IS HUMANITARIANISM BEING DEHUMANISED?

Summary report of the first Stand UP- Live debate on humanitarian issues that took place on 22 May 2014 in Paris at the IRIS conference center with Stéphanie Rivoal, Chair of Action Against Hunger France (ACF France), Pierre Micheletti, teacher at the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) in Grenoble and former Chair of Médecins du Monde, Xavier Emmanuelli, former French Secretary of State for Humanitarian Affairs and Michael Neuman, Director of Research at CRASH, Christian Troubé, director of Rue Principale agency and Didier Billion, Deputy Director of IRIS.

JULY 2014
IS HUMANITARIANISM BEING DEHUMANISED?

Summary report of the first Stand UP- Live debate on humanitarian issues that took place on 22 May 2014 in Paris at the IRIS conference center with Stéphanie Rivoal, Chair of Action Against Hunger France (ACF France), Pierre Micheletti, teacher at the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) in Grenoble and former Chair of Médecins du Monde, Xavier Emmanuelli, former French Secretary of State for Humanitarian Affairs and Michael Neuman, Director of Research at CRASH, Christian Troubé, director of Rue Principale agency and Didier Billion, Deputy Director of IRIS.

The first Stand UP- Live debate on humanitarian issues took place on 22 May 2014 in Paris at the IRIS conference center. Stéphanie Rivoal, Chair of Action Against Hunger France (ACF France), presented her thoughts on the subject: Is humanitarianism being dehumanised? Pierre Micheletti, teacher at the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) in Grenoble and former Chair of Médecins du Monde, Xavier Emmanuelli, former French Secretary of State for Humanitarian Affairs and Michael Neuman, Director of Research at CRASH, then shared their views on Stéphanie Rivoal’s presentation, followed by a public debate. Didier Billion, Deputy Director of IRIS closed the Stand UP which was hosted by Christian Troubé, Director of Rue Principale agency.

Below is a summary of the various ideas and issues addressed.

PRESENTATION BY STÉPHANIE RIVOAL

The dunantist principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence of NGOs are often at the heart of debates and questions concerning humanitarianism. Surprisingly however, the fourth yet fundamental humanitarian principle of humanity is often overlooked, as if it were so obvious that it would almost be superfluous to mention it. And yet we may ask ourselves whether humanitarian organisation have lost their humanity, whether they have become zombies, or beings without a soul or conscience which, in Voodoo culture, are being manipulated by a sorcerer. But who are these sorcerer puppeteers?

- The institutional donors whose funding serves their increasingly less hidden agendas, e.g. Justine Greening (DFID) announcing that DFID policy must serve the economic interests of the United Kingdom.

- The governments who use humanitarian action to justify their military interventions.
The corporate foundations that finance to the amount of USD 3bn of humanitarian projects worldwide but with what hidden agendas? To improve their image? To unite their teams around a social project? To access new markets?

The private foundations where the vision of an individual can greatly influence humanitarian policy.

Or even the donors, sorcerers’ apprentices of sorts. On what criteria do they select the NGOs they decide to finance?

Besides these stakeholders who, through the financial pressure they impose, push NGOs further away from the human being, other factors influence the dehumanisation of humanitarianism.

**Professionalisation:**

The humanitarian actor has become a technocrat, trained to meet the requirements of efficiency and accountability and recruited for their technical competencies. But what has become of activism? The humanitarian vocation is fast becoming a business. Humanitarians should be committed individuals before being experts. The humanitarian worker must be extracted from the writing of reports and proposals which monopolises their time and distances them from the beneficiary.

**Risk aversion:**

Nowadays we manage risk. We attempt to reduce it by being accepted by the communities of course, but also by “entrenching” expatriates in compounds surrounded by barbed wire, displacing the risk through remote working, subcontracting the provision of risk training and, what is more ethically questionable, transferring the risk to local workers (who account for 90% of serious incidents concerning humanitarian staff), or to machines, through the use of drones, which in the future will intervene instead of humanitarian workers, not to mention to NGOs’ local partners for whom there is often no risk assessment. The humanitarian failure in Syria is a textbook case which humanitarians must address. Why are there not more expatriate humanitarians currently on the ground in Syria? What has become of the ‘sacred fire’ of the French Doctors? How can the Syrians have been abandoned to their fate without anything being done? What are we afraid of? Of the legal risk? Of our insurance policies not being renewed? Of our funding being frozen? Of being accused of aiding terrorists in the case of Syria? Is it the dehumanisation of humanitarianism which has got us into this impasse?

To conclude, we cannot talk about humanitarianism without talking about beneficiaries, who must be placed not only at the heart of our actions but also, and above all, at the heart of defining our programmes and strategy. It is therefore essential that our organisations do not forget that in
‘humanitarian’ we find the word ‘humanity’, and that this principle of humanity must remain the
guiding principle for our actions.

SUMMARY OF THE SUBJECTS AND ISSUES RAISED BY THE PUBLIC.

Has humanitarianism become dehumanised?
This question gave rise to numerous comments and diverging points of view.

Has humanitarianism become dehumanised or deuniversalised? This was the question posed by Pierre Micheletti. Current humanitarianism is the fruit of the equilibriums of the 20th century, dominated by the West. These equilibriums are being called into question however, and it is therefore time to take a fresh look at our organisations in order to integrate know-how and operational processes from cultures that are not our own. The geopolitical dimension is key, according to Didier Billion. Geopolitical and humanitarian thinking have deep connections because they stem from the same principle of deconstructing dominant thought in order to be able to reconstruct international or humanitarian relations in other ways. In the same way that western powers are no longer in a position to dictate their demands, humanitarians can no longer impose their models because communities are now politically active and seeking to take their future in hand.

