

## Finding the proper balance between generations

*Étienne Baudon* • Action contre la Faim

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It seemed fitting to us to give voice to a young employee of an NGO when we developed the theme of “generational changes”. It is an effective way to get to know and better understand how members of the younger generation have come to characterize humanitarian aid, and to identify the points they share and do not share with their elders – and to reflect on what the all generations can create together.

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**A**ction contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) has just celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Created in 1979, this NGO stems from the generation of French Doctors. They were medical activists who launched a new movement in the 1970s, responding to emergencies through up-to-date concepts and practices, such as the testimony on their actions and more flexible and responsive logistics operations. Later, NGOs learned to raise public awareness in a different way through their advocacy. Humanitarian responses, by becoming more professional, have proven to be better adapted and more effective. They now comprise three phases: emergency preparation, relief, and launch of development. It is now up to the new generation of humanitarian workers – those born after 1985 – to come up with an ideal future.

How can generational changes within NGOs become a developmental opportunity for the humanitarian sector? This is an essential question for two reasons. First, because in a few years’ time, some young aid workers will still be active in, and perhaps even in charge of, these organisations. Also, because members of the younger generation are eager to work with those who preceded them. It is therefore not a question of pointing the finger at the older generation, but rather of finding synergies for them to work together, so that young people can expose their ideas, and their elders can transmit their knowledge and avoid past mistakes in the future. The input of each will help create tomorrow’s humanitarianism. And the following generation will do likewise.

### **A new vision of humanitarianism**

Young people all over the world are forever demonstrating their creativity by launching various projects, creating companies, generating ideas and movements that defend causes they deem justifiable. Generation Y is significantly more involved in societal issues than prior generations. As proof, studies on donors and volunteers in France report that young people are clearly the most generous age group (as a proportion of their income) towards associations<sup>1</sup>. In addition, they represent the proportion of the population that is most involved in associative and citizen movements with ideals and methods that are more radical than their predecessors. Their commitment is especially notable in the humanitarian sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Étude France Générosités, « Les jeunes et la générosité », octobre 2016.

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This new generation has no qualms about joining major NGOs to learn to “speak humanitarian”, to manage, or, simply put, to position itself. For the past thirty years, teaching establishments specialising in international solidarity have arisen (École supérieure de commerce et de développement 3A, and Bioforce), while traditional schools (Sciences Po, for example) have opened up specialised courses in international solidarity. The goal is proficiency in the ways and means of the private economic sector and political organisations for their use in international solidarity. The growth of these specific sectors reflects a strong and growing demand by young people to be trained in the world of solidarity and, once they are skilled in business conventions, to set up partnerships more easily. In their present or future work in solidarity organisations, they will be more pragmatic about the real world of business, because they will be guided by proven methods and acquired skills. They will doubtlessly draw on the strength of their convictions.

But pragmatism does not mean giving up one’s ideals. Young people are more demanding about the role that major groups and politicians have in society. This pushes some members of the younger generation to call into question one of the five principles of humanitarianism, that of impartiality. They believe that it is impossible to fight for a fairer world without taking part in activism, and lobbying is one of the forms this takes. Impartiality means not taking sides in an emergency. Activism in humanitarianism is centred on the fight to properly apply international humanitarian law. Besides, all major NGOs have an advocacy department. And once a commitment is made, one might just as well plunge right in and take up modern-day issues, such as LGBTQ+ and feminism, core concepts that must be integrated by NGOs, both in their programmes and in their internal operations. For the moment, this is not systematically the case.

In fact, as a young worker in the world of international solidarity, one could say that NGOs are thought to be ahead of their time on social issues. But this quickly turns out to be a fallacy when one realises that these organisations, in fact, “merely” reflect the image of today’s society, that is, they are neither ahead of nor behind the times. Sexism has not spared NGO workers. And although feminicides have now become a major issue, some NGOs refused to accept that their employees take up the fight against these acts (according to the employees) and march in their name last November 23 in Paris. Admittedly, such in-house conflicts are not only related to a generational question, but also to more political disagreements. The fact remains that the humanitarian sector’s managerial systems seem to be a far cry from being *avant-garde*.

