

## The professionalisation of humanitarian action: a work still in progress

**Rory Downham** • Director of Engineering and Quality, Bioforce (Lyon, France)

---

For a long time, the humanitarian sector has claimed its complete “professionalisation”. However, a recent study conducted by Bioforce puts this plaudit into perspective. Rory Downham, who led it, reviews the conclusions of this participatory work which calls into question a few certainties as well as opening up avenues for improvement.

---

**T**he humanitarian sector has long been engaged in a process of permanent structuring. This has involved the development of legal and ethical intervention frameworks and a “quality” approach. The International Bill of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>, the 1951 Refugee Convention and International Humanitarian Law provide a legal framework to protect the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. At the ethical level, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has developed humanitarian principles and produced the Code of Conduct adopted by the vast majority of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the principle of “Do No Harm”. Finally, quality standards have been improving since the 1990s, namely thanks to the Sphere programme and the Core Humanitarian Standard.

Over time, other elements have contributed to structuring this sector, demonstrating the will to improve the quality and relevance of humanitarian action. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was thus created in 1991 to improve the coordination of humanitarian responses. In 2005, the United Nations’ (UN) humanitarian reform gave rise, amongst other things, to the cluster system. Then in 2016, in Istanbul, the first World Humanitarian Summit led to the concluding of an agreement between public and private stakeholders to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian action: the Great Bargain.

Yet can the humanitarian sector really be said to be fully “professionalised”? Although the significant contributions mentioned above have undeniably helped, professionalisation is mainly achieved by the men and women who implement humanitarian action and who, to do so, must apply the laws, ethics, quality standards, coordination systems, and commitments made to improve the system. In any given domain, a professional sector includes, amongst other things, specific and recognised professions, professional organisations, commonly accepted competency frameworks used for the recruitment and development of personnel, certifications required for the performance of duties, and accessible training programmes that are adapted to existing needs.

The study “The State of Humanitarian Professions”<sup>2</sup> (SOHP) sought to understand the state of the humanitarian sector in relation to professionalisation through an analysis of humanitarian “professions” – in other words, through the prism of its workforce. This study was based on the following hypothesis: the quality of humanitarian action depends in large part on the professionalism of humanitarian workers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Made up of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and its two Optional Protocols (1976 and 1991) [Editor’s note].

<sup>2</sup> The study “The State of Humanitarian Professions”, led by Bioforce and published in December 2020, is available in full or in summarised form on their website: <https://www.bioforce.org/en/share/the-state-of-humanitarian-professions>

### Scope of the study

Determining what exactly the “humanitarian sector” includes is always a real challenge, given the divergence of opinions that exist within it. Pragmatically, the study was based on the definition provided by ALNAP in one of its reference studies (“The State of the Humanitarian System”, SOHS, 2018<sup>3</sup>). According to ALNAP, indeed, the humanitarian sector should be understood as “the network of inter-connected institutional and operational entities that receive funds, directly or indirectly from public donors and private sources, to enhance, support or substitute for in-country responses in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection to a population in crisis”<sup>4</sup>.

Following this definition, the “humanitarian system” includes: “local, national and international NGOs conducting humanitarian activities; UN humanitarian agencies; the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; host government agencies and authorities and regional/intergovernmental agencies; donor agencies, primarily government agencies, but also trusts and other donors”<sup>5</sup>. Still according to ALNAP’s publication, the following categories are excluded from the humanitarian system: “national militaries and civil defence groups; development actors; the private sector; diaspora groups; civil society groups (such as faith groups) that do not have an explicitly humanitarian function; the media, and the academia”<sup>6</sup>.

As an exception to this list of exclusions, the SOHP study nevertheless included a number of development actors, particularly local and national NGOs, when they followed the principle of focusing on humanitarian response in the event of a crisis. For people working in the field, the distinction between development and humanitarian aid can indeed become superfluous, given that both respond to the communities’ most pressing needs at a given time. SOHP therefore arranged for some of these people to contribute to the study by means of the survey or the local workshops.

