



HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK

CITIZEN MOBILIZATION FOR HUMANITARIAN CAUSES: RETHINK THE VOLUNTEER'S POSITION IN NGOS' FRAMEWORK

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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.



What space is given to voluntary activism within the humanitarian framework today?¹ This topic has already been addressed in several papers published in the Humanitarian Affairs Think Tank². It goes to show that this subject occupies a prominent place when thinking about tomorrow's humanitarian purpose. The concept of volunteer citizen has evolved a lot over time, so much that we've seen the development of new engagement rationales. Alongside local solidarities, a voluntary engagement with international NGOs was reinforced and institutionalized. Even if the without borders NGOs generation was comprised of field volunteers, they became more professional over time and adopted a new humanitarian approach. The question of the distinction between professional and volunteer arises today more in terms of complementarity rather than in terms of an opposition rationale. Therefore, the potency of citizen mobilization for humanitarian causes challenges to rethink the volunteer's place in the humanitarian framework. This article will examine integration systems for volunteers in a "French style" NGO template, if we can still consider them as such.

THE VOLUNTEER CITIZEN, AN EVOLVING CONCEPT

A historically associative France, a future challenge for NGOs

In a BVA-DREES survey from 2010 on associative life in France³, more than 16 million of volunteers can be counted; a figure that has risen 32% compared to 2002. Amongst them, 10% give their time for social and charitable action while 16% partake in action for the defense of human rights, interests and promotion of causes. The rise in associative engagement in France is rooted in history. Indeed, the oldest French association still carries out its activities. The May Social Home – Mercy Association has been assisting the less fortunate for over 440 years. Thanks to the volunteers' involvement, the Foyer du May continues its activities without respite since 1570 and thus through the centuries.

¹ The author would like to express his gratitude to Freddy Alagbé, Eric Berseth and Vincent Mudry for their feedback and recommendations, and to warmly thank Victoire PENIN for her proofreading and advice.

² "The disappearance of corporatism?" by Antoine Petibon, Stéphanie RIVOAL's Stand'Up debate "Has humanitarian aid become zombie-like?", "For a democratic renewal of humanitarian organizations" by Bertrand BREQUEVILLE or "Are humanitarian associations institutions?" by Jacques Serba

³ VOLUNTEER WORK, Survey on associative life in France in 2010: preliminary results. BVA-DREES Surveys, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Humanitarian action is a phenomenon that hasn't stopped growing since the 1980s. From Christian charity and Islam's "zakat", to the 13th century philosophers, the humanitarian movement has tremendously developed these last forty years. Volunteering has always been inherent to the international and humanitarian solidarity movement.

France experiences today an incredible associative vitality, with more than a million active associations, of which 4 out of 5 operate thanks solely to the volunteers' dedication⁴. In a study in *Recherches & Solidarités* by Cécile Bazin, Marie Duros and Jacques Malet, "Volunteering today, Individual and Collective Stakes", the proportion of French volunteers is only 16% for the under 25 population, 32% for the 60-70 population, but 38% for the over 70 population. Never has volunteer work faced such an evolution or been so attractive; nevertheless, associative engagement doesn't only pertain to local solidarity structures taking action in France. If social volunteer work is important – as is the case for volunteers working at Restaurants du Coeur or Secours Populaire – it is also the case for humanitarian volunteers who work here, in France, for NGOs taking action in foreign environments. Those volunteers have no operational link with the purpose of the associative project whose structure they support. It is therefore the study of the volunteer citizens' role that is at the heart of our concerns.

2011 was the European year of volunteer work, and on February 14th 2014, the French government declared associative engagement as "2014's great national cause", a label that allowed several associations to obtain free broadcasting on public radios and televisions⁵. This decree shows the will to promote associative engagement. If several solidarities structures have been able to enjoy the benefits associated with the label, NGOs known as humanitarian NGOs have stayed, for the most part, silent. The remoteness from the cause and the beneficiaries seem to be partially responsible for this silence. To run a network of volunteers committing to beneficiaries on the other side of the planet is definitely more difficult than when it's a local action. Indeed, the action's completion comes much faster and happens before our very eyes. In the collective psyche, volunteer work is first and foremost about local solidarity. The latter echoes images of Restaurants du Coeur or Secours

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ AFP, « L'engagement associatif désigné Grande cause nationale » ("Associative engagement declared a great national cause"), Libération, February 14th 2014

Populaire's volunteers to mention but a few. Towards them, the spotlight turns during great televised associative masses, through the "Téléthon" or the annual "Enfoirés" concert.

