

The endless restructuring of the humanitarian sector: an inappropriate search for performance?

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A refrain constantly heard in the process of professionalisation, the call to restructure the world of humanitarian intervention often takes the form of a reformatting based on the principles of neoliberal dogma. According to the author, this quest for performance is ill-suited to the complexity of humanitarian action and poorly serves the populations concerned.

In 1763, Diderot wrote: “It is not enough to do good, we must also do it well”. Over the last few decades, this sentence has characterised the reflections and methods that make up the solidarity sector. Faced with a number of criticisms (interference, inefficiency, lack of accountability), the humanitarian system, independently or due to external pressure, has adopted responses that are almost unanimously tinged with managerial thinking. The issues of accountability and optimisation at the centre of these changes are crucial for humanitarian aid and its delivery, but the chosen methods now constitute an obstacle to high-quality humanitarian action tailored to situations in the field¹.

The crisis of confidence in the 1990s and 2000s, the result of multiple shocks

The Biafran War, followed by the series of crises in the 1990s, led to a number of criticisms relating to the legitimacy and performance of humanitarian actions. The increasingly normalised use by international humanitarian organisations (IOs) and governments of terminology such as “militarised humanitarian aid” (by the United Nations during the first Gulf War) put great strain on the founding principles of the Red Cross, reiterated in its code of conduct, which was ratified by the majority of NGOs². The war in the Balkans confronted the Western humanitarian community with a “local” conflict, in which a high level of involvement by inexperienced volunteers was combined with significant media coverage presenting the need for “professional” humanitarian workers.

This phenomenon is not new, and persists today on an even larger scale thanks to the increased ease of transport and communication. In 1993, the difficulties surrounding intervention in Somalia forced NGOs to negotiate humanitarian corridors with the militias and chieftains, in exchange for a partial (and sometimes significant) share of the food aid. In 1994, the supposed incapacity of NGOs³ to predict the deterioration of the situation in Rwanda and limit the number of victims, along with the evacuation of a large number of actors at the pinnacle of the crisis, led

¹ See John Cosgrave “A stick to beat us with”, Joint Standards Initiative, January 2013, available online at: <http://pool.fruitycms.com/humanitarianstandards/Standards-a-stick-to-beat-us-with-John-Cosgrave-Feb-2013.pdf>

² Humanity-Impartiality-Neutrality-Independence-Voluntary Service-Unity-Universality. For more information, see: https://www.icrc.org/frc/assets/files/other/icrc_001_0513_principes_fondamentaux_cr_cr.pdf

³ We specify “supposed” since the reading of reports on humanitarian coordination reveals alerts from as far back as 1991 regarding inter-community and political tensions in the country.

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to three main criticisms: NGOs were inefficient, unfamiliar with the contexts they were operating in, and mere advance guards for neo-colonial governments.

The expression “humanitarian war” was subsequently used by NATO in Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, and “humanitarian bombardments” by the US government in 2001 in Afghanistan. The impact on the increasingly critical perception of NGOs among both recipients and Western donors was sizeable, and affected the confidence that was placed in them.

In order to respond to these dilemmas and challenges, there was an attempt to redefine ethical principles and standardise actions, reinforcing a common code of conduct that aimed to reaffirm the usefulness of the actions undertaken. This led to a series of reforms with strong managerial connotations, which built a certain model of humanitarian aid and of primarily upward accountability to institutions. The timing of these changes, which were not exclusive to the humanitarian sector, was linked to the spread of the “New Public Management” in a number of non-financial sectors in the English-speaking world, with its aim of achieving an optimal cost/efficiency ratio. This phenomenon had a drastic impact on organisational methods in the humanitarian sector, leading to a results-oriented culture and an explosion of new standards.

Evaluation as a tool, standards as proof of results

The first of these methods involved the expansion of evaluation, both internally, for organisational reasons (consolidation of organisations’ political projects, strategic reinforcement), and externally, under pressure from institutional donors (reporting to maintain institutional funding based on public generosity, image support, justification of tax exemptions specific to NGOs).