### Technology and its new applications

A youthful-minded vision of humanitarian aid is notably based on two major themes: technology and the environment. The members of Generation Y, born with the Internet, have a better grasp of the network than their elders, and they are cognisant of its power and its applications. In fact, the virality of social networks, when optimised, can become a true weapon. Young people have thus been able to initiate brand-shaming campaigns to denounce the practices of large groups such as Société Générale, which was singled out for its fossil fuel financing in 2018<sup>2</sup>. Boycott campaigns have had a huge impact on businesses, who view this tactic as a major risk, obliging them to react promptly to safeguard their image and reputation.

The internet and smartphones provide instant access to information at every moment. When an event, even a minor one, occurs on the other side of the globe, the whole world is in the know. Sources of information are much more numerous than they once were, yet the distrust young

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<sup>2</sup> Baptiste Giraud, « La Société Générale accro au gaz de schiste », *Reporterre*, 13 décembre 2018.

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people have for traditional media incites them to support other alternatives (Reporterre, Médiapart, etc.), and the spread of fake news pushes them to turn to multiple providers. Instantaneous information leads young people to react spontaneously, as they typically do, with all the risks that this entails. This is an important point to be aware of. Similarly, the digital world has led to the development of new means of raising money, like crowdfunding, which has been around for several years and proven its effectiveness. Besides, most donors to crowdfunding campaigns are young<sup>3</sup>, which is a good thing as long as other means of fundraising, better adapted to the not-so-young donors, are continued.

More recently, other measures have aroused interest in the way they call into question traditional international solidarity structures. In 2017, Jérôme Jarre (a renowned influencer, widely followed by the younger generation) launched a fundraising campaign in response to the food crisis in Somalia<sup>4</sup>. In just a few days, 2.4 million dollars were collected. Naming his donor community the “Love Army”, he stirred up a real fervour of support for the Somalian crisis. Jérôme Jarre then went out into the field and gave progress reports on his project via Twitter. NGOs, denouncing his lack of professionalism in his project, criticised him for thinking only in the short term, and for not making his donors step back and reflect<sup>5</sup>. In fact, he was accused of having acted emotionally without foreseeing the consequences. Jérôme Jarre is an excellent example of the power of young people and their tools, but who learn from the experience of previous generations.

### The ecologist generation

The second theme, the environment, has greatly mobilised members of the younger generation, whose lifestyles and consumption are being taken more into account for their ecological impact. Organic and locally grown food, as well as soft mobility, represent their main challenges. Their commitment has become more forceful, as reflected especially by the climate strikes headed by Greta Thunberg and which have brought together hundreds of thousands of youngsters from all around the world. Although most people today are aware that keeping global warming under two degrees is important, the younger generation acts as the mouthpiece for inviting both politicians and industrialists to make a commitment in this regard.

The younger generation is sensitive to the fact that, at the international level, climate change has had direct consequences on populations. Rising sea-levels are threatening the lives of millions of people, their habitat and cultivable land. Desertification has affected crops and living conditions, especially in providing nutrition. Massive population displacements are to be expected (if we give credence to a World Bank study<sup>6</sup> which has numbered 143 million climate refugees by 2050). Young humanitarian workers, now more aware and increasingly convinced, have a role to play here. Humanitarian programmes are naturally integrating climate migration to a greater extent in an attempt to address the fate of climate refugees. International humanitarian law will necessarily be subjected to increasing influence and pressure. Yet some aspects are still left for the new generation, with its views and its concerns, to put on the table. This is the case with waste management. For example, in Africa the battery recycling sector used by NGOs exists, but is underdeveloped, and there is no count of the number of recycling centres. Some NGO studies

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<sup>3</sup> Étude France Générosités, « Baromètre du crowdfunding en France 2016 », février 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Ouicher, « Jérôme Jarre et sa Love Army luttent contre la famine en Somalie », *Positiv*, 3 juillet 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Camille Belsoeur et Vincent Manilève, « Jérôme Jarre n’a pas vraiment compris le travail des ONG », *Slate*, 4 avril 2017.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank study, “Preparing for Internal Climate Migration”, 2018.

