

The United Against Inhumanity initiative

Khaled Mansour, Jean-Baptiste Richardier and Antonio Donini • Members of the emerging movement United Against Inhumanity

We are inaugurating a new “Tribune” section that will allow for the expression of various initiatives in the humanitarian sector, and original, iconoclastic and even polemical points of view. And it's the United Against Inhumanity initiative that features in its first edition. Born of urgent expectations, disappointed by the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, matured within the *Forum Espace Humanitaire* and supported during its embryonic phase by the Humanitarian Alternatives association, it takes its official flight to call for a global mobilisation of civil society.

WE MUST DEFEND OUR COMMON HUMANITY WHILE REBUILDING IT!

Khaled Mansour • Member of the emerging movement United Against Inhumanity

Fifteen years ago, I survived a terrorist attack against the UN headquarters in Iraq. The massive explosion killed 22 of my colleagues. With them, a barrier that I had erected, mostly unconsciously, several years before also crumbled. This barrier ostensibly helped me cope with the endless and continuous scenes of abject poverty; violent deaths and inexplicable atrocities; and the looming menace which I had to live close to for years.

For months, I stood at the brink of an abyss of dark and bloody memories. Scenes came flooding: a refugee camp in Jenin which was flattened by Israeli soldiers; small tombs of dead malnourished children in Hirat, Western Afghanistan, left to their horrific fate by the Taliban and the leader nations of the war on terror; and graphic stories of torture inflicted on political prisoners or suspects from Syria to Pakistan.

Such scenes have not disappeared. On the contrary, they have multiplied since then, but I no longer try to look away or forget to protect myself from atrocities that dominate conflicts and areas of political instability. Like many people who engage in humanitarian aid and defence of human rights, I have to grapple with occasional attacks of depression and waves of sadness, but I see them as signs of a shared humanity and a healthy vulnerability. They are also a call for resistance through writing, teaching, volunteering and – most important – working with others to defend the dignity and rights of people in conflict. It is a call for action to build and rebuild what our common humanity means and how we can work together to protect it.

There is a prevalent sense among critics of the humanitarian aid system that the old has disintegrated while the new is not yet born, as Gramsci said almost a century ago. There is also a shocking indifference in global and regional centres of power as to the fate of hundreds of millions of people whose lives and livelihoods are decimated in conflicts. Over the past few years, millions of innocent unarmed civilians have been subjected to a continuous frightening punishment in routinised military operations in Syria, the Gaza Strip, Yemen, Myanmar and many

other places. The Assad forces have used indiscriminate barrel bombs and chemical weapons against civilians, while the Israeli and Saudi forces (and the US forces before them) effectively disregard the concept of military advantage as they bomb densely populated areas or vital infrastructure installations such as schools and hospitals, killing and harming far more civilians than members of the Houthi or Hamas or Taliban militias. It became extremely difficult to coax combatants into compliance with the laws of war as stipulated in the four Geneva conventions, let alone hold violators accountable. Armed non-State actors, ISIS for example, have also committed their share of spectacular atrocities. Refugee law is not faring much better. The EU deterrence measures against possible refugees are an abomination that resulted in thousands of people – seeking asylum – drowning at sea.

This is fuelling cynicism, and sometimes opportunism and selfishness, among aid workers as well as recipients. Aid agencies often seem like vultures pouncing when people fall down dead or wounded. For example, they jockeyed in 2018 for a bigger slice of the USD930 million promised by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to a gigantic aid operation in Yemen. These two countries have led a merciless war against Yemeni Houthi militias, killing as many as 20,000 civilians over the past three years. Starvation as a war tactic has been regularly used in Syria since 2012, predominantly by the regime, while aid agencies simply acquiesced as the authorities rejected one request after another to access besieged areas. The same agencies continued to work in Assad-controlled territories. And now, we face the criminalisation of both asylum seekers and those who help them in western countries.

These are disturbing trends, which corrode the principles and spirit of humanitarian aid, and even undermine the claim of a commonality that should automatically trigger empathy among all human beings.

This erosion of human empathy is most disturbing, especially towards people who live across the borders and may seek refuge by crossing into one's own territory. With an unprecedented rise in populist demagoguery among politicians and hyper-chauvinism among citizenry, rights (legal and otherwise) are increasingly limited to citizens, and even then not to all of them. Such claims are not a matter of freedom of expression, as they have fomented sectarian and political violence that killed Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and Shiite Muslims in Pakistan. Within societies from the US to India, more demagogue chauvinists advocate that all humans were not equal and that not all cultures can peacefully co-exist. They are not the majority yet, but their influence is mushrooming.

