, both kinds of crises have important implications for nonprofit organizations, states, and residents of communities.

3 Nonprofits and States in Migration Crises

Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann (2017) well-cited systematic literature review provides a conceptual model that describes migrant-oriented third sector organizations as "embedded in a dynamic environment of third actors (such as governmental bodies…"(p.1862). They then continue to specifically mention a surprising lack of research on relationships between migrant-oriented third sector organizations and other sectors such as government. Our goal is to begin to address this gap by presenting a framework explicitly analyzing third sector – state relationships in the context of migration, with an eye toward broadening our conceptualizations beyond relationships most often observed in the global North. We do this by developing a framework that plots types of state-nonprofit interactions along two continua: state capacity and the quality of the relationship between the state and the third sector. We then give examples of these interactions from empirical studies and practical cases (see Figure 1).

3.1 State Capacity in Migration Contexts

One aspect of our framework acknowledges that states have varying capacity to participate in service provision, policy development, policy implementation, and

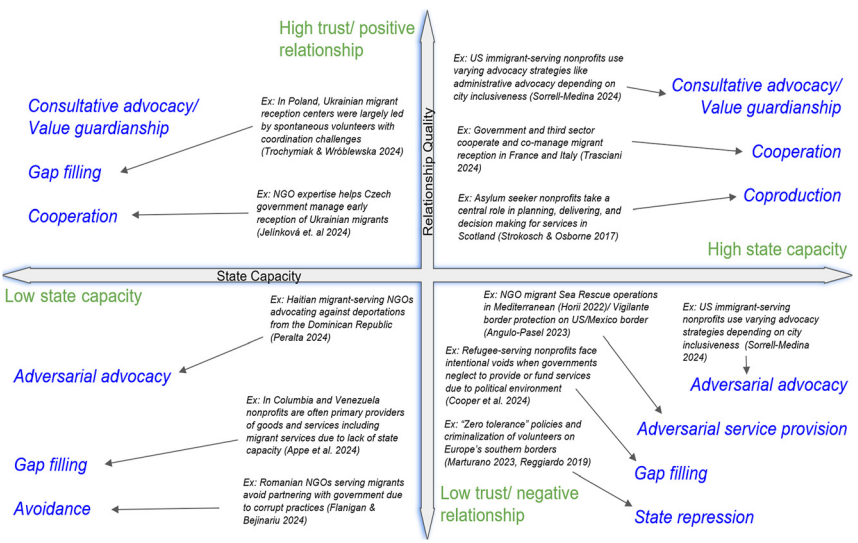

Figure 1: Categories of nonprofit-state interactions in migration contexts.

various other elements of governance, particularly when it comes to issues of migration.[2] These variations in capacity may be related to the underlying capacity of the state itself and the context within which it operates, or the variation may be due to the nature of the policy issue-in this case, migration. While within our framework (see Figure 1) we capture this nuance as an issue of state capacity, we consider it important to differentiate between an underlying lack of state capacity, which may be more difficult to overcome, and a lack of state experience with migration, where a state may simply need to "get up to speed" and then will be able to manage the issue of migration policy and services-perhaps in partnership with the third sector-from that point forward. Of course, some states may lack both underlying capacity and experience with migration, presenting an even greater challenge.

There are of course many reasons for an underlying lack of state capacity, and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each in depth. However, state capacity (or a lack thereof) has a significant influence on nonprofits, NGOs, and other third sector actors, particularly in the global South. We argue state capacity is a factor that must be considered in all discussions of state-third sector relations, and certainly in the policy arena of migration. Low state capacity may be due to operating in contexts of conflict (Besley and Persson 2014), institutional weakness and fragility (Besley and Persson 2014, Haddad 2017), economic income with lower income associated with lower capacity (Besley and Persson 2014), and public corruption (Lee and Liu 2021). We also acknowledge, as described in the work of Cooper, Atouba, and Wang (2024), that even high capacity states may leave "intentional voids" when they technically have the capacity to meet needs but intentionally do not do so due to "a lack of goodwill or outright hostility," which may be due to the inflammatory nature of a policy topic like migration. In Table 1 we offer some examples of how cases of capacity may vary depending on the specific capacity challenge the state faces.