When the rhetoric surrounding the rationalisation of budgetary choices and the practice of carrying out assessments of requirements in order to define plans of action developed in the public sector (1970-1985), the aid sector published its first internal technical guides, which aimed to facilitate field diagnostics. When the French socialist Michel Rocard promoted internal charters and the regulation of user relations, humanitarian organisations published a multiplicity of charters focusing on core values (1985-1990). When neoliberalism boasted the advantages of the 3 Ms (market, management, measurement) (1990-1995), sponsors formalised financial audits that aimed to optimise the efficiency of their funds. Between 1995 and 2000, the traditional public sector best-efforts obligation was transformed into an obligation based on results (such as the highly quantified reform of the hospital system). At the same time, bilateral and multilateral cooperation institutions developed external evaluations to ensure that contractual commitments were being upheld. The emergence of the New Public Management (2000-2005) coincided with the promotion of internal evaluations to shore up the rhetoric concerning the added value and technicity of specific NGOs in a domain that was becoming increasingly competitive. From 2005 to 2010, aid actors adopted the culture of market studies, replicating best practice and standardising intervention methods. By 2010, like other sectors, the humanitarian sector, including NGOs, had entered the “age of experts”, with its cohort of external consultants mobilised to define and evaluate minimum levels of efficiency. The profile of NGO managers also changed. In France, the departure of the “without-borders” founders was followed by a wave of directors from private-sector backgrounds, with a strong culture of profitability and “agile management”. In the English-speaking world, the increasing structuring of the sector and the exponential growth of certain organisations led to the appointment of political figures with

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significant networks (such as David Milliband, the former British Secretary of State, who became head of the International Rescue Committee).

Performance is therefore judged based on the capacity to prove and to broadcast this proof, irrespective of the fact that the model involves a “quantophrenia”⁴, and the quantitative distortion of concepts such as distress or resilience.

A second method involved the development of near-universal standards. From 1995 onwards, formalisation proliferated to such an extent that in 2012, Cragg counted no fewer than 72 texts reiterating global development objectives, intervention standards and codes of good practice⁵. Although dissenting voices have been heard since the very beginning of this process⁶, these kinds of standards have had a lasting impact, namely because a “one size fits all” approach enables a broad consensus around objectives that are difficult to dispute. Since confidence as a mode of coordination is increasingly being worn away, many look to technical and operational models (especially the logical framework and its focus on results/targets/activities/indicators of contexts and intervention methods) for a reassuring linear schematisation⁷. This approach and its rules naturally have an obvious appeal, a reassuring predictability in such an uncertain world with its multiple risks. Performance is thus seen in a very scientific, theoretical way.

Questions of ethics, between performance and relevance

In response to the crisis of legitimacy it was facing, the humanitarian sector therefore, in large part against its will, developed a model in which NGOs must meet predetermined targets and be capable of programming multiyear strategies in environments that are anything but stable, using quantified evaluation tools that “prove” their results. No matter that this virtuous cycle functions outside the realities of the beneficiaries and the continually changing context, since “the most audible tools are those that provide the best packaging”⁸. In 2009, Giovalucchi *et al.* wrote that, “The problem [...] is not that [the humanitarian system] incorporates a management perspective, but rather that it is associated with an ideological perspective that has the particularity of negating or obliterating the social and political dimensions”⁹. Institutional donors have therefore created a model that ensures functional performance, based solely on their analytical frameworks, with financial efficiency at the heart of the system. We effectively find ourselves with upward accountability, even though the link with actions’ relevance to beneficiaries is in no way ensured. This demonstrates “development institutions’ distaste for iterative, interactive and adaptive projects, with objectives that can vary over the course of their implementation, which would take into account feedback, unintended effects and mission drift; the still-tentative consideration of actors’ strategies, conflicts, local issues, the diversity of dynamics and social logics; quantophrenia, the insufficiency of qualitative follow-up, the fear of the long term and the indeterminate”¹⁰.

⁴ This expression was coined by the American sociologist of Russian origin Pitirim Sorokin, and refers to the increasing fascination with the quantification of phenomena in the social sciences (Editor’s Note).

⁵ Liza Cragg, “Mapping and analysis of quality and accountability initiatives in the humanitarian”, *Joint Standards Initiative*, December 2012.

⁶ For example, the group of French NGOs that are part of the Groupe URD Quality/Accountability Compass.

⁷ François Giovalucchi and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, “Planification, gestion et politique dans l’aide au développement: le cadre logique, outil et miroir des développeurs”, *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol.198, n°2, 2009, p.383-406.

⁸ Bernard Hours, *L’idéologie humanitaire ou le spectacle de l’altérité perdue*, L’Harmattan, 1998, p.7.

⁹ François Giovalucchi and Jean-Pierre Olivier De Sardan, “Planification, gestion...”, art. cit., p.391.

¹⁰ Florence Jany-Catrice, *La performance totale: nouvel esprit du capitalisme?* Editions Septentrion Presses Universitaires, coll. “Capitalismes, éthique, institutions”, 2012, p.401

Some even denounce an era of total bureaucracy where the goal is no longer to improve the product or service provided, but rather to optimise yield for the shareholders, the institutional donors in this case. To quote Béatrice Hibou, “What is neoliberal bureaucratisation? A method of functioning based on the systematic use of norms, rules, procedures, codes and categorisations; in short, on formalities that stem mainly from a certain conception of the market and of business and have taken over our day-to-day lives”¹¹. Yet few NGOs have the financial or systemic capacity to exert pressure to overcome this asymmetry in their relationship with institutional sponsors, with its associated risk of diminishing returns due to reliance on subcontracting.

