

Work, occupation and humanitarian skills:
professional development ambiguities and perspectives

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Dorothee Lintner, managing director of the Humanitarian School, makes a valuable contribution. After establishing a few definitions, she helps us to better understand the particular context of humanitarian work and the impact of professionalisation.

Professional development in the humanitarian sector remains a hot topic.¹ Is it adequate? Or excessive? And more importantly is it tailored to the operational challenges and skills of the future?

Professional development concerns the entire humanitarian system, which needs to act in a rigorous, transparent and standardised manner, as well as the individual humanitarians whose work needs to be organised and formalised within frameworks, tasks and clearly defined skills.

The inevitability of both professional development and aid localisation is now undisputed: they are self-evident processes to which non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly those that founded the system, have yielded. Frameworks for finance and human resources (HR) have been significantly strengthened, and training provision in the same areas has also been developed.

However, it seems that there is still uncertainty regarding the strengthened framework surrounding humanitarian action, and difficulties often arise when attempting to describe the work itself. Is it work, an occupation, a job or a profession? Can we even imagine someone making a career in the humanitarian sector in this day and age?

Firstly, we need to decide on a few definitions in order to gain a clearer understanding of the somewhat contradictory perceptions of humanitarian work. Based on these definitions, we can then briefly address a number of issues related to this topic and put forward some suggestions to more effectively focus professional development.

¹ See : Erwan Quéinnec, « La croissance des ONG humanitaires. Une innovation devenue institution », *Revue Française de Gestion*, vol. 8, n° 177, 2007, p. 83-94 ; Pascal Dauvin, « Être un professionnel de l'humanitaire ou comment composer avec le cadre imposé », *Revue Tiers Monde*, vol. 4, n° 180, 2004, p. 825-840 ; Rory Downham, "The professionalisation of humanitarian action: a work still in progress", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n° 16, March 2021, pp. 114-128.

Humanitarian work, jobs, occupations: what are we actually talking about?

Standard definitions of “work” are split into three semantic categories: the first obstetric meaning refers to labour and childbirth, the second focuses on the activity itself, while the third refers more to a process of change. In any event, work is synonymous with labour (and etymologically it is even a torture instrument, the “*tripalium*” being the root of the word “work” in several languages). The term has two dimensions when referring to activity: firstly, work is an organised activity, and it also aims to achieve a predetermined and worthwhile goal: work is not a leisure activity.² As a process, the term means a “continuous and progressive action [...] that leads to an observable change”.³ This definition is interesting in the context of humanitarian action, and we will return to it.

The terms “job” and “occupation” further clarify the scope of work: it is paid, recognised and specialised.⁴ The term “occupation”, just like “profession”, nevertheless has an even more multifaceted meaning because it suggests the existence of specialised professional sectors. Moreover, due to their etymology, these two terms also have a religious and moral meaning that is somewhat relevant to our topic, and we will return to this further on too.

Without getting bogged down in the details of this gradation, which the sociology of work has thoroughly analysed and categorised from “task” to “profession”,⁵ it is worthwhile taking these nuances on board because they clarify the humanitarian sector’s sometimes contradictory perceptions of its own activity.

Humanitarian “work”: an uncomfortable job description?

As a matter of fact, the sector seems uncomfortable with these definitions. The term “humanitarian action” is often preferred to humanitarian “work” and, better still, workers prefer to speak about their “humanitarian missions”. The objective transcends the framework, the purpose transcends the contract. Bioforce already made this observation when conducting a study on the state of humanitarian occupations in 2019. Many respondents said that they felt that they were not so much performing a specific occupation as being part of an environment.⁶

The reasons underpinning this perception become clear if we think back to the second meaning of “work” as a process of change. Humanitarian action aims to address the effects of crises and focuses much of its efforts on demonstrating that its approach leads to positive and quantifiable change.⁷

² “All organised human activities directed towards the accomplishment of something useful”, Dictionnaire *Le Robert*.

³ Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales (CNRTL), <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/travail>

⁴ “The sum of employed and remunerated human work in an economic system”, *Le Robert*.

