

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**

## Aid workers and the uprooted: chronic of a parallel evolution

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The issue of population movement didn't start with the Mediterranean refugee saga. And it only became a "migrant crisis" when the concurrence of conflicts, natural disasters and poverty encountered the incompetence of western nations. In this historical and semantic analysis, François Grünewald reminds us that, since they first existed, aid workers have always provided assistance to "the wretched of the earth".

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Since the start of the "migrant crisis" in the summer of 2015, the issue of population displacements – symptom of a more profound world crisis – has taken up considerable space on international agendas and in national debate. With people escaping the worst conflicts of recent years, "climate" refugees fleeing natural disasters and environmental degradation or migrants risking everything to escape the endemic and structural poverty of their home country, the sheer number of people wandering in the wilderness – or wandering at sea as we saw with *Aquarius* at the beginning of the summer 2018<sup>1</sup> – has put this issue back on the front page. "Back" because what we don't know – or rather what we feign not to know – is that this is in fact endlessly recurrent news. Population displacements have been part of the history of humanity from the dawn of time. And, going back just 50 years, they have been part of the history of humanitarian aid since the 1970s. But today – perhaps because it has reached the final stages of its paroxysmal evolution and more importantly of its potential for political exploitation – the issue has become steeped in semantic confusion. This confusion is no doubt due to its complexity, but also to ignorance of the legal and normative frameworks for managing displacements. More importantly, we are now seeing different (to say the least!) perceptions<sup>2</sup> of reception, generosity and exile, with worrying trends such as the rise in populism in Europe and the building of a wall between the USA and Mexico. This article aims to set the history of uprooted populations alongside that of humanitarian aid workers in order to identify legal and operational issues and analyse the challenges of mass population movements for our societies, for humanity and for the operational practices of aid actors.

### Refugees

We tend to forget that before being a safe haven for refugees, Europe was a land of emigration. Modern-day dynamics greatly resemble the events leading up to the Irish exodus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example. Indeed, the pattern is familiar: a political crisis (repression by the British since the rebellion by Irish Catholics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) leading to an agricultural crisis (collapse of potato production), followed by famine and the emigration of over 6 million people between 1845 and 1950.

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<sup>1</sup> "En Espagne, consensus sur l'"Aquarius", *Le Monde*, 18 June 2018, [www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/06/18/en-espagne-consensus-sur-l-aquarius\\_5316922\\_3214.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/06/18/en-espagne-consensus-sur-l-aquarius_5316922_3214.html)

<sup>2</sup> Michel Agier, *Gérer les indésirables. Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire*, Flammarion, 2008.

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In France, providing a safe haven for refugees dates back to before the Second World War. The civil war that ravaged Spain between the summer of 1936 and the spring of 1939 caused hundreds of thousands of Spaniards to cross the Pyrenees in fear for their lives. After a period of considerable generosity under the Popular Front, the government of Edouard Daladier then did everything in its power to bring the influx of foreigners under control. In 1938, in response to a sharp rise in xenophobia in a country which until then had welcomed exiles with open arms, recruiting tens of thousands of foreign workers to fill the demographic gaps caused by the First World War, a decree was published providing for the internment of “undesirable” foreigners (this is the adjective used in the foreword to the text) in “special centres”. Although the waning Third Republic granted asylum to Spanish Republicans, it did so with such reticence that the resulting conditions – separation of families, forced returns, the creation of camps – were often inhumane. In 1939, due to a lack of vision or foresight, French reception policy was essentially security-oriented. The Second World War saw a change of attitude. People from all over Europe fleeing Nazi persecution were offered refuge, often hidden or even helped to cross the mountains and the seas to safety. Here again, our country showed its good side, a generous and courageous side. But it also revealed a very dark side, with denunciations, roundups by the police and arrests at dawn.

In the wake of the Yalta conference in 1945 and the division of Europe into pro-American and pro-Soviet camps, refugees were easily identifiable: they were dissidents and groups fleeing the Soviet system, sneaking under the “Iron Curtain” that had just been drawn across the continent. It was against this backdrop, and following an episode at sea in 1947 – the odyssey of the *Exodus*, harbinger of present displacement tragedies – that the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July was drafted.

