

“Researchers should be in close dialogue with practitioners”

Entretien de *Virginie Troit* avec *Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert*

Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert has a PhD in Political Science and International Relations. She is a Co-Director of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies (NCHS) and also Research Director at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) focusing on security issues. Her expertise offered ample justification for an interview, skilfully conducted by Virginie Troit, Director General of the French Red Cross Foundation for humanitarian and social research.

Virginie Troit – *As a researcher in humanities and social science, what led you to take on humanitarian issues?*

Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert – It was above all the question of how conflicts and humanitarian disasters are represented which sparked my interest. I have always been interested in journalism and the media, and this led me to reflect on how the media put, or do not put, certain crises on the agenda, how they report on often remote disasters and how in turn this leads to the involvement of citizens, organisations or states. This made me want to look more closely into what became the subject of my thesis, which was the internationalisation of the conflicts in South Sudan and Darfur. From forgotten conflicts, they became high-profile and the subject of large-scale international campaigns led by both transnational activist networks and international or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as the diplomatic representatives of other states. The classes on humanitarian issues that I took at *Sciences Po* (Paris Institute of Political Studies) – those given by Rony Brauman and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, for example – also opened my eyes to the fact that humanitarian action is not only what is portrayed to us on posters and in campaigns, mainly through the image of the volunteer as a Good Samaritan coming to the rescue of victims of this or that emergency. It goes much further. We only have to think of the dilemmas humanitarian action poses when, despite the best intentions of the actors, it can cause more harm than good, if only because by failing to take the full measure of the context of an intervention, a situation ends up being prolonged rather than brought to an end. So in short, that is why humanitarian issues interested me sufficiently for me to make them the subject of my thesis and the research projects I have carried out since. These days my work focuses more particularly on issues of migration and European responses to refugees and other migrants arriving in Europe. In essence, I am at the juncture of humanitarian and security responses.

V. T. – *You then switched from studying conflict as a research subject to directing research at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). PRIO might not be well-known to our French-speaking readers (they publish in English), but it is a private foundation that was created in 1959 by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung. With a group of researchers, he initiated the field of peace and conflict studies, a new movement in social science. What was the initial vision of how research could contribute to peacebuilding? In 2023, is this vision of the founders still valid, especially in the wake of new conflicts and crises like the one in Ukraine, and how does this vision materialise into projects at PRIO?*

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M. G. J. – You are right to point out the mission of the founding fathers of PRIO, which should also be situated in the post-war context. Johan Galtung and the founders of PRIO grew up during the Second World War and studied during the years after. Johan Galtung recounted how he realised that there was no such thing as peace studies, only war studies, and saw as his mission to establish the field of peace studies. Their mission was also probably a form of activism – wanting to use research in order to foster peace – and perhaps something that could have been seen as politically engaged in the post-war context. There has been some continuity over the years at PRIO in seeking to carry out this mission by doing research, although PRIO has evolved into becoming more of a research institute. Nowadays, we want to cultivate our most excellent research in social science in the area of peace and conflict, and more broadly security and humanitarian issues in order to use our academic research to have an impact on policy. One might consider we do less activist-oriented research today. Our focus is to be anchored in academic excellence to develop new research projects that might answer big questions of our time, whether these are concrete, close to field questions, or broader questions related to the current war in Ukraine, for example. Our objective is to share, with the broader public, policymakers and practitioners in the field, the insights that we gain from our rigorous, scientific research in our respective projects. We want to make this knowledge available and accessible so that it can be taken up by policymakers and other stakeholders – as well as the broader public. Thinking about how we can have an impact with our research is central to our mission and our everyday work. I think that those who are drawn to work at PRIO really have this as a core motivation as well, that our research should be useful, and not only remain in academic publications and academic journals. However, we don't necessarily consider ourselves as a think tank as we are truly anchored in academic research. We have colleagues who spend some time at PRIO and then go back to university positions, so we have a lot of back and forth with the university sector.

V. T. – *Has PRIO managed to maintain a good level of funding and partnerships since it was created more than sixty years ago? We know social science can be hard to fund and not always perceived as attractive by partners. Does PRIO attract growing funds or do you think that more advocacy for investment in social science, in the fields of peace and humanitarian action, is needed?*

M. G. J. – It is always a struggle indeed. Right now, research funding seems to be drying up slightly, but we have been quite successful in the past few years in gaining new projects. We have grown quite a bit over the past two to three years. I can mostly speak to the period I've been at PRIO but we have received funding from a mix of sources. The Research Council of Norway has calls for research projects in Norway where we can apply for grants. We have also received grants from different ministries and the European Commission, with a range of EU projects from the 6th and 7th Framework Programmes, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe. We lead the largest migration-focused project ever funded by the European Commission, and it also funded a range of security-focused projects. We spend a lot of our internal time thinking of, conceiving and seeking funding for our next projects. We have also been successful with a few other funding sources, from private foundations, NGOs and others for smaller projects. In the last few years, we have also received funding from the European Research Council for large projects that have led to the recruitment of new staff. So yes, it is a constant challenge for each researcher to fund their portfolio because all of us have to fund our own research. We don't have any internal research projects, which means that externally- funded projects cover all of my research time. At the Institute level, we have mechanisms to motivate and support researchers in applying for grants and provide feedback on project descriptions. With regard to funding, the challenge that I see going forward is finding the right balance between receiving funding to produce research that is useful to policymakers and having access to funding for open research programmes. As researchers, we certainly want our research to be useful to society and policymakers but, at the same time, we want to keep the freedom of research, *i.e.* for research to be formulated by researchers themselves, seeing where the research gaps are. We should be able to conduct curiosity-driven research, guided by

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research gaps, and not find ourselves in situations where most of the funding is directed towards research programmes for which political priorities precondition the grant applications we can make. There should be a good mix of programmes asking for research-specific areas but also open programmes that researchers can apply for.

