

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**From enchantment to questioning: the changing face of humanitarian commitment**

Éric Gazeau • Directeur général de Résonances Humanitaires

Founded in 2002 to assist former international aid workers with their social and professional reintegration, *Résonances Humanitaires* has become a valuable observatory over the years. In this article, its co-founder, Eric Gazeau, shares his vision and analysis of the changing profiles of successive generations of humanitarian personnel and the evolution in their humanitarian commitments.

R*ésonances Humanitaires* (RH) is a mutual assistance network that provides its members with a range of levers and services. It is an ideal place for returning aid workers to take stock and reflect on the relevance and permanence of their humanitarian commitment, and a fitting environment for considering a potential career change after years in the field. Over the years, it has also offered a valuable vantage point from which to observe trends in the humanitarian aid world through the experience of the generations who walk through its doors.

Like many other observers, RH has seen the qualification level of aid workers increase in all areas since 1992 - the year in which the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) was established (later to become the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations in 2010 – Editor’s note). This agency greatly contributed towards the professionalisation of the world of humanitarian aid organisations, starting with those operating in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda following the genocide of the Tutsis.

This requirement for greater professionalism was then extended to a multitude of other international humanitarian aid programmes in South-East Asia after the tsunami, for example, or Haiti in 2010-2011 or the Middle East, many of which had very high demands for human resources. Many of these expatriates are still in the aid business today - some are now heading NGOs.

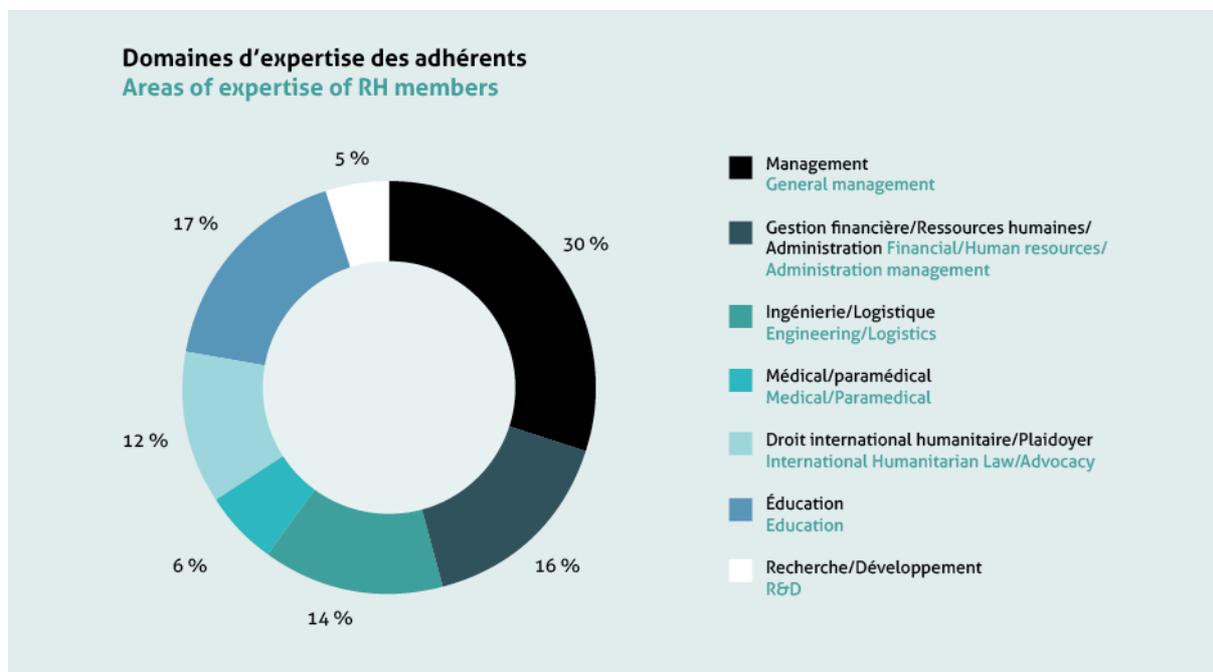
The skills assessment consultants and volunteer coaches who work with RH can certainly testify to the high level of qualification of humanitarian personnel, but also to the very high level of emotional intelligence of the majority of those who come to see us:

“The people I meet and help at RH are driven by strong values and are often looking for new challenges. Most of these professionals from the world of humanitarian aid have run successful projects in incredibly complex environments. In our Significant Achievements workshop, we help them to realise the value of their successes and identify their key competences, based on their experience in the field”¹.

¹ J.-M. Perrin, volunteer coach at RH since 2010.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Most of the people who visit RH today are women (70%), whereas ten years ago women represented only 50% of our members. More broadly, the main areas of expertise of the people seen by RH in Paris, Lyon and Bordeaux since 2002 (more than 2,200 people) can be broken down as follows:



From yesterday's idealism to today's pragmatism

After 18 years of existence, *Résonances Humanitaires* is now particularly well-placed to talk about what inspires people to become humanitarian aid workers, what drives them, what motivates them to continue or to stop working in this sector. In fact, our analysis of the information we have gathered over the years confirms significant changes in what motivates people to enter the world of humanitarian aid. The people seen between 2002 and 2010 were quite different from those we have encountered since 2010.