Beyond this necessary definition of the field, and rather than attempting to give an exhaustive description of such a large and complex sector, the SOHP study tried to capture the experiences, visions and opinions of the people working in it. In total, more than 1,500 people from every continent were consulted (with a majority of French- and English-speaking Europeans, nevertheless). Ninety-eight interviews were carried out with key informers representing the different areas of activity in humanitarian aid (see below). Next, 753 humanitarian workers took part in an online survey. The observations drawn from the interviews and the survey were then discussed in eleven local workshops, involving a total of 121 participants, that were held in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia, France (2), Senegal, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Uganda, the UK and the USA. Finally, a conference brought together 566 people to discuss the results of the study and make recommendations.

It is important to note that this study presents the representations of those who contributed to it and does not presume to provide an absolute state of the sector. Hence, the conclusions regarding the level of professionalisation of the humanitarian sector which we are going to draw require qualification: they are not absolute truths, but the reflection of collective opinions.

### Lessons

First of all, the study confirms that people are now “making a career” out of humanitarian action, contrary to what could be observed as recently as the early 2000s. To say the least, for many, humanitarian aid makes up the main element of their career paths.

---

<sup>3</sup> The 2015 ALNAP report is available at the following address: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2018-full-report>

<sup>4</sup> “The State of the Humanitarian System”, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

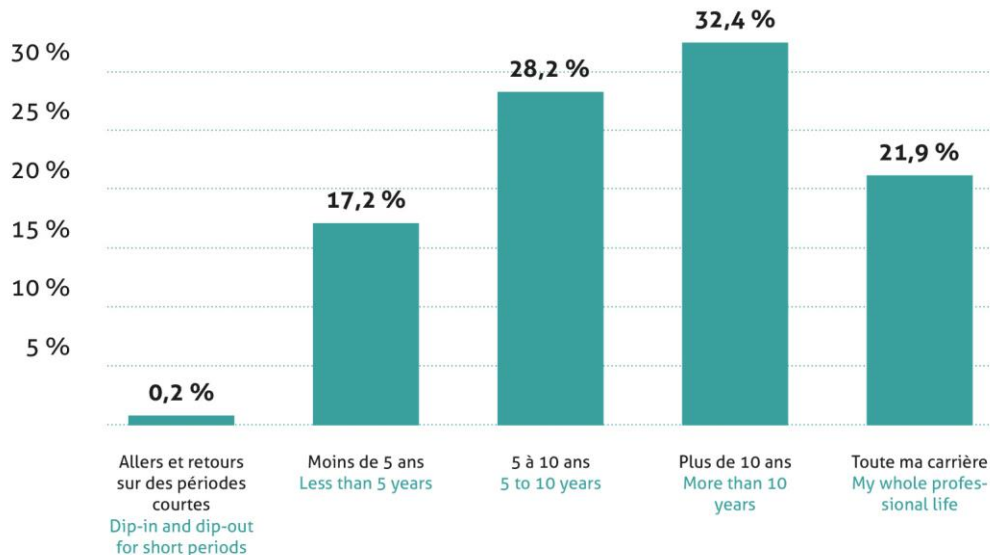
## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Graphique 1 (figure 11 tirée du rapport final SOHP, section 5).

**Combien de temps vous voyez-vous travailler au sein de votre domaine ?**

Chart 1 (Figure 11 from the final SOHP report, Section 5)

**How long do you see yourself working in your profession?**



And yet, although the humanitarian sector defines itself as increasingly professionalised – because it believes itself to be –, on closer inspection it seems that there are still relatively few structuring elements in terms of concrete professionalisation. 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. Indeed, when respondents were asked to specify their “profession” from a list of twenty-four professional areas identified by the study (logistics, health, finance, protection, etc.), most selected several areas instead of just one corresponding to a specific profession. The statements gathered over the course of the SOHP study seem to indicate that there is a tendency to consider that these are professions that can be found in other sectors (such as a logistics coordinator), that have simply been adapted to the humanitarian sector with all its specificities, naturally taking into account the particular environment of humanitarian action. We can deduce, at least to all appearances, that there is a lack of recognition of professions that are specific to the humanitarian sector.

