

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

“What’s important, is the mission and that everyone be inspired by common guidelines”

Entretien avec

Patrice Paoli • Directeur du Centre de crise et de soutien

Patrice Paoli is the director of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs Crisis Centre. While the French State reaffirms its desire to involve companies and foundations in humanitarian action, it was essential to know more about this approach. For Patrice Paoli, it is based on pragmatism, collective action and the effective synergy of the means of each actor. NGOs now must position themselves according to this roadmap.

Humanitarian Alternatives – *On December 19th 2017, the Crisis Centre (CC), signed twelve partnership conventions in the field of humanitarian aid, in particular with companies and corporate foundations: can you tell us what are the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs expectations with this approach?*

Patrice Paoli – Actually we proceeded with an empirical approach. We didn’t start from the idea that we absolutely had to work with corporate foundations or with businesses: things happened little by little. The idea doubtless appeared historically through the aid the CC could bring to French citizens abroad, namely with the Airbus foundation, by obtaining helicopter or plane flight hours, in order to do reconnaissance work. In the same way, when we set up humanitarian projects, France being a relatively modest donor of humanitarian action, we invented new procedures, by pooling our efforts with those of the Regions in France, with those of international organizations, NGOs and companies. This was the case, for example in Bardarash, in the North of Iraq, where the PACA region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur) helped us to build schools, with the Merieux Foundation managing everything that concerned medical aspects and the Veolia Foundation taking care of all the water supply aspects. We realised that it was working, that it was enabling us to step up our efforts and to group together – it is very important as we are talking here about a duty of solidarity and commitment. So, progressively, we built up a vision. But it’s an exchange, we do not have all the ideas: they come from businesses, from foundations, from NGOs. We share ideas and we see what works. We developed this approach with the idea that the more we are working in the same direction the more efficient we are. If the minister himself wished to participate in this ceremony on December 19th, it was to show the commitment to breaking down borders between the different parties involved, for the benefit of the mission. Our mission is to protect French citizens and humanitarian action abroad for the benefit of third-party populations. This does not mean that all foundations contribute in the same way. Each one has its speciality, its vocation to make available means or skills. It is a variable-geometry approach, very pragmatic. We have to come up with solutions to the problems we are faced with, to crises that come up, involving people, by finding the best way to do so. I would give one last example, during the humanitarian assistance in Haiti, while the island was hit by a cyclone, we were able to put in a plane, which was chartered by the Crisis Centre and the Civil Security General Directorate, corporate foundations, NGOs and CC’s humanitarian material. Everyone took off together and this allowed us to be amongst the first to respond by ensuring everybody worked together. And we are very proud of that.

H. A. – *What interests us in these questions of convergence of States and companies and corporate foundations, is to see how the latter innovate, and what they can bring to humanitarian action. As a matter of fact, it would be interesting to know if the twelve partnership agreements equally cover natural disasters, conflicts or epidemics, for example. It also appears that other States continue to move forward this way, like the Belgian government which set up with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) the first humanitarian impact bond [Editors note: a declination of the social impact bonds], which, involves three actors: the State, investors and NGOs. So, are we, in France, also following this approach of continuing to innovate, in a partnership, through these three families of actors?*

P. Paoli – That’s exactly it. There again, we do not have a doctrine because we are not dogmatic. Certainly we elaborate theories, but often afterwards, by building up our ways of doing things from experience, from the accumulation of everyone’s observations and I think that the important word that you used is innovation. We are an innovative sector because we are constantly reacting and adapting. Reacting is not having a way of doing things that does not change, on the contrary, it is knowing how to adapt constantly. So I think that we must adapt. What we have seen about climate change is very interesting: when actors are ultimately failing at the State level – we saw it with the United States – then cities and other organizations like foundations, rally to keep the flame alive, I daresay, of the struggle against climate change. It’s interesting because it shows us that we need to bring down barriers. We do not have theoretical barriers, because what’s important is the mission, and the fact that everyone be inspired by common guidelines. That is what we need to, once again, in a pragmatic way. There is no limit in itself, but there is also no fixed goal or precise road map. We have a path that aims at bringing all these actors together progressively. During the last visit of the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management he asked us what our procedures were because he had got wind of the conventions we were passing with corporate foundations and he wanted to see how the European Union could be inspired by these.

H. A. – *But aren’t some NGOs in their right in asking whether the Crisis Centre is going to fund corporate foundations at their own expense? Or are we in the process initiated with the humanitarian focus group¹, which in a few words consists in saying that even if everyone remains free we can also sometimes coordinate and make our means converge?*

P. Paoli – Yes, we are in this approach that consists in providing the means for collective action. We work together, and no one tries to reap the benefits of an action. Indeed, the debates we have in the humanitarian focus group are about generating new ideas, to see how we can work and, whilst remaining flexible. I think that the coming years will see a development of these means that goes far beyond the question of foundations: which is the position of France in humanitarian action in the world. Its rank amongst the donors is another question. A lot can be done with relatively modest means, if they are well used, meaning brought together. This is what happened in the North of Iraq where, instead of taking on problems all over the place, we focused our action on a camp for displaced persons in Bardarash, by taking charge of all of the aspects of life in this camp, with a psychosocial centre, schools, sanitary action, etc. Humanitarian dialogue will find one of its “critical nerve endings” during the national humanitarian conference that will take

¹ Set up in 2013, as part of France’s first “humanitarian strategy” (2012-2017), the humanitarian focus group is a forum for exchange and dialogue between the Ministry and the representatives of the main French NGOs, hosted by the Crisis Centre.

