

MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENTS - FRANCE

Repair to Empower

The French Red Cross's mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab helps displaced and highly vulnerable people repair personal belongings. Are there also psychosocial benefits?

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Humanitarian and Social Context and Challenges

First launched in the Netherlands in 2009, repair cafés are collaborative workshops run by volunteer groups, where people can bring broken or unused items back to life. What began as an ecological response to throwaway culture has since evolved into a broader movement, encompassing social and humanitarian initiatives that support vulnerable communities in repairing essential everyday items. In this spirit, the French Red Cross introduced its mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab in early 2023, in Montpellier, as part of its social action programmes. The Lab now operates in informal settlements and transit areas across Montpellier, Lyon, Toulouse and the Hauts-de-France region. It brings repair workshops into humanitarian settings, enabling displaced and highly vulnerable people to mend items they use every day. Beyond practical assistance, the Lab provides essential social and psychological support, encouraging beneficiaries to join in the repair process and move beyond a helper–recipient dynamic that can lead to dependency. By fostering technical autonomy, the scheme supports psychosocial empowerment. In light of this, the French Red Cross aims to clearly identify the social and psychological benefits of DIY and repair in order to develop new ways of assisting vulnerable populations.

Research Objectives

The mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab adapts the repair café model for the humanitarian sector, focusing on individuals facing exclusion and psychosocial distress. This research explores how collective repair activities empower marginalised groups, enhancing their agency, material and social well-being and mental health.

The research is based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork, partially filmed and presented as video excerpts documenting the scheme's implementation. It employs a transdisciplinary theoretical framework, integrating insights from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, design and the psychodynamics of work, with a particular focus on the contributions of anthropologists specialising in migratory experiences and mental health.

Research Partners

This research, conducted between 2023 and 2024, was supported by the French Red Cross through its Bénévo'Lab programme, which funds scientific research projects proposed by French Red Cross volunteers and employees.

What are the psychosocial outcomes of the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab for displaced and highly vulnerable people?

In a psychosocial framework, mental health is understood comprehensively, with social environments playing a key role. Research on the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab's repair workshops has identified the following psychosocial benefits for participants.

Working Together to Meet Essential Needs

By helping highly vulnerable individuals repair essential items, the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab addresses their basic daily needs, such as mending clothes and shoes, fixing bikes and scooters, protecting or replacing phone screens to maintain connections with loved ones, and even laminating documents to preserve official paperwork. This material support is delivered through a unique helper-recipient dynamic, where beneficiaries actively participate in the process. As a tool for technical empowerment and mutual aid, the scheme transforms participants into co-actors in the repair process.

Creating Social Ties

The Lab offers beneficiaries opportunities to interact with and confide in a responsive and attentive team. These exchanges extend beyond technical repair issues to include personal challenges, such as psychological problems, as well as requests for advice, information and guidance. While the mobile workshop is a technical space for repairs, it also provides a welcoming and often lively environment for conversation, fostering camaraderie, humour and cross-cultural exchange.

Restoring Emotional Security

The repair process stabilises the beneficiary's material environment, offering a form of reassurance. For highly vulnerable people, regaining the use of a personally significant object can be a source of relief. Some project aspects of their lived experience onto these 'biographical objects'¹ that accompany them in their daily lives; they identify with them or perceive them as familiar companions whose stories are bound up with their own. Beyond restoring a prized possession, this focus on material objects helps people who have lost everything rebuild a lasting relationship with them. Many displaced individuals have had their few belongings stolen or were forced to abandon what little they carried or acquired along their journey. For them, repair becomes a way to reconnect with material things, grounding themselves more firmly in their new lives.

Learning New Technical Skills

During deployments, the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab creates a collaborative space for technical instruction, encouraging beneficiaries to participate in repairs. This educational and pedagogical aspect is particularly impactful for unaccompanied minors (UAMs), often taking the form of technology classes that introduce them to electronics and soldering.

Stimulating Attention

Repair activities give displaced people an occupation, helping them cope with the uncertainty and stress of precarious living conditions and administrative delays. As highlighted by a clinical psychologist in the study, trauma often impairs displaced people's ability to focus and concentrate. The repair process actively engages and stimulates these cognitive abilities.

Development of *Solutionist Optimism*

The repair process, from diagnosing to fixing technical issues, fosters solution-oriented optimism, encouraging individuals to contextualise problems and focus on actionable solutions. When successful, it creates a sense of 'minor triumph' often accompanied by joy, pride and even euphoria, leading to a heightened sense of self aligned with the 'do-it-yourself' ethos.

Methods and Sources of Data

The study is based on an eight-month ethnographic investigation using three methodological approaches: 1) semi-structured interviews with volunteers and beneficiaries of the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab (including asylum seekers, UAMs and the unemployed), members of repair cafés and collaborative DIY workshops, and subject matter experts, such as psychologists working with asylum seekers; 2) Direct observation and participation in the scheme's activities; 3) an ethno-filmic approach, including observation and filmed interviews. Additionally, volunteers completed a brief online questionnaire to share their perspectives on the service's benefits.

Encouraging Creativity and Style

While repair may not be particularly innovative, it demands creativity to devise clever solutions or adapt repaired objects. In the observed groups, this creativity often extends to clothing, transforming jeans into shorts or customising accessories like hats and bags. These personal touches allow individuals to express their unique style, giving their clothes symbolic value beyond their displaced status. Styling clothes helps people express their individuality and freedom, despite the alienating legal status of being an asylum seeker or UAM.