Humanism in a sense is an act of faith which rests on certain cosmopolitan values that form the roots that feed much of the humanitarian and human rights movements. These values, to say the least, are beleaguered. This is coupled, or maybe fuelled, by the absence of an international or national political will to tackle the increasing atrocities in conflicts. This absence was very evident in the ICRC's failure to introduce a new mechanism for compliance with the Geneva Conventions in 2015, or in the minuscule outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit and the Refugee Summit in 2016, after years of preparation, producing no real change to the grim reality.

So, to quote another Marxist, who was maybe luckier than Gramsci, what is to be done?

There is a large body of literature and policy studies that deconstruct the current aid system. There is a ton of policy papers and many think tanks which have ideas to reform/fix or change the humanitarian enterprise.

But what seems to be missing is sustained popular pressure to force a genuine change or quicken the pace of reform. There is a clear need for a movement of people to struggle alongside those who are affected in conflicts in order to ensure their rights to protection and basic needs.

This is why a group of former and current aid workers, researchers, and activists from several countries came together last year and started working energetically but without false hopes to build such a global movement. They want to engage in social action and political advocacy, nationally and internationally, and organise social forces publicly against the increasing mass atrocities around the world.

United Against Inhumanity is still emerging, propelled by the outcome of extensive consultations with diverse groups and potential stakeholders in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia and Europe since late 2017 to turn a common feeling of indignation into a repertoire of impactful actions.

The overall purpose of UAI is to initiate and facilitate joint action by civil society at global, regional and national levels to challenge warring parties, their sponsors, governments and relevant international organisations in order to reverse the normalisation of indiscriminate warfare and the erosion of the right to asylum.

This is a tall order and a very ambitious objective! But it is probably one of the very few ways left to us to stand against unbridled and murderous acts of inhumanity in conflicts. It is our alternative to building higher barriers, material and psychological, that we falsely think could protect us.

Biography • Khaled Mansour

Khaled is a member of the emerging movement United against Inhumanity. He is a senior fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative. After ten years of journalism, he worked for 13 years in several aid and peacekeeping operations. He led Egypt's premier human rights organisation before stepping down to focus on writing and teaching. This text is based on a keynote speech he delivered at the International Humanitarian Studies Association conference in the Hague in August 2018.

UNITED AGAINST INHUMANITY: THE START OF AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

Jean-Baptiste Richardier • Member of the emerging movement United Against Inhumanity

Tackling inhumanity is imperative now! It is a worldwide responsibility but it is also one in which citizens can play an important role through individual and collective action. United Against Inhumanity (UAI) will seize every opportunity to engage with a wide range of actors operating at the local or global level, to identify partnerships and to spread the word that the voices of a multitude of communities and committed individuals can prove an irresistible force against the inhumanity of contemporary warfare.

How did UAI come about?

In the aftermath of the World Humanitarian Summit a diverse international group of experienced humanitarian practitioners, members of NGOs and think tanks from a broad range of countries and backgrounds started discussing the need for a space for civil society to demand change: what could be done, practically, to counter the inhumanity of wars and their cortege of consequences? What is the future of the universalist principles around which humanitarian action is organised? What can be done to enhance the survival and dignity of people living in or fleeing from armed conflict when the international system is unwilling or unable to do so? What sort of credible global mechanism could be established to monitor and report publicly on State and non-State actors responsible for atrocities and crimes against humanity? What would be the added value of our initiative?

Incubation phase (July 2017 to June 2018)

Working with initial seed money provided by a handful of NGOs and foundations, a provisional core group organised a series of informal consultations with national NGOs, civil society groups and think tanks in several humanitarian hubs to test the concept of UAI and whether or not there was sufficient appetite for a global campaign. Brainstorming sessions were organised under the so-called Chatham House privacy rule in Bangkok, Beirut, Berlin, Dublin, Geneva, London, Maputo, Nairobi, New York, Paris, Phnom Penh, Washington DC, Yangon and Rome over the past year. Bilateral briefings with concerned individuals from international institutions were also held. The inputs gathered in these consultations contributed to the refining of the UAI concept, modus operandi and potential actions to be conducted.

Most participants in these consultations broadly concurred with the analysis that triggered UAI, namely the crisis of multilateralism and the erosion of the refugee/migration systems coupled with varying levels of indifference in the face of war-related atrocity.

Meanwhile the small group of initiators has expanded regularly to include approximately 450 like-minded practitioners, academics and groups from different geographical, cultural and political settings around the world. Most people consulted agreed that something had to be done urgently to challenge State and non-State armed actors who violate international humanitarian and refugee norms; and that not doing so was tantamount to being complicit to such violations.

