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Refugees and Displaced Persons in Nigeria and Myanmar: rethinking the synergy

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A number of crises linked to forced migration are developing throughout the world, “in the shadow of the humanitarian centres of gravity that are the Syrian crisis and its consequences in Europe”, to quote the two authors, members of Solidarit s International. Following the parallel contexts of Nigeria and Myanmar, where the French NGO is operating alongside displaced persons, Marie-Alice Torr  and Thierry Benlahsen deliver a reflection midway between criticism and self-criticism, which emerges from the field and extends to the decision making bodies.

The consequences of the crises to which international organizations are attempting to respond throughout the world nearly all have a common denominator: people in movement. Each crisis is different and each resolution subject to political and financial agendas, so the positioning of aid actors, especially those midsize organizations often reputed for being efficient in the field, is a complex but necessary task. Classic material and financial responses to population movements are no longer adapted and need to be rethought.

Two-Fold Change: the modern reality of displacement and the humanitarian microcosm

The number of refugees and displaced persons throughout the world has never been so high since the end of the Second World War: 60 million in 2014, over 65 million in 2015. In spite of NGO professionalisation and changes in terms of response and mandates in “classic” crises over the last ten years, the humanitarian sector as a whole recognises the incompatibility of the responses developed up to now, and the pressing need to adapt their practices. We have chosen here to report on the reality of the action and contexts of intervention of an NGO like Solidarit s International (SI) relative to two unfortunately “classic” crises, in order to better understand the constraints and sometimes the impossibility it encounters in bringing the aid required.

Myanmar, Nigeria: history and background

Whilst attention has focused for the last few months on democratic transition in Myanmar, the country’s humanitarian situation remains very fragile. Whilst most of the country’s 135 officially recognised ethnic groups, opposed for a long time to the government’s centralising policy, have been living under a ceasefire since 1994, tensions have increased since 2011 between the armed Kachin ethnic group (KIA) and the Burmese army, leading to the displacement of 100,000 people. Clashes with the Burmese army have been intensifying, lessening the likelihood of a peace agreement (KIA not having signed the ceasefire in 2015), and leading to further population displacements.

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In Nigeria, the humanitarian crisis in the North-East of the country is also the latest in a long series of power struggles, this time between secular institutions and fundamentalist movements, appearing long before Boko Haram existed, and going back as far as Sokoto d'Usman dan Fodio's 19th century caliphate. More recently, it took until mid-2016 for the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe to be exposed in the Yobe, Adamawa and Gombe States, and particularly in the newly-secured districts of Borno. 2.7 million internally displaced persons who more or less found refuge in informal camps and were left without assistance for 18 months, experiencing rates of malnutrition unequalled since the 1990s. In the shadow of the humanitarian centres of gravity which are the Syrian crisis and its consequences in Europe, Nigeria silently entered into the top 3 greatest displacement crises in the world, in spite of alerts issued by organizations such as Action Contre la Faim (ACF) or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Whilst needs in Myanmar and Nigeria are immense, and the urgency of the humanitarian response imminent, access to populations constitutes a de facto constraint for NGOs. This constraint is unfortunately becoming more and more complex.

Adapting intervention logics by working with local organizations with freedom of movement

In the State of Kachin, the main issue is the difficulty of access to displaced persons living in camps situated in zones which are controlled by KIA. In these areas, and in spite of international humanitarian law, the Burmese government imposes restrictions on the transport and delivery of humanitarian assistance by international organizations, resulting in unequal and insufficient humanitarian access to populations. In an attempt to get around these restrictions, NGOs must adapt their intervention logics, by working through local organizations which have freedom of movement in Kachin, or by transforming their material assistance programmes into financial support. The limits of these approaches are manifold: lack of capacity and skills of local organizations, neutrality, independence and transparency of humanitarian aid delivery. This political hindrance to access is compounded by the insecurity of transport and delivery due to anti-personnel mines, used extensively in recent years by both governmental and rebel armies. Whilst this dissemination of deadly weapons hampers humanitarian movement, it also introduces uncertainty concerning the possibility of displaced persons returning.

In Nigeria, the challenge of negotiating access to military authorities is compounded by the insecurity created by Boko Haram. This "war", and its impact on Borno State, led most large organizations to focus their response on the city of Maiduguri until mid-2016. Recourse to local partners remains a real issue in Nigeria, given the weight of suspicion of corruption in local civil society, whose members have little training in humanitarian principles. At the same time, certain UN agencies' distrust of international NGOs is no secret. A number of sponsors and UN agencies complained of their international non-governmental partners' incapacity to gather information on needs in the most isolated districts. It is nevertheless surprising to note that it was not until mid-2016, with the deployment of NGOs in the field, that the alarming figures began to stack up. Yet for nearly 18 months, the United Nations - freed from constraints applied to unarmed convoys - would have been in a position to negotiate sending in diagnosis teams, short of helicoptering in Tobi Lanzer, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel... Today, conversely, there is a rush on zones considered to be uncovered, in districts which have fallen back under government control, flouting the pragmatic security approach which had characterised the presence of the same actors. For a recently arrived organization such as SI, it is therefore difficult to isolate what pertains to a real analysis of access to positioning movements that have not been thought out. In

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the field, the main issue encountered by SI was not so much the contextual characteristics of its countries of intervention, but the development of the humanitarian system itself.

