

## Training future generations of international aid professionals: challenges and discussion topics

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France is by no means lacking in training for young people looking to pursue humanitarian causes. As head of one of the most prestigious Master's degrees on the subject, Stéphanie Tchiombiano wonders how we can best satisfy the needs of the aid sector and the career aspirations of students.

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**N**owadays in France there are over 100 Master's degrees focusing on international action. This type of qualification – constituting the last year of studies for the vast majority of students – is now to all intents and purposes considered to be a pre-requisite for those wishing to forge a career in international aid.

I have been personally involved in this type of training over the last decade, specifically in the “Développement et aide humanitaire” Master's degree (formerly the “Coopération internationale, action humanitaire et politiques de développement” Master's) at Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne<sup>1</sup>, and my interest is in training future generations in this field. Namely, what skills should we transfer to them, what reference points should they be given, and what messages should be taught?

While the challenge is obviously to strike a balance between the need to “professionally train” students and develop their critical thinking skills; there is also a need to reflect upon the place occupied – or that should be occupied – by certain cross-cutting topics such as migration, gender and climate issues.

### What types of skills should be taught?

Generally, students are keen to acquire technical skills: how to make an assessment, identify needs, develop a project, and manage a budget. Above and beyond project management tools, the aim is to introduce them to our small world's own “newspeak”, teach them the basics of project management, and above all help them to gain an understanding of the types of professions open to them, from advocacy to logistics, reporting to fundraising. Students do not tend to be aware of the sheer range of career options and the specific facets of each position. We therefore have the difficult task of introducing them to the overgrown bureaucracy of the international aid world, teaching them to construct (and deconstruct<sup>2</sup>) the sacrosanct logical framework, and preparing them for what lies ahead: finding the right tone, coordinating teams,

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<sup>1</sup> Created in 1981 at Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne's Political Science Department, it would be fair to say that this DESS ([post-graduate diploma] – the course became a Master's degree in 2005) heralded the advent of courses on international action, [www.pantheonsorbonne.fr/ufr/ufr11/scolarité/master/master-2/parcours-developpement-et-aide-humanitaire](http://www.pantheonsorbonne.fr/ufr/ufr11/scolarité/master/master-2/parcours-developpement-et-aide-humanitaire)

<sup>2</sup> François Giovalucchi et Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, « Planification, gestion et politique dans l'aide au développement : le cadre logique, outil et miroir des développeurs », *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 2, n° 198, 2009, p. 383.

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finding their niche (or not) in expatriate life, which often differs greatly from what they imagined, managing stress and uncertainty, and always asking themselves the relevant questions.

In reality, their first internships or first professional experiences on the ground will teach them much more than our practical exercises in class, but the primary aim is to give them a few shared reference points and reflexes so that they fit in as easily as possible and are able to understand the strange language spoken fluently by the humanitarian community. Students obviously need to be aware of sector developments (the risk management culture<sup>3</sup>, the paradigm of localisation<sup>4</sup>, the growing importance of consortiums/partnerships, constant fundraising, the stringent requirement for project efficiency and transparency<sup>5</sup>, etc.) but equally and above all they must be given a grounding in theory.

Analytical skills are essential. Students are in a rush to start their careers and be faced with real-life challenges, and are not always aware of it at the time, but this critical thinking apparatus to which we endeavour to introduce them will often make the difference. The idea is to give them a good grounding (political science, sociology, history and even anthropology) so that they are able to understand for themselves the issues at stake and the unique nature of each context, decipher the limitations (and the often indecent nature) of “developmentalist” discourse, undertake ethical reflection, and view the excesses of the profession with a critical eye. The intention is not only to give them some historical points of reference for the major international aid paradigms (and also for the social and political dynamics that have historically caused them), but also to help them to ponder the social and political impact of development and humanitarian aid practices. Reading Achille Mbembe, Felwine Sarr, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Olivier Nay, Johanna Siméant, Jean-François Bayart, Béatrice Hibou and Didier Fassin should be mandatory for anyone wanting to make a career in development or humanitarian work, alongside more political authors, such as Rony Brauman (a non-exhaustive list to which we could of course add many English-speaking authors!).

This stimulating reading will enable students to objectively understand the dynamics, concerns and logics with which they will soon be confronted on the ground. Group discussions are often passionate, with the students (generally) espousing an altruistic position, academics (generally) adopting a critical stance, and the (generally) pragmatic viewpoint of the professionals who teach on this type of Master’s course. International aid is not like any other profession, nor should it become so. International aid professions require almost permanent ethical reflection because they take place in profoundly unequal contexts, and above all because the underlying relationships are highly asymmetrical<sup>6</sup>. New voices are making themselves heard, both in the developed and developing worlds, calling for a new approach. Future generations will need to question the narratives that we have collectively developed and conveyed, and find new ways of working.