International NGOs also experience associative commitment since there are thousands of students, active or retired volunteers. Thanks to their commitment and to the diversity of their profiles, they nourish NGOs' humanitarian action. Beyond a little extra militant soul in structures that are more and more professional, volunteers are, by their number, a powerful striking force in society, directly linked to their fellow countrymen. Today, many NGOs have local structures, genuine human militant resources allowing all citizens to take action here in France, to help elsewhere in the world. Citizen mobilization is at the heart of NGOs' strategic concerns. Many articles of the HATT deal with citizen's behaviour in NGOs, attesting to the importance devoted by humanitarian actors to volunteers in France, some even speaking of an "associative citizen". We will speak here of a "volunteer citizen".

New engagement rationales

In a classical approach, adhesion to a cause, the effort to join an association, or volunteer work was the result of an acculturation process. The citizen, in an approach ingrained in his political-social culture, joined a group by embracing its traditions, its modes of operating, and its shared values. Henceforth, there is every reason to believe that the individual determination to partake in change supersedes collective work. This doesn't imply it is an individual, or deceptively generous approach, but one that seeks to find or rediscover oneself in others. Thus, the associative "me-us" replaces the "me-I"⁶. The motivations for commitment evolve and change. The new volunteer citizens don't join an association for the same reasons as their elders. Peer recognition, the need to feel useful, the sense of belonging to a group, personal fulfilment are all motives⁷ that add up to the classic ones, such as partaking in change, in a fight that is beyond us, belonging to a cause greater than our own issues. An altruism that is not erased but somewhat remodelled, which reinforces the idea that any engagement goes with compensations associated with the idea of nearly

⁶ CNVA, « Bilan de la Vie Associative » ("Review of the Associative Life"), La Documentation Française, 2003.

⁷ According to a study by Cécile BAZIN, Marie DUROS and Jacques MALET, « Le bénévolat aujourd'hui Enjeux individuels et collectifs » ("Volunteering today, Individuals and Collective Stakes"), in Recherches & Solidarités, amongst reasons inciting to volunteer time, the first spot is held by the desire to help others at 80% and personal fulfillment at 54%.

instantaneous results of action⁸. In a society where the new generations are consumed with the immediacy of the instant or even instantaneousness, any action to which they devote time has to achieve an outcome so that the engagement can be meaningful. NGOs have incorporated that very well in their new communication strategy. They emphasize increasingly the progress of their fight. That is what new volunteers look for to convince themselves that they are not doing this for nothing, which encourages them to keep going.

Social media also participates in the evolution of volunteers' integration in associations and in NGO's citizen mobilization. For these organisations, new media such as social networks and digital technology are above all tools to fundraise, manage their brand image and build their notoriety. Unlike preconceived ideas, digital interaction contributes very little to citizen mobilization. Indeed, beyond signing a petition or adding a "like" on a Facebook post, there is no real concretization of a volunteer commitment. When an Internet user shares a message, a call for mobilization or a campaign video, he becomes a supporter, more than an activist. According to a recent study in Recherches & Solidarités, on the topic of mobilization goals, whether it is for members, volunteer leaders, volunteer facilitators, or for all citizens, a significant discrepancy remains between the expectations and hopes put into such tools to attract volunteers, and the obtained results in associations as of now⁹. The main concern here is to concretize the new volunteer's attraction. The question arises as to how NGOs can transform a community of digital supporters into a committed group that takes action and mobilizes tangibly.

RETHINK THE VOLUNTEER'S PLACE WITHIN THE HUMANITARIAN FRAMEWORK

Citizen mobilization, new link in the chain?

The humanitarian framework can be described as a combination of institutions, resources, rhetoric and individuals¹⁰. But, for the layman, international solidarity and humanitarian action can seem very complex and field of intervention too remote. For many, going on a

⁸ GAXIE Daniel, « Économies des parités et rétributions du militantisme » ("Economics of parities and compensations of activism"), Revue française de Sciences Politiques, February 27th 1977, Paris.

