Chronicle of a foretold manipulation of humanitarian aid?

Audrey Sala • Revue Alternatives Humanitaires

This article cannot be termed a survey but it has much to say about the increasingly strong signs — for anyone willing to notice them — of the growing influence of private economic interests in the humanitarian sector. Audrey Sala brings us an in-depth insight into the world of convergence, “partnerships of enlightened self-interest” and the creeping appropriation of the humanitarian label by stakeholders that are anything but solidarity actors.

Since this review was set up nearly four years ago, we have regularly taken part in forums, conferences, fairs and other events with the aim of promoting our work, highlighting research and fostering reflection and debate on humanitarian aid. This has also been an opportunity for us to meet new readers and potential partners, and to take the pulse of the various players involved in the humanitarian sector. Over the last four years – and it has only taken four years – the evolution has been striking.

In 2016 we attended the Salon des Solidarités fair in Paris and the Semaine des Métiers de l’Humanitaire in Annemasse on working in the humanitarian sector, both events focusing mainly on human resources. There we encountered young student activists looking to work in the sector and make a more permanent commitment. If the debate ever turned to the subject of potential collaboration between NGOs and businesses, it was mainly to discuss the role of the social and solidarity economy. Mentioning the SSE always has the virtue of allaying fears, rarely touching on the possibility of it being a gateway to the neoliberal economy. Such was the case here.

That same year and in 2017, at the Convergences World Forum, less specialised in humanitarian matters and concentrating more on questions of development and environmental protection, new players started to appear on the scene, often from the banking or commercial sectors rather than from non-profit organisations. Thus a representative of a local authority, the founder of a Bangladeshi NGO and a member of the French Development Agency (AFD) could find themselves engaging in talks on the importance of Partnerships for the Goals, the 17th Sustainable Development Goal at the heart of the UN Agenda 2030, with someone from … Pernod Ricard.

In 2018, we were in Brussels to attend AidEx, described as “the leading platform for the international aid and development community to come together and improve the efficiency of aid”. The first stand we came across was that of AirBnB, followed by those of the Qatar Charity and the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities, the two Qatari sponsors of the event. Browsing the stands, we found out about the latest developments from many specialist water treatment companies, the virtual reality simulation tools used by the Red Cross, the products of NITCO, the official Nissan and Renault supplier to international aid and development agencies, and the services of Bolloré Logistics, leader in supply chain management. At our stand, obtained

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free of charge after the withdrawal of another review, issues six and seven of our review, published the same year and focusing on relations between NGOs and the private sector\(^2\), are those that attracted the most attention. Could they have provided food for thought?

In June 2019, the Polish Embassy in Paris took us on what would be first press trip for the *Humanitarian Alternatives* review, as we were embedded\(^3\) at the Warsaw Humanitarian Expo (WHE), held under the honorary patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda. The WHE claims to be “the first trade fair in Poland and Central Europe devoted to humanitarian affairs and development”.

It was announced that Bernard Kouchner and Mark Lowcock\(^4\) would be present but in the end they turned down the invitation, as did the various French journalists invited on the press trip. Was this a scheduling issue? A lack of interest? A political boycott? Fear of an exploitation? Whatever the reasons, I reluctantly found myself as the default “representative” French journalist…

Between two power cuts, in a large warehouse on the outskirts of Warsaw, President Duda described in detail the aims of the Fair and its watchword “aid effectiveness”. He specified that the WHE aimed to become a platform for exchanging ideas, leading to swifter and more effective humanitarian responses. While acknowledging the work of NGOs and United Nations agencies, the spotlight was on the importance of the business sector. Following his speech, the journalists were invited to a press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Director of the Department of Economic Cooperation, Wojciech Ponikiewski. After presenting the four pillars of the event, details of which are given below, we were invited to ask questions. There was only one. It concerned President Duda’s trip to the USA to meet Donald Trump, scheduled the next day, to request a reinforcement of the US military presence in a Poland visibly feeling threatened by Russia. The WHE Forum seemed therefore only of secondary interest.

But let us return to the pillars of the WHE. The first pillar, as Mr Ponikiewski explained, was the creation of a “humanitarian city”, a platform where organisations both governmental and non-governmental, institutions, universities and businesses can meet to showcase their activities, research, services and products. So a typical opportunity for networking, for highlighting the activities of all the stakeholders in the humanitarian community, and nothing that could be considered out of the ordinary for such events, where the interest and benefits of taking part lie precisely in the networking possibilities and in meeting other participants and potential partners.

The second pillar – the highlight of the event – was the conference on the theme of “Responsible Business for Humanitarian Emergencies”, with its high-profile participants. Its stated objective was to promote the development of partnerships between Polish companies and NGOs – rather than between NGOs and companies – and to emphasize the opportunities offered by the humanitarian sector for Polish companies still not sufficiently present in this domain.

