

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**About the critical junctures in humanitarian history**

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If ever there was an expression seemingly devised for the study of humanitarian action, the one that fits the bill perfectly is “critical juncture” – a series of events which, when combined, mark a turning point in the history of a society. The history of humanitarian action is punctuated with such junctures, the most visible of which have fuelled the development of a mythical narrative of humanitarian practices. 1968 is one such moment.

With international attention focused on the Vietnam War, a conflict which emerged in Nigeria between the secessionist rebellion in the region of Biafra and the central government in Lagos would radically change the context, scope and form of humanitarian action in areas of conflict. The dynamics at work in the Biafran conflict, with rebel forces fighting the government army on political and economic issues inherited from colonial rule, would become the norm at the end of the Cold War. Situations like these would arouse government interest in humanitarian action, neglected thus far in favour of development aid. Controlling the provision of aid helps support one’s allies and gain the trust and support of local populations, but it also helps to collect strategic information about developments in the conflict. Indeed it was de Gaulle, advised by the Elysée’s Africa unit, who ordered the French Red Cross to intervene in the Biafran conflict, seeing it as a unique opportunity to weaken post-colonial British networks and boost those of *Françafrique*. Paradoxically, the French government’s involvement in the conflict would give rise to a new generation of humanitarian workers wanting to free themselves from the pact of neutrality sealed by the International Committee of the Red Cross – the dominant player in this sector at the time – in order to cross borders, provide care and testify about what they saw in the convenient secrecy created by national sovereignty, distance and poor media coverage.

Fifty years on, humanitarian action is facing a new critical juncture. The impact of climate change and the challenges posed by urban violence and extreme poverty require humanitarian aid stakeholders to adopt new positions in new contexts. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the Syrian conflict is pitching most international powers against each other in support of the myriad parties to the conflict. Not recognising borders and or artificial distinctions, the humanitarian aid provided in the name of universal humanity is once again facing the demons that created it: colonisation and the “civilisation” of “indigenous” peoples. In both the North and the South, borders once thought blurred are coming back and being strengthened and militarised. In Europe, the same governments that profess the values of humanity and hospitality from the rostrum of the United Nations renounce them daily on their national soil, building walls and camps to protect themselves from the “threat” of migration for which their own international policies are primarily responsible. At the same time, humanitarian action is being increasingly integrated into the security agendas of conflict management and counter-terrorism. Under the banner of localising aid, the governments of crisis-hit countries sometimes hound and harass their civil society and sometimes absolve themselves of their responsibility by passing it on to humanitarian organisations... If not both at the same time.

In such a climate – which of course leaves humanitarian aid stakeholders with precious little room for manoeuvre – it is striking to see the extent to which official announcements from most

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humanitarian aid organisations are restricted to the technical aspects of their work. A content analysis of nearly 500 documents published by humanitarian aid organisations – including strategy documents and more general documents about the sector – shows the preponderance of terms that refer to the programmes undertaken by the organisations¹. They speak of managing “data” collected in the field, ensuring the “security” of their “staff” and “developing partnerships” to meet “strategic objectives”. This is the controlled management-speak that humanitarian aid organisations give to their donors and partners as reading matter. Whilst the French newspaper *Le Monde* regularly opened up its columns to testimony from humanitarian aid workers in the 1980s to denounce the hypocrisy and cynicism of European and North American governments, what we read today is a less militant and scarcer depiction of humanitarian aid practices. At a time when humanitarian action is at risk, public debate about its purpose and its political aspects is rare.

The reality experienced and reported by humanitarian aid workers is very different. At participatory workshops on the subject of humanitarian terminology held with national and community humanitarian aid organisations² in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, other terms emerged that reflected long-standing preoccupations in humanitarian aid practice. What does it mean to remain “neutral” and “protect” in instances of mass crime and forced displacement? How do we focus on “crisis-hit communities”? What does being “accountable” mean for a humanitarian aid stakeholder? Behind these apparent breakdowns, the basic debate seems to be the same, but at odds with practices that are largely depoliticised.

Against such a background, this edition aims to take the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of the without-borders movement as an opportunity to shed some light on the reconfigurations at work in contemporary humanitarian aid. Our goal is neither to take stock of the Biafran experience nor to lament a vanished golden age, but to identify breakdowns, critical junctures and continuity between humanitarian aid in the present and the past. To provide a framework for our thinking, we asked the authors to work around five terms which, far from exhausting the register of humanitarian aid practices, would provide a basis for questioning their *raison d’être* and their meaning: humanitarian aid, context, sovereignty, professionalisation and politics. What is the history of the use of each term and its associated practices? How have this use and these practices evolved over time? What future(s) do they map out for humanitarian action?

Of these five terms, three were widely selected by this issue’s authors: the sovereignty-politics combination on one hand, and migration as a key element of the intervention context for humanitarian aid stakeholders on the other. Critical analysis of professionalisation in the sector and of the contexts of intervention, however, was the least popular. This choice *per se* already says a great deal about the priority issues and challenges for observers and stakeholders in the humanitarian sector. By examining these terms in light of their own practices and research, the authors describe some perennial features but also some new horizons for humanitarian action in the 21st century.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

¹This analysis was conducted under the framework of the “Humanitarian Encyclopedia” project developed by the CERAH-Geneva Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action (a joint centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies [IHEID] and the University of Geneva [UNIGE]). The aim of this project is to analyse the way in which the central concepts of humanitarian action are defined, used and interpreted by humanitarian aid organisations. The first results will be published on the website <https://humanitarianencyclopedia.org> and in a forthcoming publication.

²A presentation of the workshops is available on the Humanitarian Encyclopedia website <https://humanitarianencyclopedia.org>

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To quote this article: Clara Egger, "About the critical junctures in humanitarian history",

Humanitarian Alternatives, n°9, November 2018, p.1-5,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2018/11/09/critical-junctures-humanitarian-history/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-413-9