

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Crossing glances from Asia and Africa towards Istanbul

*Danielle Tan* • Institut d'Asie Orientale (École normale supérieure Lyon, France) et  
Institut de recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine (Bangkok)  
*Mamadou Ndiaye* • Office africain pour le développement et la coopération (Sénégal)

---

If the World Humanitarian Summit generates many expectations, it also gives rise to many questions. In spite of the eight regional consultations that took place between the spring of 2014 and the summer of 2015, from Abidjan to Tokyo, tending to collect the greatest number of contributions, satisfaction is not really widespread. From the perspective of Laos and Cambodia for one and that of West Africa for the other, Danielle Tan and Mamadou Ndiaye tell us a bit what two continents, strongly concerned by humanitarian issues, retain from this process and are hoping for at the closing in Istanbul. Of course without pushing aside what may have been lost on the way.

---

**Humanitarian Alternatives** – *What do you see as being positive or negative in the form and content of the World Humanitarian Summit as announced?*

**Danielle Tan** – This Summit (WHS) raises many expectations because it aims to reform a system currently failing to address the intensification and increasingly complex nature of crises. This Summit will be the culmination of a two-year consultative process conducted by the United Nations and intended to foster worldwide dialogue on how to improve humanitarian interventions. The method used has been both ambitious and innovative, as this is the first time consultations have brought together and given a voice to such a broad spectrum of actors, finally more than 23,000 people, after having produced over 400 written declarations, at a cost of 24 million dollars.

Unlike most of the processes conducted by the United Nations, the WHS agenda was not decided in advance to avoid shaping the debates and ensure all the different points of view would be heard. But despite general appreciation of the open and innovative nature of the process, there is concern that the absence of a clear framework will prevent promises being turned into action.

The report of the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility*, which summarises the debates, advocates a new and better-coordinated aid architecture that will ensure more effective links between humanitarian aid and development aid and place a greater focus – both financial and political – on preventing the occurrence of crises.

Yet, reading this report gives way to many disappointments. The main criticism is that it lacks vision and concrete proposals. It feels like reading a list of 122 “good intentions”, laudable ones, of course, but which don’t establish priorities or the course to be taken if we are to implement these essential commitments. The report offers a noble vision of “humanity”, but this concept is

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

not clearly defined. And, most importantly, it pays little more than lip service to concerns raised regularly during the consultations, such as self-reliance for local actors, protecting the independence of humanitarian action in highly politicized contexts, greater accountability towards aid beneficiaries and a stronger presence in the field. For example, a concrete proposal for localising humanitarian aid put forward by Charter4Change<sup>1</sup>, an initiative led by a group of national and international NGOs, is not mentioned. Lastly, the report is not ambitious enough when it comes to reforming the mandate of United Nations organisations themselves which bear considerable responsibility for the institutional confusion that reigns in the current aid system.

**Mamadou Ndiaye** – The consultation has been an interesting and inclusive exercise that has gathered the points of view of the region in which we carry out humanitarian activities. The number and diversity of the participants were impressive. The overall quality of the contributions was good and representative of regional issues. But great care will be needed in compiling and summarising these contributions in a document which will serve as a reference for the next five years.

**H. A.** – *Do you feel that any special attention has to be paid to your main geographical areas of expertise and intervention – Laos and Cambodia on the one hand, West Africa on the other hand?*

**D. T.** – Laos and Cambodia participated in the regional consultation of North and South-East Asian countries in Tokyo in July 2014. During this consultation, participants stressed the importance of greater coherence between the WHS and the other global processes focused on climate change and sustainable development (World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai, Japan, 2015; the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted in September 2015; the latest conferences on climate change). Indeed, Asia and Pacific is the region of the world most prone to environmental hazards: in 2013, 137 natural disasters affected 82 million people and killed more than 18,000.