Most people who became aid workers before the creation of RH – now in their fifties – were motivated by an ideal of justice – freeing people from various forms of economic or political oppression – as well as a desire to distance themselves from a consumerist society in which everything is up for negotiation. They were also inspired by the notion of a social bond based on authenticity and sharing.

With the increasing professionalisation of the world of humanitarian assistance, new profiles – more pragmatic, sometimes opportunistic or even “calculating” in career terms – began to swell the ranks of expatriate aid workers: “It looks good to have stepped off the beaten track and gained experience of a foreign culture [...], to have management experience that combines interculturalism and interdisciplinarity”, we were told. Although RH probably facilitated this movement by promoting this professionalisation, the entire humanitarian assistance world was in tune with this trend. Lest we forget, when RH was set up in 2002, 90% of people leaving France on aid missions were voluntary workers or international solidarity volunteers, fewer than 10% had salaried status. In 2005, a bill was passed – supported by our association – which regulated

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

international aid volunteering and marked a turning point in NGOs' human resources management². Today, more than 80% of the people sent on humanitarian aid missions are salaried employees, and management positions – formerly the exclusive domain of expatriate staff – have been widely opened up to local employees, i.e. nationals of the countries receiving the humanitarian aid.

Although we cannot establish a causal link, we can say that today, and especially since 2010, we are seeing less enchantment and more questioning. The younger aid workers have seen their elders instrumentalised – at least that is how they interpret it – while the “romanticism” of aid missions has been eroded by difficult contexts. More than a quarter of all missions are now carried out in what I would call “stationary mode” – for security reasons, expatriates' movement is tightly controlled. Those on missions in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Yemen and certain regions of the Sahel in Africa, which can last several months, may never leave the NGO's compound. Many of them resent spending more time drafting reports for funding agencies and their NGO's headquarters than having contacts with the residents of the regions in which they are operating. This probably explains the growing interest in more targeted projects, even if this means adjusting the size of a project to ensure field contact.

According to Agnès Konrat³, whose first mission was in 2009 and has since carried out a variety of missions for different NGOs:

“Institutional donors have effectively strengthened their accountability criteria in response to humanitarian stakeholders' desire to ensure significant improvements in the quality of action. Notably through the creation of the Sphere project, designed to prepare the personnel at intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental humanitarian institutions to improve the aid provided in the field. In NGOs, we have seen new jobs appear with titles like “reporting officer” or “grant officer”, where the person's main responsibility is to coordinate the drafting of the narrative and budget sections of proposals and reports for projects funded by institutional donors. These jobs call for coordination, writing and synthesising skills, for example, but not necessarily field experience. They are often a good way in for “junior” staff straight off a humanitarian training course and/or an internship at an NGO's headquarters. But in these positions, aid workers sometimes never get to a chance to see the activities and meet the populations that they spend so much time writing about – which raises questions”.

Human rights advocacy, facilitated by new digital tools, is also attracting more and more people. In recent years, we have seen increasing commitment to preventing discrimination or improving victim support. The same is true of gender, an issue which the association began to invest two years ago at the behest of its new president, Laurence Wilson, also a volunteer support worker with the association:

“RH's public is now made up of a majority of women. Since 2018, our approach has been to offer a private space at RH where we can listen to whatever women aid workers wish to share with us and gather information on their issues. Women's need to confide is often apparent from the minute they walk through the door. They tend to be reserved, but have a lot of questions about their humanitarian commitment and, in some cases, settling down and starting a family, along with concerns about reconciling their job and a family

² <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000257503> (in French).

³ Member of RH and volunteer support worker.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

and managing a career break – something that always worries them. This is where our discussion groups come in. They are a place where everyone can let go, pour their heart out and benefit from intimate group dynamics in complete confidentiality. These discussion groups meet regularly in Paris and at our branch in Lyon and are facilitated by a coach who gently guides the discussion and helps channel emotions”.

While some things change, others stay the same...

The changes just presented in people’s commitment to international humanitarian aid require some nuancing, as some of the values generating and underpinning a person’s investment in the humanitarian aid sector remain unchanged from one generation to the next. These invariables are recognisable when listening to new members tell us about their initial expectations.