⁹ « Développement du numérique dans les associations et nouvelles formes de mobilisations citoyennes » ("Digital development in associations and new forms of citizen mobilizations"), conducted by Cécile BAZIN et Jacques MALET – Online study on www.recherches-solidarites.org.

¹⁰ Emil COCK, Le dispositif humanitaire : géopolitique de la générosité (The humanitarian framework: geopolitics of generosity), Paris, L'Harmattan Editions, 2005.

mission and being in direct contact with the beneficiaries are part of the most well-known side of humanitarian engagement. It is the image that has been conveyed for a long time in the media and stayed ingrained in the collective psyche. It is somewhat reminiscent of the debates over the opposition between professionalism and activism; or simply of the confusion that reigned between the volunteer medical staff sent out into the field, since the inception of “French doctors” humanitarian aid, and the various statuses of volunteers or employees¹¹. In light of this observation, NGOs were forced to communicate one TV spot after the other the new reality of humanitarian engagement and that of the fieldwork. That is what Solidarités International reminded us in an awareness campaign showcasing a young hippie interviewing for a job¹². If this advert wasn't understood by the public, who perhaps saw it as a disincentive to solidary engagement, it must be acknowledge that, in the last few years, the professionalization of the humanitarian sector is not so much a trend but an established fact for the non-governmental actors of the humanitarian sphere. This trend does not prevent the employee or the humanitarian volunteer in the field to be militant. For Doctors without Borders, activism is one of the key elements valued in the recruitment process. Professionalization and professionalism are warranted by an increasing complexity of intervention fields¹³, but also by an imperative of programs' effectiveness and efficiency towards both the contributor and the beneficiary. The first and second-generation “without borders” NGOs had to adapt to an increasingly complex humanitarian sphere. Nevertheless, one might say the purpose of a NGO is to express the civil society's solidarity? To allow it to claim, to take action and to go beyond the indignation stage? To become professional without losing one's soul, one's historic identity, to question us on the reasons of our engagement, is it a false debate? The true question remains how to achieve the association's mission? Isn't this initial indignation ideal compromised by professionalization? Most definitely not. Indeed, NGOs have managed to develop tools allowing each citizen to engage alongside them thanks to the establishment of regional or departmental structures, true relays between the NGO and the general public.

¹¹ Johanna SIMÉANT, « Urgence et développement, professionnalisme et militantisme dans l'humanitaire » (“Urgency and development, professionalism and activism in the humanitarian sector”), in Mots, march 2001, 38-50.

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hm_y9Jz7Kgo

¹³ Philippe RYFMAN, Une histoire de l'humanitaire (A history of humanitarian action), Paris, La Découverte Editions, 2008.

A volunteer & employee duo at the heart of mobilization

Symbolically, the volunteer/employee duo is evidenced by the concrete example of Action Against Hunger's departmental delegations, Doctors of the World regional delegations, or Doctors without Borders' local branches. If the semantics vary from one NGO to another, they all share the same objective: fundraise to maintain and develop fieldwork programs, to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion. Thus the volunteers who participate are not operating; they aren't connected to the field or even to the beneficiaries. They are conducting their missions by means of mainstream communication events and allow everyone to be informed, to inquire and to commit. In this way, the volunteers from NGOs such as Doctors of the World, Doctors without Borders or Action Against Hunger commit all year long to promoting their NGO; not by belonging to a group but as an indignation tool. From being an institutional communication relay with the local media to setting up solidary events to raise awareness and mobilize local public opinion, the volunteer's mission is as large as it is necessary to the NGO that he represents. Whether they are regional or departmental, the volunteers from those local branches participate in humanitarian action as closely to the citizens as possible. The local delegations must be understood as vehicles allowing each and everyone to be a part of Action Against Hunger, Médecins du Monde or Doctors without Borders, offering everyone the opportunity to become an international solidarity actor. Associative engagement here, in the service of beneficiaries abroad. Therefore, let us start thinking humanitarian intervention as a chain including actors with various profiles and statuses. Ab initio, one can find the volunteers in France and acting as the last link in the chain are the field, the mission and the beneficiaries: two links organized and administrated by NGO's headquarters. Non-governmental actors of the humanitarian action operate according to an executive and associative tandem; professional for some and volunteer for others. It is from the diversity of the profiles therein that humanitarian NGOs derive their assets: the combination of professionalism and volunteering, field interventions and local activism. However, the links between volunteers and employees are not only linear. They are interdependent. Within several NGOs' headquarters, volunteers support various departments of the organization. In some cases, they are co-facilitators of the action. One may consider the case of two structures illustrating the duality in the use of volunteers. At Action Against Hunger, the best example would be the relay of the main citizen

