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Asylum Bureaucracies at Work: Ethnographic Insights within Three UNHCR Offices

In this presentation, I will explore the bureaucratic practices of asylum-makers with a specific focus on the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR). Drawing on fieldwork conducted within several UNHCR offices in Switzerland and Africa, I will show how the protection mandate of the organization is translated and enacted into at least three types of bureaucratic practices: the continuous production of global norms on refugee protection; the work of triage and classification aiming at sorting out "refugees" from other migrants; and the work of camp management which materializes the liminal position of refugees. I will argue that beyond their moral goal of protecting refugees, these bureaucratic practices are all about globalizing a Weberian model of migration management, based on a sedentarist and state-centred definition of refugeeeness and asylum. Yet, far from being merely hegemonic, I will demonstrate that this endeavour remains fragile, as it relies on an endless work of legitimation and objectivation of the refugee status, of technicization and commodification of what is a highly contested and politicized field, as well as on the ability to produce, enrol and sustain networks of refugee experts in countries where such expertise is sometimes inexistent.

Marion Fresia is professor at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Neuchâtel. Her research interests include transnational asylum bureaucracies, refugee camps, refugee education and humanitarianism. She has recently published with Philippe Lavigne-Delville Au cœur des mondes de l’aide internationale : regards et postures ethnographiques, Karthala/APAD 2018.