

## Press release

### Population Europe

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## 'We are not machines' – First research findings of VULNER project

**Attention to vulnerable migrants increases, still the approach is often stereotyped. Those who are difficult to identify may not be addressed adequately. How they are treated often depends on individual actors, such as case workers or judges.**

Legal scholars, anthropologists, and sociologists work together in the EU-funded VULNER project to examine how states identify the needs of vulnerable migrants who seek protection. The countries reviewed are Belgium, Germany, Italy, Norway, Canada, Lebanon and Uganda.

During the first phase of the project, scientists analysed literally thousands of legal and bureaucratic documents: international, European and national laws, regulations, administrative guidelines, white papers. In Canada alone, researchers reviewed more than 850 court cases. The goal of this endeavour was to explore how vulnerability is assessed through bureaucratic practices.

### Legal analysis and interviews

The analysis of legal documents was accompanied by interviews with decision-makers on the ground, such as public servants in charge of deciding on asylum applications, social and aid workers, judges and lawyers. Researchers conducted 216 in-depth interviews to ascertain how the legal framework is put into practice.

Dr. Luc Leboeuf, scientific coordinator of the VULNER project, is excited about the preliminary outcome: 'It's fascinating to see how a seemingly consensual policy objective set out at the UN and EU levels, such as the protection of the most vulnerable people, can be understood in very different ways and lead to very different outcomes. The impressive amount of data collected during the first research phase shows a great variety in approaches to identify vulnerable persons and address their needs across the countries under study – from standardised vulnerability assessment procedures to flexible processes, which leave a wide leeway to the public servants in charge. It allows us to better grasp the respective disadvantages of each approach. We are very much looking forward to deepening our analysis based on the ongoing study of how migrants' realities are impacted as a result of these different approaches'.

### Attention to vulnerability increases

The first findings show growing attention on the topic, as well as awareness for the special needs of vulnerable migrants. In recent years, guidelines have been developed at UN, EU and in most of the countries under study to assist decision-makers when they deal with vulnerable migrants.

At the same time, this translates into lists of groups to determine who is 'vulnerable', with a focus on minors, women or LGBTQIA+-persons. This kind of classification of 'vulnerable migrants' does not only exclude people who do not fit into these categories. It also leads to fixating on personal characteristics that are defined in an abstract way, instead of

developing a comprehensive understanding of vulnerabilities. A social worker in Norway highlights the problem of this approach: 'We are capturing the more serious things, such as disabilities and whether a person is deaf. You know in these cases that something needs to be done. Less visible needs are more difficult to discover. Vulnerabilities caused by what happened in their home country or on the journey to Norway are not easy to voice'.

Interviewees in other countries, such as Uganda and Lebanon, feel that vulnerability categories are often disconnected from realities on the ground. Lebanese interviewees criticize them as being defined from abroad and rendering refugees passive. Humanitarian actors in Lebanon approach vulnerability differently than other countries that were analysed in the project. To them, it is primarily the 'ability of access economic resources as well as protection'.

Too many guidelines kill the guidelines

Standardised tools like questionnaires can help authorities and public servants to swiftly identify vulnerable migrants. On the other hand, interviewees stressed that they need leeway to approach each person individually. A Belgian Protection Officer from the Asylum authority says: 'Too many rules kill the rule, so in the end we have to leave a little bit of freedom of appreciation, not too many guidelines, because I mean, it must remain something natural to grasp a story, it must not be mechanical. We are not machines'.

Furthermore, problems do not end when a person is identified as vulnerable. State actors need supporting measures to address these vulnerabilities, for example efficient communication channels with other state actors involved in the process.

## VULNER

The research project 'Vulnerabilities under the Global Protection Regime: How Does the Law Assess, Address, Shape and Produce the Vulnerabilities of the Protection Seekers?' is an international research initiative. Starting point is the increasing focus and use of 'vulnerability', although there is a lack of a comprehensive definition and understanding of it. The research's objective is to reach a more profound understanding of the experiences of vulnerabilities of migrants applying for asylum and other humanitarian protection statuses, and how they could best be addressed. Therefore, it makes use of a twofold analysis, which confronts the study of existing protection mechanisms towards vulnerable migrants (such as minors and victims of human trafficking), with the one of their own experiences on the ground.

It is coordinated at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (MPI). Funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 Work Programme and the Canadian Research Council SSHRC/CRSH, the VULNER project has a budget of €3.2 million for a period of 3 years. Combining analysis of the legal and policy framework on migration with empirical case studies, VULNER will examine how nine countries in Europe, North America, Africa, and the Middle East address the vulnerabilities affecting migrants.

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More information

This is a short summary of the first findings from scientists of the VULNER project which continues until May 2023. For more information, please check the research reports on our website:  
<https://www.vulner.eu/58250/Scientific-Publications>

URL for press release: <https://www.vulner.eu>