

Humanitarian aid workers and the challenge of climate change

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Are humanitarian aid workers ready to tackle the challenge of climate change? We were already asking ourselves this question in 2009¹ on the eve of the COP15 in Copenhagen. Where do we stand now, ten years on?

One obvious change concerns how the challenges are being perceived: back then, apart from a hard core which was trying to mobilise the humanitarian “community”, many actors thought that climate change was not part of their remit. COP15 in Copenhagen was therefore denounced in advance by various figures from the field of humanitarian aid, such as Jean-Hervé Bradol, who saw it as the desire “to dominate the Universe to the point of regulating global temperature differences” and as “Man’s age-old quest to dominate Nature”².

Today, however, every “natural” disaster is examined in terms of climate change. Perhaps excessively so. Climate migrants have become a well-entrenched feature of the media/humanitarian landscape, sometimes blatantly. Even those crises (Darfur, Syria, etc.) which until recently were analysed primarily from a political viewpoint, are often re-examined to highlight the role of climate change, and without necessarily finding a “fair” balance between a straightforward lack of environmental analysis and an over-determination of climate.

Admittedly, some scientific publications have long demonstrated that climate change undeniably exacerbates the threats to food security, access to water and even healthcare, and helps to increase the intensity and/or frequency of extreme events. Consequently, a certain number of “climate discourses” have been deployed in the humanitarian aid sector, without always making it easy to distinguish between hasty short cuts, the conscious choice of “enlightened catastrophism”, and communications strategies drafted quickly in order to garner donations by using buzz words. Yet deep down, what about the organisational methods and practices adopted by humanitarian aid workers? To what extent have they been structurally transformed (or not) to integrate this new challenge? This issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* aims to take stock of these changes which can be manifold.

Given the impact of climate change, organisations whose aim is to “save lives” could be expected to lead by example: are humanitarian actors therefore committed to cutting their greenhouse gas emissions given that ten years ago, two of the most emissive activities – rapid deployment in the field and direct mailing campaigns – seemed to be an integral part of their operating methods?

¹ Christophe Buffet, « Les humanitaires sont-ils prêts à relever le défi du changement climatique ? », *Humanitaire*, n° 23, décembre 2009, <http://journals.openedition.org/humanitaire/598>

² Jean-Hervé Bradol, “The return of the Titans”, *Crash blog*, 18 December 2009, www.msf-crash.org/en/blog/humanitarian-actors-and-practice/return-titans

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Similarly, after COP15, links with environmental NGOs were forged³ to conduct joint advocacy (cutting greenhouse gas emissions, funding to support adaptation in “southern” countries etc.), revise humanitarian standards by incorporating environmental issues (notably the inclusion of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature – WWF – in the Sphere project), or simply to gain a better understanding of the complexity of climate sciences and greater insight into the contribution and limits of impact modelling. Which links have been the most prolific and which have stood the test of time? To what extent is the dialogue ongoing or, conversely, are the two NGO “families” still living in parallel worlds?

Lastly, the joint “humanitarian aid and climate change” theme conjures up ideas of temporality and antagonistic relationships; emergency response tends to save bodies above ground, whereas the effects of climate change are more often understood as long-term phenomena that touch upon social ecosystems. To what extent are approaches such as disaster risk reduction or, more recently, forecast-based financing able to reconcile such temporality with the human–nature relationship?

The contributions to this issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* provide part of the answer to these questions and paint a rich and nuanced picture of current debates. The authors representing the member NGOs of the Disaster Risk Reduction Network (CARE, French Red Cross, Solidarités International, Humanity & Inclusion and Groupe URD) endeavour to re-assign climate change as one of the determining factors of crises whose causes are myriad, and analyse the extent to which frameworks and practices have changed. New standards and funding instruments now allow a better understanding of the various temporalities which link “development”, alert and crisis-management cycles. Development actors consequently now have, more than ever before, the opportunity to demonstrate what the boundaries of aid have experienced. Describing the experience of the Friendship NGO in Bangladesh, Runa Khan, Marc Elvinger and William Lebedel highlight the extent to which the dichotomy between humanitarian and development aid, which has made its mark on western NGOs, is largely unworkable. Would development actors, particularly those in the “south”, have understood the challenges of disaster risk reduction, and then of resilience, much easier and much sooner by integrating climate change forecasts? Marie-Noëlle Reboulet shows how GERES (founded in Marseille in 1976 to promote solar energy) “came across” the energy–climate *nexus* in the early 2000s by transforming its practices and its strategy of association, becoming a player on the carbon markets and then integrating populations’ resilience to the effects of climate change. The point being that humanitarian aid NGOs have a great deal to learn from the work of their colleagues in the development sector; organisations such as *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the iconic organisation that embodies reflective and voluntarily restrictive humanitarian aid in its stances,⁴ and which has long been reluctant to grasp the climate issue. The members of its Canadian and Swiss sections who express their opinions here – admittedly in a personal capacity – demonstrate, however, the range of questions that climate change raises within their organisation, whether in terms of cross-disciplinary context analysis, the involvement of populations, or the reduction of the environmental effects of humanitarian aid missions. Their contribution also questions the blind spot that climate change has been thus far for MSF’s advocacy strategy, and calls for the mobilisation of the humanitarian aid sector as a whole. One could almost be inclined to wonder if, in light of the disasters described, it would be legitimate for MSF to add its (strong) voice to

³ Anne Chetaille, François Grünewald, Guillaume Fauvel, Alix Mazounie et Christophe Buffet, « ONG humanitaires et environnementales : l’alliance nécessaire ? », *Humanitaire*, n° 38, 2014, <http://journals.openedition.org/humanitaire/2951> ; Boris Martin, « Pour un mariage de réseaux ? », *Humanitaire*, n° 38, 2014, <http://journals.openedition.org/humanitaire/2944>

⁴ Rony Brauman, Bruno Rebelle, Boris Martin et Christophe Buffet, « Le Politique, chaînon manquant entre humanitaires et environnementalistes ? », *Humanitaire*, n° 38, 2014, <https://journals.openedition.org/humanitaire/2957>

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all those organisations tackling the causes of climate change and demanding measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A strong gesture which would be all the more logical given the major preoccupation that the climate cause represents and which connects with the political cause of vulnerable populations.

In conclusion to this issue, Audrey Sala rightly reflects on the major conference of researchers and practitioners organised by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Cannes in April 2019 entitled “Health and climate change: taking care of humankind at +2°C”. Through a multitude of ideas and case studies she shows how this issue has increased in importance. Lastly, Arjun Claire and Jérôme Élie analyse the debates which led to the adoption of the two Global Compacts (for migration and on refugees) with a toned-down consideration of the challenges of climate change, given the concerns expressed by certain countries that the international definition of refugee might be expanded.

As can be seen, there is a good deal of resistance and difficulty, and this issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* clearly does not cover all aspects of the subject which is vast, complex and constantly changing. It is not certain, however, that humanitarian aid workers have another ten years before they can *really* address the challenge posed by climate change.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

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To quote this article: Christophe Buffet, “Humanitarian aid workers and the challenge of climate change”,

Humanitarian Alternatives, n°11, July 2019, p.1-7,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/07/17/humanitarian-aid-workers-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-529-7