



HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK



PARTICIPATORY HUMANITARIAN ACTION... ILLUSION OR PROMISE LAND?

Stand Up Report - Live Debate on Humanitarian Issues

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Save the Children



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*Minutes of IRIS' 6th Humanitarian Stand UP held on Thursday, October 27th 2015, with **Nathanaël Molle**, cofounder of the SINGA association, and with the participation of **Michel Maietta**, Director of the Strategic Analysis department of Action Against Hunger, **Antoine Peigney**, Director of Operations and International Relations of the French Red Cros, **Sylvie Mattely**, Head of Research at IRIS and lecturer and researcher at Léonard de Vinci management school, as well the audience here. The debate is moderated by **Stéphanie Stern**, researcher specialized on humanitarian topics at IRIS.*

INTRODUCTION BY STEPHANIE STERN

The SINGA association, created by Nathanaël Molle and Guillaume Capelle in 2012, aims at accompanying the socio-economic integration of refugees in host communities, to change how these refugee populations are viewed in order for them to be considered as qualified actors to play a role in the development of a society.

Today, we notice that the most innovative initiatives regarding the refugee populations come, for the most part, from civil mobilization such as Magda hotel in Vienna, Refugees-welcome.net in Germany and Austria, My Refuge in England, or CALM – “Comme A La Maison” (“Just Like Home”) – in France, to mention only a few. As an example, CALM's objective, which is a project put together by SINGA, is to connect citizens with refugees to offer them lodging and consequential services to facilitate their integration into French society.

All of these initiatives, carried by citizens, are creating a new way of thinking on the place and role of citizens in traditional humanitarian responses and generates a debate within the humanitarian community:

Is this “participatory humanitarian action” a new basis for inspiration or does it risk weakening the current humanitarian system? Will it allow to instill a new source of energy and does it represent a window of opportunity for NGOs, which, due to constant professionalization, has lost along the way some of its identity, freshness and dynamism?

STAND UP NATHANAËL MOLLE

Weakness of welcoming and integration solutions for refugee populations

Today's assessment is that refugees do not experience adequate conditions for integration in host countries and are constantly faced with the same difficulties, such as the complexities of cultural codes or the population's defiance, which are encountered regardless of the country hosting them. There are none or very few specific tools available to their integration in these communities.

The excessive professionalization, in France, for welcoming refugees mainly focuses on the urgency stage and asylum seekers, and host countries' governments or humanitarian actors settle most of the time for superficial administrative support, without putting in place at the same time individual support mechanisms in favor of integration or employment for refugee populations. (It is to be noted that the French asylum budget was estimated at 524 million euros in 2014 of which only 14 were allocated to long-term integration questions.)

The current social support offer is therefore very limited and does not allow refugees to have real access to innovative solutions and new competencies.

Citizens' involvement:

These different observations are at the core of SINGA: raise awareness among French citizens by letting them mobilize and invest themselves, both individually and collectively, through new citizen-led initiatives, on topics regarding the welcoming of refugee populations (often little known and misunderstood) in order to compensate for the lack of proper aid.

Examples of initiatives:

- The "CALM" program offers people with a spare room the possibility of welcoming a refugee in order to facilitate his or hers integration, by helping them learn French culture and language (which are the first means of integration) and by also allowing them to develop a social and professional network thanks to these newly formed unique relationships.
- SINGA's purpose is also to create a community, a place where refugees will have access to help to build their professional project and, in some cases, their own business. Its main focus is to connect people with a professional, entrepreneurial, artistic or cultural project with people in France who have common interests and who will be able to support them in the

fulfillment of their project by sharing their competencies. (As an example: support or training for business plans, human resources, communication or marketing).

The objective of this approach is to provide, through citizen mobilization, an individualized support system but also to contribute to creating a new personal network allowing for both professional and social integration through the practice of common cultural or sporting activities.

Re-humanizing hosting:

The circulation young Ilan's photo in the media has helped to re-humanize the topic of hosting in France. Furthermore, the scale of the refugee crisis in Europe has also renewed citizen mobilization and the welcoming culture that had fainted these past years.