The *Exodus* was a ship full of Holocaust survivors seeking to settle in Palestine, under British mandate at the time. But the authorities, who were trying to limit the immigration of Jews to this country in order to avoid tensions with the Arab population, prevented the ship from landing for weeks, stopping the *Exodus* as it neared the Palestinian coast. Its passengers were sent to Cyprus, where they were put on three ships. After one port of call in France where they were invited to disembark, the British navy decided to send all its passengers into the zone under British control in Germany. Passengers began to engage in passive resistance on a large scale, starting a hunger strike and refusing to disembark. Thus began a long period of wandering at sea – a circumstance to be tragically mirrored 70 years later by the *Aquarius*.

The first major post-war refugee operation was also linked to the Palestinian crisis. The “Nakba” (“catastrophe”) of 14 May uprooted 700,000 Palestinians from their homes and, together with the Six Day War, redrew the map in the Middle East. The creation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1948 was an indicator of the political awareness of the scale of the Palestinian refugee crisis. Today, UNRWA<sup>3</sup> continues to provide basic services to the big Palestinian refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as those confined in Gaza and the West Bank. A veritable administration, for a long time it held the monopoly over assistance to Palestinian refugees until the creation in recent years of OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and the humanitarian agencies of the UN system in Palestine. The recent decision by the US government to freeze funding for UNRWA in an attempt to deprive millions of Palestinians of their refugee status (transmissible from generation to generation) has resulted in a significant

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<sup>3</sup> [www.unrwa.org](http://www.unrwa.org)

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heightening of tensions in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa, editor's note) zone, already in a state of serious unrest with the crises in Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

The end of the Second World War also saw an outbreak of conflicts resulting from colonial history and the lifting of the political "lid" on a number of "pressure cookers" in which the consequences of colonial choices had long been simmering, choices such as which ethnicity, religious community or elite to put in power, or how to slice up countries, leaving peoples to co-exist or dividing communities with artificial boundaries. The first of the three Indo-Pakistani wars in 1947 was the first in a series of major modern-day crises, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and chasing ten million refugees out of one country and into another. It was also a war of blocs and of difficult choices in a context of binary international politics and a powerless UN Security Council.

The Cold War, with its tropical offshoots and its redeployments, especially the Sino-Soviet component, created a new dynamic: massive movements of populations fleeing war and repression, manipulated by all kinds of propaganda. The Cambodian refugees in Thailand, the Afghans in Pakistan and the Nicaraguans in Honduras may have been on the "right side", but they still had to stay in the countries of first asylum where camps provided "rest and recreation" for "freedom fighters". All over the world, the Cold War had made political pawns of those fleeing war and oppression at the hands of allies of the USSR. Anti-communism (whether on the right or the left-wing) and the loss of political illusions in the wake of May 1968 resulted in the emergence of a new actor: NGOs without borders. Working in refugee camps, some of them in countries at war, these "warriors without weapons"<sup>4</sup> seriously and lastingly disrupted conventional political agendas.

The embassies selecting refugees to be given asylum in a third country (UNHCR's third sustainable solution, alongside integration in the first asylum country and return to the country of origin through tripartite agreements) were mainly looking for teachers, engineers and people who could speak foreign languages. But from 1985 onwards, most of the Cambodian refugees in the Aranya Prathet camps in Thailand<sup>5</sup> were peasant farmers, a fact which reduced the embassies' acceptance rates considerably. In many contexts, "push and pull factors" became central to the strategic management of refugee flows: encouraging them to come and settle in camps by offering favourable reception conditions or, on the contrary, attempting to contain the flows, or even reverse them, by putting tough conditions in place at reception sites. Institutional donors – the financial arm of State policies – then instrumentalised the UN agencies and NGOs by reducing or increasing aid budgets. Peasants still accounted for the majority of refugees in camps when the end of the Cold War suddenly changed the game. Policy switched to ensuring they returned home as quickly as possible. However, programmes of support to returning refugees were largely insufficient and reintegration was often very difficult: returning refugees were known to be those who had fled, and many were even seen as traitors.

Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan served as a rear base for "freedom fighters". Many humanitarian missions for the interior of the country were prepared here among these refugees, while the CIA and other services trained anti-Soviet war actors in the camps in Pashtun territory and maintained information networks among the refugee communities in Quetta, Peshawar or

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<sup>4</sup> To quote the title of Dr. Marcel Junod's work, *Le Troisième combattant. De l'ypérite en Abyssinie à la bombe atomique d'Hiroshima*, Payot, 1947 [ed. note: Marcel Junod was an ICRC delegate from 1935 to 1945. For the American edition of his book, the title was translated as "Warrior without weapons"].