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<sup>3</sup> Michaël Neuman and Fabrice Weissman (eds.), *Saving Lives and Staying Alive. Humanitarian Security in the Age of Risk Management*, Hurst Publishers, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Localisation can be defined as wanting local stakeholders “at grassroots level” to design and develop emergency and development initiatives. It is one of the principles that underpin the Grand Bargain, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, <https://www.coordinate-sud.org/wp-content/uploads/Synthese-ETUDE.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> For these issues, reference can, for example, be made to the work of Béatrice Hibou, and the following article: Perrine Laissus-Benoist, “The endless restructuring of the humanitarian sector: an inappropriate search for performance?”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°9, November 2018, p.52-62, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/11/13/endless-restructuring-humanitarian-sector%e2%80%89-inappropriate-search-performance%e2%80%89/>

<sup>6</sup> To quote Didier Fassin: “Those who receive humanitarian aid know only too well that they are expected to demonstrate the humility of the obligated, rather than the assertions of an entitled person”; see Didier Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire. Une histoire morale du temps présent*, EHESS, Gallimard/Seuil, 2010.

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Globalisation invites us to rethink international aid by forging much stronger links between what happens “here” and what goes on “over there”. Our links and our mutual dependence are such, in the “global village”, that the classic distinction between those who work in France and those who work abroad is becoming less meaningful. The rationale behind the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in that they no longer solely apply to low-income countries, but instead to all countries, including the richest nations, is a prime example of these new dynamics, going beyond the “development aid” logic and advocating the concept of “global public goods”. Many of us in France are now using skills originally acquired abroad when working with migrants, socially-excluded people, and the most vulnerable members of society. The careers of the future generations will, in my view, be less homogeneous from this perspective, and I can imagine that they will develop their careers both in France and abroad, with constant toing and froing. In the future, the aim will be to address inequality, wherever it occurs. Increasing numbers of international aid organisations are now running programmes in France<sup>7</sup>. The teams are also becoming increasingly multicultural (and just as well): international aid professionals are from all around the world, as are the beneficiaries. The humanitarian sphere is expanding in a way, and our academic courses need to be open to the new realities of international aid.

### Three areas requiring further development

I have not chosen these three topics because young people are particularly interested in them, because they are on-trend, or because they are in the “sights” of funding bodies. It could be argued that other sectors are key (personally, I am a healthcare specialist) but, in my view, these three issues are deeply, each in its own way, cross-cutting, and they are not sufficiently taken into consideration in international aid projects. Irrespective of the sector (healthcare, education, agricultural development, micro-credit, etc.), the nature of the project (emergency, post-emergency, development, advocacy, etc.), and the remit (specific or broad-based) of the organisation, new operating methods need to emerge when developing, rolling out, and evaluating projects. Systematically checking whether these three issues (climate, gender and migration) have been taken into consideration would certainly increase effectiveness. These are complex issues with major repercussions for all sectors of international aid. The intention is not solely to call for specialised Master’s degrees to be created on these subjects with a view to training subject specialists, but rather to give all future international aid professionals reference points, reflexes, and tools to gain an improved grasp of these phenomena.

The challenges are clear and urgent for the climate and the environment. The report published in March 2019 by the think tank The Shift Project invited us to systematically train professionals from all sectors and to methodically deliver teaching on “green issues” in all academic courses<sup>8</sup>. A discussion is underway in the *Coordination Sud* team, but also in many French NGOs (non-governmental organisations)<sup>9</sup>, as to how they can incorporate climate issues: how to reduce our

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<sup>7</sup> While *Médecins du Monde* has been involved in programmes in France since 1986, other organisations have become involved in (or moved back into) this field over the past few years. Michaël Neuman’s article focuses on the internal debate generated by this decision at *Médecins sans Frontières*: “*Médecins sans Frontières*-France: tensions arising from the ‘Migration’ projects”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°10, March 2019, p.22-35, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/03/25/medecins-sans-frontieres-france-tensions-arising-migration-projects/>

<sup>8</sup> Further information can be found on the think tank’s website: <https://theshiftproject.org>

<sup>9</sup> The example of *Médecins du Monde*: Astrid Fossier-Heckmann and Hugo Tiffou, “Environmental health at *Médecins du Monde*: from the emergence to the structuring of a struggle”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°12, November 2019, p.78-89, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2019/11/14/la-sante-environnementale-a-medecins-du-monde-de-lemergence-a-la-structuration-dun-combat>

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environmental impact (notably changing our practices to cut our absolutely disastrous “carbon footprints”), how to reduce our dependence, how to adapt to future changes<sup>10</sup>?