Using recognition as actors in the field to influence political agendas

In the State of Kachin, where the Burmese government partly exerts its sovereignty by controlling or even obstructing NGOs' work, SI is seeking the best impact for its response. In order to do so, it balances its interventions, between direct assistance action with populations and advocacy action with United Nations agencies, sponsors and diplomats. In this way, SI pleads for the respect of international law in terms of access to populations and for the search of sustainable political solutions. Even if its influence is not always sufficient, the organization uses its recognition as an actor in the field to try and influence political agendas.

The crisis in North-East Nigeria, far removed from Lagos' economic issues, seems for its part to be relatively spared by international political contingencies, and on the contrary suffers from disinterest which obviously is not going to reverse itself very soon, given the small number of emergency humanitarian actors who are actually operating in the area.

Inventing new, more fluid models of partnership between international actors

Three months after its first teams' arrival in Maiduguri, one question was making the rounds at the SI headquarters: how, in 2016, had an international NGO with 35 years of experience arrived so late, whilst organizations on the ground were denouncing the lack of actors? The question remained unanswered internally, and must serve to call into question our capacity to think outside of the "motorways" of aid. More globally, given that the coordination bodies of IASC (*Inter-Agency Standing Committee*) send weak signals concerning this kind of crisis, we could also consider that an inter-NGO communication platform, more fluid and operational than those that exist already, following the example of the British START initiative¹ would be necessary. Even if an NGO like SI was on the ground from the very beginning of a crisis, its near-total dependence on institutional funding would lead it only to emergency response. There again, whilst a handful of organizations which share non-earmarked funds admit in private having difficulty spending their budgets, more fluid partnership models between international actors deserve to be considered. In the State of Kachin in Myanmar, SI teams respond to urgent population needs thanks to the development of multi-sectorial tools for analysis. Whilst the relevance of these interventions has been proved, their sustainability remains subject to the yearly allocation of institutional funds which, in the context of a protracted and under-reported crisis, seems more and more illusory.

Asserting differences and encouraging a return to the fundamentals of humanitarianism

Whilst for a long time the major grievance which an actor such as SI could level at the "humanitarian system" was the growing weight of accountability vis à vis the sponsors in humanitarian work, it must be admitted that these demands are no longer on the increase. Nowadays, it is the weight of norms and intervention methods which puts a strain on the reactivity of NGOs' actions. Following a first (necessary) phase of increased financial transparency, an equally necessary phase of normalisation of humanitarian interventions is currently underway. Yet it is all a question of degree... Humanitarian actors must be capable of

¹ Formerly CBHA (Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies), the START network, comprising around 20 organizations, aims in particular to optimise deployment and coordination delays of Humanitarian NGOs in crisis areas.

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working together more efficiently, by means of common methods and approaches, yet the appropriation of these requires a significant mobilisation of resources for an often mitigated result, and especially tends to curb the creativity that is essential in order to respond to the challenges of an unprecedented global humanitarian situation.

To adapt itself to these challenges, SI must assert certain differences and encourage a return to humanitarian fundamentals, whilst simultaneously integrating its latest codes and practices. The proximity to populations is therefore a fundamental condition for the respect of humanitarian principles for SI. This proximity in no way precludes equal proximity with civil society, but actions in partnership are only considered in post-crisis situations for resuming activities, as emergency capacity reinforcement, and very occasionally for temporarily resolving access issues. The positioning of an actor on the front line should be accompanied by the capacity to grow in power, whilst preserving the authenticity of the action and providing first-hand information to decision-makers.

In this way, the role of an NGO such as SI is fundamental in order to maintain the human factor, if not at the heart, at least close to the definition of strategies in global humanitarian response. An increasing percentage of humanitarian funding passes through the UN to address management concerns and the efficiency of these funds tends to dissolve in the face of the United Nations' operating costs and their dependency on international political issues. In order to mitigate the effects of this slippage, participation in initiatives such as the START Network seems to be a solution to propose relevant interventions for institutional sponsors, whilst simultaneously proposing a significant scaling of said interventions.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Biographies

Marie-Alice Torr  • Marie-Alice Torr  has been working for 10 years in Solidarit  International's fields of intervention, gradually taking on logistical and administrative responsibilities, project management and mission leadership duties. As a result of her experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad, Bangladesh and Haiti, she is particularly sensitised to issues of humanitarian spaces in conflict zones and in the wake of natural disasters. Marie-Alice Torr  is Head of Mission in Myanmar for Solidarit s International since March 2015.

Thierry Benlahsen • After several years of deployment in the field for a number of organizations (SI, Handicap International, Triangle G n ration Humanitaire...), Thierry Benlahsen became the head of the Emergency SI team in 2015. He supervises the deployment of the organization's teams in new countries of intervention, as well as monitoring of emerging crises. He started to investigate access issues for negotiations with armed groups whilst in the Middle East.

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