

From resilience to localisation, or how slogans are not enough for an in-depth reform of the humanitarian sector

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At regular intervals, a new slogan echoes around the humanitarian sector, with unifying virtues that are supposed to embody its reform. Yet fads pass, and often the poor integration of innovations and new technologies is deplored. What must we conclude? The two authors undertake here a critical exercise, starting from resilience, and apprehending the implementation of the relatively recent, but promising, concept of localisation.

Aid localisation, which was just recently elevated to a priority level during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, is already showing its limitations. Why does the humanitarian sector seem incapable of implementing an admittedly complex methodology, but one so crucial for its reform? In order to understand this phenomenon, it is worth considering the lessons learned from the latest attempts to modify the sector's architecture. One example, that of resilience, strikes us as particularly informative. It recently had its day in the forefront and its phasing-out is already obvious. By studying the historical reasons for the progressive disconnection of humanitarian models from their fields of intervention, by analysing the double moral and economic stake in the promotion of resilience and by questioning the successes and limits of the concrete applications of localisation in the Central African context, we believe that it is possible to identify the key points necessary for its successful promotion.

What does the old refrain of humanitarian reform reveal?

Following the crises of confidence which the humanitarian community has been undergoing since the 1990s, the sector has constantly wanted to prove its legitimacy. Since the beginning of the 2010s, alarm bells began to ring particularly loudly because of the global financial crisis, the decrease in funding for Official Development Aid (ODA), and the proliferation of complex and cyclical crises. These repeated shocks led the system managers, starting with the United Nations, to think differently. This quest took the form of a managerial reading of neoliberal inspiration, with a *one size fits all* model in which the system was to prove its quality and performance through tangible, quantifiable and objective results. However, in doing so, to ensure perfect programmability, complexity was ignored, and an aversion to risk developed.

Resilience and localisation, the two latest leading concepts at the centre of issues of reform, share at least one essential concern: remaining close to the field and the realities of beneficiaries. But why focus specifically on these two concepts here? Because they do not merely call for a change in the way of reading contexts: they imply a new humanitarian architecture. Indeed, “under the guise of scientificness, the tinkering and pragmatic arrangements, the search for a theory of ‘good practice’ and a rationalisation of methodological tools from the field suggest that it is less a search for scientific rationality than a question of government”¹.

¹ Béatrice Hibou, *La bureaucratisation du monde à l'ère néolibérale*, La Découverte, coll. « Cahiers libres », 2012.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Hence in 2012, Devex, the social media company specialised in development, selected resilience as the trending word of the year². Why such enthusiasm? Because it proposes a new model for reflection on a system which is confronted with an increase in the number of people affected by crises and a spike in shocks, both in terms of frequency and intensity. Whilst many have criticised the concept, due to its vague and divisive definition, it has nevertheless been excessively present in sponsors' strategies. It is therefore important to reflect on what the concept underlies, and four points seem identifiable to us. Firstly, resilience can enable us to overcome the search for links between phases of reconstruction in order to admit their concomitance in a given country (contiguum of aid). Secondly, its effective promotion involves a centrality of diagnostics and a multi-temporal, multi-level, multi-sector approach. Moreover, its operational implementation requires more flexible intervention contracts. Finally, the performance of a "triggered" resilience project must be defined by its qualitative impacts. All of these points require modifications, not only in terms of sponsors' strategies, but also in terms of their operational methods.

The promotion of resilience: from method to practice

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a particularly unstable country in Central Africa. In 2012, rebel movements formed a coalition called Seleka, which took over the capital in March 2013. A self-defence militia called the Anti-Balaka was created in response. International humanitarian intervention and the implementation of a transition government led to a curbing of the conflict, but the consequences had a serious impact, since the crisis was the work of military-commercial war mongers. The new media coverage of a little-known area led to an influx of aid, with, as often happens, to recommendations for intervention, and prescriptive typologies. We noted the significant promotion of population resilience, which was to be at the heart of the strategic orientation of the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)³. Unlike the initial pilot areas⁴, the CAR represented a particular context for this terminology given that the country had undergone a multitude of shocks and stresses. And that is why this case is so interesting. The majority of international sponsors and institutions highlighted the quality of programmes in the country in 2014 and 2015, citing it as a reference combining democratisation, peace-keeping and early recovery. Yet experts quickly called this approach, and its results, into question: "While there is near universal recognition that the current collective approach to supporting communities and countries in crisis is not optimal, this has not yet led to a comprehensive shift, and instead [has] resulted in a proliferation of unconsolidated projects, programmes and frameworks labelled resilience, which often reinforce the very institutional barriers they are meant to overcome"⁵.

