



# HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK

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## IS CORPORATISM DISAPPEARING?

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*The author is solely responsible for the views presented here, which do not necessarily reflect the positions of the organisation for which he works.*



# IS CORPORATISM DISAPPEARING?

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## PREFACE

This modest contribution centres on the French perception of the English expression “being corporate” and is not based on the definition of corporatism in its strictest sense which refers rather to a group of trades. The understanding of the word in the humanitarian arena is, rightly or wrongly, more along the lines of full and complete adherence to the party line of the organisation for which its members and employees act daily. The party line described in their charters, declarations of intent, letters of commitment, in short any document or supporting material, allows each organisation to define themselves, and in particular to differentiate themselves from each other. To be a standard-bearer, a convinced and convincing ambassador of the cause of “their” association, this is my focus.

## INTRODUCTION: HUMANITARIAN WORK TODAY

Over the past 15 years, non-profit organisations, more commonly referred to as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), have been subject to profound and often paradoxical organisational changes.

The scale and recurrence of civil emergencies and natural disasters, virtually instantaneous media coverage and increasingly complex organisation of the response have forced NGOs to navigate multiple and complicated functional areas. NGOs have had to grow, diversify their expertise and have therefore been subject to framework and very important internal practice requirements.

At the same time, institutional donors have repeatedly specified then tightened the rules on how the funding that they grant works, thus exerting a growing pressure on NGOs in terms of contract management. The large majority of organisations that depend heavily on this funding have therefore had to structure their operations support services in view of these priorities and requirements.

These two types of pressure, operational and contractual, have forced NGOs to recruit for diversified roles, at first from traditional sectors, accounting and financial management for example, then from new “professional” sectors, created ad-hoc.

And so engagement and/or activism are no longer criteria that are necessarily considered when NGOs recruit today, leading to the gradual disappearance of corporatism. Conversely, applications for roles within the new professional sectors are made as if they were interchangeable. Indeed, international

aid is becoming increasingly professionalised and standardised, we are moving from “political” and very medical humanitarian work to more “technical” and salaried humanitarian work with organisations that are less about campaigning but more about managing. These organisations are becoming more uniform through systematising and standardising their practices, values, charter, and therefore their recruitment, among other things. Moreover, areas of intervention are often shared which means that NGOs end up in competition over the same recruiting ground.

At the same time, an eagerness for humanitarian jobs can be seen among students who are turning en masse towards the field of international aid, from here on seen as a fully-fledged professional vocation. There has therefore been an emergence of numerous university courses dedicated to humanitarian work; however they do not necessarily meet the expectations of the international development actors themselves, as we will see in this document.

Competition is becoming tough, places are expensive and not guaranteed, and being motivated and engaged alone does not suffice. Some would say that humanitarian work has been the victim of its own success.

Jean S. Renouf, taking up the observation made by Roni Brauman that "*many humanitarian actors and observers today*" identify with the "*description of the humanitarian work of yesterday*", says he finds it striking<sup>1</sup> "*to hear the number of humanitarian workers today harking back, often nostalgically, to the “glory days” of the humanitarian work of yesterday. This nostalgia does not necessarily constitute a return to the old days but rather characterises today’s frustrations: distance from populations; endless report writing for donors – and NGO head offices – which are situated far away from the realities of the field; becoming increasingly professionalised is welcome yet it is happening at the cost of the humanitarian “soul”; difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff; political/military/commercial manipulation of humanitarian action etc. All this contributes to a certain amount of humanitarian navel-gazing.*"

For all that, does becoming increasingly professionalised and increasing bureaucracy in humanitarian work signify the end of activism and engagement? Becoming increasingly professionalised is a logic imposed by donors but can NGOs only work on a managerial model? What are the recommendations then?