<sup>5</sup> François Grünwald, "OK bye bye : populations cambodgiennes dans les camps de réfugiés", *Affaires Cambodgiennes*, L'Harmattan, 1990, p.52-73.

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the high Chitral valley. The end of the Cold War also led to major budget cuts and a reduction in the quality of services. Taking advantage of the calm in Afghanistan since the arrival of the Taliban, tens of thousands of refugees returned home. But on the way they crossed paths with new waves of Afghans heading for exile: often high-ranking officials of the Najibullah regime or the first years of Tajik rule, fleeing the hardline regime of the “theology scholars”.

One very symbolic situation from a current perspective was the exodus of Vietnamese fleeing the arrival of the communists in Saigon<sup>6</sup>. This was the first time aid operations were carried out by boat to rescue refugees in distress in hostile seas, and saw the epic saga of the *Ile de Lumière*, mythical predecessor of the *Aquarius*. From the South China Sea to the Mediterranean, whether faced with dangerous Thai pirates or unscrupulous Libyan people traffickers, the Law of the Sea, the imperative of saving any life in danger, now and 40 years ago, is the same imperative that drives humanitarian action and the law supporting it.

### Internally-displaced people

In 1977, in the context of Cold War civil wars, the Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Conventions were drafted. They broadly covered the victims of these internal conflicts, although the expression “internally displaced person (IDP)” was not used (the ICRC preferring to recognise the status of “victim of the conflict” to statuses associated with place of residence). This expression only emerged at the end of the 1980s, coined by Jean Pierre Hocké, High Commissioner for Refugees. Perestroika was underway, peace negotiations were progressing in Cambodia and Afghanistan and there was a need not only to prepare for the repatriation of refugees but also to prevent new cross-border population flows. Refugees no longer had the same political interest as during the Cold War and the doors to asylum were already firmly shut. Sadako Ogata, head of HCR from 1991 to 2000, greatly developed the IDP concept during the crises in the Balkans, Somalia, Rwanda and South Sudan. Until then, help for internally-displaced people had been provided mainly by the ICRC, notably within the framework of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention of 1949 and its Additional Protocols of 1977. A new chapter began with the Security Council decision to give the HCR an *ad hoc* mandate to work with people displaced during the Balkans crisis. For a long time, a Security Council Decision was all that was needed for the HCR to take charge of displaced persons, but things became more complicated with the creation of the DHA, later to become OCHA. Inter-agency coordination of assistance for these displaced populations became a key issue in contexts of crisis, especially with the growth in the humanitarian aid budgets devoted to them.

### Refugees, IDPs and host populations

The crises in Somalia, South Sudan and Rwanda, with their millions of refugees, were the first major refugee crises outside of the Cold War. They raised the critical issue of the reception of refugees and launched the debate on sustainable solutions<sup>7</sup> and protection. They also led to major changes in humanitarian approaches. The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda produced an astonishing optical illusion. Although most of the lessons of this evaluation

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<sup>6</sup> “Grâce à l’*Île de Lumière*, des milliers de Vietnamiens ont reconstruit leur vie”, *La Croix*, 8 August 2013, [www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Grace-a-l-Ile-de-Lumiere-des-milliers-de-Vietnamiens-ont-reconstruit-leur-vie-2013-08-08-996240](http://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Grace-a-l-Ile-de-Lumiere-des-milliers-de-Vietnamiens-ont-reconstruit-leur-vie-2013-08-08-996240)

<sup>7</sup> François Grünewald, “Les 4 R: Retour, réconciliation, réhabilitation, reconstruction”; *Déplacés et réfugiés: la mobilité sous contrainte*, IRD/ORSTOM editions, 1999, p.409-427.