3.2 Relationship Quality Between State and Nonprofit Actors

Another aspect of our framework acknowledges that the quality of relationships between states and nonprofit organizations or other third sector actors varies. We suggest that the quality of these relationships spans a continuum from high trust or positive relationships, to low trust or negative relationships. The quality of these relationships will be context specific and depending on context, the nature of

2 We note here that a number of scholars in economics, political science, and related fields engage in efforts to precisely quantify the capacity of a state along a variety of criteria (for a helpful illustration, see Vaccaro 2023). We value these efforts, but for our purposes, we view state capacity through the lens of the average citizen or NGO employee as they might experience the basic functioning of the state in their daily work and interactions.

Table 1: Differentiations between state capacity challenges in migration contexts.

State capacity challenge	Clarification	Examples
Lack of underlying state capacity	*Less economically developed states*; *states in conflict*; *weak and vulnerable states*; *high levels of corruption*	Colombia and Venezuela: government provision of goods and services is limited; thus nonprofits are often primary service providers including for migrants (Appe, Araque, and Telch 2024)
Lack of state experience with migration	*Medium to high capacity but little to no migration infrastructure or experience*	Poland: Good overarching state capacity but less experience with complex crisis management when Ukrainian migrants first arrived. (Trochymiak and Wróblewska 2024)
Intentional voids in state attention	*Medium to high capacity but little attention to migration due to contentious political environment*	United States: refugee services' "intentional destruction" under Trump administration and "purposeful neglect" under Biden administration. (Cooper, Atouba, and Wang 2024)

relationships could be prevalent to an entire sector (e.g., in a country where an authoritarian-leaning leader was just elected, suspicion of civil society organizations may run high; or in a country where government corruption is rampant, NGOs may not trust local government as viable partners.) Likewise, the quality of relationships may be specific to a particular policy arena but not others. For example, in a country where migration has been highly politicized, a local government bureaucrat may not feel free to award contracts for migration services to their usual nonprofit shelter partner but perhaps can award contracts for homelessness services without controversy. In either case, we argue the quality of the relationship will affect the types of interactions in which the state and the nonprofit actors choose to engage (see Figure 1).

3.3 Interactions Between States and Nonprofit Actors in Migration Contexts

Within our framework, we identify a variety of types of interactions in which states and nonprofit actors may choose to engage, based on the unique context of state capacity and relationship quality in which they find themselves operating. These include, in cases of positive relationship quality, Consultative Advocacy and Value

Guardianship, Cooperation, Coproduction, and Gap Filling. In cases of negative relationship quality, we find Gap Filling, Adversarial Advocacy, Adversarial Service Provision, Avoidance, and State Repression. While some of these interactions will sound familiar based on Young's (2000, 2006) well-known models of government relations, we parse some concepts and elaborate upon others to capture the complexity of lower state capacity and varied trust in relationships.

3.3.1 Higher Trust-Positive Relationships

3.3.1.1 Consultative Advocacy and Value Guardianship

Whereas Young (2000, 2006) describes advocacy as a single category, we differentiate between two broad categories of advocacy depending on the quality of the relationship between the third sector actor and the state. When organizations have a friendly and cooperative orientation toward the state and vice versa, we do not think that characterizing advocacy as adversarial (Young 2006) makes sense conceptually. Therefore, drawing from Toepler et al. (2023) Government–Nonprofit Relationship Types, we distinguish these more collegial and cooperative advocacy strategies as consultative advocacy and value guardianship. We know such activities are common in the global North, and in countries of the global South legislators who lack staff capacity are often eager for this type of advocacy from NGOs who can provide needed expertise (see for example Abdel-Samad 2017).

In Figure 1, we assert that consultative advocacy would be present only when the state and nonprofit actors share, or are building, a trusting and positive relationship. This would most often be present and likely would be most fruitful in situations where state capacity is high. However, consultative advocacy can also be useful in situations where state capacity is low, and it is often welcomed by legislators in these settings, since staffers and well-resourced research offices are less common (Abdel-Samad 2017). Therefore, except in the case of the lowest capacity states, we anticipate consultative advocacy will be an option in any situation where relationships are sufficiently positive, and trust is sufficiently high (both upper quadrants of Figure 1).