## **1. LOSS OF CORPORATISM: BECOMING INCREASINGLY PROFESSIONALISED, SALARIED ROLES AND INCREASING BUREAUCRACY**

### **1.1. Standardising practices to become increasingly professionalised**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.grotius.fr/debat-la-fin-de-l%E2%80%99humanitaire-sans-frontieres-2/>

For the sake of quality, NGOs have come together to develop manuals, standards, common norms and guidelines for actions on the ground and working in head offices. Work tools and administrative procedures have been standardised and operational procedures have converged, from NGO to NGO, through the emergence of thematic rosters, to genuinely coordinate operations. With virtually homogenous charters, NGOs are also moving towards making their areas of intervention and target populations the same. Indeed, these NGOs differ a little less every time, leading to confusion and the risk of duplication and lack of coordination between actors.

On the ground, the reality is less characterised by the altruistic actions and deep engagement of individuals. There, it is more a case of huge logistic and organisational expansion. NGO missions show much more a world of management, HR and financial control.

Furthermore, work and jobs to be completed are strictly divided thus restricting recruitment to very specific roles which are mainly management positions.

### **1.2. Loss of loyalty for actors - increasing turn-over**

The strict division of jobs within organisations is coupled with a significant “turn-over” of human resources so diminishing loyalty and attachment to the organisation’s values among these people. Many problems are caused by turn-over. It leads to direct costs (ending contracts, recruitment, induction, training, integration, leaving etc.) and indirect costs (decreasing engagement and motivation, inefficiency, errors, delays, loss of institutional memory). Turn-over has serious consequences for individuals (extra work, poor morale and work satisfaction, stress-related illnesses), organisations (loss of institutional, programme and operational knowledge, no succession of leadership), programmes (lack of continuity, poor quality), and finally for the sector (loss of talent, inadequate response capacity, little capacity for agencies to work together).

Therefore, many negative effects can be seen, including lack of interest in one’s role on the ground due to little contact with the programme’s beneficiaries, a lack of questioning of programmes in the name of head office political logic, a shortfall in volunteers or the absence of a campaigning framework given by the organisation.

The main reasons for an employee leaving an NGO are: better pay and conditions elsewhere (50%), weak values of leadership and culture (40%), absence of career and development opportunities (38%), burnout, disillusionment and irritation (29%).<sup>2</sup>

Turn-over as a result of dwindling staff loyalty is also affected by the duration of signed contracts. There is a general tendency for core humanitarian worker contracts within an organisation, to be

<sup>2</sup> Cécile de Calan, *Recruter et fidéliser le personnel humanitaire. Bilan and enseignements des pratiques actuelles.* [Recruitment and retention of humanitarian staff.], People in Aid, 2008. <http://www.peopleinaid.org/pool/files/pubs/Recruter%20et%20fidéliser.pdf>

moving from around five years to one and a half year. Permanent contracts are becoming increasingly rare in the face of an explosion in fixed-term contracts and/or resorting to temporary staff without offering them employment opportunities at the end of their contract.

## 2. HUMANITARIAN WORK: A PROFESSION LIKE ANY OTHER

### 2.1. Increased pressure from donors and local partners

NGOs have become veritable enterprises, to use Max Weber<sup>3</sup>'s terminology, they are solid and reliable bureaucratic structures. This cognitive framework has been imposed in recent years by donors and local partners that demand an increasingly managerial approach. *"To be clear: beneficiary countries do not have to accept nostalgic explorers or dropouts without qualifications."*<sup>4</sup>

Donors who are in favour of an expert approach to humanitarian work are in the ascendancy and they are exerting a growing pressure. Donor thinking expects a more legalistic framework often synonymous with increasingly cumbersome and time-consuming administrative procedures and financial burden. In addition, constant reporting is diminishing programming freedom. Indeed, donors influence programming by directing the areas of intervention, the choice of target populations and that of the areas in which NGOs work.

Apart from Médecins Sans Frontières<sup>5</sup> and the ICRC, NGOs are adjusting and adapting very well to this system (salaried roles, programme quality, expatriate expertise) bringing to the fore the tension between activism and being increasingly professionalised.

However, roles required for working on the ground should bring together professional expertise (procedural constraints) and interpersonal skills. NGOs' dialectic is based less and less on associative dynamic. Nevertheless, these two aspects must be linked together for the action to be effective. Today, a good humanitarian worker is an individual who is capable of demonstrating interpersonal skills and putting procedures into action. Managerial thinking adds value as it is the managers themselves who interpret this with a combination of know-how, recognised qualifications and emotional control. It is dangerous to minimise the pertinence of the split between professional and private space. The social power of actors is not limited to the skills set out in job descriptions.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber is considered to be the founder of interpretive sociology. Interpretive sociology is a theoretical perspective that social action is subjectively based on the behaviour of actors.