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concerned the lack of attention paid to signs warning of an imminent crisis and the response system's inaction in the face of a "genocide" situation, what remained in the humanitarian galaxy's collective subconscious was a series of complicated technical challenges, such as the reception in just a few days of millions of refugees on the edges of Lakes Uvira and Goma and the setting up of IDP camps inside Rwanda. Latrines, shelters, health systems – it was all pretty chaotic. Thus, the findings of the Joint Evaluation led to the development of the Sphere Project in 1999<sup>8</sup> and its universal minimum standards. These minimum standards caused a general outcry among French NGOs. Can we regulate all humanitarian aid according to technical standards designed for refugee camps? Twenty years later, the question was back on the table, but had been inverted. This time the focus was on the appalling reception conditions in Sangatte and the Calais "Jungle", the concentration of tents in Paris or the camps on the islands of Lesbos and Chios in Greece. In our rich countries engaged in humanitarian action, the question now was why are there no minimum conditions applicable to reception here, especially when the needs become long-term?

But as well as the very "technical" reflections at NGO level, issues of protection and the concomitant respect of national laws and international humanitarian law (including the Convention on the status of refugees) were raised at State level. Long debates under the aegis of the African Union led to the drafting in 2009 of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, known as the Kampala Convention. This Convention clearly addressed the issue of the location of camps in relation to the borders of the countries in situations of internal conflict that have generated the displacement. In more recent refugee crises, the generosity of countries such as Uganda, Niger, Mauritania and Cameroon has been impressive.

The issue of local populations in areas occupied by refugees first appeared on the humanitarian agenda at the start of the 1980s with the situation on the Thai border. The question was how to compensate these populations for the loss of their land or for the difficulties caused by the presence of the Khmer refugees. A large-scale programme called "Thai affected villages" was put in place as part of the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), one of the first complex humanitarian operations in the history of the UN. This decision was a political one, as the presence of the Thai army and Thai communist party rebels active in this poor area of Isan made humanitarian aid work delicate. Thirty years on, consideration of the impact of concentrations of uprooted people on the host population is an integral aspect of all humanitarian operations.

The reform of the UN's humanitarian system and the introduction of the "clusters" system made coordination between the HCR and OCHA more complex, as each had its own tools and methods. Things gradually became more straightforward as areas of responsibility were more clearly defined. In the operations led by the HCR and its partners, things were made simple by NGOs' financial dependency on the HCR. A relatively close working relationship formed within the clusters between the NGOs, the UN agency in charge of each cluster and the system validating the inclusion of projects in OCHA's call<sup>9</sup>. But internal tensions remained visible within the United Nations system, as shown by our evaluations in Chad and of the Syrian crisis.

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Dufour, Véronique de Geoffroy and François Grünewald, "Rights, Standards and Quality in a Complex Humanitarian Space: Is Sphere the Right Tool?", *Disasters*, vol.28, n°2, June 2004, p.124-141.

<sup>9</sup> Abby Stoddard *et al.*, *Cluster Approach Evaluation*, November 2007, OCHA, [www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/erd-3641-full.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/erd-3641-full.pdf)

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES****Migration**

Migration is not new. Since the beginning of humanity, people have moved in search of greener pastures or new territory or to escape increasingly harsh climates. The French colonists who left for Algeria and the Portuguese who headed for Angola and Mozambique, not forgetting the convicts sent to colonise South Africa and Australia, are more recent examples. But the biggest migration flows are often within the same continent, such as the inter-African migrations, often a continuation of rural exoduses from the poor countryside to hinterland towns, then from these towns to the mega-ports.

During France's "Thirty Glorious years", when the country was being rebuilt after the Second World War, the government encouraged massive emigration from the South Sahara region. Thus began "the long voyage of the people of the river" to borrow the title of Adrian Adam's magnificent book (*Le long voyage des gens du fleuve*). The biggest waves of West African migrants were Soninke until, under the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the government offered 10,000,00 francs to encourage the return home of people who, with the money they had been sending back to their home country, had become a vital resource for a very poor region the size of France. Meanwhile the living conditions in the Sonacotra hostels for migrant workers were made harder for those wanting to stay. At the time, a small group of NGOs, including Cimade, Grdr and CCFD, attempted to explain why this policy wouldn't work, but in vain. Then came the "co-development" period, which tried to curb the exodus, until François Mitterrand's government finally authorised family reunification. Migration thus began to diversify. Made up essentially of Turks, Kosovars and other migrants from the Balkans in Germany, and people from the whole of West Africa and also China in France, specific neighbourhoods were created to accommodate them and segregation set in. As economic difficulties and unemployment increased in our countries, rejection and populism grew steadily, with ever-stronger opposition to migration in general and the reception of migrants in particular.