Even when repairs are purely functional, altering a garment or having it altered, such as adjusting trousers or a dress, ensures a dignified appearance.

Feeling Useful Again

Repair is not only a playful and creative form of investigation; it is a materially and economically valuable activity. By restoring functionality to objects, repairers gain a sense of personal and communal usefulness, taking pride in meeting their own needs and those of others. Participating in mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab workshops thus strengthens self-esteem, particularly in situations where individuals are heavily dependent on others for material support.

Le faire, le soin et la connaissance

This research draws on scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, particularly at the intersection of the anthropology and philosophy of 'making' and the field of 'repair studies'. Beyond framing repair as an ecological solution to waste, this body of work presents it as a vernacular practice suited to contexts of material scarcity³. It also highlights repair as a form of attentiveness centred on care⁴ invoking a right to knowledge in response to industrial objects delivered to users as 'black boxes'.

Reviving Professional Skills

For many, one of the most meaningful aspects of the scheme is the opportunity to reactivate their professional skills, whether in mechanics, electronics, IT or sewing. Former tailors, for example, eagerly return to sewing machines, repairing their own clothes or helping others. This process helps individuals, especially those excluded from the job market, rebuild their relationship with work. Extensive social science research demonstrates that work plays a deeply structuring role in the lives of social actors² and, conversely, its absence can lead to significant distress and adverse effects on mental health.

Limitations of Study Findings

As women represented a small portion of the study sample, the psychosocial benefits they experience through repair are less well understood than those of men.

Scientific Insights Beyond the Study Scope

This research highlights an innovative model of open production workshops: the 'humanitarian repair café'. A key finding is the scheme's ability to restore a connection to work for individuals excluded from employment. A similar observation was made in a study⁵ on a therapeutic sewing workshop run by the FILAO non-profit, affiliated with the psychiatry department of Avicenne Hospital in Bobigny, which serves traumatised migrants.

1. MORIN, Violette, « L'objet biographique », in *Communications*, n° 13, 1969, pp. 131-139.
2. DEJOURS, Christophe, « Activisme professionnel : masochisme, compulsivité ou aliénation ? », in *Travailler*, n° 11, 2004, p. 25-40.
3. OROZA, Ernesto, « Subvertir la panne », in *Techniques et Culture*, n° 72, 2019, p. 108-125.
4. DENIS, Jérôme, PONTILLE, David, *Le soin des choses. Politiques de la maintenance*. Paris, La Découverte, coll. « Terrains philosophiques », 2022.
5. DELAHAYE, Maud, SAGLIO-YATZIMIRSKY, Marie-Caroline, MARICHEZ, Héloïse, LOTZ, Victoria, BAUBET, Thierry, « Repriser le "troumatisme", retisser le lien. L'atelier thérapeutique de couture FILAO », in *L'Autre*, Éditions La Pensée sauvage, vol. 23, p. 185-194.

F There is no real equivalent in France to the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab. - **Jérémie Grojnowski**



Who are the volunteers running the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab?

J. G. : The volunteer team is composed of both women and men. Some bring technical expertise to repairs, while others focus on interpersonal and facilitator roles, welcoming, guiding and informing beneficiaries. Volunteers come from varied backgrounds — some were once displaced themselves. After benefiting from the service, they now support their peers by contributing to the initiative.

You've noted the low representation of women in your study. Is this because repair work, like DIY, is often seen as a gendered activity — more masculine than feminine? If so, how could more women be involved?

In most of the locations we studied, women were underrepresented and sometimes absent, particularly in spaces with unaccompanied minors. This may stem from a lack of confidence in their repair skills compared to men, though this isn't universally true, as some women do engage fully. To address this, I believe creating women-only workshops could help remove barriers and encourage greater participation.

Could repair workshops evolve into a professional model, for example by selling restored items or offering repair services to the public?

I think the strength of the mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab and repair cafés in general lies in their non-commercial, mutual-support ethos. However, our fieldwork also shows that repair activities can help individuals reconnect with professional skills and practices. For those excluded from the labour market, this could serve as a pathway toward gradual reintegration.

Aside from the French Red Cross's initiatives, do local authorities or other public programmes run repair workshops for disadvantaged people?

The mobile Humanitarian Repair Lab is unique in France in both its approach and scope, so there is no exact equivalent. That said, repair cafés, often run by voluntary organisations, also serve people in precarious situations, alongside other user groups, sometimes in partnership with non-profits working with the most disadvantaged.

What does this mean for humanitarian and social action?

The workshops share similarities with social occupational therapy, as they support occupationally disadvantaged individuals through 'making'. Highlighting the empowering, even 'restorative' potential of repair workshops encourages the development of this activity and its expansion into other humanitarian interventions, whether mobile or fixed. Beyond their strong symbolic value, regular participation in these activities can stabilise the psychological well-being of highly vulnerable individuals. In this respect, it would be worth exploring therapeutic mediation centred on repair workshops, co-led by psychologists. This 'therapy through making' could help displaced people reconnect with society by reactivating personal and professional skills and fostering a collective desire to 'make together'.

The 'Pratiques & Humanités' series, published by the French Red Cross Foundation, synthesises research produced by Foundation-funded researchers in a 4-page format. The series aims to provide humanitarian professionals with concise, high-quality scientific information.

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