Students seem particularly alert and mobilised on gender issues. The fact that the majority of Master’s degree students are female is undoubtedly a factor, but I am delighted to see that young people seem deeply committed to this issue. Working on the ground in some regions, such as the countries of the Sahel where I worked, is likely to be a painful experience: in those areas, gender is a sensitive issue that needs to be handled flexibly if results are to be obtained. Projects focusing on access to contraception, the right to abortion, combating gender-based violence, and bolstering female empowerment and autonomy, are particularly complex. While the struggle for gender equality is almost universal, these issues are particularly important in the field of international aid. The 2011 scandal involving misconduct by several members of the Oxfam UK team in Haiti tarnished the whole humanitarian sector and reminded us that the world of international aid is not immune to this type of misconduct. NGOs are obviously duty-bound to be beyond reproach in this respect, but apart from these obvious precautions, gender issues need to be included in all projects. Students therefore need to be trained in this area, and to be given conceptual references and practical reflexes.

Lastly, I believe that it is important to teach all students about migration issues, as migration is all too often forgotten by NGOs. Firstly, grassroots workers are increasingly faced with new humanitarian issues linked to the sheer scale of migration, border closures, and what Michel Agier calls “l’encampement du monde<sup>11</sup>” or “a world of camps”: the creation of neglected zones, buffer towns, etc. The living conditions of those who seek a better life are terrible in these lawless areas, and many organisations are working on these issues. The aim is not simply to highlight the emergence of migration-focused programmes (and therefore the development of a new field of expertise for future professionals), however, but also and above all to call for these issues to be systematically incorporated into grassroots projects in all sectors. Moving beyond the controversies and simplification in the media, migration is a complex issue, requiring highly diverse practices, but which plays a major role in social dynamics. The professionals of the future must know these dynamics, work more with the diaspora and gain an understanding of the new economic practices linked to migration – whether they are the much-talked about “remittances” (money transfers to migrants’ home countries), or other practices linked to the rise of migration (cross-border suitcase traders, *tontines* [self-organised savings associations], family networks, secret society-type trading associations etc.) –, in short include human mobility in their strategies. There is little teaching on these topics, while there is great demand from students, just like there is for gender and climate issues (and I realise this every year, particularly when interviewing course applicants). Travel and migration (notably migration within the Global South) should not only be covered by dedicated projects (moreover, it is interesting to see a real growth in the number of “migration representative” posts in the organisational charts of many NGOs over the past few years) but should also be taken into account in the design stage of all projects in all sectors.

The changes in our world invite us to reformulate international aid issues more appropriately, develop our practices, and, logically, to redesign course content. These last few years of studies are invaluable (for many students, they will be the best part of their university careers), and they should be an opportunity for them to put professional practices and views into perspective, do

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<sup>10</sup> Guillaume Devars, Julien Fouilland, François Grünewald, Thuy-Binh Nguyen and Julie Mayans, “Anticipating uncertainty, preparing for the unknown: humanitarian actors in the face of issues linked to climate change”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, N°11, July 2019, p.10-23, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2019/07/18/anticipating-uncertainty-preparing-for-the-unknown-humanitarian-actors-in-the-face-of-issues-linked-to-climate-change>

<sup>11</sup> Michel Agier, « L’encampement du monde », *Plein droit*, n° 90, vol. 3, 2011, p. 21.

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more in-depth reading, take a critical view of development policies and discourse, and take the time to reflect... before taking the plunge.

*Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton*

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### Biography • Stéphanie Tchiombiano

Stéphanie Tchiombiano holds degrees in Political Science and Public Health, and is an associate lecturer at the Political Science Department at Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. She is the co-director of studies for the “*Développement et aide humanitaire*” Master’s course. Stéphanie worked for over fifteen years in the health sector in West Africa. Her first post, lasting eight years, was as the representative of the French Red Cross (Niger, Togo, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso). She was notably involved in setting up several outpatient treatment centres. She then worked as Head of Mission for the NGO Solthis in Niger, Mali and Guinea for eight years, during which she mainly worked on access to antiretroviral drugs for HIV-positive patients and on strengthening healthcare systems. Stéphanie then spent three years with FEI/Expertise France, coordinating the 5% AIDS, TB and Malaria Initiative. She now divides her time between university teaching and coordinating the Santé Mondiale 2030 ([www.santemondiale2030.fr](http://www.santemondiale2030.fr)) think tank.

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*To quote this article: Stéphanie Tchiombiano, “Training future generations of international aid professionals: challenges and discussion topics”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n°13, March 2020, p.59-68,*

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/03/16/training-future-generations-of-international-aid-professionals-challenges-and-discussion-topics/>

*ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-637-9*