3.3.1.2 Cooperation and Coproduction

In situations where relationships are sufficiently positive and trust is sufficiently high, we expect to see instances of cooperation between the state and nonprofit organizations and other third sector actors. We should note, though, that relationship quality is only a minimum qualification for partnership, and there may indeed be scenarios where crises or other external pressures would cause parties to cooperate despite less than ideal relationship quality. Cooperation between states and government has been described and researched by numerous nonprofit scholars;

one considers Young's (2000, 2006) conception of complementary relationships between the nonprofit sector and the state. These interactions can be viewed in both upper quadrants of Figure 1.

In the field of migration, high-capacity states are well prepared to cooperate with nonprofit partners. As examples, the government and the third sector cooperate, co-governing and co-managing migrant reception in France and Italy (Trasciani 2024). Nonprofits working with asylum seekers take on a central role in planning, delivering, and decision making for services in Scotland as a form of coproduction with government (Strokosch and Osborne 2017). We see both these interactions in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1. In states like the Czech Republic that have lower migration management capacity due to being less accustomed to migration overall, cooperating with NGOs was central to the government's early ability to manage Ukrainian migrant reception (Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochranaet 2024). We see this interaction in the upper left quadrant of Figure 1.

3.3.2 Multiple Capacities and Relationship Types

3.3.2.1 Gap Filling

In some circumstances, third sector actors operate in the absence, or near absence, of government due to low state capacity. As mentioned prior, there are many reasons for low state capacity, and the role of nonprofit organizations in filling gaps left by the absence of state activity is most often associated with what Young (2000, 2006) calls supplementary relationships. We see this nonprofit activity in both quadrants on the left side of Figure 1, where state capacity is lower. In Venezuela and Columbia, where overall state capacity is low, NGOs are common service providers for many individuals, including for migrants (Appe, Araque, and Telch 2024). In Poland, where overall state capacity is good but historical inexperience with migration leaves migration management capacity low, spontaneous volunteers filled gaps as a primary workforce at reception centers and worked with minimal supervision from public representatives or even formal NGO staff (Trochymiak and Wróblewska 2024).

However, Cooper, Atouba, and Wang (2024) remind us that high-capacity states such as the United States also neglect to provide sufficient goods and services to migrants. Rather than structural holes or institutional voids, these scholars argue the gaps are "intentional voids" created by governments when the political rhetoric around a policy issue like immigration has become too inflammatory. They describe the resulting gap-filling behavior of nonprofit organizations, shown in the lower right quadrant of Figure 1, as a "trap" that presents a threat to refugee-serving nonprofits (Cooper, Atouba, and Wang 2024).

3.3.3 Lower Trust-Negative Relationships

3.3.3.1 Adversarial Advocacy

In contrast to consultative advocacy and value guardianship, in situations where a relationship between civil society and the state is negative or trust is low, either because of the nature of a specific policy issue or because of the overarching character of the relationship between the nonprofit actor and the state, we expect to see adversarial advocacy. Adversarial types of advocacy align more closely with Young's (2000, 2006) traditional definition of advocacy. This describes activity where nonprofit actors prod states for changes to policy and practice or for greater accountability, including in the realm of migration (see for example Sorrell-Medina 2024). With adversarial advocacy, the third sector presses the state to engage in or increase policy or accountability activities when, presumably, the government is not interested in doing so. There are limits to the extent to which nonprofits might choose to engage in this type of activity. Where state capacity is high but the relationship is exceedingly negative, the state might simply repress nonprofit activity, which we will discuss. As mentioned previously, if state capacity for policy development and implementation is too low, the third sector may decide adversarial advocacy is a poor use of its time and resources. Adversarial advocacy likely occurs along a continuum, with third sector actors unlikely to invest in advocacy activity in contexts where state capacity for policy development and implementation is so low as to render their efforts ineffective.

Nonetheless we expect adversarial advocacy to be an option for organizations where state capacity is both high and low if the relationship quality around a particular policy issue is sufficiently contentious (both of the lower quadrants of Figure 1), as it happens to be around the issue of migration in many countries at the time of this writing. As examples, in Figure 1 we see Haitian migrant-serving NGOs, discussed by Peralta (2024), appear in the lower left quadrant as engaging in adversarial advocacy. These NGOs advocate for government actors in the Dominican Republic, often viewed as a lower-moderate capacity state, to stop deportations of Haitian migrants. Sorrell-Medina (2024) in contrast describes a spectrum of advocacy strategies that immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations select across United States cities depending on varying characteristics of those cities. These strategies appear in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1 as well as the lower right quadrant, depending on the degree to which they are contentious.