In other words, whilst sponsors have been promoting resilience, they have had great difficulty in modifying their DNA in order to allow for a revision of their strategies. Since 2014, we started to understand how this method has been devised far from the field, with little contextual analysis. Hence, whilst the weakness of the State in the CAR was noted, there was an inability to consider the *Hinterland*⁶. In the Central African Republic, it is often said that "the State ends at PK12" [for

² <http://www.devex.com>

³ OCHA, Strategic humanitarian document 2014 initially titled "Resilience has a 100 days" and available in its revised version under the title "100 day plan for priority humanitarian action in the Central African Republic", 24th of December 2013, April 2nd 2014: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/100_DAY_PLAN_2014_CAR.pdf

⁴ See the capitalisations of the European Union's AGIR project in the Sahel region: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/sahel_agir_fr.pdf

⁵ Outcomes of expert panel discussion, 87th IASC Working Group Meeting, Geneva, 29-30 October 2014

⁶ Louisa Lombard, « Rébellion et limites de la consolidation de la paix en République centrafricaine », *Politique africaine*, n°125, 2012, p.189-208.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

“Point Kilométrique 12”, an area in the suburbs of Bangui, north of the capital, *editor’s note*]. It is important to understand that, beyond the partial control of the territory by the militias, the Central African State is itself hardly present outside of the capital and the Berbérati area [the third biggest city in the country, roughly 500 km from Bangui, *editor’s note*]. Provincial public services are limited, or non-existent. There is therefore an additional complexity in conceiving of the redeployment of the rule of law, as in most of the country it is rather a question of conceiving of its creation or reinforcement. Reforms were undertaken by people rather than by the organisations themselves (we note here the evolution of OCHA’s positioning with regards to the third cornerstone of resilience promotion, with varying visibility according to changes in leadership). We can also observe the United Nations’ difficulties in limiting their hierarchical influence on the system. Whilst a reflection is undertaken internally to reconfigure relationships between actors, and the humanitarian architecture over the medium term, in order to better respond to the humanitarian aid-development “nexus”, this work mainly aims to (re)train the United Nations agencies in charge of these two components of aid to work together and coordinate better with each other⁷. The promotion of an integrated approach implies a reconceptualisation of the silo approach promoted by the architecture of clusters. It could therefore potentially lead to a weakening of the roles of coordination between sectors in certain agencies. This is not merely a question of power, but also of finance. How can we justify the centralisation of financial thematics within an agency, which will be in charge of a flow of subventions as a result, if the sectoral entries are made to be limited? For example, an agency like Unicef has requested to receive their Wash funding directly from big bilateral sponsors and redeploy it in a given country. The goal is to improve aid coordination in this sector and limit partnership contracts for bilateral sponsors, thereby reducing management costs. For the agency, it also means a substantial increase in its budget and influence. But an integrated response often implies multi-sector activities, whose contracting made difficult because it depends on various sources of funding. Finally, pro-resilience innovation ambitions, be they programmatic or organisational, were quickly restrained by the decrease in institutional funding. Since 2016, emergency aid and recovery budgets have fallen to pre-crisis level in the CAR, with a majority of sponsors playing down resilience promotion in order to focus on the heart of their mandate.

The first, faltering steps of localisation in the CAR

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, a new priority emerged: localising aid, in other words, developing a humanitarian response rooted in and managed by local communities. As with resilience, there was nothing innovative about this approach as such, but rather a return to basics. Yet we note the same difficulties in fully conceiving a plan of action which aims, no more no less, at the disappearance of the established humanitarian infrastructure. This localisation manifested itself in the field in two ways: the reinforcement of the presence of local and national aid actors (who up to now received only 1.6% of the humanitarian aid provided by international sponsors⁸), and an increase in local inputs and purchasing. To go back to our example of the Central African Republic, we saw during our last trips to the field how the promotion of localisation unfortunately seems to be encountering the same pitfalls as resilience. Though it calls for strong contextualisation, the pilot projects were based on the replication of good practices from other countries. The attention given to local providers can, however, bring real results⁹, but

⁷ The New Way of Working is a good starting point, but remains very centred on the UN system.

⁸ Caritas International and CAFOD, *Funding at the sharp end. Investing in national NGO response capacity*, July 2014, https://cafod.org.uk/content/download/24369/175018/version/4/file/Funding_at_the_sharp_end.pdf

⁹ See the analysis co-written with the NGO Triangle Génération Humanitaire on their project of promoting local input in Ouaka (CAR), available on the NGO’s website: <http://www.trianglegh.org/ActionHumanitaire/PDF/MissionRCA/Un-exemple-d-approvisionnement-local-TGH.pdf>

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

there again, strategies for intervention are not always coordinated in advance. We can observe a duplication of activities, and even competing pro-localisation approaches within UN agencies. What are the impacts when a sponsor funds groups of seed producers aiming to locally produce inputs for an agricultural recovery and another ensures that seed distribution (purchased from wholesalers in the sub-region) is carried out by local NGOs? Yet both are promoting a certain idea of localisation.