Strategic review (June 2018, Geneva)

On the strength of this widespread support for the UAI concept and its potential to capture people's imagination, the initiators convened a Strategic Review meeting to take stock of progress made. It was decided then to move forward with the registration of the emerging UAI international network as an NGO and to launch a Consolidation phase. It will continue to test the appetite for UAI on a wider scale and widen networking and advocacy initiatives while further exploring ambitious mechanisms with the aim of challenging the inhumanity of wars that are taking an unacceptable toll on civilians and the impunity that destroys lives and tears apart societies.

UAI will operate in two ways

Working with institutions and groups that share its goals, UAI's ambition is to collect, analyse and disseminate independently verified documentation on the harm inflicted on civilians subjected to the inhumanity of warfare, and use the data to support the mobilisation of public opinion to confront perpetrators and encourage compliance with international law and respect for universal human values.

Producing knowledge

At present there is no credible and independent entity that systematically collects and analyses violations of humanitarian norms and standards and makes this information available to the general public. To fill this vacuum, UAI plans to engineer the establishment of an Independent Humanitarian Watch (IHW) to track and document inhumanity, and an (In)humanity Index could encourage compliance with international law and respect for universal human values.

Critical activities for the Consolidation phase will involve a series of technical consultations on the feasibility of these mechanisms, bringing together academic experts and practitioners in the elements needed. The plan is to collaborate with specialists who have worked on similar issues in the past, in particular the proponents of the "IHL Watch" proposal, which was put forward by Sweden in 2012. The University of Edinburgh has agreed to host a first technical meeting of experts in autumn 2018.

Promoting a sense of collective responsibility of civil society from all parts of the world

Mobilising a worldwide collective commitment of individuals and groups who refuse to be part of the silence that allows violence to be "normalised", UAI will challenge governments and relevant international and regional organisations to uphold their obligations and actively address war-related atrocities and mistreatment of people fleeing for their lives. It will work with others to advocate for changes in the policies and practices of governments and other warring parties.

The way forward

We envision UAI developing organically as a broad international citizen and civil society campaign in which NGOs and local groups conduct a range of activities in sync with the UAI

Call to Action. The individuals and groups that champion UAI will be supported by a Secretariat reporting to an international Executive Committee (IEC). An Advisory Board will ensure representation of UAI national, regional or thematic groups or chapters that will provide substantive advice to the IEC while conducting their own activities in line with the agreed UAI objectives.

The UAI founding General Assembly took place on 2 October in Geneva. Symbolically, the founding members (box below) who were present gathered under Broken Chair, place des Nations, to mark the beginning of this new collective adventure.

Following the constitutive general assembly, symbolically several founding members of UAI gathered under the “Broken Chair” monument, Place des Nations in Geneva.



From left to right:

Jean-Baptiste Richardier, Nathalie Herlemont, Antonio Donini, Norah Niland, Tammam Aloudat, Martin Barber, Mark Bowden, Nicolas Borsinger, Audrey Sala.

UAI Founding members : Mimidoo Achakpa (Nigeria); Saba Al Mubaslat (Jordan); Tammam Aloudat (Syria); Laetitia Atlani-Duault (France); Martin Barber (UK); Nounou Booto (Democratic Republic of Congo); Nicolas Borsinger (Switzerland); Mark Bowden (UK); Francis Charhon (France); Pauline Chetcutti (France); Cristina Churruca (Spain); Deirdre Clancy (Ireland); Antonio Donini (Italy); Juliano Fiori (Brazil); Sarah Hammerl (Germany); Nathalie Herlemont (France); Anne Héry (France); Khaled Mansour (Egypt); Benoît Miribel (France); Kostas Moschochoritis (Greece); Norah Niland (Ireland); Jean-Baptiste Richardier (France); Stephane Rousseau (France/Thailand); Audrey Sala (Peru); Jeevan Sharma (Nepal); Margot Tudor (UK); Ulrike Von Pilar (Germany).

Biography • Jean-Baptiste Richardier

A medical doctor and co-founder of Handicap International in 1982 to bring assistance to Cambodian refugees with disabilities, notably mutilations caused by anti-personnel mines, he has steered the development of the Handicap International network, present today in nearly 70 countries. In 2014, he worked to create the HI Institute on Humanitarian Action and to launch the *Humanitarian Alternatives* international review. He is one of the co-founders of the association United Against Inhumanity, established in October 2018.