3.3.3.2 Adversarial Service Provision

Another category of activity observed among nonprofits and civil society actors in the field of migration, and in some other policy arenas, is one we term adversarial service provision. Conceptually in some cases this might be considered a subcategory

of a gap-filling or supplementary behavior, but the primary difference here is that the state itself, and perhaps some other citizens, do not consider there to be a lack of the goods or services provided. In other words, there is not a perceived gap among at least some critical component of the population, and the state and other citizens do not necessarily welcome the intervention of the third sector actor. In fact, in some cases these groups are criminalized. One example is border vigilante groups that take it upon themselves to patrol the Mexico-United States border due to concerns that the border is under-protected from irregular migrant crossings by the state. This activity is illegal and unwelcome by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, though in practice, it is rarely prosecuted (Angulo-Pasel 2023). A second example is the increasingly well-researched activity of NGO sea rescue of migrants, particularly in the Mediterranean Sea. Though governments initially were more cooperative with these groups, the relationships have become more co-optive and confrontational in nature (Najam 2000). These rescues are now often opposed by the European Union and national governments, and NGO actors are often criminalized, with much research on the practice being published in criminology and law journals (Horii 2022). These examples appear in the lower right quadrant of Figure 1. We anticipate that adversarial service provision will occur in contexts where a relationship is negative or trust is low due to an underlying assumption that the third sector actor does not trust that the state is doing its work properly. We suggest that this activity would be uncommon in low-capacity states since, in that context, it would be a purely gap-filling exercise of meeting unmet needs.

3.3.3.3 Avoidance

In cases where a relationship is negative and trust is low, nonprofit organizations have plenty of incentive to completely avoid state interaction. This may be particularly acute in contexts where state capacity is low and institutions are weak due to challenges with impartial public administration or entrenched corruption, both common indicators of state capacity (Peeters and Campos 2023, Vaccaro 2023). In Romania, many NGOs assisting migrants from Ukraine were hesitant to cooperate with government actors at all levels due to experiences of corruption and a desire to avoid becoming involved in political nepotism (Flanigan and Bejinariu 2024). This is shown in the lower left quadrant of Figure 1. It is reasonable to assume that even in high-capacity states some nonprofit actors with negative experiences may choose to avoid government involvement, but we argue that this will be more common in low-capacity states that struggle with certain endemic public administration challenges.

3.3.3.4 State Repression

Finally, in cases where state capacity is high, and where a relationship is negative or trust is low, states are often in a position to repress nonprofit activity, as shown in the lower right quadrant of Figure 1. While this may bring to mind authoritarian states that engage in widespread clamping down on civil society actors, efforts that chill nonprofit activity need not be so broad. A growing number of studies, many from Italy, focus on the criminalization of solidarity organizations that provide basic aid to migrants traveling through southern Europe, and "zero tolerance" policies on provision of aid to migrants, some of which have resulted in prosecution of volunteers (see for example Reggiardo 2019, Marturano 2023). A reasonable conceptual question is whether states along the Balkan migration route are repressing what we previously referred to as "adversarial service provision", and at what point, and by whose perception, service provision can be considered adversarial. As Lucchesi and Cerase (2023) aptly note, public attitudes toward migrant-assisting NGOs shift just as public attitudes toward migration shifts, with perception of some migrant solidarity NGOs shifting from "saviors of the sea" to the pejorative term "sea taxi". Likewise, movement among these categories may be dynamic.

While low-capacity states will engage in some degree of repression of nonprofit actors, we expect repression of civil society activity to be more common in states with at least moderate to high capacity, unless nonprofits are engaged in activity that states find directly and immediately threatening. As an example, prior to the 2024 fall of the Assad regime in Syria, many diaspora organizations found that in areas where the Assad regime's state capacity had been degraded by the civil war they had more freedom and flexibility to provide humanitarian aid, and that partners had increased access to formerly restricted communication technologies, despite facing other war-related infrastructure challenges (see for example Abdel-Samad and Flanigan 2019).

4 Practical Applications of Concepts and Frameworks

A goal of policy-related research is to make concepts and frameworks applicable to real-world situations. In addition to illustrating the concepts we discuss with empirical examples from the special issue and other extant research, we attempt to make our framework presented in Figure 1 operational by introducing measurable indicators for each axis and proposing ideal type scenarios and real-world examples for each quadrant in Figure 2.

