A humanitarian consensus *à la française*

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**French humanitarian NGOs could not stay aloof of the World Humanitarian Summit, where a major reorganization of the international humanitarian system will be sketched out. At Coordination SUD, the French 160-member platform for the coordination of international solidarity NGOs, certain members took the initiative of drafting a joint statement to the Secretariat of the Summit. Pauline Chetcuti and
Karine Penrose-Theis review the process that led to this text that expresses a vision of humanitarian engagement *à la française*.**

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rench NGOs, mindful of the flaws of the current humanitarian system, wish to seize the opportunity of the Summit to not only express their concerns, but also their hopes and expectations for a humanitarian response that can be better adapted to every context. However, the Summit’s very broad, yet very ambiguous objectives, as well as the organizational process itself that is far from being transparent, have given rise to deep apprehension amongst French NGOs.

**NGOs seeking a position in the midst of an uncertain process**

The Summit is playing for high stakes. In fact, it is set in a context of ongoing crises and unfolding challenges, such as climate change, that are at the root of profound transformations. These considerations require us to rethink the current system and begin laying the groundwork for a new international humanitarian architecture, for a more effective and all-encompassing response to growing needs in situations that are ever more complex.

Like other international NGOs, French humanitarian NGOs have taken this opportunity to participate in the regional consultations and expert meetings, either through their organization’s network or through the already existing collective structures of Voice (Voluntary Organizations in Cooperation in Emergencies) and ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies), as well as of Coordination SUD.

The Humanitarian Commission of Coordination SUD, a platform which brings together a number of French-based NGOs, did not hesitate to put these issues on the table during the preliminary discussions. By the summer of 2014, several NGO members of the Commission were already involved. NGOs, such as Handicap International and Action Against Hunger, took part in the regional consultations of the countries of Europe and of the South. Doctors Without Borders, in its deliberations on the reform of the UN, published the report, “Where is everyone?”[[1]](#footnote-1) that deals with the response to crises. At the meetings, many French NGOs contributed directly to the discussions on various themes: humanitarian effectiveness, reducing vulnerability and managing risk, transformation through innovation, and serving needs of people in conflict.

NGOs are already raising questions about the Summit, and more specifically on its organization that seems both overly ambitious (despite more than two years of global, regional, and thematic preparatory consultations), and jumbled (the mixed range of topics, the lack of a clearly defined outcome), in addition to other questions on the Summit’s true agenda and its capacity to fundamentally overhaul the very system from which it was born. It was feared that the Summit would be a routine UN conference set to mark the end of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s mandate, and would come up with, “humanitarian objectives” in line with sustainable development goals (SDGs) but without a true operational mode.

These misgivings were reinforced by initial feedback voiced during the consultations by members, mainly in Africa. The feeling was that too few international NGOs were represented and that the discussions were overshadowed by the States directly affected by crises, wanting to make a point about their authority and their direct involvement in emergency relief. Issues of efficiency and accountability were addressed primarily in terms of certification and not of coordination. The talks on the emergency response mainly dealt with prevention and risk management so as to skip the politically sensitive issue of conflict resolution. When States brought up humanitarian principles, it was often to call these in to question. Finally, the NGOs were concerned that discussions would be organized in such way as to have NGOs from the South and NGOs from the North confront each other, instead of highlighting their complementarities.

As early as February 2015, critical comments surfaced during the session of the *Forum Espace Humanitaire*[[2]](#footnote-2) about the way the Summit was being prepared, its lack of transparency, and the little weight being given to international NGOs.

While other European countries (Ireland, and Spain in particular) were taking advantage of the regional consultations to hold talks with members of civil society, France set itself apart by failing to establish any official dialogue between NGOs and public authorities during the consultation phase of the Summit. This explains why the Humanitarian Commission of Coordination SUD began searching for a consensus among NGOs that would be officially presented at the Summit. It was prepared well in advance of the Global Consultation that was held in Geneva in October 2015. In May 2015, members of the Humanitarian Commission of Coordination SUD felt it was vital that the misgivings, critical views, and expectations of NGOs vis-à-vis the Summit be added to the agenda before it was too late. They feared that the non-issuance of any statement would be interpreted as an unconditional acceptance of the Summit’s final, and for some, dubious outcome.