V. T. – *We observe a growing and evolving role of private and civil society entities and institutes in humanitarian action. The emergence of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies (NCHS) confirms this trend. I understand the NCHS focuses not only on research production but also on discussion and cooperation. Could you tell us more about the specific role of the NCHS, and how it complements that of PRIO?*

M. G. J. – PRIO is a large research institute. Until recently we had three research departments and now we have five research departments, over a hundred staff, and between seventy and eighty full-time research staff. We cover a range of research streams on migration, security, peace and conflict, civil wars, etc. In 2012, some researchers working on humanitarian topics saw a need to join forces to consolidate the emergent field of humanitarian studies. Internationally, we know that the field of development studies is more established, but the field of humanitarian studies is becoming more established recently. In 2012, colleagues from PRIO, together with colleagues at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen and from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo, decided to join forces and created the NCHS. The idea was to group researchers who, in different ways, worked on humanitarian questions or questions relevant to the humanitarian field. The NCHS is not a physical new entity but a centre across three institutes to consolidate humanitarian studies as a field of research by pooling together researchers working on humanitarian questions. Norway is an important humanitarian donor internationally and has ambitions to make its mark in the humanitarian field, so we consider that it is important to have a space to ask critical questions. The Centre is also a research-led knowledge hub that aims to serve as a platform for exchanges and discussions between policymakers and humanitarian actors.

V. T. – *We know that humanitarian NGOs and aid workers face new challenges and practices in the field. Would you say that research centres also act as first-line observatories and see the emergence of new trends and innovations for humanitarian action? Do researchers and practitioners work hand in hand to observe new trends?*

M. G. J. – Yes, absolutely. It is our ambition to serve as an observatory both of trends and needs in the humanitarian field and analyse how different challenges are responded to. Our ambitions and research questions also depend on the research being conducted as part of the projects we receive funding for. One research project may focus on humanitarian negotiations, another one on refugee protection and humanitarian responses, another one on humanitarian technology and innovation, or humanitarian diplomacy, and yet another one on refugee education. The questions might be more specific within each research project, but more generally we want to bring up the questions and findings from our projects and use the Centre both to disseminate the findings and publications and create meeting places for practitioners and policymakers.

V. T. – *As a Co-Director of the NCHS, what would be your main message to researchers and humanitarian practitioners, maybe in terms of future collaboration or orientations?*

M. G. J. – We are convinced that we need exchanges between researchers, policymakers and practitioners. A lot of good insights can come out of those exchanges, both for concrete policies to be formulated and for concrete humanitarian action. Researchers should be in close dialogue with practitioners, who are closer to the field and actual operations, and with policymakers, who know the ins and outs of how the decisions are made and the different considerations they need to balance. So

we know this, but using each other's insights and knowledge in the best possible way is not always a given because we work in different ways. The main challenge I see is the temporality of how we work. Diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, work on a whole other timeframe. While they might need our input on a given question for the next day or the next week, our research will rather build on insights over time in a research project whose results will come out later in a publication. How can we foster the best possible exchanges to build on those publications and make sure that this knowledge lands where it should? As researchers, we can see the big trends and ask different questions than those who are closer to the operations. But we need to be relevant. We need to ask critical questions that may not always be pleasant to hear in the moment, amidst the urgency, but are important questions to ask in the longer run. Asking critical questions doesn't mean we want to undermine the importance of the immediate response. But critical questions on how things are done, on whether some actions might cause harm in the longer term, on how next steps are decided in the aftermath of a crisis, are also important questions to ask to constructively think together for a better response in the longer term.

The NCHS and PRIO provide many resources to encourage critical thinking within the humanitarian sector, in the form of events, publications and policy briefs that can be disseminated to practitioners and policymakers. For more details : <https://www.prio.org> <https://www.humanitarianstudies.no>

Interview by Virginie Troit

Translated from the French by Fay Guerry

Biographies

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Virginie Troit • Virginie Troit has a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from *Sciences Po Paris*. She has been the Executive Director of the French Red Cross Foundation for humanitarian and social research since 2013, following eight years' experience with national and international NGOs (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, Handicap International). She is a member of the Board of Directors of the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA), a member of the orientation council of the *Humanitarian Alternatives* review co-founded by the French Red Cross Foundation for humanitarian and social research, and a member of the steering committee of the Red Cross Red Crescent Research Consortium (RC3). She co-directs the *Devenir humanitaire* series published by Karthala, and contributes to the teaching committee of the Master's programme in Migration (EHESS, Paris 1).

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