fundraising event, the Race Against Hunger. If the headquarters initiated the event, volunteers support it by canvassing secondary and high school participants or by carrying out awareness-raising sessions in schools. Doctors of the World (MdM) offer another mobilization template in terms of co-decision and the notion of trio: at MdM, a trio comprises a General Coordinator (field employee), a Desk Manager (headquarters employee) and a Mission Leader (volunteer, member of the MdM association). In the spirit of the trio rationale, the Mission Leader, the General Coordinator and the Desk Manager are supposed to collectively ensure the project management in its various dimensions (political, strategic, operational...)¹⁴. The volunteer is much more than a relay or a workforce for the NGO, but rather an actor in the decision-making process. Empowering volunteers reinforces their militancy, which might be considered as an encouraging path in terms of citizen mobilization. One may easily think that the volunteer, seen as a citizen above all, brings a new perspective. A non-expert perspective of course, but first and foremost a different perspective. The volunteer has distance, a more pragmatic vision and represents in a way the grassroots level, which prevents the NGO from separating or disconnecting from its militant base.

The volunteer citizen then occupies a peculiar place in the humanitarian framework. The majority of the causes defended by humanitarian NGOs find their finality in political solutions. Playing with political forces means using a large citizen mobilization gathered around the structure and the cause it defends. Citizen mobilization, volunteer citizen, activist or associative engagement, let us not forget that those words have meaning. The meaning they are given change their weight and the perception we have of them. The 12th edition of « La France bénévole, les mille et une façons d'agir » (“Volunteering in France, a thousand and one ways to take action”), conducted by Recherches & Solidarités, provides a great learning experience on this topic. If we test on a panel the use of the term “militant”, 15% declare themselves indifferent. The use of the term “volunteer” or “citizen” prompts the answer “this speaks to me” at 96% for the former and 89% for the latter.

This same study suggests concrete recommendations for associations. It is in the best interests of NGOs to seize them for human resources management policies. The study thus

¹⁴ Bertrand Brequeville, “For a democratic renewal of humanitarian organizations”, Humanitarian Affairs Think Tank, IRIS

suggests “attentive listening, a recognition of everyone’s roles. Defining missions likely to match various paths. Offering and organizing training courses – Paying special attention to the welcome of new volunteers – Defining reciprocal engagements, or even formalizing them”¹⁵.

In conclusion, should we export this template of western citizen mobilization, or import new models of participatory mobilization, as is the case in BRICS countries? Regardless of the new citizen force in the humanitarian system and the redesigned volunteer’s place in the system, it still remains too West-centric. If the volunteer must acquire a new place amongst the links of the humanitarian chain in Northern countries, it would be interesting to consider adapting this template for Southern NGOs, taking into account its particularities, its innovations and without replicating its flaws and its blockages but with the will to innovate and to better serve the humanitarian cause. Let’s go beyond the concept of taking action here to help there and replace it with taking action, as a volunteer citizen. In countries of the South, where NGOs from the North intervene, civil societies’ have increasing influence. They structure themselves, organize themselves and many are already key players in countries where NGOs intervene. In those countries, NGOs must be able to organize their action with local civil societies. This can represent a powerful leverage with regards to advocacy work to influence public policy orientation in NGOs’ field, as well as significantly impact fundraising. It represents an opportunity to shift from replicating a system to designing a new innovative humanitarian model. ■

¹⁵ To find the summary online: http://www.recherches-solidarites.org/media/uploads/benevolat_juin_2015.pdf

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