Towards impossible performance?

The truth is that “development is not driven by a Cartesian logic of cause and effect, but by a chaotic dynamic of simultaneity”¹². Humanitarian actors quickly suffocate in the framework imposed by major aid sponsors. Attempts at adaptation retain the same “manufacturing defect”: sponsors will not modify the architecture of the system because of their aversion to risk. They prefer to leave the responsibility to NGOs. They therefore back increasingly integrated approaches (e.g. combining reconciliation, rural development and microcredit), in areas enlarged to the level of subregions, without having fundamentally rethought their different mandates (both sectoral and in terms of contractual flexibility and the positioning on the scale between emergency and development)¹³, and without effectively covering the inherent costs of these new organisations. It is up to NGOs to juggle different funding requests, with no guarantee of their approval, nor of their harmonisation in terms of technical positioning, timing and methods of deployment. The creation of innovative trust funds which seek to embody the linking of relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) remains circumstantial. The sustainability required of projects is not always in keeping with the sustainability of the funding. Whilst we face an increasing number of chronic crises, many institutional donors continue to offer emergency funding of six months to a year, limiting the implementation of graduated rehabilitation models.

Institutional donors, like NGOs, must justify their relevance to their contributors, and they are therefore forced to keep their mandate comprehensible, even if it must be simplified. In this sense, thematic approaches remain the dominant trend, promoting the multisectoral approach while reinforcing restricted “clusters” (actors coordinating humanitarian aid by technical sector of intervention). UN technical agencies go even further, pushing bilateral actors to distribute their funding through them (towards subsequent cascading grants). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Chad, for example, receives “educational” funding from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), which it redistributes to NGOs (some of which previously received European funds directly). This leads to a standardisation of technical approaches. The only added value of this approach is an optimisation of administrative performance (supposedly) enabled by reducing the number of personnel required for monitoring. Here again, the financial priority of economic optimisation is given precedence.

¹¹ Béatrice Hibou, *La bureaucratisation du monde à l’ère néolibérale*, La Découverte, coll. “Cahiers libres”, 2012.

¹² Pierre Jacquet, “À la poursuite des Objectifs du millénaire”, *Option Finance*, January 2005, p.50.

¹³ This is especially relevant for large consortiums, which are often driven by a concern with limiting the administrative weight of contractual management, rather than by a programmatic logic of optimisation.

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According to the liberal model, competition between actors would also naturally ensure intervention quality. But cooperation between actors is most negatively impacted by this strong competition: between NGOs, but also sometimes between sponsors (as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Katanga: the duplication of interventions, and even opposition in the same target area, between a project for unconditional food distribution funded by the World Food Programme and a project involving agricultural groups that required greater investment from beneficiaries but with more sustainable results funded by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), both projects limiting the mobilisation of beneficiaries), together with the resulting limited communication (as in the Central African Republic in 2010-2011: funding was allocated by both a European sponsor and an American sponsor for the rehabilitation of the same section of road one year apart).

On paper, all these projects perform well. In practice, local relevance receives little scrutiny, adaptation to changing contexts is complex due to administrative red tape and relatively fixed contracts (a result of the approach based on control rather than partnerships developed by sponsors) and accountability is upward, towards the "purse strings".

The debates surrounding the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 in Istanbul lead one to believe that it will once again be difficult to overcome the issues of quantification and the constraints of timing. The weight of organisational culture is perhaps too significant, and risk aversion too acute. Nevertheless, clear developments must be recognised: a will to concentrate on processes as well as effects, particular attention for recipients' rights, reflection about the role of all the actors, not only NGOs and international organisations, and the mobilisation around the "New Way of Working"¹⁴ (which aims to limit competition between UN actors and within the humanitarian sector in general). These approaches have the merit of considering and integrating risk, and potentially envisaging changes to the current architecture of the humanitarian system.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Biography • Perrine Laissus-Benoist

A graduate of Sciences Po Lille, she has been working for nearly 10 years as a Projects and Evaluation coordinator for various NGOs. She is currently finishing a development economics thesis on the concept of performance in the humanitarian sector with reference to the example of Central Africa at the Centre lillois d'études et de recherches sociologiques et économiques (Clersé-Lille 1-CNRS). Her operational research focuses on the impact of the spread of this concept and its bureaucratisation in the humanitarian system, especially with regard to the implementation of projects promoting resilience. In this context, she collaborates in the development of humanitarian observatories. She also works as a trainer in several specialised masters programmes on the management of humanitarian projects.

¹⁴ For more information on the "New Way of Working", see the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) website, a platform for cooperation agencies: www.icvanetwork.org

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