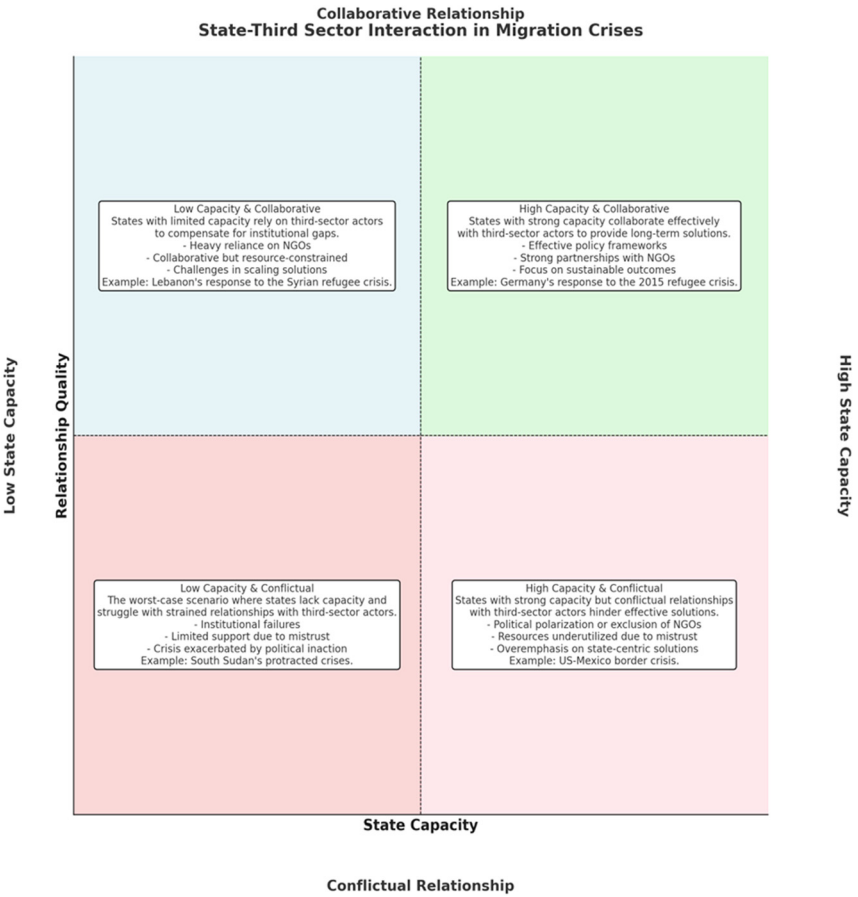

Figure 2: Ideal type framework of state-third sector interactions in migration crises.

Though well researched by others (see for example Peeters and Campos 2023, Vaccaro 2023), some base-level measurable indicators of state capacity regarding migration include financial resources allocated to migration responses, institutional strength and capacity (e.g., migration agencies, refugee management), migration policy frameworks and implementation capacity, and historical success in managing crises. Relationship quality can also be measured through indicators of trust in government and levels of trust between state and third-sector actors, degree of cooperation (e.g., joint programs, funding partnerships), conflict indicators (e.g., policy disputes, exclusion of nonprofits), and outcomes such as improved refugee conditions and efficient crisis response. We expect a wide array of interactions

between states and third sector organizations, as illustrated in Figure 1. However, one might expect certain ideal type relationships to emerge from each quadrant as we observe particular patterns of interactions between actors. These are illustrated in Figure 2, with practical examples offered.

As a first example, in the upper left quadrant, we highlight an ideal type where low state capacity but collaborative relationships predominate. States have low capacity and rely on third sector actors to compensate for those capacity gaps. While the strengths of these scenarios are an espoused collaborative spirit, drawbacks include heavy reliance on NGOs that may exceed their capacity, an overall environment of resource scarcity, and challenges in bringing solutions to scale in the case of larger scale crises like sudden influxes of migrants. A practical example of such a case is the Lebanese state's cooperation with NGOs in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis (Haddad 2017, Saade 2020). In such cases the state may not be getting in the way of NGO activity, per se, but humanitarian needs may exceed the capacity of the third sector and the state is not in much position to provide active support.