The World Humanitarian Summit will be held a few months after the 2015 proclamation of international commitments for development and international solidarity, just as major multidimensional and ever longer-lasting humanitarian crises are still raging. The actions of Coordination SUD and its members were needed to have the government listen to French NGOs as they air their collective concerns, and to give them a greater say on the international scene. French NGOs share with their international networks and with their English-speaking counterparts many of the same concerns. But they have always been able to stand out by their capacity to be the actor of the “last mile”, and by their commitment to a neutral approach regarding humanitarian principles and ethics. Their voice is of value to the international community, and is necessary to help make this questioning Summit pro-vide the opportunity of a much-
needed qualitative leap forward for the humani-tarian system.

***Philippe Jahshan****, President of Coordination SUD*

**The need for a committed and realigned collective advocacy**

The deadline to officially submit a statement to the Summit’s Secretariat was July 2015, the same as for the Commission’s *ad hoc* workgroup. While adopting a stance that is both proactive and committed, the NGOs concerned decided to detach themselves from the topics and the rather classical recommendations proposed by the Summit, and focus instead on finding more daring answers to the basic question – the same as the Summit’s – relating to the fundamental reform of the humanitarian system.

In this regard, French humanitarian NGOs claim to be the heirs of a historical Dunant-inspired tradition of independence and defiance vis-à-vis public policy. This United Nations context with its indeterminate ambitions offered the occasion of upholding the tradition of “non-alignment”. Aroused by this strong desire for independence, NGOs in this workgroup began to carefully negotiate a way to produce in a short time a document that would reaffirm their commitment, while being supported by most others.

When it came to making practical, concrete, and realistic recommendations with respect to a powerful, yet rigid humanitarian system, NGOs quickly ran into the problem of expressing fundamental concerns that ultimately turned out to be highly political. It required skillful maneuvering in the present context, where political interests or the concerns of relief agencies always take precedence over the needs of people. And competition for funding makes matters worse.

Some of the key concerns of these NGOs had to do with the embodiment of humanitarian principles based on humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, and the coordination and politicization of aid. French humanitarian NGOs therefore decided to focus on these issues which, lying at the core of a malfunctioning humanitarian system, may seem unsettling.

**Humanitarian principles**

The upholding of humanitarian principles being one of the key expectations of NGOs at the Summit (dealt with in a specific common appeal[[3]](#footnote-3)), NGOs wanted to remind the States of their responsibilities.

During the preparatory discussions at the Summit, NGOs saw that the special attention given to local governmental and non-governmental humanitarian operators to create a more level playing field with international organizations opened a way for host States to reaffirm their authority, sometimes in contradiction with humanitarian principles. Regional consultations, for example, did not lend themselves to background discussions and failed to differentiate complex, politicized, and contentious humanitarian crises from natural disasters. NGOs thus reaffirmed their commitment to humanitarian principles by asking that there be made a “distinction between natural disasters and armed conflicts, so that the system can respond more in line with a specific context and be better adapted to the needs of those concerned, in accordance with humanitarian principles.”

**Humanitarian coordination**

Even though the coordination system has gone through a series of reforms over the last ten years, the effectiveness of coordinated response remains a key concern for NGOs. The statements drafted during the talks simply proposed to dismantle the United Nations, but instead, the solution finally adopted was an interesting alternative. Using as an excuse the reinstatement of independence of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the NGO signatories called for a review of the mandates of UN agencies. As this measure had always been rebuffed by the UN, this was indeed a bold recommendation.

It suggested that “as part of a review process of the humanitarian agencies under the UN mandate, OCHA, as the coordinator of emergency responses, should be granted full independence from other UN agencies and given complete authority when handling complex crises, including those involving displaced persons”.

**Separating politics from humanitarianism**

Talks leading to the Summit were initially centered on non-governmental processes, but the States were reluctant to get involved in the discussions. NGOs signatories recognized the clear responsibility of the States in preventing and resolving conflicts and in negotiating access for humanitarians. The Security Council’s power to block populations from having access to humanitarian assistance, especially when mass atrocities are committed, proved to be a joint concern for NGOs. They proposed in their statements that “the five permanent members of the Council give up their right of veto on matters related to humanitarian response and to access in complex emergencies.” This hotly debated recommendation was, by its very political nature, outside the normal sphere of influence of the NGOs and even overstepped their mandate. But NGOs managed to remain “non-aligned” and absolutely committed to a strong dichotomy between politics and humanitarian response.

