

**HUMANITARIAN &  
DEVELOPMENT  
PROGRAMME**

# **REMODELLING HUMANITARIAN ACTION: Why and how?**

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**HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK**



**R**emodelling humanitarian action presupposes to revisit its foundations and if necessary to challenge them. Contemporary humanitarian action is not set in the continuation of the beginnings of the Red Cross since the latter evolved in a different era and to a certain point in a different humanity. The extraordinary development of humanitarian action in the last 30 years, after the end of the Cold War, is one of the reasons for occasional drifts and for the questions which humanitarian players are asking themselves ever more often. Their reflexivity has evolved in parallel with this development.

Talking of remodelling presupposes a lot of doubts engendered by the very field operations. To tackle them I shall first position the three cornerstones of present humanitarian action, born in my view in the 1980s in the wake of the French doctors and the anti-totalitarianism of the end of the Cold War. A second part will be dedicated to the analysis of the three entities present on the political and social stage, the state, the market and civil society. Humanitarian action operates on this stage. It does not fall from the sky nor does it stem from the simple goodwill to help one's neighbour. I shall finally dwell on the dangers that henceforth threaten NGOs and that provoke some soul searching regarding a necessary remodelling. NGOs ponder the sense and the scope of their actions in the 21st century where hitherto unseen violence has been unleashed in the areas occupied partly by the humanitarians in Asia, Africa, in the Middle East, in the US and in Europe. This world of global violence is no longer the world of the 1980s where emergencies were limited to mainly the medical field. Nowadays, emergency in terms of security appears to hover over all areas. First and foremost, environmental emergencies have been setting in for the last three decades without, however, having been mastered. This context has obviously changed the landscape of priorities and has impacted humanitarian action.

And finally, mass migrations are the result of these events and an unavoidable phenomenon whose humanitarian dimensions constitute a genuine challenge that suggests that the adjective *humanitarian* stems from humanity and is measured in terms of human dignity.

## **THE THREE CORNERSTONES: HUMAN RIGHTS, VICTIM, INTERVENTION**

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Modern humanitarian action rests on three essential cornerstones. They do not constitute good intentions but are preconditions to make humanitarian action plausible and necessary. Without these three cornerstones, humanitarian action is not self-evident. The claim that human rights are universal dates to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It is a solemn declaration, a positive declamation, a political and moral statement, a legitimate aspiration that is easy to share but its implementation

is a challenge, a necessary utopia tabled during the French revolution and the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The rights of Man became “human rights” less gender-centred, and that leads us to the subject of these rights. The political subject, the citizen, is no longer at the heart of human rights. The latter are naturalised and de-politicised. They are rights of the species and their value is centred on biological life (absence of death). This kind of dignity, or rather the enjoyment of a living body in good shape, bears no relation with the political citizen of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These rights are nowadays largely darkened and incantatory. The political emancipation of a political subject is no longer at the centre of the project since the subject is no longer the same and the world is different. Protecting physical integrity, fighting against diseases and epidemics is now the central project. The path from the dignity of the political citizen to the one of his biological body is being affirmed and analysed without nostalgia. Universality has experienced multiple trials and tribulations in the face of state sovereignty and of all forms of political violence and oppression which humanity dished out in abundance during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the failure of the League of Nations (LDN), the incapacity of the UN to constitute a vector of durable progress rather than being an environment of paying it mere lip service mixed with state cynicism is appalling. Nevertheless, it is very real.

Apart from the nature of the subject of the rights, it is worth examining the nature of the community in question. Without citizens (of the world) in a political area that remains national, the idea of a global civil society, the dream of global governance nourished by multilateral institutions (Hours 2012, Hours, Selim 2014) will remain a mere project, coherent but far from being implemented. There remains the naturalised community, the human species, in the nakedness of its “mere life”, the one of extermination, transit and refugee camps, where the humanitarians busy themselves with the necessary logistics that produce care but not much dignity, for want of time, of means, and of pertinent objectives. Dignity of the species is reduced to a living or rescued body, death being the ultimate indignity in this representation of others. The subject of rights has ultimately become an object of care, i.e. of an attention, albeit well meaning, but without the space for whatever form of reciprocity which is yet the basis for a genuine relationship. Being a victim, the subject is first and foremost a living or surviving body even if provided psychological support.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE VICTIM