**Uprooting and urban dynamics**

Colombian peasants fleeing abuse, Afghan refugees extending the suburbs of Pakistani towns, IDPs from Darfur huddling around Nyala, nomads from the Sahel or Somalia trying to earn enough money to replace herds decimated by drought or migrants on the road into exile – they all end up in cities<sup>10</sup>. However long they stay, and whether or not their presence leads to the creation of new halos of urbanisation, these dynamics are formidable in terms of demographics, the societal changes they bring about and the impacts they have on urban services. Humanitarian aid is still in its infancy in these situations and it is only thanks to alliances with urban stakeholders and development agencies specialised in urban issues that the first promising initiatives have begun to see the light of day in countries like Lebanon, where one person in every four is a refugee. It has taken humanitarian NGOs a while to understand the new paradigms of aid in urban areas. To begin with, they came armed only with the approaches they had developed in rural areas (such as the sites of the Cold War conflicts and conflicts left over from colonial times) and refugee camps. It took the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to make them look at things differently.

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<sup>10</sup> Agnès de Geoffroy, *Aux marges de la ville, les populations déplacées par la force: enjeux, acteurs et politiques: étude comparée des cas de Bogotá (Colombie) et de Khartoum (Soudan)*, thesis, Paris 8, 2009.

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### Reasons to hope?

With the Mediterranean and Sahel regions (Syria, Libya, etc.) entering a period of turbulence, unresolved conflicts (Eritrea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, etc.) continue to generate a continuous flow of migrants. For populations trying to reach Europe, the reception policy in many countries has become extremely restrictive. British intransigence has led to disaster in Sangatte and then in the Calais Jungle. The exodus via Turkey and the Greek islands has ground to a halt in the Balkans. Europe's *Ode to Joy* is gradually giving way to Fortress Europe and France's Enlightenment has been reduced to a few candles in flimsy shelters and icy tents. But for refugees, there are still a few reasons to be hopeful.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) call on UNHCR to work with a wide range of partners, including not just governments, but also refugees themselves, as well as NGOs, UN agencies, the private sector and civil society, including think tanks, academia and faith leaders. This coalition of energies should help ease the pressure on countries that host refugees, build the self-reliance of refugees, expand access to resettlement in third countries and, lastly, foster conditions that enable refugees to voluntarily return to their home countries. For migrants without refugee status, however, the outlook is much bleaker.

Observers of the tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies in the practices developing internationally and across Europe are despairing. We were with our German friends on the day the first trains transporting refugees arrived in Berlin, and we were overwhelmed by the amazing generosity of the people of Berlin who had come *en masse* with “Welcome” signs, hot soup, cakes and clothes for the children. Since then, things have gone rapidly downhill. The agreement between Europe and Turkey has slowed down the exodus via Greece, but new routes into exile are appearing – ever more dangerous, ever more lethal. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, is paying a high political price for her brave choices. Europe in general has taken a dangerous path, torn between its extremes.

But you can't hold back the tide when conflicts, poverty, government mismanagement, the degradation of economic exchanges and the growing impact of climate change keep forcing men and women to leave their homes in search of a less terrifying future. So we need to ready ourselves. We need to find more of the spirit in evidence at the church of Saint Bernard in Paris where, with Lucie and Raymond Aubrac, the marvellous Stéphane Hessel and so many others, we tried to promote another vision of the world, of hospitality and fraternity.

*Translated from the French by Mandy Duret*

### Biography • François Grünewald

François Grünewald trained as an agricultural engineer at the National Institute of Agronomy, Paris Grignon. He has worked in the international humanitarian aid sector for more than 35 years. In 1997, after holding various positions with the United Nations, ICRC and in NGOs, he became president and then General and Scientific Director of Groupe URD, a research, evaluation, methodology and training institute specialising in crisis management, emergency relief and reconstruction.

He has carried out numerous research projects and evaluations on emergency response and post-crisis programmes for different institutional funding agencies, the ICRC, the IFRC, the UN and NGOs. He is currently coordinating work on disaster management and resilience, as well as on population displacements. Formerly an associate professor at the University of Paris XII, he teaches in various institutions in Europe, Canada and the United States. The author of many articles, he has also edited a number of publications, notably *Entre Urgence et développement, Villes en guerre et guerres en ville* and *Bénéficiaires ou partenaires*, published by Éditions Karthala (see [www.urd.org](http://www.urd.org)).

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