Directly across in the upper right-hand quadrant of Figure 2, we have the ideal type of high state capacity and collaborative interactions among state and third sector actors. In such situations, states benefit from strong capacity and can provide effective policy frameworks for migrants, designing sustainable solutions. The state is able to partner with NGOs effectively based on the third sector's strengths and relative contributions to the service environment. A practical example of a situation that begins to approach this ideal type, which is not to suggest it was without any challenges, is the German response to the 2015 migrant crisis (Funk 2016). In such a situation, both sectors bring their strengths to the table and complement one another.

In the lower right quadrant of Figure 2 we highlight the ideal type relationship of high capacity states with conflictual relationships with migrant service providers. In these situations, states have high capacity, but relationships with migrant service providers can be negative, perhaps due to the heightened political rhetoric around migration or due to politically manufactured aspects of migration crises. In these situations, political polarization may result in the exclusion of or mistrust of NGOs from partnership arrangements. Migrants may underutilize state and/or NGO resources, and states may take little advantage of the possible benefits of partnership with NGOs, resulting in an overemphasis on state-centric solutions. Due to the potentially manufactured aspects of the crisis, the empirical impacts can be variable. If there is indeed a massive influx of migrants, NGOs may be overburdened. If the number of migrants has been exaggerated, NGOs may not be overburdened by needs, but fear among the migrant community will be heightened. A practical example of this situation is the migration response on the United States' southern border. Here, a wealthy state has high capacity, while the threat posed by migrants has been a

subject of extraordinary hyperbole (Romero and Hill 2025). The result is that many immigrants have gone into hiding and avoided seeking services due to fear of President Trump's early 2025 threats of mass deportation (Garsd 2025).

Finally, in the lower left quadrant of Figure 2, we have the ideal type of low-capacity states and conflictual relationships. These scenarios represent perhaps the most challenging and intractable situations for migrants and other communities in crisis situations. In these locales, residents and migrants alike cope with institutional weaknesses and state failures. Support for the work of NGOs is weak due to mutual mistrust between NGOs and the state, and crises are exacerbated by a lack of state capacity and political inaction. A practical example of such a situation would be the ongoing migration crisis in Sudan (UNHCR 2023), exacerbated by the war in neighboring Sudan (UNHCR 2025). In such cases, much available aid may come in from outside organizations without direction from local actors, and those external aid providers may often have difficulty accessing the most vulnerable in local communities.

Our hope is that by identifying ideal types and engaging in case-based applications within these categories, scholars can move toward a robust analytical framework for assessing state capacity and third-sector relationships in migration crises by identifying challenges and solutions for improving governance and partnerships. Through the use of empirical indicators, quadrant analysis, and case-based applications, the framework can become a tool for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to craft targeted, evidence-based solutions to migration crises.

5 Conclusions

Research on the role of nonprofit organizations in the migration milieu is growing, but still importantly under under-researched. In their seminal systematic literature review focused on Europe, Garkisch, Heidingsfelder, and Beckmann (2017) note a lack of research on interactions beyond those directly between migrants and third sector organizations, including a distinct need for more research on the role of government in these relationships. We hope this special issue makes an important contribution by bringing scholars together to think about third sector organizations, migration, and public policy. We encourage further research at the intersection of nonprofit organizations, migration, public policy and governance, especially outside the most studied contexts of the global North. While we are excited to see articles in this special issue examining contexts in the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe, and South America in addition to North America and Western Europe, our field is in deep need of more research on nonprofit organizations, migration, public policy and

governance from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and additional work from Central and South America.

In conclusion, this paper examines the role of the third sector in migration crises, providing a nuanced understanding of its involvement across different levels and distinguishing between authentic and constructed crises. By introducing a framework for categorizing third sector-state relationships and presenting a typology of their interactions during migration crises, we aim to broaden the field's perspective beyond conventional global North contexts. While our discussion of concepts and frameworks around crises and nonprofit-government relationships focus on migration for purposes of this special issue, inherent within is flexibility for broader applications. Many of these ideas can be adapted to analyze other forms of crises, such as humanitarian emergencies (e.g., natural disasters), global health crises (e.g., pandemics), or economic crises (e.g., unemployment, food insecurity). We would argue that many crises share much in common, particularly human vulnerability, and we welcome future work that tests the applicability of these concepts and relationships to a variety of concepts.

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