Humanitarian action in Laos and Cambodia was front-page news in the 1970s and 1980s due to the media attention attracted by the “French Doctors”, campaigning at the time for the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds. But today the nature of their humanitarian needs is in a transition phase. In fact, these countries are a good illustration of the porosity of the divide between humanitarian and development aid. Armed conflicts have been replaced by natural disasters and by increasing inequalities in a context of strong economic growth. These countries are no longer considered a priority because they don’t suffer from large-scale natural disasters, but rather from regular, low-intensity ones caused by climate change and the extensive exploitation of natural resources –but above all because priority is clearly given to the development process. Yet needs exist and poverty is still a fundamental problem.

Although the report does integrate climate issues, calling for a greater focus on natural disaster preparedness, the lack of financial investment for strengthening the resilience of the most vulnerable is still a major problem. In 2014, only 0.4% of ODA was spent on disaster risk reduction. The report provides for a 1% increase in the financial allocation, but for field actors, this is a derisory commitment.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://charter4change.org>

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

During the consultations, these same field actors also stressed the importance of reducing the humanitarian-development divide, pointing out that current financing methods are not adapted to disaster response (for short periods, lacking in flexibility and not enough focus on preparation). It would seem that the humanitarian-development divide question has been heard, as Ban Ki-moon has made it the main pillar of his aid architecture, with humanitarian and development objectives to be pursued as part of the same challenge.

In theory, this idea makes sense, but some actors – especially Médecins Sans Frontières – question the pertinence and feasibility of this combined approach in practice, and even see it as a potential threat to humanitarian principles. Instead of establishing a global norm for dealing with all crises in the same way, it would be better to clearly differentiate between conflicts and natural disasters – different responses and a clear distribution of responsibilities between donors, agencies, UN, governments and civil society organisations – as the response is not the same in these two types of situations.

**M. N.** – The United Nations Secretary-General, in his “Agenda for Humanity” (appended to his last report) and with reference to the fifth core responsibility, “Investing in humanity” referred to the need to “develop concrete targets to increase direct and predictable financing to national and local actors and provide long term support to develop such actors’ capacity to seek and manage funds where needed”. Indeed, poor humanitarian financing is still a serious concern. In recent years, it has rarely gone beyond 50% of minimum requirements. Yet the explosive situation in the Sahel up to the Lake Chad area requires more attention if we are to find an adequate response to the violent extremism developing there.

The two Africa region consultations wanted to see some concrete action taken on the question of direct financing to local actors in line with the discourse on their role and importance in humanitarian action. These actors have thus strengthened their activities, developed their capacities and gained experience so they can play an important role in the region alongside other humanitarian actors.

**H. A.** – *Still on the subject of Cambodia and Laos, and West Africa, do you think that the initiatives, processes or experiences of these countries could provide useful input to the global reform of humanitarian aid?*

**D. T.** – The debates surrounding this reform have raised questions on money, humanitarian principles and the institutional changes to be made. But for many local organisations, the real question concerns power, or more precisely, the unwillingness of international partners to share it. Over recent years, field actors’ main recommendation for improving humanitarian interventions has been to put local organisations and the people affected by crises at the heart of the new aid system. There is a clear demand for a more equitable and people-centred humanitarian model.

According to Development Initiatives, out of the 4 billion dollars granted to NGOs in 2014, more than a third (\$1.4 billion) went to the 10 biggest international NGOs who then outsourced to local partners. Only 0.2% of humanitarian aid was sent directly to national NGOs for the implementation of humanitarian action – or \$46.6 million out of a total of \$24.5 billion. International NGOs that have signed the Charter4Change initiative have pledged to transfer 20% of their funding to local NGOs for example.

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**

The reasons most commonly put forward to justify this imbalance are the lack of technical and administrative capacity among local organisations and the risk of corruption. These organisations are called partners but in fact are often confined to the role of sub-contractor. We need to urgently consider ways of strengthening civil society organisations so they can play an active part in developing programmes, formulating partnership rules and in decision-making processes in the same way as international NGOs. This calls for a radical change of attitude on the part of funding agencies.