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place on March 22nd, under the presidency of the minister. We want the national strategy, which will be adopted there to bring us together and give a common direction of work.

H. A. – *Do you think that there is a specifically French practice or maybe some dynamics unique to France that are developing at the moment?*

P. Paoli – I think that there are some dynamics developing. With the first national humanitarian strategy we were only in the early stages. Today we are in a process of creation, a sort of laboratory of ideas. So obviously the funding has to follow and I think that this is one of the big issues for us, and will be in the years to come, to increase the level of our ODA [Official Development Aid] in general, and of humanitarian action in particular.

H. A. – *You probably are talking about President Macron's commitment in favour of an increase in ODA to 0.55% of gross national income (GNI). How much of that do you think will go to international humanitarian action, and will it concern emergency action as well as stabilisation for example. More globally, this question maybe refers to the need of better explaining the complex question of the distribution of responsibilities of each party?*

P. Paoli – We suffer from a number of flaws which are not crippling, but they exist as for example scattered administrations. We work a lot with different partners, to make French humanitarian action more readable. One of the stakes, and it's a political commitment of the President of the Republic, is to increase ODA from 0.38% – which remains out of step with the goal of 0.7% – to 0.55% of GDI within the next five years. Of this ODA, France allocates about 2% to humanitarian aid when the average in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is of 12%. We are out of step both qualitatively and quantitatively: the second stake is thus to increase the share of humanitarian aid, in particular emergency aid and stabilisation – the intermediate step between humanitarian emergency and development – you were mentioning before. For example, in the context of a region like Mosul and the Nineveh Plains after ISIS was driven out, it is clear that we have to be there to help for the return of displaced persons, to clear the mines, to allow society to re-establish itself, in other words, to create the conditions for more long-term action. These are both humanitarian and political actions, and our politicians need to be aware and know which tools we need to optimise. If the President decides that we need to be present in Mosul after the departure of ISIS, then the tool of emergency action, the CC, needs to be one of those but we need to develop its means.

H. A. – *As we are talking about resources I think we need to take into account the potential the development of foundations represents. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of foundations in France went from 1,000 to 2,000 with the State's incentive. Yet, in Europe generally and even in the United States, foundations give 80% of their means nationally and only 20% internationally. Even if it is relevant to ask for ODA to increase, we need to encourage individual or family foundations, to be interested in international issues, a horizon of which everybody does not always perceive the interest. That is why as President of the French Centre for Foundations I proposed our next General Assembly takes place in the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs so that our members can be thinking in a world without borders. I also think that there will be even more pressure on the State if more private actors put resources in international action.*

P. Paoli – Without a doubt, there is also an issue of influence. And in a policy of influence, there are different ways of doing things: French NGOs were innovative by being the main recipients of European funds notably. Today, and it is one of the stakes, to have the capacity to influence we

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must give the financial means to promote our way of thinking and doing to influence decisions, particularly within the European Union. The *savoir-faire* of French NGOs, is very important and it must be our work, with sometimes modest means, to bring to the field as quickly as possible this capacity of reaction of humanitarian actors.

H. A. – *Since we are in a logic of synergies, the duty of some actors is also perhaps to warn about the activities of others, whether or not they know what they are participating in. I think of Liberia, in the 1990s, where we knew the iron ore of Mount Nimba was being mined by child soldiers and then taken up by mafia-like intermediaries to end up at Usinor Sacilor, which probably didn't even know. In any case when Usinor Sacilor was warned they committed to putting a stop to it. We can hope that, through dialogue the Crisis Centre, NGOs and companies will speak frankly because we have humanitarian and simply humane priorities: it's our role to insist on that, because we are on the front line. As humanitarian aid, in principle, is a step towards reconstruction this implies autonomy of persons who must not be dependent of NGO or companies that sometimes impinge on the sovereignty of States, substitute local authorities or exercise a virtual monopoly on markets. In short can we hope that, through this convergence of NGOs and companies we will be able to make progress in these logics?*

P. Paoli – I have often been struck during field visits by the fact that some humanitarian actors are generally unaware of their departure date. And it is true that, in some areas, we realize there is a substitution effect on the national State concerned. Unfortunately, these are not things that will stop overnight. Similarly, in Lebanon where I was posted before, we were accused of wanting to “settle” displaced populations or refugees in the country. This was wrong because on the contrary, we did everything to encourage their return. There comes a point when emergency action must give way to action more focused on stabilizing the situation and reappropriating their destiny by States and individuals.

In addition, the Crisis Centre is in contact with companies at different levels. First, for the protection of French citizens, since companies are employers and are responsible for French employees. Then, with the so-called security companies, which today unfortunately are increasingly necessary in difficult areas in order to ensure the security of multiple actors, be they public operators or private businesses. Finally, we support French companies to participate either in peacekeeping operations, or to facilitate the roll-out of European Union aid, where there are regular calls for tender, or in the selection of innovative products which will allow them – as Nutriset® did – to be retained to feed the stocks of the United Nations, for example.

Of course each party has its reservations. Perhaps twenty years ago, NGOs guarded their autonomy and their personality – and they still do – considering State with suspicion. And companies were not considered to be natural partners, far from that. What is interesting today is to ensure that, whilst maintaining each parties' way of doing things, everyone interacts with each other.

Interview by Virginie Troit, Executive Director of the French Red-Cross Foundation, and Benoît Miribel, co-founder of the *Humanitarian Alternatives* review.

This text is a reworked transcript of the interview given by Patrice Paoli. The entire filmed interview is available on our website: <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org>

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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