

Humanitarian work: obvious progress and persistent challenges

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In the early 2000s, “professionalisation” was the rallying cry in the humanitarian aid sector.¹ Twenty years later, professionalisation has undeniably and largely done its job. It is no longer just a process, welcomed by many and criticised by some, but a fact (with a salaried workforce, career structure, standardised practices, increasingly complex division of labour, etc.), even though the term is still used in a way that makes it far from clear whether this indicates a lack of understanding of these developments or empty criticism. We can but wonder, however, if the community of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has not been struggling to find a new lease of life over the past few years. It is as if the structure of the sector – whose benefits are incontestable – has gone on to erase its distinctive character built on activism and “vocational values”, at times unsettling the “old hands” and disillusioning the “newcomers”.

While the race to “critical size”, the implementation of management techniques inspired by the private commercial sector,² the hiring of managers from the business sector, the introduction of validation and assessment processes, accountability rules, etc. serve to try and make NGOs more effective, have all these concrete expressions of professionalisation not ended up disheartening many professionals in the sector? How does the young generation of future humanitarian workers trained in the many disciplines that have emerged over the past twenty years perceive this sector when, at the same time, it is not immune to accusations of discriminatory practices regarding gender or race? Is the (relatively recent) emergence of trade unions or branches of trade unions specific to the voluntary sector an extension of professionalisation, or a kind of resistance to its effects? Can we talk in terms of “dehumanised human resources in humanitarian aid”, even though the nobility of the struggle and the aura surrounding the humanitarian worker have long been the banner waved by the sector? If activism has been worn out by the strain of professionalisation, what can we do to revive it? Or has it reinvented itself, clearing a way through the growing demands of funding bodies and the constantly renewed but increasingly critical support of donors?

¹ “This principle of managerial rationality, currently contested only on the fringes, is, as we well know, a cognitive framework imposed by funding bodies and, to a lesser extent, local partners” [publisher's translation]: Pascal Dauvin, « Être un professionnel de l'humanitaire ou comment composer avec le cadre imposé », *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 180, n° 4, 2004, p. 825-840. This article was a continuation of the work the author had undertaken with Johanna Siméant-Germanos, foremost of which is their publication *Le travail humanitaire* which paved the way for a political sociology of humanitarian aid “on the ground”: Pascal Dauvin et Johanna Siméant, *Le travail humanitaire : les acteurs des ONG, du siège au terrain*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002.

² Bruno Cazenave, Emmanuelle Garbe et Jérémy Morales, *Le management des ONG*, La Découverte, 2020. See also: Boris Martin, *L'adieu à l'humanitaire ? Les ONG au défi de l'offensive néolibérale*, Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer, 2015.

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Even though, just like the rhetoric of professionalisation, the *Focus* of this new issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* draws on the experiences of French NGOs, it must assess this development in light of what the English-speaking NGOs have experienced. How do they deal with the hyper-specialisation, activism and exposure in increasingly complex environments from which humanitarian workers do not always emerge unscathed, particularly in terms of their mental health? What new paths are taken by those who choose to leave the profession and work in social work or on a freelance basis, thus bringing their humanitarian experience to new sectors?

And what about the “Majority World” in this “Global South” where local NGOs have also become more skilled and important? Increasingly present on the front line and invited to become ever more professional, they are asking for a “localisation” which would enable this movement, but which the NGOs and funding bodies from the “Minority World” are struggling to implement.

From French-speaking NGOs, via English-speaking NGOs to the NGOs of the countries where we work, this issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* sought to take stock of what NGO work is like today and of the organisational challenges these structures face. What has changed in twenty years, what is the current sociology of the volunteers – many of whom, by the way, have the status of salaried employees – and what are their expectations, their questions? What effects are governance and management methods having on the way they work and, quite simply, on how they experience their humanitarian commitment?

These are the questions we asked ourselves, and we have not had all the answers to them yet. There is no doubt that the plan was ambitious, but in the contributions submitted to us, we also had to understand the themes that resonate with those involved in humanitarian work and those who observe it.

In fact, these questions have a long history, as Natalie Klein-Kelly’s overview shows. But what is the current state of play? With the help of researchers, people working in the field are trying to find a way through this humanitarian world which, while undoubtedly disillusioned, continues to show commitment. They do so by tackling issues that are at the top of today’s agendas. The contributions from Lila Ricart and Lucy Hall, for example, focus on the development of the sector itself, which is being called upon to introduce a “localisation” approach which at times feels like nothing but a pipe dream. Dorothee Lintner, Alexia Tafanelli and Camille Rouxel question certain words (“profession”, “work”, “career”) which do not always mean the same thing in other sectors, and question the conditions – remuneration in particular – that would allow associations to retain their talented staff, and attract others. Other contributions address issues which, although unfortunately common in so many other sectors, are all the more appalling in the humanitarian sector. Issues such as sexual violence and toxic masculinity examined by Delu Lusambya and by Janyck Beaulieu, Rosalie Laganière-Bolduc and Laurie Druelle. And it is precisely with the place of women in humanitarian work that Miren Bengoa concludes this issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives*. As we can see, humanitarian work, as exceptional as it may be, is not immune to the major debates raging throughout the world today. This issue of our review, inevitably incomplete, has merely scratched the surface, but we can only hope that it will shed a little light on the subject.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

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