⁵ See Claire Tourmen’s enlightening article, « Activité, tâche, poste, métier, profession : quelques pistes de clarification et de réflexion », *Santé Publique*, vol. 19, n° Hors-série, 2007, p. 15-20.

⁶ Rory Downham, “The professionalisation of humanitarian action...”, *art. cit.*, p. 118 : “First of all, the SOHP study seems to indicate that the very existence of ‘humanitarian professions’ as such is the subject of debate. The study showed that, as a general rule, humanitarian workers did not identify with a specific humanitarian profession, but rather with the humanitarian sector in general.”

⁷ See Theory of change approaches, etc.

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However, this perception is surprising for two reasons. Firstly, because other, closely related occupations are very comfortable with this framework and designation: this is the case for social work, whose aim is to help people, according to the UN Code.⁸ Various laws in France reiterate that social work is also tasked with supporting people in a way that respects their dignity and based on the principles of solidarity.⁹ Moreover, it is a highly regulated employment sector, including through social work qualifications. Specific professional certifications exist, and the training institutions that issue the qualifications have special accreditation.¹⁰

Humanitarian work involves undertaking highly supervised and standardised activities and tasks. The sheer number of frameworks and standards, generated by the funding bodies and the NGOs themselves, fosters habits and practices that render the work quite specialised and create specialised occupations (financial management, for instance), even though the sector criticises the burdensome nature of these standards.

Thus, institutions delivering humanitarian skills training, such as Bioforce, have been able to obtain professional certification for some humanitarian occupations through the French Ministry of Labour. The public authorities recognise the specialist nature of humanitarian work by approving job descriptions/profiles, based on professional situation analyses, job adverts posted by the sector and surveys.

However, the situation remains ambiguous, as there is no “professional humanitarian industry” in France, and therefore no observatory responsible for analysing the development of skills and jobs in the sector. Neither are there specific regulations governing the institutions that award humanitarian sector qualifications¹¹ as there are for other fields such as management and engineering. The sector is endeavouring to establish its own quality labels, but recognition of them remains limited. For instance, the label developed by PM4NGO aims to certify project management skills in civil society organisations. However, this label still faces fierce competition from international brands such as the Project Management Institute. In the same vein, HPass, set up by a group of humanitarian training actors, still has a lower standing than the certification issued by renowned certification institutions.

A final irony stems from the fact that the humanitarian sector, while highly constrained by standards and accountability requirements remains, it seems, a very small source of employment: perhaps engaging no more than 650,000 workers worldwide, according to humanitarian coordination studies (SOHS 2022 report).¹² While the sector is still not fully at ease with professional development discourse, it has to be said that anyone who undertakes these niche occupations, despite the burden

⁸ “Social work is an activity that aims to facilitate the reciprocal adaptation of people and their social environment, and this goal is achieved using techniques and methods enabling individuals, groups and communities to address their needs, and resolve the issues involved in adapting to a changing society, through cooperative action, and improve socio-economic conditions”, as quoted in Sandrine Dauphin, « Le travail social : de quoi parle-t-on ? », *Informations sociales*, vol. 2, n° 152, 2009, p. 8-10.

⁹ See also the *code de l'action sociale et de la famille* (French Social Work and Family Code) definition, *Décret n° 2017-877 du 6 mai 2017 relatif à la définition du travail social*, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/article_jo/JORFARTI000034633910

¹⁰ Légifrance, *Titre V : Formation des travailleurs sociaux (Articles L451-1 à L452-1)*, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section_lc/LEGITEXT000006074069/LEGISCTA000006142857

¹¹ The *commission des titres d'ingénieur* (engineering sector accreditation body), the *Conférence des grandes écoles* (for business schools...).

¹² Alice Obrecht, Sophia Swithern and Jennifer Doherty, *The State of the Humanitarian System*, ALNAP, 2022, p. 62, <https://sohs.alnap.org/2022-the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-sohs-%E2%80%93-full-report>

of standards and the very small pool of jobs available, should well and truly be called a humanitarian “professional”.