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There is no humanitarian action without universal rights and without victims. The victims are obviously very real but the image of the victim, the one which moves the donor, is construed by ideology and the media. The victim is represented as suffering, passive, without resources, depending on aid, distressed and alone. The victim is thought to be in need - which is certainly the case - and asking for help, but asking for what and who decides? These clichés show a quasi-colonial representation of the misery of the other, the one who is not like us. NGOs use these stereotypes *ad nauseam* to move donors, an approach commercially understandable but containing perverse effects, not the least being the (involuntary) humiliation to which the victims may be exposed. Local societies are not devoid of resources, of skills, of emotions in situations of catastrophe. Which role do we attribute them, what sort of coordination, what kind of cooperation do we establish with local populations in an emergency?

This cluster of frustrations is well known and often eluded by fanciful or offensive capacity building. The other is our equal. He is not inferior, even as a victim, he is not only a victim but has a dignity that goes beyond the physiological needs of his body in danger. Recent events give a very real dimension to the image of the victim. The discovery of “victims at home” has shocked public opinion who found out that the misery presented in the mailing of NGOs does not only strike somewhere else, among the others. I see there the diabolic return of the claim of reciprocity that has been frustrated and humiliated by decades of humanitarian actions little inclined towards the other, to his otherness that needs more than cultural kits, to his dignity involuntarily neglected or badly evaluated, put in the wrong place or caricatured in technocratic procedures or norms in the shape of simulations and fictions. One pretends to understand and for lack of training or comprehension, the doctor and the nurse are there to work, to provide care, to save lives. They do not have the time and it is not their job to dwell on the emotions of the victims who find themselves squeezed in the straightjacket of victims. Unease on both sides. It is not easy to access the space of the other often circumvented by the humanitarian set-up but the first step is always welcome. It limits the dimension of violence that any intervention far from home brings with it. Because intervention does exist, as B. Kouchner stated at the time when humanitarian action came to be launched.

## FROM THE DUTY TO INTERVENE TO THE RIGHT TO INTERVENE

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Who speaks today of intervention? With the help of globalisation, the moral globalisation (Castelli, Hours, Hillenkamp 2015) that humanitarian action represents, is in line with the multilateral agenda. Intervention is part of the landscape and is

exercised under multilateral consensus rather than as a militant imperative *à la Kouchner*. Intervention affects the sovereignty of states, the latter being already in bad shape since they are heavily indebted. When it was the object of a resolution of the United Nations, intervention led to reservations by several states. Today, only strong or authoritarian states can offer successful resistance (China, Russia, Uzbekistan...) Humanitarian intervention, henceforth more discreet, or even limited, was an instrument of the end of the Cold War and of the so-called anti-totalitarian struggle. A twist of international law, its aim was to give a voice to muzzled civil societies. An attractive programme but a reductive cartoon. Most astonishing in this ideological gamble was the absence of a public debate that gave way to change the duty to care (Hippocrates) into the duty to intervene, and, more daringly, the duty to intervene into the right to intervene as if intervention could be a right. We appreciate the ideological lever thus actionated that led the humanitarians rapidly to occupy the blind spots since they, the humanitarians “pick up the pieces” (kidnappings, assassinations) in situations where the actors step on each other’s feet or even compete or develop contradicting strategies.

Intervention is a kind of violence, albeit legitimate, and violence is not a durable solution. Humanitarian theatres infested by decades of faction fighting that have become humanitarian traps attest to this abundantly. Interference is part of the chain of conflicts that rebound along with the interventions. It is the strategy of the arsonist firefighter. Except for these trap countries, intervention is less exercised since initiatives by NGOs are less solitary but embedded in multilateral set-ups and financial contributions that provide political legitimacy. Having become tools of global governance, the big NGOs are in fact extremely dependent on their multilateral donors who do not fund adventurers like Zoë’s Ark but competent professionals who nevertheless can ask themselves questions.

Out of the three cornerstones on which the evolution of humanitarian action rests, only intervention has become less essential since moral and political standards have evolved and have spread globally, at least in theory. In numerous big NGOs advocacy seems to occupy a less important place than before while the joint management of crises and funding by big multilateral donors is on the rise. The rise of nationalism, observed here and there, may nevertheless lead to developments that may remind NGOs of their advocacy role. Humanitarian action is played out within a society. As such, it deals with three entities of society: the state, the market, civil society.