We are becoming aware that citizens can also be a part of the solidarity effort. We can measure this current change through civil societies' involvement, which want to act and participate more in the communities' efforts. As an example, SINGA has received more than 15 000 lodging propositions in a month.

The current issue is to manage to rely on this citizen mobilization, to channel it and to meet the expectations of this involvement demand, which is voiced more and more, in order to reinvent efficient citizen humanitarian actions.

(As an example, at *France Terre d'Asile*, working with volunteers wasn't considered as an opportunity even though only 10 experienced staff were available to accommodate 8 000 people a year, but now this idea is being reconsidered and is gradually evolving.)

Thanks to the increase in French citizen's mobilization, these initiatives make it possible to fight against indifference and better alert host country citizens to the situation face by vulnerable refugees, therefore making them more aware to laws or news regarding refugees in the future.

New innovative tools:

This new momentum in citizen solidarity has allowed to put forward a new strategy, and to develop new measures and tools contributing on a wider range and more efficiently to the development of integration process.

- A tool that allows, thanks to Internet, to publish job offers, training or artistic activities, but also to publish the needs of refugees.

- The creation of training workshops for those involved in helping refugees (development of competencies and methodology)
- SINGA's concept of citizen mobilization is also found in several other countries (Germany, Australia, Morocco and in Quebec) and should continue its international development in the future.

Thus, innovation is stimulated by the diversity of profiles from professionals in various sectors as well as competency pooling. This allows introducing a new way of thinking in the humanitarian sector as well as creating new involvement.

Following Nathanaël Molle's presentation, Michel Maietta, director of the Strategic Analysis department at Action Against Hunger and Antoine Peigney, director of operations and international relations at the French Red Cross, have given their insights on her presentation. The following is a summary of ideas brought forward by participants.

PRESENTATION OF MICHEL MAIETTA

Participatory humanitarian action: an innovative and inspiring model

Through SINGA's initiatives, we understand today that top historical NGOs lack creative ideas or strong leadership capable of bringing about this type of innovation in our structures and in our response to humanitarian crises.

Perhaps it is time to shake up the current humanitarian sector, which has become too stiff and has issues with questioning itself.

Humanitarian organization's current operational procedures lack innovation. They are efficient and well settled in but they have also lost a bit of humanity. The humanitarian sector has to re-humanize itself and welcome innovation as a fundamental driving force. SINGA brings this new perspective by offering a different outlook on civil societies.

To rely on the help of civil societies when the context allows it is a brilliant idea. Let's take the example of the Syrian crisis where humanitarian NGOs cannot reach affected population. Neighboring countries are for the most part relatively stable with structured civil societies, in which the historic culture of solidarity is immense. Couldn't we use this lever? Could CALM's experience

inspire a portion of our programmatic response in the caring for refugees, for example in Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey? Why did we not think of it?

We live in a complex world where the dichotomy between urgency and development doesn't exist anymore as they both have the same purpose. These new solutions, this differentiated approach, these citizen-led initiatives, fit into an innovative humanitarian approach, based on particularly interesting models.

PRESENTATION OF ANTOINE PEIGNEY

A utopian participatory humanitarian action

It is difficult to consider that this participatory and digitalized humanitarian action can replace humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross Movement in the future, as they exist today and rely on the four pillars of humanitarian action.

Mainly because these citizen initiatives let us perceive some limitations:

- First of all, in the name of the principle of humanity:

It is fundamental that the human link remains between those helping and those soliciting this humanitarian aid, however there is a sizeable risk of dehumanizing humanitarian action if it is organized via the Internet in the future.

- Limits of humanitarian action:

These different participatory or digital initiatives cover only a small fraction of humanitarian action as we practice it today and as we have built for the past 40 or 50 years. These initiatives limit themselves to two types of humanitarian crises: political crises leading to population displacement and natural disasters. But they don't allow covering health crises, which could be the most important ones in the near future, as we have seen it with Ebola or the recurring cholera or HIV crises. These are heavy, complex crises for which we need structured humanitarian actors, acting on the field, on healthcare and with communities.

