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India: countermodel, alternative or future partner?

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Together with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and specialised United Nations (UN) entities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from international civil society are the third-largest family of international actors. Still overwhelmingly Western, they bring together and organise citizens who share an ambition to change public policies in their countries of origin. But they also operate at a distance from these countries to carry out solidarity actions. They assert too that they intervene in the name of a common humanity alongside populations affected by political or environmental crises. Violence, communicable diseases and shortfalls in basic needs are often the common denominator.

Whether they want to or not, these civil society organisations perpetuate and export the model of political sociology of which they are a product within the European and North American democracies that gave rise to them. While it may seem intent on generalisation, does this model have any universal value? In our multipolar world undergoing vast reconfiguration, are other emerging powers likely, in the near future, to allow such dynamic forces to strengthen their power to act or, in other words, become the partners of these organisations? Or are they in the process of coming up with alternatives that would in some way complement the latter's actions? Else do they harbour emerging countermodels that would compete with the "Western model" at the risk of creating "archipelagos" of solidarity?

This issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* examines this subject through the particular lens of the Republic of India, a parliamentary federation that is the second-largest country in the world after China. A superpower in the making, a recurrent candidate for permanent member status on the United Nations Security Council, it lacks neither the assets nor the contradictions to one day, as soon as tomorrow, also thrust civil society actors beyond its borders in the interests of international solidarity.

It is one of the world's leading cereal producers, yet a major epicentre of hunger and undernutrition. This has been used as an argument to ban wheat exports, which has become a major issue since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A great economic and intellectual power, it is also home to widespread illiteracy and poverty. A democracy long cited as an example, it is simultaneously a society that has institutionalised a stratified caste system, marginalises tribal populations, is fighting against Naxalite (Maoist) pockets of armed insurgents and displaying worsening violence between religious communities. As a country that is open to scientific and industrial innovation, multilateralism and non-alignment, it is also a nation marked by sometimes intransigent sovereignty, as it proved by banning any intervention by international NGOs after the devastating tsunami that hit its coasts in 2004. With its long history of non-alignment, India has also systematically abstained from the multiple UN votes

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calling for the condemnation of Russia's war in Ukraine, even if the country has more recently spoken out in favour of a peaceful solution.

Given its strengths and weaknesses, how does the country perceive humanitarian action? Whereas organisations from Western countries provide temporary substitution assistance, often deployed by foreign workers from the health professions, Indian NGOs direct their focus and resources on supporting and reviving income-generating activities: distribution of agricultural equipment, reinstatement of fishing fleets, reconstruction of schools and clinics, etc. In India, the bodies of the deceased are cremated or buried, survivors are entrusted to the care of a health system which is often precarious in the countryside, but people living in disaster zones are given the gift of hope for a better tomorrow.

International NGOs project their technical skills in space, whereas Indian organisations project people over the long term. They are active in the fight against hunger and intervene when confronted with the mass displacement of populations, as during the Covid pandemic. They are also working towards providing basic necessities to communities in need, such as drinking water and sanitation.

But how and under what conditions might Indian society ultimately create humanitarian organisations capable of intervening beyond the borders of the subcontinent? Does it even wish to do so, or does it intend to confine itself to a form of humanitarian sovereignty, in the image of its state sovereignty?

Rather than a disruptive development, might we imagine a scenario where the potential identified in India could feed the global humanitarian movement as a whole? People facing major emergencies could thus be provided with the human and technical skills of which the country is both a melting pot and a nursery. Similarly, the experience gained by Indian NGOs in managing recurrent cyclone-related disasters (in the Sundarbans and the Gulf of Bengal in particular) would complement the solidarity responses rooted in the emergency culture – inspired, for French organisations, by SAMU[1] practices – which currently dominate the operating procedures of international NGOs. In the long run, might such an approach not lead to a reinvention of the international humanitarian movement by internationalising it in the fullest sense of the term? Indeed, its donor countries and its actors remain almost exclusively Western, a bias which, in the "majority world," has long fuelled the feeling that humanitarian aid is a soft power tool, the symbolic figure of a disguised form of interventionism.

The many analyses contained in this latest Focus of *Humanitarian Alternatives* undoubtedly provide food for thought.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

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[1] The SAMU is the *Service d'aide médicale urgente* (urgent medical assistance service), a public service tasked with dispatching emergency medical responders as part of France's healthcare system.