## HUMANITARIAN ACTION BETWEEN THE STATE, THE MARKET, CIVIL SOCIETY

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NGOs are said to be the voice of civil society. This claim, somehow reductive because of a lack of representativity of NGOs, emphasises however their private (non-state) character and their lack of economic objectives that distinguishes them from commercial companies. The associative character of NGOs is a fiction in as far as the most important ones are concerned: they are enterprises of morality who sell social services financed by donors. The state used to be donor at a time when its finances were healthier but henceforth the big multilateral donors, the European Union, fund the bulk of humanitarian operations. A worrying dependency has settled in, turning NGOs into tools of multilateral governance to the detriment of their advocacy role. Logistic support by states is often used in natural catastrophes. The deployment of state or military humanitarian operations puts the political neutrality of the NGOs into question. This notion is problematic and relative since any action in the field grounds the players in the political arena. It is better to manage this state of affairs than to hide it. Nowadays, NGOs are aware that they are political actors. They must live with it but it is not easy.

The market is the actor that has dominated states since the time when their performance started to be measured by their debts. Humanitarian action is an attractive device for the moral laundering of the profits of big companies. Those were sometimes obtained under morally questionable circumstances in as far as human resources management, labour laws, child labour and salaries are concerned. NGOs are extremely vigilant with regards to this partner who, albeit financially useful, is potentially dangerous for their image. But companies as well as institutional donors constitute the most sustainable pool for funds in today's world.

If NGOs are not the voice of civil society but maintain a permanent dialogue with the latter, it is first and foremost via the donors that communication is established. Communication is extremely emotional and this does not make it easier for donors to speak up. They participate passively in a humanitarian action that is seconded to third parties. They do not control the action nor do they have a say in it. As consumers of moral commodities, donors are requested to programme their contributions in a durable and sustainable fashion. Hence the pertinence of the notion of the sale of moral commodities and of sustainable procurement that confirms that the big NGOs have become morality enterprises subject to business constraints. This is not shameful but a reality that needs to be considered for a reconstruction that goes beyond mere lip service. Civil society nowadays is constituted of consumers rather than of political citizens thanks to the market and to neo-liberalism. The citizens are to consume environmentally and morally clean products. They are reassured by labels of compliance that are thoroughly abstract and flouted as soon as the evaluator turns his

back. For ultimately the local player decides, appreciates the situation and the scope of the external rules and regulations to be observed. The ones who give lessons about best practices must transform their sermons into attempts to dialogue so as to understand a bit a bit more and to preach a bit less.

## THE MANY FICTIONS OF PARTICIPATING AND DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETIES

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That have been staged, albeit in good faith, by humanitarian NGOs in the last decades are about to vanish into thin air. Aid attracts greed, even hatred, rather than gratitude and thankfulness. The kidnappings and assassinations of NGO personnel (in general local staff) are a case in point. This is a new development and confirms that humanitarian action is at times perceived as a domination in disguise, against the wish and the intention of its actors. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, particularly in the humanitarian field.

In the triangle of state, market and civil society, humanitarian organisations occupy a location exposed to ideological and political take-over bids. And they are undeniably political actors. Of a different kind of politics, true, but not so different once the management of their moral enterprise removes them from their advocacy role and their mission to make suggestions. Victims of their success at the end of the last century, NGOs live under heavy threat in the present century and are obliged to rebuild their foundations.

## HUMANITARIAN NGOS IN DANGER?

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NGOS, like most of the social institutions, are nowadays weakened despite their budgets. In the universe of savage financial competition brought about by an aggressive, albeit not yet quite victorious, neo-liberalism, humanitarian NGOs are exposed to multiple risks and to an auctioning off of their functions to which they have contributed with their visibility. They appear to ultimately be victims of their success.

Philanthropic foundations run by businesses occupy a terrain close to NGOs. Also, the focus on social responsibility of businesses has taken up part of the space. The multiplication of appeals and offers makes donors ever more attentive or more puzzled in front of this marketplace of volatile moral commodities. Philanthropy, charity, humanitarian action do not merge but may step on each other's feet like humanitarian actors in the field at times.