This is confirmed by data regarding the associated levels of professionalisation. The SOHP study effectively showed a near-absence of professional organisations of reference associated with these “professions” (professional branches, professionals’ associations). The same went for other determining factors of professionalisation mentioned above in the introduction (recognised competency frameworks, etc). On the other hand, there was a broad consensus regarding the existence of specific competencies for humanitarian practice, and this was true for all of the areas of activity.

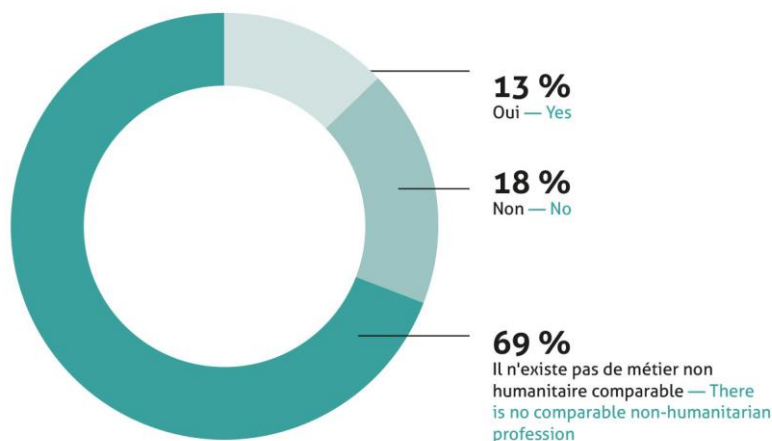
## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Graphique 2 (figure 1 tirée du rapport final SOHP, section 6).

Chart 2 (Figure 1 from the final SOHP report, Section 6)

**Existe-t-il des compétences humanitaires spécifiques ?**

**Are there distinguishable humanitarian competencies?**



In addition to research that had already been carried out in order to develop the Core Humanitarian Competencies Framework (CHCF<sup>7</sup>) in 2011, the SOHP study drew up a list of twenty-four “distinguishable humanitarian competencies” which were broadly recognised by the different people who were consulted and during the conference discussions. It is difficult to prove that all of these competencies are specific to humanitarian work. It is probable that, in nearly all cases, a similar skill would be required in other sectors of work. Nevertheless, we can consider that these competencies are particularly important for humanitarian work and therefore make up a reference list of essential skills for working in the sector. The SOHP study divided them into two categories:

### **Knowledge and skills**

- Knows the humanitarian system and actors. Understands humanitarian law, principles, and standards
- Able to manage stress and operate effectively in an uncertain, rapidly changing, and sometimes insecure environment
- Can adapt very quickly and apply technical knowledge to a wide range of different situations
- Can work very fast, whilst maintaining quality and professionalism
- Can work with limited resources and equipment
- Understands protection issues and how crises can affect capacities and vulnerabilities of different people
- Can work effectively with crisis affected communities and ensure accountability to them
- Excellent communication skills – can build relationships, negotiate and coordinate
- Understands and can apply principles of safeguarding
- Effective decision making

### **Behaviours**

- Flexible and adaptable
- Works well in a multicultural environment (both with colleagues and affected communities)
- Human empathy and emotional awareness
- Takes a needs-based approach, putting others first and seeking to empower them

<sup>7</sup> The CHCF, which was revised in 2017, is currently managed by the CHS-Alliance: <https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/core-humanitarian-competency-framework>

