

The impact of generational change on humanitarian aid

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In the humanitarian field, as elsewhere, generational change has made an impact. Now that many French NGOs are commemorating their 30, 40, or even 50 years of existence, what changes have been observed over time and, more importantly, how have they specifically transformed humanitarian action? From post-1968 medical doctors taking time off to volunteer on the field, to today's "community managers", to what extent does their experience fit with the commitment, the convictions, fieldwork, training, politics, mobilising actions, technological tools, and even with the very history of the humanitarian movement?

This is a time of overlapping generations. The founders of the major French NGOs – and those that followed – had often built their organisations amid severe geopolitical crises arising directly from the Cold War: the Biafran war for *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the Vietnamese boat people for *Médecins du Monde*, Afghanistan for *Solidarités International*, Cambodia for *Handicap International* (now Humanity & Inclusion), etc. Then came Generation X trained in Bosnia, Rwanda, Indonesia, and Darfur. These two generational currents took different trajectories. The generation of founders and their followers went on to pursue their medical careers, some entering politics when they did not remain at the head of their organisations. Members of Generation X – probably the first to have been "trained" in humanitarian action since the development of education programmes in the 1990s – still constitute the inner core of NGOs. They took on board Generation Y's Millennials in the early 2000s, which will be soon joined by members of Generation Z.

How do these different generations coexist within NGOs? How do older generations view those just stepping into the field? Precisely how do newcomers manage to find their place in the humanitarian environment, inhabit it, transform it, and even challenge it?

Rather than describe these matters as a conflict between old and new generations, the forthcoming issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* seeks to better grasp how the coexistence of different generations, cultures, and practices has affected the humanitarian world, and to better understand what can emerge from this coexistence. While it is important to point out mutual misunderstandings in this generational transition, all quite natural, it is above all a question of identifying the areas where they complement one another and any ensuing structural changes this generational change might imply. But wouldn't these differences be more structural than generational? In other words, with the advent of crowdfunding, concerted mobilisation through social networks, blockchains, startups combining liberal economics and philanthropy, are traditional NGOs still up to applying the "right formula"? Should they – or can they – reinvent themselves in such way as to better profit from the injection of these new energies, or are they fated to wither away, opening the field to new working models that younger generations are already developing?

Translated from the French by Alan Johnson

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