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have reported that they are ineffective, and that batteries are improperly recycled and are causing environmental pollution. However, young aid workers are pushing for NGOs to be paragons of virtue in their programmes – installing solar panels and batteries to supply homes in need only makes sense if recycling is planned in advance.

### Betterment through exchange

The comments made so far may give the impression that young people are largely putting the blame on their elders (OK, Boomer!<sup>7</sup>). However, while young people aspire to shape the world (and the humanitarian sector) to their liking, as prior generations have done, they are well aware of the significance of the legacy of prior generations who possess the expertise in humanitarian practices that really work. The humanitarian sector is dynamic and never ceases to question itself. This is a sign of compatibility between generations and of a desire to open up to the future. For example, innovation is viewed as a factor of paramount importance. Danielle Tan (consultant and researcher) and Pierre Gallien (Humanity & Inclusion) said in 2018, “What has changed in recent years is to see innovation becoming a strategic concern for the humanitarian sector as a whole”<sup>8</sup>. The humanitarian sector constantly seeks to improve. The older generation embraces its own specific culture and practices, which young people may or may not decide to retain.

The new generation brings a fresh outlook on humanitarianism. It seeks to voice an ideal that can be attained by expressing international solidarity. It wishes to make structural changes that it considers necessary and inevitable. Everything is in place to meet a changing economic world head-on. Young people favour major companies as partnership targets, because they consider that companies have a greater moral duty than ever before. According to them, the private sector must accept to take on a greater role in society. As for start-ups, their societal dimension has become an integral part of their DNA, and this has thus created a philanthropic-economic mix.

It is impossible to envision the future without building firmly on the past. Gilles Pison, associate researcher at the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED), wrote in the previous issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* that “in exploring the future, it is useful to keep past developments in mind”<sup>9</sup>. Even if he was speaking about global demographic changes, this comment is just as relevant with regard to the impact of generational changes on the humanitarian sector. Constructive, efficient, and respectful development can only be achieved by transmitting skills and knowledge between generations. Intergenerational cooperation must remain at the service of international cooperation. Things are changing, and that’s good. Points of friction may arise from the older generation’s lack of momentum and flexibility, but also from the impatience and the radicalism of young people. It is therefore the responsibility of each humanitarian stakeholder to find a happy medium, so that the impact of generational change remains only positive.

*Translated from the French by Alan Johnson*

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<sup>7</sup> « “Ok Boomer” : un terme plus profond que vous imaginez... », Mr. Mondialisation, 22 décembre 2019, [https://mrmondialisation.org/ok-boomer-un-terme-plus-profond-que-vous-imaginez/?fbclid=IwAR3RH-J897MvkXJF2p1\\_eOaOs8XAtUrQY5-XnW4dCIQDdlmQFBvhdZYyNE](https://mrmondialisation.org/ok-boomer-un-terme-plus-profond-que-vous-imaginez/?fbclid=IwAR3RH-J897MvkXJF2p1_eOaOs8XAtUrQY5-XnW4dCIQDdlmQFBvhdZYyNE)

<sup>8</sup> Danielle Tan and Pierre Gallien, “New technologies put to the test of humanitarian ethics”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°8, July 2018, p.5, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/07/03/new-technologies-put-to-the-test-of-humanitarian-ethics-2>

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Pison, “World demographic prospects: between certainties and uncertainties”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°12, November 2019, p.7, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/11/14/world-demographic-prospects-between-certainties-and-uncertainties>

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### Biography • Étienne Baudon

Étienne Baudon is a second-year Master's student at the 3A School of Business and Development in Lyon and is 26 years old. After alternating work for two years at Heoh, a start-up that provides associations and NGOs with tools for collecting donations, Étienne quit private business to enter the humanitarian sector. He joined *Action contre la Faim* in September 2019 in the Partnership Department. He plans participate in field missions with major international solidarity organisations.

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