Can one make a career in the humanitarian sector?

The term “profession”, the one most closely connected to “professional development”, opens up another area of discussion, also laced with irony. “Profession” is a broader term than “job”. It has more to do with the idea of a community created around the same occupation, which gradually considers its work to be primarily based on shared values, from which specialist skills and working methods stem. Moreover, the terms “occupation” and “profession” have a religious or mystical dimension in their etymology or in some contexts: the term “ministerium”, from which the French term for occupation (*métier*) derives, refers to serving God. Likewise, the term “profession” refers to the profession of faith. To “profess” an opinion or belief means to affirm it openly.

Therefore, being a humanitarian professional should, in theory, lead to long and productive careers. However, the actual reality of the jobs on offer flies in the face of long-term hiring. Contracts are often temporary, and career development prospects few and far between, preventing an organisation from creating the conditions needed to support its staff. Consequently, implementing a “human resources development” policy is no easy task.¹³

There is a similar sense of ambiguity from the employee perspective: although a sense of commitment often trumps contractual arrangements and pay grades,¹⁴ workers are paying increasing attention to working conditions (pension contributions, in-service leave, social security, training). This is probably one of the reasons why many choose to go freelance, after first building up some experience. They take on multiple freelance humanitarian missions, shifting from operational to back-up roles, for organisations that are lacking qualified employees in these areas. These freelance humanitarians remain involved in the sector but not in a specific “occupation” or organisation. The vogue for humanitarian “consulting” has maybe also been bolstered by two trends, namely aid localisation and the need to train and support local partners. Mobile, flexible and boasting good field experience, freelance humanitarians are easy for organisations to hire and efficiently address this twin-pronged challenge.

Life post-mission and what doors to other professions

A last point to consider is the “life post-mission”. This is particularly an issue for an entire generation of former, particularly European, humanitarians who want to return home after many years spent in countries in crisis. They rarely take jobs at NGO headquarters, because the number of jobs is very limited, and these jobs do not always match their expectations, as they are very different from working in the field.

¹³ However, this is not specific to the humanitarian sector: all the sectors of employment in which most contracts are temporary or freelance (such as the digital industry) are affected.

¹⁴ See the article in this issue about the study conducted by *Coordination Humanitaire et Développement* on NGO/CSO pay, pp. 51–60.

Consequently, it is vital that their experience and skills are recognised so that they can find new roles in other sectors and settings. Organisations such as *Résonances Humanitaires* have been working for many years to help humanitarians, from both a career and personal perspective, when they return to more stable environments. However, a previously mentioned difficulty again rears its head. Less humanitarian work is structured, less it is understood and recognised by other sectors. And more the sector sets itself a framework and emphasises its uniqueness, more it fosters a feeling of being different, which also makes changing careers a struggle. Nowadays, even the links between emergency social services and humanitarian occupations remain tenuous, the two worlds are not being very familiar with each other and not sharing the same networks or procedures. For instance, emergency social work focuses on long-term reintegration into society, and is not really based on a project culture.

Bolstering data and HR forward planning?

Ultimately, what is perhaps missing today is research that could collect and analyse reliable, precise and consolidated HR data. Knowledge of the aid sector “jobs market” and how it is developing would be improved. This would include career paths (comparing local and international staff), how quickly talent pools are replenished, gateways between occupations, job mobility between emergency and development work, and emergency social and international work (in countries in the Global North and South).

It would also be worthwhile undertaking five or ten-year forward-looking research on humanitarian work, enabling a vision of the humanitarian work of the future to be developed, and identifying missing skills, hurdles to overcome and advocacy methods to bring about change. This would enable local and international organisations to prepare accordingly and support their teams.

Translated from the French by Gillian Eaton

Biography

Dorothee Lintner • Dorothee Lintner has been the managing director of Bioforce Humanitarian Training School since 2022 and has built her career in higher education and vocational training. She is a teaching fellow and the holder of a doctorate in French literature. She has taught at universities in France, the UK and Lebanon. Dorothee has worked in company-based vocational training for a decade.

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