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

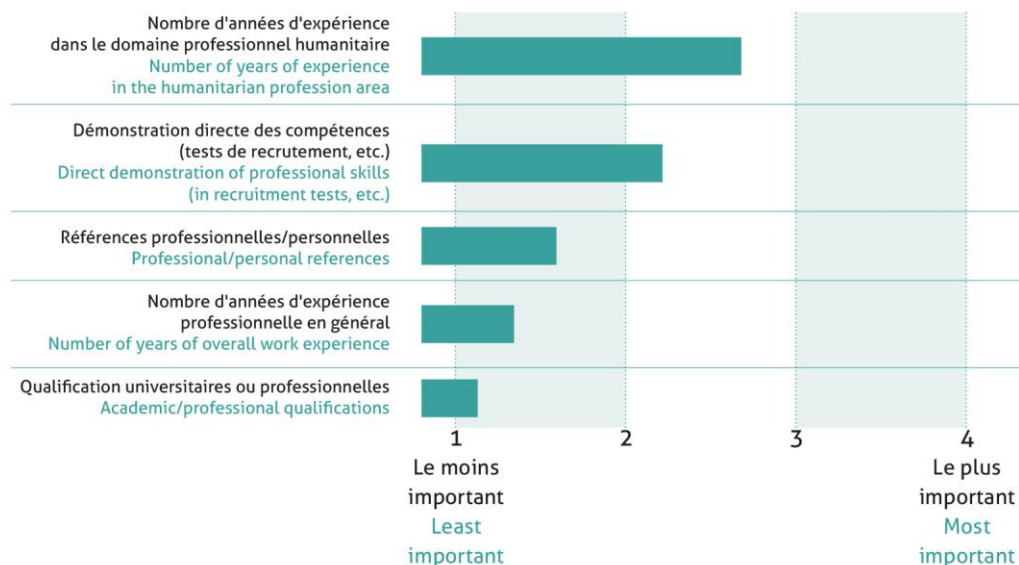
- Agile, rapid and succinct
- Good listener – engages well with other people
- High level of personal resilience, keeps going
- Curious, creative and innovative
- Practical and realistic, focused on the solution rather than the problem
- Reflective (both self-reflection and stepping back to take a strategic view of the situation)
- Inclined towards developing the capacity of others
- Has respect for the dignity of others
- Recognition of power imbalances and a commitment not to abuse their power

It is tempting to believe that these competencies are therefore required for the “professional” practice of humanitarian action and that, even in the absence of specific professional certifications in the humanitarian sector, there is kind of generic reference certification based on these elements. But here too, we noted that in spite of certain certifications for a handful of specific skills, no certification could be identified that covered the entirety of these distinguishable competencies. Moreover, according to the study, these kinds of skills, although admittedly more complex to evaluate than technical skills, do not appear to be checked during the recruitment process.

Graphique 3 (figure 4 tirée du rapport final SOHP, section 5).

Chart 3 (Figure 4 from the final SOHP report, Section 5)

### Quest-ce qui importe aux employeurs? What is important for employers?



This observation drawn from the SOHP study completes the discovery, made during the revision of the reference CHCF in 2017, of a moderate, not to say low, level of awareness, and consequently a lack of “savoir-faire” in the use of this reference.

The data from the SOHP study seem to indicate that recruitment practices favour humanitarian experience over the proven existence of competencies, be they generic or specific to a particular area of activity. Recruiters avoid juniors without humanitarian experience and, according to some accounts, favour “friends, relatives or internal candidates”<sup>8</sup>. These practices are an obstacle to the integration of new personnel and to the diversity of profiles, especially of national actors in a time of localisation.

<sup>8</sup> “The State of Humanitarian Professions”, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

They carry risks of favouritism, exclusivity, the recruitment of “like-minded people”, and even of nepotism or abusive behaviours, in the absence of measurable and verifiable data. Not checking competencies can weaken the quality of work and, ultimately, compromise the necessary accountability towards the beneficiaries of our aid.

Despite a significant training offer on humanitarian topics, provided by universities, specialised training organisations, and humanitarian organisations themselves, the accounts gathered over the course of the SOHP study seem to clearly indicate an absence of known and recognised reference training for future humanitarian workers. This observation, together with the lack of structure and visibility at the career path level, illustrates the fact that humanitarian sector is not investing sufficiently in its own professionalisation.

In conclusion, by means of the different data provided by the study, and despite numerous initiatives specific to various areas of activity or to the humanitarian sector as a whole, the approach to professionalisation remains little structured and, in any case, not yet equal to the responsibilities of humanitarian workers and their employers.

### **Areas for improvement**

During the conference that took place at the end of the study, an analysis of the results enabled the identification of four major issues related to the professionalisation of humanitarian action, in the form of questions, as well as nineteen practical recommendations to address them.

#### ***How do we drive professionalisation when professions aren't recognised?***

It is possible to consider the professionalisation of humanitarian workers without necessarily focusing on the structuring of the sum of different “professions” involved. The sector could focus solely on those professional areas of activity that have the biggest impact in terms of quality and performance, such as accountability or abuse-prevention, for example. Another interesting proposal was to focus on the “professions” that are traditionally dominated by international or expatriate personnel, in order to improve access to these positions for local and national personnel – professionalisation at the service of localisation, in short. Finally, given that humanitarian workers seem to identify more strongly with humanitarian work in general, rather than with specific professional humanitarian areas, one very concrete proposal was to create a single “humanitarian profession” based on the distinguishable competencies identified in the study and on the CHCF.

#### ***How do we stop bias making humanitarian recruitment less effective?***

To open up the sector to new talents, participants at the SOHP conference suggested a much wider diffusion of job offers and more transparency with regard to the skill requirements. To facilitate access for less experienced people, one proposal was to set up internship programmes offering talented but inexperienced candidates a pathway towards a certificate of general competence that would be recognised by the work sector.

#### ***How do we ensure that humanitarians have the skills to do their job effectively?***

This first requires the recognition and adoption of a common reference for essential competencies – such as the one developed in the framework of the SOHP study and the CHCF – and its concrete, operational integration into human resources processes, namely at the levels of recruitment, personnel development, and performance evaluation. More broadly, the recommendation is to reinforce a culture in the sector that prioritises competencies, especially at the level of humanitarian organisations’ human resources departments.

### *How can we drive localisation in humanitarian staffing?*

This last issue is not the least, if we consider that it corresponds to high expectations from the Istanbul summit. To address it, the first proposal was to concentrate on competencies and function, and not on status or administrative labels such as “national” and “international”, which are obstacles to change. It is also important to promote local expertise, namely by giving greater importance to contextual knowledge and to skills that enable effective work in different contexts, and by making this recognition explicit in the processes of recruitment and remuneration. Finally, another significant recommendation was to use competencies to justify the necessity of international positions when these competencies do not exist at the local level, and at the same time, to implement activities to help local personnel to develop these lacking competencies.

### **Perspectives**

The success of the SOHP study<sup>9</sup> confirms the importance given to the issues of professionalisation by those working in the humanitarian sector today. Ninety-five percent of the 566 conference participants believed that this work, which one of the experts described as “decisive and timely”, should be pursued in the future. Finally, the SOHP initiative demonstrated the need for a collective space for consultation and the sharing of initiatives, but especially for the coordination and piloting of these issues, namely in order to pursue the nineteen recommendations that were jointly produced. We hope that the heads of humanitarian organisations will take notice of these perceptions communicated by those who work alongside them.

From one end of the human chain that makes up humanitarian aid to the other, from the person who mobilises to provide aid to the person receiving it, the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector will be a strong contribution to the process of localisation. It represents the guarantee of aid provided by professionals whose competencies are verified, validated and recognised.

*Translated from the French by Juliet Powys*

---

### **Biography • Rory Downham**

Rory Downham holds a Master’s in Training Engineering from Aston University (UK) and has been working in the apprenticeship sector for over thirty years. He is now director of learning and development at Bioforce where, for more than twenty years, he has been developing and implementing solutions to meet capacity building needs in the humanitarian sector. He has been at the origin of several key industry initiatives in the sector such as HPass, Taking the Lead, the Training Providers Forum, and most recently has led the State of Humanitarian Professions study.

---

*Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:*

Rory Downham, “The professionalisation of humanitarian action: a work still in progress”, *Humanitarian*

*Alternatives*, no. 16, March 2021, p.112-127,

<http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2021/03/25/the-professionalisation-of-humanitarian-action-a-work-still-in-progress/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-800-7

---

<sup>9</sup> During the closing conference, 100% of participants indicated that the SOHP work was useful, and 77% considered it to be very useful.