- Technical limit:

Humanitarian action cannot limit itself to offer housing or work. It is set in a much larger frame, spreading to healthcare, access to water, food security and requiring a specific technical expertise. This expertise cannot be used without structured organizations, which stay on the field and capitalize on this expertise.

- Capacity limit:

Humanitarian aid cannot limit itself to a person-to-person aid as some citizen initiatives offer. It is a form of utopia that cannot offer a sufficient humanitarian response given the scale and length of some crises.

Thus the participatory humanitarian action cannot be viewed as a promise land but rather as an interesting tool from which we would benefit using more to supplement our own toolbox.

DEBATE WITH THE AUDIENCE

- **What is slowing down innovation of humanitarian NGOs?**

The urgency aspect of humanitarian responses implies efficiency and rapid response in most cases, which leaves little room for thought and thus innovation. (Nathanaël Molle)

NGOs inherent mission of assistance forces them to be sure of their action, of their methodology and of their legitimacy. But being convinced of holding the truth is detrimental to innovation.

(Olivier Le Bel – MdM)

Civil societies are the ones producing innovation today. Citizen initiatives are confined to the cracks left by traditional humanitarian structures and, frequently, answer needs not yet identified by NGOs.

NGOs don't have a culture of innovation even if they can produce it without even knowing it (mainly in development activities). They should rely on this participatory humanitarian action, which represents an obvious driving force for them. (Philippe Ryfman)

The other difficulty NGOs are faced with regarding innovation is financing.

Traditional financing is not one to stimulate innovation.

As an example, SINGA has made the choice of using a different economic model, pragmatic, based on that of a social business, which sells services to other businesses (such as organizing events involving refugees), thus financing activities and programs freely.

There are grounds for thought in the years to come regarding the financing of the humanitarian sector. Today's associations are very far from the business world however businesses constitute a considerable vector of innovation and should play a major role in the years to come.

- **Testimony:** (Stéphanie Rivoal, president of ACF, currently welcomes a refugee via CALM)

The reality of receiving refugees in private homes is very different from the situation described previously. Host families are faced with different and significant cultural or administrative shocks, requiring lots of time and energy on the behalf of private individuals, which are neither prepared nor supported in the process.

- **Participatory humanitarian action's mission isn't to replace traditional and historical NGOs work, which carry out extremely important and specific work, but to offer supplementary solutions.**

The objective is to involve citizens on societal questions who can later on offer solutions, which NGOs cannot provide because the mechanisms put in place for the community cannot take into account individual opportunity. The greater the cooperation between NGOs and citizen initiatives is, the better the coverage of affected population's needs.

CONCLUSION – SYLVIE MATELLY

If participatory initiatives aren't new, the perception we have of them has however evolved and is a token of a new state of mind in a world that has never been so individualistic. Therefore very different actors, and ever more numerous, are on the lookout for meaning, for something more participatory and singular, in response to the current context and climate. Even if it is not yet a massive movement but rather a progressive one, individuals feel the need to think and act differently.

However, the novelty resides in the confusion and blurring of lines that are ever more vague between some actors (as an example, NGOs sometimes act like businesses and conversely businesses diversify their patronage or solidarity activities). We are thus witnessing a transformation of society as a whole, which translates to a re-assessment of western NGOs on many different levels and fronts.

Should NGOs evolve towards a participatory humanitarian action? If the notion of citizen involvement evokes certain limitations, such as the period of involvement or the question of technical nature and expertise necessary to any humanitarian action, we should however accept the idea that there is a new demand from civil society that should be integrated into humanitarian actions. NGOs thoughts now have to be set on the evolution of this audience, which has dramatically changed and doesn't necessarily want to give money but instead give more of its time and energy,

and its wish to do something for the community. Thus shouldn't NGOs rethink their approach and better include a participatory dimension, which could also compensate for the lack of innovation of which they seem to suffer from, and help them identify new needs? ■

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