However, as highlighted by Michael Neuman, when you look at the number of interventions, the number of NGOs, the number of countries where interventions are taking place, the number of people who are receiving humanitarian aid, the figures are constantly rising. The idea that the Golden Age of humanitarianism is not behind us was an idea also shared by Xavier Emmanuelli, for whom humanitarianism has not been dehumanised, because this is primarily a story of men and women who stand up for individuals. Nevertheless we must be able to combine the two humanitarian imperatives: the function and the mission, so that humanitarian action retains its true meaning.

Are humanitarians being exploited?
There was support for the idea put forward by Xavier Emmanuelli that we are all manipulated, whether consciously or unconsciously. There is always a sleeping partner, and humanitarianism is no exception. The key is to be aware of it and to define its limits. For Didier Billion, it is not a case of naive humanitarians on one side and Realpolitik cynics on the other. They should not be pitted against one another because they complement each other; they are elements in a long and complex process that cannot be reduced to a single dimension. Michael Neuman also declared his opposition to pitting the purity of humanitarianism against the cynicism of politics in humanitarian negotiations. Humanitarian intervention is only possible when there are converging interests; this is a reality that
humanitarians must accept and which they must address. They are free to choose the institutions from which they are prepared to receive funding. On the other hand, Michael Neuman takes issue with the sense of exclusivity that humanitarians have with regard to their work. In the name of what are states, private companies and the army entitled to carry out humanitarian work? Each actor must defend their own notion of aid policy without claiming that it is universal. Stéphanie Rivoal however disagreed with this acceptance of manipulation because to accept being manipulated is to call into question the value at the very origin of our actions and that which distinguishes them: their selflessness. We must therefore actively combat manipulation insofar as is possible by uniting, by forming consortia, etc.

Do humanitarians refuse to take risks?

On this point Michael Neuman underlined that it is difficult to say with any certainty whether the danger has increased. MSF for example experienced as much kidnapping in the 1980s as it did in the 2000s, with the exception of the last few years, in which MSF has recorded an increase in kidnappings due to the appearance of transnational terrorist movements that communicate with each another. Humanitarians must learn to deal with that. Pierre Micheletti expressed his opposition to this idea that the danger has not increased. According to him, it represents a refusal to tarnish the humanitarian myth. Even if you can question the relevance of the statistical models, you cannot deny that there is a subjective danger today that NGOs assess prior to sending their staff out into the field. So, whether subjective or objective, the danger is increasing. Philippe Ryfman also added that it is less about risk aversion than risk management. The risk today is much higher, and humanitarians are no longer welcomed regardless of their nationality. We cannot point the finger at humanitarians in Syria for example because the risk is too great there, with a significant portion of the territory not under the control of the rebel militia. Stéphanie Rivoal believes that it is nevertheless important to place activism back at the heart of our organisations. It is not the staff who is not committed; it is our organisations which are no longer stimulating this commitment.

Has humanitarianism become bureaucratic?

The weight of bureaucracy is an indisputable fact and, as Pierre Micheletti highlights, leads to paradoxical situations, with NGO employees whose role is to meet the reporting requirements of donors and external auditors, who scrutinise our organisations' accounts throughout the year. MSF spends 50% of donations on overheads including coordination and 50% on its projects. This creation of standards poses problems and, as Philippe Ryfman underlined, it is important to find the balance. The challenge for our organisations will be, as Pierre Micheletti points out, succeeding in being funded by ECHO whilst not looking like ECHO in our decision-making processes and cumbersome technocratic processes.

Humanitarianism must therefore evolve
The moment has arrived for our organisations to evolve on various fronts. For Anne Héry, this could occur, for example, through greater coherence between the discussions humanitarians have amongst themselves, whereby they freely tackle the issues or difficulties they are facing on a daily basis, and the discussions they have with donors, where these issues are no longer tackled and where everything suddenly becomes perfect. We must bridge this gap and cultivate straight-talking. Stéphanie Rivoal agreed wholeheartedly by affirming that we must put a stop to the superhero mentality among donors and educate them about the reality of humanitarian action with its successes but also its failures.

For Patrick David, it is imperative that we challenge the humanitarian model because the financial flows it generates creates an artificial economy which deconstructs the cultural and economic model of the country of intervention. Finally, Françoise Sivignon also proposes reconsidering our organisations’ development projects and asks ourselves what we bring as a collective. This is an approach in force at Médecins du Monde which, through a highly participative approach, is re-examining its development projects in order to collectively define its position in terms of governance, partnerships, the role of expatriate employees etc., in a world that is constantly evolving and becoming increasingly complex.

The first Stand UP-Live debate on humanitarian issues gave rise to a rich and lively debate. The question of the dehumanisation of humanitarianism has certainly not been resolved, but the discussion nonetheless enabled a number of issues and challenges to be identified which humanitarian actors must address for aid to be more effective, fair and sustainable in the future. We would like to thank all participants for attending and enriching the debate and look forward to seeing you at the next Stand UP-Live debate on humanitarian issues.
IS HUMANITARIANISM BEING DEHUMANISED?

Summary report of the first Stand UP- Live debate on humanitarian issues that took place on 22 May 2014 in Paris at the IRIS conference center with Stéphanie Rivoal, Chair of Action Against Hunger France (ACF France), Pierre Micheletti, teacher at the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) in Grenoble and former Chair of Médecins du Monde, Xavier Emmanuelli, former French Secretary of State for Humanitarian Affairs and Michael Neuman, Director of Research at CRASH, Christian Troubé, director of Rue Principale agency and Didier Billion, Deputy Director of IRIS.

HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK
Directed by Michel Maietta, Associated Research Fellow at IRIS, Head of the Humanitarian Affairs Unit at Save the Children
maietta@iris-france.org

© IRIS
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED