

### Should the “new young humanitarians” hack the system?

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Even though it does not have the weight of a full investigation, let alone a sociological study, the survey conducted by Amélia Houmaï-Romy and Vincent Taillandier nonetheless provides much food for thought. Appearing to embrace the aspirations of their elders whilst having a clear awareness of the humanitarian sector's pitfalls, the “new young humanitarians” may hold the keys to change, as long as they are not made to bear responsibility for it. To overcome this dichotomy, the authors put forward the idea of an intergenerational alliance.

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For me ‘being humanitarian’ means everything and nothing, it is not a job in itself.” For some young humanitarian professionals<sup>1</sup> we questioned, it can sometimes be extremely difficult to think of this sector in precise terms, and sometimes to find its place in it, to make its mark. Yet it is precisely this new generation of actors who are at the very heart of the challenges that we face: how can young women and men make a difference?

The term “generation” usually conjures up images and reference points relating to a particular age group or cohort, and it is customary to name them: baby boomers, X, Y, Z or millennials, for example. This “given name” refers to a group of people linked by the same shared experiences during a given historical period such as industrial revolution, geopolitical upheaval, or information society. For researcher Baptiste Rappin<sup>2</sup>, this sociological theorising of the concept of “generation”, however, hides its original meaning of “creation”. Thus, to examine a generation is an invitation to go beyond a rigid form of categorisation and look for movement, in the sense of “becoming, being born, growing and achieving fulfilment”<sup>3</sup>.

Aware of these conceptual ambiguities, we decided to focus on “the new humanitarian generation” by defining an easily identifiable framework, a kind of generational unit<sup>4</sup>. We pre-identified it as follows: firstly, young people, mainly aged 20 to 30, who have had specialist training in humanitarian aid and who have chosen this specific labour market, regardless of their current position in it; secondly, a generation attracted by a humanitarian sector that is

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term “humanitarian” is used to refer to any person who undertakes any form of action in response to an international problem with the aim of helping people or contributing to the development of a community, society or state. For further information, see François Audet, *Comprendre les organisations humanitaires. Développer les capacités ou faire survivre les organisations*. Published by the Presse de l'Université du Québec, 2016, pp. 8-12.

<sup>2</sup> Baptiste Rappin, « Actualité de la génération Y. Intempestivité de la génération? », *Revue internationale de psychosociologie et de gestion des comportements organisationnels*, 2016/53, Vol. XXII, p. 29-36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> In the sense of a specific group within a generation, see Karl Mannheim, *Le Problème des générations*, Armand Colin, « Hors Collection » coll., 2011.

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experiencing rapid growth in terms of activities, job opportunities<sup>5</sup>, and renown; and finally, people who feel affected by various issues, be they political, social, economic, or environmental.

We therefore decided to question these “new young humanitarians” directly, removing any institutional or hierarchical filters by putting ourselves at the heart of a conversation between peers to gather spontaneous, sincere testimonies. We asked them about their experiences, perceptions, dreams and ambitions, and let the main trends emerge in an attempt to answer our questions. Who are they? What are their requirements, their aspirations? Do they carry the seeds for a renewal of the sector, or even the seeds to undermine it? We received thirty-three responses to the questionnaire we sent out<sup>6</sup> – a source of data as raw as it was rich and which provided the substance of this article.

### Unexpected testimonies... well, almost

It was not our intention to conduct a statistical study. This enabled us to adopt a flexible approach, far removed from the scientific criteria of randomisation, quantification, power, or even bias control, but with all the limitations that such a choice brings in terms of extrapolation. We also accepted our own biases, as authors, chief among them our career paths, personal situations and values that allow us to hope that this new generation will be able to address the many challenges facing the way the humanitarian system operates.

That is why we were surprised when we read the testimonies. More specifically, we were surprised that we were not surprised! Whilst we were unconsciously expecting the respondents to wander off the beaten track, or even to say things that were radically different from what their elders may have said, their comments were generally commonplace, in the sense that they had already been made by others before them. We identified three main strands.

### *Similar motivations, yesterday and today*

Despite all the developments in the sector, humanitarian aid is still a field “apart”, one that calls upon a particular set of values both within ourselves and in the eyes of others. In this respect, the younger generation is no different. It comes as no surprise to see that the predominant factor influencing their commitment is a desire to “go and have a look somewhere else”, a taste for travel, adventure, and a change of scenery. This is mainly achieved through training courses or volunteer work. With one slight difference – and no doubt much more readily than before – that this sense of otherness can sometimes be experienced closer to home, as reflected in the comments about the effects that the “prison system” has on a community, “the integration of young immigrants” or “welcoming refugees into the family home”. Commitment to this sector is also, of course, a way of “giving meaning to the word ‘work’”. It is a “rebellion against inequality”, a desire to be “useful”, to “reach out to others” – in short, a desire to “help thy neighbour”.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2017, it was estimated that, globally, 570,000 people were employed in this sector, including 66% national staff, for an increase of 27% compared to 2013. Source: ALNAP (2018) “The State of the Humanitarian System”, ALNAP Study, London, ALNAP/ODI, p.17. In France, “French NGOs also create jobs. The total ‘full-time equivalent’ increased from 38,000 in 2011 to 51,240 in 2016”. Source: Coordination Sud, Étude Argent & Associations de Solidarité Internationale, mars 2018, p. 12. [https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/Etude-Argent-ASI-2012-2016-vf\\_BD-1.pdf](https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/Etude-Argent-ASI-2012-2016-vf_BD-1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> We disseminated it by mobilising our personal and professional networks (including the French specialized schools IRIS Sup<sup>7</sup> and Bioforce).

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In other words, factors that differ little from those that formed the basis for the commitment of previous generations<sup>7</sup>. Here, we can even see one of the ontological cornerstones of humanitarian aid, characterised by a double asymmetry: on the one hand a sense of the “personal” between those providing aid and those receiving it, and on the other a geopolitical aspect given the dominance of the West<sup>8</sup>.

Yet the image and perception of the humanitarian tag were the subject of frank debate. Only 57% of the respondents claimed this status, and while some believed that it gave them value, that they could take pride in it, others were not so sure:

“It destabilises my relations with the other person from the very outset: either I am placed on a pedestal and regarded as the reincarnation of Mother Teresa, or I am an accomplice of the ‘great neo-liberal machine assuaging the conscience of rich countries’.”

“In the collective imagination, a ‘humanitarian’ is someone who rides off on a helicopter’s back [*sic*] and distributes bags of rice in Africa or Asia.”

### *An awareness of having inherited the pitfalls of the system*

All the humanitarian issues described (and decried) in recent years thus appear in the testimonies collected. In addition to the image of the humanitarian worker as discussed above, the main criticism revolves around donor dependency and the impact of humanitarian programmes. These young people speak of inefficiency and ineffectiveness, of funding that is “too high for the services rendered”, or even of the “misuse of resources, stocks, and staff”.

Next in the incrimination hierarchy comes humanitarian posture, whether systemic or individual. The respondents thus refer to neo-colonialism, the lack of a transfer of “skills and responsibilities to actors in intervention countries”, to a “‘cowboy’ intervention dynamic: we arrive, we impose, we have things done, we leave”, but they also criticise the figure of the expatriate “tourist” with their “deviant behaviour”, their “conceit”, and who may even be guilty of the “physical or mental mistreatment... of beneficiaries”.

The respondents also bemoan the lack of beneficiary involvement in the decision-making process, the abuse of power (all kinds), the gulf between local staff and expatriates and between the field and the headquarters, not to mention the lack of collaboration between NGOs that seem to have become competitors rather than allies.

We should not, however, be surprised by this intimate knowledge of the system. Here we can see the mark of specialist literature, and more generally the influence of analyses introduced in specialised courses that the vast majority of those contacted have attended. Thus, one of them said “[I] understand the misappropriation that exists in the sector [but I] did not fully appreciate it before the training course”, another said that during their studies they experienced “a certain disillusionment with the sector”, whilst a third asked “how can a respectful, non-imperialist, non-neo-colonialist humanitarian approach be adopted”. These statements and questions are all the

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<sup>7</sup> Pascal Dauvin et Johanna Siméant, « Se réaliser en faisant de sa vie un roman », in *Le Travail humanitaire. Les acteurs des ONG, du siège au terrain*, coll. « Académique », Presses de SciencesPo, 2002, p. 137-167.

<sup>8</sup> See Didier Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire. Une histoire morale du temps présent*, Paris, « Hautes Études » collection, Gallimard/Seuil, 2010.

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more valuable in that most respondents already have professional experience at NGO headquarters or in the field, where they have experienced these pitfalls.

### *The desire to hold the positions of today's executives tomorrow?*

We were struck by the fact that, with one exception<sup>9</sup>, all the testimonies gathered about professional aspirations reflected the traditional career patterns currently visible in the sector. The respondents referred to specific posts, technical specialisations, large institutions, places – in short, the very cornerstones of what constitutes the current range of jobs available. Sometimes their dreams were embellished with qualitative details that have now become equally consensual, such as an emphasis on transferring skills and autonomy to local actors. They sometimes imagined themselves much later, “retired after a stimulating career, holding a position as a volunteer with a high level of responsibility in at least one association”, the classic end to a recognised career path. Are we to read these testimonies as a lack of empowerment vis-à-vis the sector, or as a gentle criticism of an environment that it is difficult to leave behind? Above all, we recognise here the pressure of the employability imperative and the fear of insecurity, which were often mentioned in the testimonies.

In short, our young humanitarians have motivations similar to those of their elders and an intimate knowledge of the system and all its flaws yet, in spite of all that, an attachment to the profession's current frameworks. So how can the profession expect them to lead a radical transformation? We feel it is more appropriate to try and deconstruct these expectations, even if it means starting this process from our own cognitive biases.

### **The young generation faced with the imperative for change**

Let us start by asking ourselves again whether it is right to talk about a “new generation” of humanitarian actors. For this we shall use the words of those who formed the basis of our study, the overwhelming majority of whom (almost 80%) claim to belong to this “new generation”. Their arguments can be split into two main themes. The first of these is centred on professionalisation, embodied by such terms as “protocols”, “sustainability plans”, “procedures”, “compliance”, “transparency”, “accountability” and “career”. The second revolves around “ecological awareness” and other activist causes, such as gender and sexual orientation which, to a certain extent, are the “current” issues for their generation.

Two minor themes complement their sense of belonging to this “new generation”. The first concerns the use of new technologies: “more ways to access information”, “better mastery of technologies (instant information)”. The second refers to a seemingly increased capacity to question the “limits and responsibilities born of previous generations” expressed as “distance from past developments” and “greater attention to adverse effects”.

This sense of belonging to a new generation, a sense that stems from a common historical experience in the humanitarian sector and society in general, is a crucial factor that we must recognise because it has real potential. Being aware of the “historic importance” of its condition can provide a group with the power to challenge, re-appropriate and innovate, not least because

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<sup>9</sup> One woman who dreams of opening “a coffee shop/bookshop where I employ one or two people in rehabilitation/reintegration; we have preferential rates for homeless people/refugees/students/vulnerable people and the premises are open to associations and citizens' initiatives (courses in French as a foreign language, art therapy, debate café, etc).”

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the individual is bound to other individuals by elements of social identity<sup>10</sup>. We may therefore think that this particular characteristic distinguishes them in their ability to act, makes them particularly able to consolidate and accelerate positive changes in the system, or even generate new ones. We may therefore expect the desired changes to come from them.

Yet we feel that this would be a mistake, for two reasons. Firstly, the issues raised by our respondents (professionalisation, new technologies, ecological awareness, etc.) affect all the generations in terms of their lifestyles and commitment. In fact, these issues may even have a greater impact on the older generations because in their eyes they constitute real upheavals rather than the status quo. Secondly, these elements of “modernity” do not transform the balance of power. Yet when we talk about “transformative power”, we are essentially just talking about “power”. It is in fact clear that this power remains concentrated in the hands of the older generation, mostly men over 45 years of age<sup>11</sup>, as one respondent pointed out.

So would it not at best be unjustified, and at worst unfair, to expect the new generation to lead the change? Perhaps it is necessary to move away from a generational dichotomy (if not a multichotomy) to consider other rallying points or possible sources of opposition, for example between those who support and those who oppose a controversial issue such as that of a “just war”<sup>12</sup>? Is it possible to imagine a collaborative imperative, in the belief that the changes should be borne by an intergenerational alliance? For a process of transformation to result in what could be called a “revolution”, or at least a real change in the system, history shows that an alliance between different social groups, sometimes with conflicting interests, is necessary.

### **How can we capitalise on the expectations of the new generation?**

The very fact of talking about the new generation of humanitarian actors would therefore imply burdening that generation with a particular responsibility for the future of the sector. Even though we have expressed our doubts about this prospect – or even this order – can we nonetheless imagine that this new generation has its own unique destiny that it must follow?

How can we not promote a whole range of weak signals that suggest the emergence of a certain “youth leadership”? Groups of activists, for example, are emerging at the very heart of some NGOs, which is beyond their traditional mandate and inevitably leads to tension<sup>13</sup>. These groups weave the different causes of our time together, even if that means rejecting the principle of neutrality, thus forcing organisations to examine their own internal practices (and not just with regard to their activities).

Admittedly, some important questions remain. Can the key issues of the moment (ecology, gender, efficiency, etc.) become the driving force behind a new form of intergenerational collaboration? How can power be shared to enable young humanitarian workers to harness their own specific resources? Can we change the humanitarian sector from within, or would it now be

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<sup>10</sup> See « écart générationnel », *Vacarme*, 2009/2, n° 47, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Blackney *et al.*, “Data on diversity: humanitarian leadership under the spotlight”, Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG), 2019, p.7 and 12.

<sup>12</sup> Rony Brauman, « Les mensonges des guerres humanitaires », *Médiapart*, 27 janvier 2018. <https://www.msf-crash.org/fr/le-crash-dans-les-medias/rony-brauman-les-mensonges-des-guerres-humanitaires>

<sup>13</sup> Consider the example given by one of our respondents who referred to the creation of a Gender Task Force, “which, on behalf of ACF, wanted to campaign against the march against violence against women”, and which would have led to “internal resistance [from some employees and management]”.

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better to exert pressure on it from the outside (new actors<sup>14</sup>, rise of the social economy and social businesses, etc.)? So many questions that could nurture future developments building on the modest study we have initiated. Perhaps it will provide a springboard from which the new young humanitarians, from within or from outside the humanitarian community, with or without their elders, will manage to hack the humanitarian system, or even the global system. If so, they would be echoing the writer Edouard Glissant who, in a text transcending the notions of breakdown and continuity, poetically said: “Nothing is true, everything is alive”<sup>15</sup>.

*Translated from the French by Derek Scoins*

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### Biographies

**Amélia Houmaïri-Romy** • With an eclectic, multidisciplinary academic background, Amélia Houmaïri-Romy discovered the international aid sector during a two-year field mission to the central provinces of Vietnam as head of the local network of an international solidarity organisation working in the fields of cultural cooperation, development assistance and healthcare. Back in France, Amélia decided to do a Master’s degree in humanitarian affairs at IRIS Sup’, graduating top of her class in 2018. These studies were, for her, the starting point for many reflections on the meaning of individual commitment and the very essence of this particular occupation, which is part profession and part vocation.

**Vincent Taillandier** • Head of humanitarian operations at Action against Hunger for over eleven years, Vincent Taillandier has been advising social organisations and aid agencies on strategic, organisational and governance issues for three years. Co-founder of the SCIC *Les Maisons de l’Intelligence Collective*, Vincent’s approach is based on collective intelligence working practices aimed developing the autonomy and self-determination of individuals whilst strengthening their affiliation with the collective. His teaching activities at several universities and elite higher education establishments regularly give him the opportunity to talk to young professionals in France and abroad.

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<sup>14</sup> Randolph Kent, “The future of humanitarianism”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°9, November 2018, p.104–119, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/11/13/the-future-of-humanitarianism>

<sup>15</sup> Title of the last public lecture he gave at the Maison de l’Amérique latine in Paris on April 8, 2010; he died in 2011.