For their part, the international NGOs that we met in CAR in 2016 and 2017 denounced the process of localisation when the latter seemed to consist solely in forcing them to cover the legal and financial risks of the promotion of local actors. As for sponsors, whilst they reflect on the evolution of their programming (for example, distributions of cash intended to give more power to the beneficiaries in their recovery instead of a forced distribution), they largely leave aside the question of the impact on their internal architecture (namely the staff variations that this would entail). As with resilience, the desire for change is mainly carried by people, rather than by organisations: “If you are asking what changes will be made in organisations in the real world, and what the concept of localisation means to them, you will obviously not see much difference with what is being done already”¹⁰. In other words, the decrease in funding has reinforced traditional actors’ instincts of preservation, to the point that the two main distortions of the concept of localisation are first and foremost due to financial concerns. Firstly, there is the limitation of projects dedicated to the capacity reinforcement of local actors, with the restriction of funding and denunciations of the costs of “long and insidious chains of transactions”¹¹. There are indeed management costs at several levels, but it must be noted that the same international actors did not voice the same criticism when they sought to centralise sector financing before dividing it amongst the operational teams, citing thematic coordination... The second distortion, which is more insidious, is a weakness in the mobilisation of local actors in subcontracting dynamics: national NGOs are rarely actors in project approaches, being often reduced to mere distribution operatives.

Favouring the acceptance of complexity and investment over catch all terms

We have identified obstacles to the implementation of these two concepts: the search for a unified method, difficulties in coordination, competition in programme strategies between traditional sponsors, limited organisational delivery, and the limitation of innovative approaches in the face of financial constraints... To simplify, we can only emphasise the extent to which aversion to risk slows down progress and innovation in the humanitarian sector.

The latent refusal to accept the complexity of environments and investments, including financial investments, which a new approach entails (even when it has been conceived of, as is the case for the two concepts under study, with an objective of cost-reduction), prevents any desire for reform. It is essential to reconsider reform at both micro and macro levels of aid: contiguum, multi-sector, financing of research-action, participative approach, financial flexibility, investment in training, equipment and tutoring linked to capacity reinforcement, etc. Some try to see the glass as half-full: “The process served as a catalyser, even though the recommendations remain unimplemented. Consultations have indeed forced the United Nations to publicly come under fire of criticism, which it has borne without attempting to shy away”¹². The fact remains that so

¹⁰ Heba Aly, « Quel espoir pour la réforme humanitaire ? », IRIN, August 5th 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/fr/report/101833/quel-espoir-pour-la-reforme-de-l-humanitaire>

¹¹ IRIN, « Repenser le financement humanitaire des ONG nationales », September 2014, <http://www.irinnews.org/fr/report/100617/repenser-le-financement-humanitaire-des-ong-nationales>

¹² Heba Aly, « Quel espoir... », art. cit.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

long as reforms are not considered as foremost impacting sponsors' professional practice, they will not reach their goal.

It is interesting to note that in the CAR, one of the few actors to maintain its support for both resilience and localisation is the Bekou Fund. As the first multi-sponsor fiduciary fund set up by the European Union and three of its member countries (France, Germany, and the Netherlands), this new sponsor was created to overcome bureaucratic constraints and develop new approaches for recovery. "This tool enables the rationalisation of intervention methods, the concentration of human and technical resources on the ground, and the creation of a real common dynamic [rooted in the LRRD]"¹³. Its culture of innovation, rooted in its very architecture, was strongly criticised in a report by the European Court of Auditors. In a way, it is also impeded by the system's difficulty in conceiving of organisational innovation and financial flexibility as a tool for the reform of the methods of humanitarian action¹⁴.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Biographies

Perrine Laissus-Benoist • A graduate of Sciences Po Lille, Perrine Laissus-Benoist has been working for nearly ten years in Central Africa as a project and evaluation coordinator for a number of NGOs. She is currently finishing a thesis in Economics and Development on the notion of performance in the humanitarian sector, based on the example of Central Africa, as part of the Clersé laboratory (Lille 1 - CNRS). She is carrying out operational research on the impact of this notion and its bureaucratisation in the humanitarian system on the implementation of projects promoting resilience. In this context, she is collaborating with the development of observatories in the Central African Republic and in Lersa. She also works as a consultant for a number of organisations on impact evaluations, quality of practice and strategic development and as a trainer for a number of Masters programmes specialised in the management of humanitarian projects.

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¹³ See the website of the Bekou Fund: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/fonds-fiduciaire-bekou-introduction_fr

¹⁴ For the full report, see: <http://publications.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/Bekou-11-2017/fr/>

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