THE CRUMBLING PILLARS OF THE TEMPLE OF STATES... AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Antonio Donini • Member of the emerging movement United Against Inhumanity

The UN in its current form does not serve the citizens it promises to protect. Is it time for a “UN 2.0” that puts citizens at the centre? This article, based on a presentation at the International Humanitarian Studies Association conference at the end of August 2018, explains why the current international system is becoming irrelevant. A world citizenship approach must urgently be explored. A good place to start is citizen mobilisation around the United Against Inhumanity agenda.

When the founding fathers – and the single founding mother – were assembling the building blocks of the United Nations in the waning months of WWII, they were spurred by the sentiment or, at least, the narrative of “never again”. Jettisoning the lofty Wilsonian ideals of the League of Nations, they expressed their vague notions of peace and security through a mix of functionalist ideas (strongly influenced by David Mitrany) and the victors’ can-do capitalist spirit – a sort of Fordism applied to international relations: the right mix of money and technical expertise would set the scene for peace and development “in larger freedom”. Arguably, the notion that collective action problems (i.e. politics) could be solved or at least defused by de-politicising them through technique is one of the great contributions of the UN to international cooperation. This approach worked more (decolonisation) or less well (superpower crossed vetoes). For more than 50 years it was the dominant standard operating procedure – SOP – of the international system.

Then something broke. Despite the heart-warming rhetoric of “We, the peoples”, the unit of measure in the international system was definitely the State. “My country right or wrong” – sovereignty – was what was worshipped in the temple of States. Could the founding parents have done otherwise? Were the lessons of the League of Nations learned? Probably not: there was still a war to win and spoils to distribute. The compromises that led to the Charter were based on the *status quo*, not on any deep thinking about the future. And now we have an ossified system totally impervious to reform.

While States were busy honouring and polishing their tabernacle, the world had moved on. The post-WWII order built on sovereignty, triumphant capitalism, superpower rivalry and spheres of interest collapsed with the Wall, but the institutions established to “manage” this order hardly noticed. It became progressively clear that the “system” was constitutionally unfit to deal with transnationality and that “sovereign” States in the North (as had been the case in the South for decades) were unable to rein in unregulated transnational capitalism and globalisation, not to mention radicalised non-geographical armed groups and movements, the havoc they and the Global War on Terror wreaked, population flows (forced and voluntary) and climate change. Trump and the demise of multilateralism are but an epiphenomenon in the collapse of the so-called rule-based world order. Perhaps Rosa Luxemburg’s prediction that when the capitalist system ran out of an “outside”, to occupy and exploit, it would reach its structural limits and collapse had come true?

Capitalism is of course alive and well. It is the sovereign State as we know it since the Treaties of Westphalia that is paying the price of the unfettered success of globalised capitalism. This more

or less liberal “State-form” has expanded in tandem with the capitalist mode of production and no viable alternatives seem to exist to either. But the relationship between the two has gone through an interesting reversal that has Marx and Keynes turning in their graves. The idea of the welfare State is truly gone (well, there are still some vestiges in places like Scandinavia and maybe France and Ireland). No State is willing or able to claw back control over transnational capital and finance. In fact, while States are still important cogs in the inter-State machine, this weakening of the State is functional to capitalist development.

The challenge to the capitalism-sovereign State dyad is thus not coming, as Mark Duffield would put it, from “barbarians” in the borderlands – as these borderlands effectively no longer exist – but from the “inside”: from the transnationality of globalised capitalism, transnational millenarist movements and the like.

What did the UN ever do for us?

A system of global order based on the idealised notion of sovereign States, and their power configurations as they stood seventy years ago, is poorly equipped to deal with collective action problems that are transnational at their core. Moreover, citizens have no say whatsoever in how these institutions are run and for whose benefit. All attempts to reform the UN have failed. Yet it rambles on with its tiny brain and huge dysphoric body to which additional appendages are added as soon as a “new” problem hits the headlines. Conventional wisdom has it that only a WWIII might provide enough motivation and vision to equip the UN for the future. Let’s not go there. Instead, let’s think outside the box.

If UN reform is pointless, then DRUNSA is the answer: don’t reform the UN, start again¹. Build something in parallel: if it works, it will move centre stage. There is a research agenda here on how to make transnational citizen participation the cornerstone of any institutional reform.

The argument goes like this: the Temple of States was not conceived as a tool to deal with transnationality. It sacralises sovereignty and demonises the individual with or without citizenship. Yet in transnational times States are unable to cope with crises and citizens have no say on the consequences of transnational forces that affect them directly. Citizenship, for now, is inherently linked to the nation-State. But if the nation-State is no longer able to respond to citizens’ needs and is downright hostile to those seeking refuge or lacking citizenship, perhaps the time has come to redefine citizenship by de-linking it from territory. Technology can be pressed in the service of global citizenship so that rights and opportunities could be claimed by all and not just within the confines of national borders. The EU provides some minimalist models of this already. In an extreme example, “if democracy is supposed to give voters some control over their own conditions... should a US election not involve most people on earth?”² Should the citizens of, say, Afghanistan who are directly affected by the results of US elections not have a say or even vote in these elections? Ditto the citizens of Yemen who are being bombed courtesy of Western weapon-of-war factories.