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\(^4\) Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
market, if the speaker was to be believed. The event, which also included a side event, the Global Compact Network, was very clearly intended to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies within Polish companies, to make them more competitive and aware of the attractions of gaining market share in the humanitarian aid sector. Moreover, the third pillar, the Warsaw Procurement Forum, was presented as a platform for discussion and advice, empowering Polish firms to respond more successfully to calls for tender for the supply of goods and services to international organisations.

This aspiration for increased efficiency can moreover be seen in the light of questions about the relevance of humanitarian organisations: are NGOs or the United Nations the most suitable bodies to intervene? Are we facing a loss of trust between providers of aid and those receiving it? Some people have referred to the “hypocrisy of humanitarian aid”, whereby the main donors are also those who finance and fuel conflict. In other words, the political exploitation of NGOs and the promotion of more competitive and technically proficient actors.

The fourth and final pillar was the Expo/Fair, an open space “for companies operating in various sectors of development and humanitarian aid”. The stands were divided into seven sections: logistics, communications and technology, shelters, medical and pharmaceutical equipment, food, security, agencies and… “other”.

And by “other” they refer to the few NGOs and foundations present. I recognised in particular the logos of Caritas and the Red Cross, came across Polish Humanitarian Action and Polska Misja Medyczna before stopping at the Noha® stand where a young student presented the four-semester Masters degree in Humanitarian Action awarded by this interuniversity network for the modest tuition fee of €12,000…

My next steps took me to the stand of the European Commission’s Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) manned, among others, by a young Polish woman employed by the communications agency which had come up with the idea and installed and hosted the DEVCO stands. She told me how disillusioned she was by the lack of involvement of Polish youth, the majority of whom are on the far right of the political spectrum, while I in turn expressed my unease at the spotlight placed on the role of businesses in the humanitarian sector, at the lack of young people going round the Expo and at how few NGOs were present. She reminded me that until the 1980s, Poland had been a recipient of aid from other states and NGOs and that the country had only recently emerged as a donor of humanitarian aid. Although it is quite easy to see how this Polish state aid will be orientated, it is difficult to imagine it as a source of inspiration for the country’s youth or see how an independent civil society will be able to develop from it.

I continued on my way as far as the “agencies” section, where I spotted the stand of DIHAD-2020 – a humanitarian forum to be held in March 2020 in Dubai under the patronage of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Emir of Dubai, and presented as the world hub of humanitarian aid in the Middle East and Africa. I also saw the stands of Aid&Trade 2020, an event to be held in London; and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre – a government organisation founded by the King of Saudi Arabia, and of the Polish Chamber of Commerce and Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology. On the way to the exit, companies were promoting their products: from Sokolow sausages to DuPont chemical

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5 NOHA Network on Humanitarian Action is an international association of universities that aims to enhance professionalism in the humanitarian sector through education, training and research: [https://www.nohanet.org/en](https://www.nohanet.org/en)
protection suits, helicopter drones and fire engines... My journey into humanitarian convergence and pragmatism ended here.

Although the principle of private and non-profit sector partnerships is no longer under question, it seems obvious to me at the end of the WHE that NGOs should be under an obligation to remind companies that, when they commit to the humanitarian sector, they must do so under the responsibility of these NGOs, guarantors of humanitarian principles. The onus is on the NGOs to put ethical concerns at the heart of their partnerships, to analyse, monitor and evaluate how their partners are respecting the criteria which, though they may not be universal and applicable to all NGOs, should at the very least guarantee a reasoned approach and a respect of humanitarian principles. A legal framework exists, agreements have been signed: partnerships must operate within this framework. Humanitarian aid is not a loss leader to promote commercial growth. Forces may be combined, external elements used to improve aid, and technical and innovative tools employed to support it: we do not dispute this. But that is exactly what they should remain: tools, backing, support. It seems however that a shift is gradually occurring and the distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred. In the race to bridge the gap between needs and resources, are we ready to sacrifice our independence? Have we lost sight of what our objectives really are?

Our press tour ended with a visit to the Warsaw Rising Museum. Housed in a converted tram power station, the museum traces the Warsaw Uprising day by day from 1st August to 2nd October 1944. It is a moving tribute to the inhabitants of Warsaw who fought and died for Polish independence and the liberation of their capital, an example of courage resonating with the strength of resistance.

Translated from the French by Fay Guerry

Biography • Audrey Sala

After participating in the creation of Fondation Handicap International and Fondation Vivre Debout, Audrey Sala has worked alongside the founders of the Humanitarian Alternatives review since the project began. She is currently in charge of communications and coordination for the association. She has a Master’s degree in Human Rights Theory and Practice from Institut des droits de l’Homme in Lyon. Audrey has also worked for Amnesty International France as an external consultant for the creation of their Foundation, and for Handicap International on the ethical screening of financial partners. Since May 2017 she has been a member of the operational coordination team of Forum Espace Humanitaire.