

Cities: a new humanitarian field*Boris Martin • Rédacteur en chef*

From the plains of Solferino to the mountains of Afghanistan, by way of Ethiopian villages and the South American bush, humanitarian aid has mainly been forged at a distance from urban settings. Certainly, cities have never been spared their share of wars, natural disasters or epidemics. Lisbon, Hiroshima, Saigon, Beirut, Sarajevo and Sanaa spring to mind. As far back as their respective creations, the Red Cross Movement, the United Nations system and NGOs have supplied aid to the populations of these martyr cities. In turn, these actors have not hesitated to engage with issues of increasing exclusion in their own cities, like the “Missions France” launched by Médecins du Monde and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) in the 1980s¹.

But the phenomenon in question in this new issue is on a much wider, planetary scale. We may well be witnessing the turning of a new page in the narrative of globalisation expounded by “global historians” such as Jeremy Adelman, whose article introduces this issue. The urban explosion – like climate change, which will be the subject of the following issue n°11 – has already taken effect and still has the potential to inflict collateral damage.

Since the turn of the century, most of the world’s population has been urban, and this trend “is still rising, expected to reach 68% by 2050”, as Julien Antouly notes. Emmanuel Matteudi adds that “by 2030, ten megacities will be added to the existing thirty-three, mainly in countries in the southern hemisphere, with ever more densely populated urban spaces.” If we assume that this increasing urbanisation is in keeping with “global history”, the myth of total cities as reflections of Progress and hubs of interconnectivity is likely to explode once it hits the wall of reality.

Transcribing this reality – or part of it – was the primary aim of this issue and the eight contributions endeavour to do so. From Soacha in Colombia (Pablo Cortés Ferrández) to N’Djamena in Chad (Emmanuel Bossennec) and Kampala in Uganda (Louise Thaller and Innocent Silver), migrants are part of everyday life in these cities under pressure (thousands of kilometres from the European cities haunted by the spectre of their submersion). Whether they come from neighbouring States, rural areas or smaller cities, migrants hit the same wall; in this new reality, you have to find a job, a house, find care, and educate your children. In this reality, the “Officials of 40 Street” (Bossennec) rub shoulders with drug users (in Maputo, Mozambique, by Carlota Silva, Lucas Molfino, Alan González, Alexandra Malm), the primary victims of this scourge and of HIV and hepatitis C infections. “Refuge cities” therefore become slums, men and women become “slumdweller” – a terrible expression which both ascribes them a derisory membership and assigns them to an intolerable fate: “40% of urban growth occurs today in slums accounting for an additional 30 to 50 million people every year, reaching a total of 3 billion slumdweller in 2050, or 30% of all those who live in cities” (Matteudi). The urban factory is also a machine for breaking lives.

What is to be done? Understanding the types and courses of action available to humanitarian workers in these contexts was the second aim of this issue. Although they “now have more than

¹ Reference Michael Neuman’s article in the “Perspectives” column to take the measure of the debates still raging within MSF about its “Mission France”, especially with regard to aid to migrants across the national territory.

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50 years of experience, principally in rural areas” (Matteudi), humanitarian workers are increasingly led to intervene in these environments which are unfamiliar to them. Whilst their intervention is deemed relevant in cases of war or natural disasters, the urban dimension is never insignificant. This is illustrated by Renaud Colombier’s article, which explains how, following the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the development NGO GRET found it very difficult to coordinate with humanitarian NGOs. Similarly, Antouly revisits the warlike phenomenon in urban settings to raise the question of explosive weapons which cause untold damage there. Both authors’ recommendations (“a holistic approach is needed to address humanitarian aid requirements” for Antouly, and “integrate development into emergency response” for Colombier) converge. In cities, the issues (cohabitation between settled urban inhabitants and newly arrived rural residents, the management of chronic diseases, types of combat/weapons and impacts on civilian populations...), infrastructures (hospitals, health centres), and actors on the ground (the State, public services, associations), significantly influence the conditions for intervention. Conflicts of competencies, governance and cultures can arise. Will we see gangs getting involved in distributing aid to populations, as Diego Otegui suggests?

In any case, all the contributors to this issue agree that humanitarian actors must adapt their practices to new forms of vulnerability and to the actors on the ground. With all due respect to the denigrators of the so-called immobilism of humanitarian workers, they have been doing so since their creation! By working with development NGOs², and with national States where necessary, with local associations and with the inhabitants themselves, they will be able to bring to the cities the lessons they have learned in the countryside. In a way – and this is one of the many lessons to be drawn from this issue – the urban issue has reactivated the recurring debate surrounding the link between humanitarian aid and development. The union between actors of solidarity will perhaps mean that no humanitarian deflagration need accompany the urban explosion that all the experts are predicting.

With this tenth issue, our review is celebrating three years of existence. Slowly but surely, it has become a feature in the humanitarian landscape where it continues to gain recognition. This was not a given, considering the extent to which the success of such a project depends both on the energy of its initiators and on its reception by its intended audience. In this respect, the addition of the Fondation des Amis de Médecins du Monde to our group of supporters is a strong signal, as well as an encouraging one. The adventure continues! More than ever, the existence of a review like ours, which has become yours, is justified in the light of these few lines drawn from Pierre Brunet’s opinion piece, published in this issue: “The entire challenge for humanitarian aid today is to adapt realistically, effectively, and with pragmatism and determination to a globalised, industrialised, competitive, standardised, supervised, and in a word more constrained humanitarian system. And we must do so while retaining its true added value of this selfless commitment, this sincere drive that pushes us to act not for oneself but for others.”

Translated from the French by Juliet Ponys

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² In the “Transitions” section, Gilles Carbonnier states that “development workers dealing with social change tend to have grown more agile in identifying and dealing with social exclusion than humanitarians.”