This is, actually, not such a revolutionary idea. It has been around for a while.³

¹ Kudos to Martin Barber for having coined the acronym and set up the DRUNSA organisation of which, as far as I know, he and I were the only two members.

² See Rana Dasgupta, The Demise of the Nation-State, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2018.

³ R. Dasgupta; but also earlier work by Goodin, Arzideh and others.

For now, this is little more than a pipe dream. But shouldn't the question of the participation of human beings on matters that affect them directly be put on the agenda? And if this agenda cannot be handled by the UN because it goes against the grain of the outdated power dynamics of a sclerotic organisation, shouldn't citizens and civil society start thinking of a UN 2.0 – or better still a UCO (United Citizens Organisation)? This UCO would be based on the principle that "as a citizen of the world, I should have a say on anything that affects me". From climate change to the use of pesticides to conflict resolution to people on the move.

The point here is that mainstream international institutions are increasingly less relevant to the nature and scale of the conflicts and crises of the early 21st century. The toll on civilians caught up in or trying to flee vicious wars is particularly high. Armed conflict itself is changing and so is its cortège of humanitarian consequences. We are in a pre-Solferino moment where the old laws no longer work and new ones adapted to the current dispensation have yet to emerge.

The humanitarian *internationale* suffers from similar ills as the State-based international "system". Its very make up is consubstantial with the State system as it is based on a triad of western donors, UN agencies and prevalently western NGOs (in ethos if not in terms of nationality). It may have reached its structural limits. Humanitarian principles have stood the test of time but it is unlikely that they will survive unscathed the current wave of transnational crises and conflicts. The Geneva Conventions are ill equipped to deal with non-geographical wars, not to mention forms of armed urban or mafia-style violence that sometimes kill more civilians than traditional "wars". Like areas controlled by "terrorist" groups, shantytowns in Latin America and elsewhere are becoming "no-go" areas where a governance of sorts is provided by non-State armed actors.

A good place to start DRUNSA is by bringing the citizen into the decision making around humanitarian action. Rhetoric around participation and accountability to affected communities abounds, but the stubborn reality is that the humanitarian enterprise is anything but accountable or participatory. It continues to be an establishment – some say a club – in which the rules have been set, so to speak, by absentee feudal landlords who have no clue about how the land is tilled. Citizen action needs to re-emerge as a force to hold the powers-that-be to account. More importantly, transnational citizen mobilisation – something we saw a lot of in the 1920s and 1930s (International Brigades in Spain, the Third International, the IWW/Wobblies, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Federalist Movement, the anti-colonial movement, etc.) – can sometimes achieve results.

To sum up, it is dubious that nation States can have durable success in combating transnational forces (of capital, finance, ethno-religious millenarism and the like). These movements would be better countered transnationally through a UCO or coalitions of civil society groups or similar citizen-driven initiatives.

United Against Inhumanity: citizens at the centre

And this brings us to United Against Inhumanity (UAI) – an emerging global movement of citizens and civil society who are outraged by the inability and unwillingness of the formal international system to address the causes and consequences of armed conflict. As explained in more detail in the article by Jean-Baptiste Richardier (see above), the goal of UAI is to provide a channel for the indignation of the growing number of citizens and civil society organisations who refuse to sit back and accept the appalling suffering of civilians caught up in war, or the policies and practices that stop children, women and men fleeing today's armed conflicts from reaching

safety. UAI works with citizen and civil society organisations and puts the citizen at the centre of efforts to combat the inhumanity of warfare and the abomination of measures that deny those in need of refuge the right to seek asylum. It aims to increase the political and reputational damage to perpetrators and to support civil society actions on the inhumanity of war and the erosion of asylum.

This, of course, is a tall order. But so was the abolition of slavery, or the struggle for decolonisation or for human rights. Difficulty is not an excuse for veiling our face or sitting on our hands. As Seneca used to say: it is not because things are difficult that we don't do them; it's because we don't do them that they become difficult. In an interconnected and networked world, our common humanity compels us to act. If not, we become “accomplices to that which leaves us indifferent”⁴.

Biography • Antonio Donini

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⁴ George Steiner, *Language and Silence. Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*, New York, Atheneum, 1967, p.150.