<sup>4</sup> Pascal Dauvin, *Etre un professionnel de l'humanitaire ou comment composé avec le cadre imposé* [Being a humanitarian professional or how to come to terms with the imposed framework], Tiers Monde, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> I do not believe that MSF (in particular its French section) nor the ICRC are subject to the same external pressures that other NGOs face. Their innovative economic model essentially based on public fundraising and state contributions and their identity affirmed by this spare them from both the pressures suggested.

## 2.2. The emergence of courses specific to the humanitarian profession

In response to the increased needs of NGOs and the demands of young students, many “professional” humanitarian courses have been developed (universities, institutions, schools) and many publications dealing with the humanitarian profession have been issued. Today, no fewer than 35 courses specialising in humanitarian work have been counted in France. But where do these new graduates go? Are the promises made to these young people that they live as humanitarians realistic?

To start with, the new courses are not effective in terms of employability as the new courses specialising in humanitarian work are not commensurate with the expectations of the NGOs themselves and are far from being unanimously supported. There are issues with coordination, even compatibility, between NGOs’ actual needs and what the academic courses are proposing.

In addition, NGO recruitment is very limited and selective. The era when NGOs were recruiting because they were becoming increasingly professionalised and there was an increased number of salaried roles in the humanitarian sector because of doubts about their skills, is over. Very few roles are unfilled as there is a reduced number of salaried roles for an unprecedented number of applicants and the open positions require specific and precise attributes that are not greatly compatible with these new degrees, thus creating a “surplus of the poorly qualified”<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, accessible roles are most often found in charitable organisations within our own cities than on the ground around the globe.

NGOs are basing their recruitment on specific roles, specific know-how and recognised qualifications as situations today are even more complex. They are looking for diverse even atypical roles, with individuals coming from business, human resource specialists, managers who are logistics, computing, communications and legal specialists with some experience and professional maturity (2-3 years minimum). *“There is a hiatus: These degrees that are too general are proving to be far-off from the needs of the sector.”* (Christophe Moreau, French Red Cross) Indeed, the sector needs experienced professionals with specialist skills in the areas of agronomics, biomedical work, logistics, property, medical specialities, finance and administration.

Ultimately, competition is tough in the humanitarian jobs market. Moreover, individuals very often have a poor idea of what really constitutes humanitarian work on the ground. It is therefore essential to ensure training is of a high standard. It is the responsibility of NGOs, among others, to develop training that is adapted to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice and the lack of compatibility between course content and NGO expectations.

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<sup>6</sup> Marine Gaignard, *Travailler dans le secteur de l’humanitaire : quel cursus pour réussir ?* [Working in the humanitarian sector: which course for success?], Grotius, July 2012

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS: RESTORING LOST VALUES

And so, in recent times, one might say that Humanitarianism has lost the strength of its values and corporatism. NGOs must try to restore their specific values to create their own identity. What are the recommendations for avoiding the pitfalls in the humanitarian sector today?

- Increase private fundraising to be able to reduce institutional funding and gain independence and decision-making ability.
- Improve career management and place strategic importance on human resource management in NGOs (career plan, better work/life balance).
- Measure engagement, gauge social motives, understand individual steps and pass them through the filter of the organisation's policy documents from the very first interview.
- NGOs should ensure that ad-hoc training is monitored to evaluate and provide direction for developing the content of the training.
- Retain humanitarian staff: salaried staff, volunteers etc. Employers should promote a sense of community and involvement within the organisation which goes beyond the attraction of the humanitarian field (it is essential to strengthen the organisation's analysis of turn-over).
- Humanitarian actors should try to substitute competition for the same resources with collaboration by opening avenues for working together.
- Build up the organisation's values, set out a singular mandate and a differentiated intervention strategy.

Differentiate NGO operations but above all ensure that defining and implementing NGO charters (and therefore identities) once again become central to our organisations. ■

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