The strengthening of civil society organisations (CSOs) is a major issue in Laos and Cambodia. In an authoritarian state such as Laos, the situation of CSOs is particularly critical. Only 35 Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) have managed to obtain legal status, and twenty or so are registered as social enterprises or operate as informal networks. They are also kept under close surveillance and muzzled. In 2012, Sombath Somphone, a respected civil society leader was kidnapped. He is still missing today. CSO capacity-building has become a priority for institutional donors, but international NGOs have problems finding partners. For example, the European Commission has set aside a sizeable budget of 2 million euros for non-state actors, but few CSOs can access this funding because the selection process is too complicated and not adapted to the situation in Laos. As for Cambodia, the damaging effects of the massive arrival of aid are clearly visible. Since the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established in the 1990s, NGOs have spread like wildfire. In 2012, the number of officially registered NGOs was around 3,500 (2,982 local NGOs and 511 international NGOs), with probably about 1,250 NGOs operational. This large number gives this little country of 14 million inhabitants one of the highest concentrations of NGOs in proportion to its population. These two examples confirm the need to give serious thought to the issue of “unearned development income” and “unearned humanitarian income as one of its variants”<sup>2</sup> in any reflection on the reform of international aid. Whether in Laos or Cambodia, international aid too often serves to strengthen the elites in power who instrumentalise this financial manna to heal wounds caused by non-sustainable development. At the end of the day, the challenge for this humanitarian reform is making sure the money really does go to the poorest and those most in need; and that won't be possible without civil society's active participation.

**M. N.** – National actors have highlighted the risk of the localisation process being reduced to turning certain international NGOs into local NGOs instead of establishing real partnerships with those that already exist. So a key question for national NGOs is whether humanitarian actors are willing to change so that appropriate responses can be brought to the needs of affected populations. During the consultations, we didn't always feel that this was the way the points of view, the various proceedings, were heading. We hope that the Summit will obtain this commitment. Moreover, there is no doubt that the role and responsibilities of the states are crucial in finding solutions to conflicts and mitigating the effects of natural disasters. In this respect, the Summit must ensure states renew their engagement to respect and assume obligations to which they freely subscribed.

*Interview by Boris Martin, chief editor*

*Translated from the French by Mandy Duret*

---

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, « Aide humanitaire ou aide au développement? La “famine” de 2005 au Niger », *Ethnologie française*, 2011, vol. 41, n°3, p. 415-429.

### Biographies

**Danielle Tan** • Doctor in political science (Paris School of Political Science, 2011), she is an associate researcher at the Institute of East Asian Studies (ENS Lyon) and at the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia in Bangkok. Her research focuses on Chinese presence in South-East Asia, especially in Cambodia, Laos and around the Golden Triangle. In 2014, with a grant from the French Red Cross Fund, she conducted research into the “humanitarian transition” concept in Laos (“La ‘transition humanitaire’ au Laos : une cartographie des acteurs, des dynamiques et des modes de gouvernance”, Les Papiers du Fonds, January 2016, n°2). She has taught at the Paris, Nancy and Lyon Schools of Political Science and also has also worked in development in France, North Africa and South-East Asia as a volunteer and as a consultant.

**Mamadou Ndiaye** • Agro-economist by training, he is Director General of OFADEC (African Bureau for Development and Cooperation, *Office Africain pour le Développement et la Coopération*) in Senegal, an NGO intervening in the two fields of development and humanitarian action. He participated in the Ombudsman project for humanitarian aid initiated by the British Red Cross in 1999, one of the objectives of which was to permit aid beneficiaries to have their voice heard in the management of emergency situations concerning them. He was during two years a member of a strategic committee the work of which led to the creation of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP International) in 2003. In April 2015 he was elected for three years member of the Executive Committee of ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) and represents ICVA within the international council of the *Sphere* project. OFADEC was the first NGO in the world to be certified on the basis of the HAP International standard’s programme on accountability.

*Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article: Danielle Tan and Mamadou Ndiaye, "Crossing glances from Asia and Africa towards Istanbul", Humanitarian Alternatives, n° 2, May 2016, p. 60-69, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2016/05/13/crossing-glances-from-asia-and-africa-towards-istanbul/>*