Businesses and civil society that NGOs are supposed to represent may create alliances just as they may compete on a "market of generosity" that coexists peacefully with the



cynical and violent management of big enterprises. Apart from the generosity competition that increases at the same time as the market gets hold of society and must shirk its financial brutality, humanitarian NGOs will be confronted with a rise of spontaneous comments on the internet and social media.

Henceforth, brokerage between the emotion of the donor and the professional humanitarian actors is no longer indispensable, and crowd funding by project does away with the need for a stable organisation as an intermediary. Consuming moral clichés and commodities via the internet weakens traditional sale methods of NGOs, among them emotional street campaigns, public sale of moral goods through subscriptions for the citizen-consumer. NGOs run a real risk of losing their relative monopoly of humanitarian moral emotion. This is the result of the emotional commodification that the NGOs have used and abused by creating a market and, subsequently, competition from other actors who seek to whitewash or improve their image.

## REBUILDING HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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The foundations of contemporary humanitarian action in the 1980s were part of an anti-totalitarian (anti-soviet) offensive inspired by America and neo-liberalism. B. Kouchner and the *Fondation Liberté sans Frontières* illustrate this perfectly. After the end of the Soviet Union, this source dried up and the humanitarians came to understand that they should not be an ideological toy but remain candid.

The arrival of humanitarian actions by states and a new political context created the conditions for a more professional and less militant capacity. Humanitarian NGOs became morality businesses, after an expression of Rony Brauman. They are managed as such and funded mainly by multilateral institutions. The role of donors decreases in the face of crises at home.

So-called terrorist acts bolster this tendency which leads to consider security primarily at home even if this reinforces the causes of violence. Massive migrations constitute another challenge for humanitarian action whose political dimension has never been so obvious.

NGOs are the instruments of humanitarian action and any remodelling relies on their practices and strategies. Remodelling presupposes above all a greater humility of the West. Even if dreaming of dominating the world, the West does no longer possess the political, economic and moral means. China, Russia, Central Asia, not to mention Turkey, refuse the exportation of American democracy and the rule of law is subject to their home-grown interpretations. Occidentalism that nurtured humanitarian action in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is over. This means that the body of moral, political, legal references of the humanitarian NGOs must be revisited. This in turn does neither imply to abandon everything nor to keep everything as it is.



The weakening of states in the face of the dictatorship of markets is a decisive phenomenon in the humanitarian landscape and of the state-market-civil society triangle. Civil society is more mobile, more volatile, fed up with excessively emotional appeals and seeking more reflexive tools than the sale of moral dignity to donors. Too much emotion has killed reason. The emergence of “victims at home” has put an end to the staging of the misery of the others. Suffering is split equally and globalised. At the interface of humanitarian action and environmental protection, a set of rules more mobilising than human rights – which are anyway flouted every day - should be developed. There is wear and tear and fatigue provoked by a humanitarian offer directed at consumers who are bored and stuffed with permanent emotions.

De-westernising discourses that preach, identifying partners and not beneficiaries to the end of making a bit, just a bit of reciprocity possible, reasoning instead of creating emotions, here and elsewhere, these seem to be the avenues to be explored. Humanitarian action must no longer take part in alienating donors who are as passive as the recipients of aid but must contribute to our and their emancipation. The obstacles are enormous but we must talk more and more to subjects and less and less to objects. Remodelling is impossible if not along this alley.

Global governance offers an important position to NGOs regarding public-private partnership and participation of civil society. Beyond technocratic slogans, NGOs dispose of strong pressure mechanisms if they manage to leave their dependency on donors behind and to escape the grips of the financial markets. It is under these conditions that the sale of moral commodities will make way for the production of a shared dignity.

Of the three cornerstones of humanitarian action only the compassionate figure of the victim remains. His fragile dignity is at the heart of any remodelling. The verbal inflation of human rights is equal to their constant flouting and turns them largely into pipe dreams with a limited mobilising potential. At the same time, the market lives well with dictators, particularly as regards weaponry and public works. Regarding intervention, military or state humanitarian action has turned it into a theatre of permanent conflicts called humanitarian wars. This speaks volumes about global geopolitical humanitarian stakes. It is hence first on a responsible victim and his right to speak out that any remodelling of humanitarian action - devoid of the moral imperialism of some of the founding fathers of the last century - may lean. It is time for advocacy together with the others. Not on their behalf. ■

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## **PROGRAMME HUMANITAIRE & DÉVELOPPEMENT**

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