**Over the long-term**

Following these consultations, most members of the Humanitarian Committee finally settled on a joint statement[[4]](#footnote-4). The NGOs[[5]](#footnote-5) who signed it wanted to convey a vision of humanitarianism *à la française*, one that is concerned with the ways and means deployed to reach out to the most vulnerable populations, as well as with the impact that humanitarian action has achieved.

These NGOs thus produced and officially shared with the Secretariat of the Summit a joint statement that was courageous, centered on a small number of recommendations, and ambitiously instrumental for the general debate on the overhaul of the humanitarian system. And it is quite naturally that this statement was presented and delivered by Coordination SUD, as the representative of its members, thus providing it with the necessary weight. This statement, slightly updated a few months later, also served to present the positions of some French humanitarian NGOs at the National Humanitarian Conference held in Paris on February 23, 2015.

Finally, now that the process of preparing the Summit draws to a close, the last two years of discussions have shown that signatory NGOs can, even today, relate to the provisions of the declaration, which remains relevant today. And this impression is reinforced by the Secretary-General’s message, released in February 2016[[6]](#footnote-6). It declares that the decision of NGOs to address the issue of State responsibilities was on target, although their original intention seemed to be aside the mandate decided.

And interestingly, some of the proposals made in the declaration of the members of the Humanitarian Commission have been incorporated into the Secretary-General’s report.

***Translated from the French by Alain Johnson***

**Biographies**

**Karine Penrose-Theis *•*** Shespent several years in the field (Cambodia, Uganda, Ivory Coast, Bosnia, Montenegro, Indonesia, East Timor) with Action Against Hunger and, briefly, with the United States Agency for International Development/Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI). In 2000, she relocated to the UK where she managed educational and child protection programs in Afghanistan, East Timor, Ukraine, Poland, and Ecuador for the organization Children in Crisis. She subsequently worked for the International Rescue Committee-UK (IRC-UK) as Manager of Programs and Director of International Programs. Between 2009 and 2014, she worked as a consultant for various organizations, including the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), Save the Children Australia, Save the Children US, the Global Education Cluster, and ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project). Since September 2014, she has headed the program Analysis and Advocacy and has been active on the Humanitarian Commission of Coordination SUD’s Executive Secretariat.

**Pauline Chetcuti *•*** She is Head of humanitarian advocacy at Action Against Hunger (ACF) in Paris and Head of the Humanitarian Commission of Coordination SUD. With strong field experience in Afghanistan and Palestine with other NGOs, Pauline joined ACF in 2012 to develop a humanitarian advocacy department. Her role is to uphold humanitarian principles with institutions during humanitarian interventions, and to support field missions so as to assure that vulnerable populations have access to basic services. Pauline has authored various publications for ACF, particularly on the application of humanitarian principles during conflicts and for the Transformation Agenda. Pauline represents ACF in international humanitarian networks (Voice, ICVA, IASC) and is a member of the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH).

**Coordination SUD *•*** The French coordination platform for international solidarity NGOs, registered as an association under the French law of 1901. Founded in 1994, it brings together over 160 NGOs engaged in humanitarianism, emergencies, developmental aid, environmental protection, human rights among disadvantaged populations, and promotes actions for international solidarity and advocacy. Coordination SUD carries a twofold mission of supporting the professionalization of French NGOs and of representing them with public and private institutions in France, Europe, and worldwide. This organization takes part in the European-wide activities of Concord, the European NGO confederation for relief and development, and, at the international level, in the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP), which brings together over 60 national and regional NGO platforms.

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1. Report published in July 2014, http://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/msf-whereiseveryone\_-def-lr\_-\_july.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.forum-espace-humanitaire.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Their joint declaration is available at: http://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/D--claration-commune-sur-les-principes-humanitaires-VF.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Statement published online and available at: http://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/Joint\_statement\_French\_NGOs\_WHS\_FINAL-30-07-15.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Action Against Hunger, CARE France, Medair, Médecins du Monde, Handicap International, Première Urgence Internationale, Secours Islamique France, Solidarités International, Coordination SUD. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The report is available at: http://sgreport.worldhumanitariansummit.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)