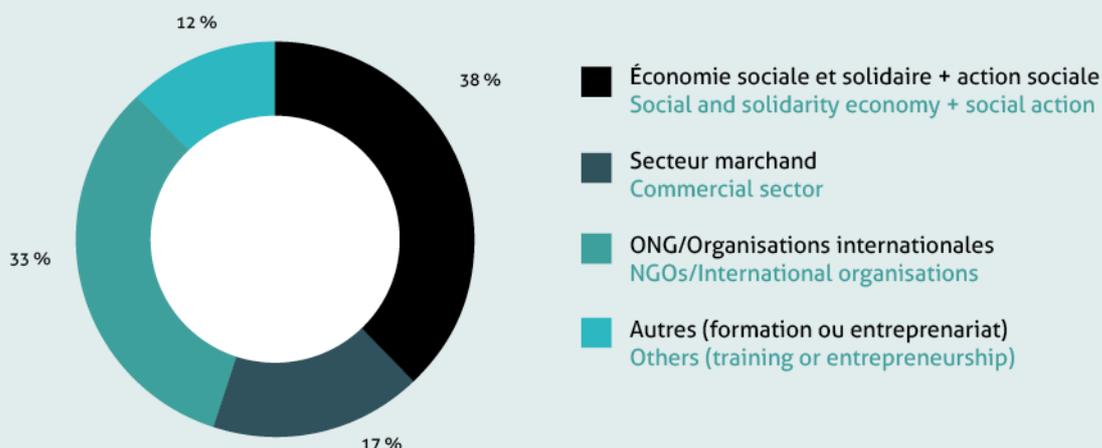
Preserving their physical and psychological equilibrium is one such invariable. In other words, our reasons for creating RH are still relevant today. If anything, they have become more so given all the work being done by the big aid and development organisations on managing psychosocial risks.

Similarly, the “in the public interest” aspect of the project remains a determining factor in people’s humanitarian commitment. Today’s humanitarians recognise the urgent need to consider the impact their projects have on the planet and the legacy they will leave behind for future generations. Hence the growing success of projects focusing on the protection of the planet and “social healing”, such as the reception of migrants, support to isolated people, and the notion of leaving no-one behind. Indeed, 80% of the people visiting RH after returning to France are looking for a project and an environment that will satisfy these expectations. The world of the Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) is particularly attractive to returning aid workers. When we talk to RH members who have moved to this sector, they tell us that, working with the vulnerable or fragile people they now support, they have rediscovered the “societal engagement” dimension that had first motivated them to do foreign aid work. They also appreciate the intercultural dimension present in most of the projects: no doubt a way of finding “here” what they had searched for “over there” – with varying degrees of success.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Répartition des secteurs professionnels où travaillent les personnes ayant été accompagnées par RH (mise à jour au 30 septembre 2019, sur la base d'un échantillon de 900 adhérents ou anciens adhérents dont la situation actuelle est connue) :

Breakdown of the professional sectors in which current or former RH members are now working (updated on 30 September 2019 and based on a sample of 900 members or former members whose current situation is known):



Finally, we have seen that career pathways with NGOs are longer now than they used to be. In fact, it has become possible to “make a career” in humanitarian aid, whereas long careers this sector used to be reserved to senior managers. Moreover, before 2000, there was a tendency to stay with one organisation. This is less true today, with many people seeking a range of experiences with different NGOs and international organisations. This presents a challenge for NGO recruiters who – like big companies – have to try much harder and show much more imagination to retain their managers.

In conclusion, despite the professionalisation of humanitarian aid work, it has not become a job for pen pushers. There is still plenty of opportunity for a great human adventure in the world of NGOs. This may be why – despite the difficulties – it still keeps people “captive”. As our pie chart shows, 33% of the people accompanied by RH decide to continue working for international aid organisations. Very often, because they have taken the time to come to terms with their limits and identify their talents and capacity to meet future challenges, they feel surer of their commitment and are better prepared for the road ahead.

Translated from the French by Mandy Duret

Biography • **Éric Gazeau**

After training at the *Institut Européen des Affaires*, Éric Gazeau spent 27 years working in the world of international humanitarian aid. After an initial 6 years in the commercial sector in France and abroad, he began his career in humanitarian aid in 1993, alternating between missions for *Solidarités Internationales* and *Médecins Sans Frontières* as a field officer, as an administrator in Bosnia,

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

South Sudan and Rwanda and then as head of mission in Somalia and Afghanistan. After returning to France, Éric earned a post-graduate diploma in International Humanitarian Assistance, Emergencies and Rehabilitation at the Faculty of Law in Aix-en-Provence before heading to Kosovo with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and then Madagascar with the NGO Inter Aide. Back in France, he worked as Human Resources Manager for the Samu Social in Paris from 2000 to 2002. In July 2002, he gathered a few aid workers together to help him create the association *Résonances Humanitaires*. After chairing the association until October 2004, he is now its Managing Director. Éric has also launched a think-tank on the emergence of a new type of NGO, the support NGO, with the *Coordination Humanitaire Développement* collective <http://coordination-humanitaire-developpement.org/groupe-ong-support>

For further information on the history of *Résonances Humanitaires* and its current activities: www.resonanceshumanitaires.org

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives.

To quote this article: Éric Gazeau, “From enchantment to questioning: the changing face of humanitarian commitment”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n°13, March 2020, p.25-34,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/03/13/from-enchantment-to-questioning-the-changing-face-of-humanitarian-commitment/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-625-6