

*Independent think tank specialised in analysing practices and developing policies for the humanitarian sector*



**SAVE THE DATE !**

Overview

**AUTUMN SCHOOL ON HUMANITARIAN AID**

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# LOCAL SOLIDARITY, MUTUAL ASSISTANCE AND CITIZENSHIP: THE FORGOTTEN SIDE OF CRISIS RESPONSE

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## SAVE THE DATE

From the ruins of Beirut to the flooded regions of la Roya, from the villages attacked in the Central African Republic to the high-risk zones of the Sahel, everywhere, citizens, elected representatives, and loosely formed groups of individuals are taking action to help their neighbours and their territories. As was the case last year, in every crisis that has taken place in 2021, we have seen how valuable this local solidarity can be. Many reports have underlined how crucial local action has been in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and how zero-order responders and locally-led responses are often more effective in crisis contexts<sup>2</sup>. And yet...

And yet, as 'traditional' humanitarian actors, we still have difficulty understanding this local solidarity which takes many different forms: there are informal mutual help networks and there are organisations who are familiar with humanitarian standards, there are activist groups and there are apolitical neighbourhood committees... It is not clear exactly what the boundaries of 'local solidarity' are, nor is it clear what the sector can do (or wants to do?) to support it. Five years after the commitments of the Grand Bargain, the meagre 4.7% of humanitarian funds directly allocated to local and national actors, well short of the objective of 25%, is there to remind us of the difficulty, if not the failure, of the sector to reform itself<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps a paradigm shift is necessary? Perhaps the sector needs to be integrated into the ecosystem of local actors rather than the other way around? Perhaps, in order to do this, we need to put an end to a stubborn collective attitude that places international actors at the centre of the response, alongside local organisations who need to be trained to adhere to our standards in order to be legitimate? What new operational approaches can be invented to support local initiatives, sometimes on the margins of the humanitarian 'system', without impairing them? How can we combine our classic mechanisms and these local forms of assistance?

**These are some of the questions we would like to discuss with you at the 14th edition of the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid.**

## NEW AND VARIED FORMS OF «LOCAL SOLIDARITY»

Kinship networks, religious and community-based organisations, traditional chiefdoms and neighbourhood networks: mutual assistance as always existed and, despite what the Social Darwinists say, has even been a determining factor in the way our societies have evolved.<sup>4</sup> Ranging from mutual assistance for survival to mutual protection and collective long-term recovery, these forms of solidarity have always been central to the resilience of individuals and societies. Today, mutual help and local solidarity have taken new forms, going well beyond what the sector sometimes mechanically refers to with the generic term of civil society organisations (CSO). Though some

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<sup>1</sup> Larissa Fast and Christine Bennett, « From the ground up: It's about time for local humanitarian action », *HPG Report ODI*, May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Qu'ils s'agissent de conflits, de catastrophes naturelles ou sanitaires, d'accidents technologiques, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B. and Spencer, A. (2021) *The Grand Bargain at five years: an independent review*, HPG commissioned report. London : ODI.

<sup>4</sup> Voir l'essai de Pierre Kropotkine, *L'entraide, un facteur de l'évolution* (1902), ou, plus récemment, celui de Pablo Servigne et Gauthier Chapelle, *L'Entraide, l'autre loi de la jungle* (2017).

forms of mutual assistance are provided via organisations, who sometimes are only 'local' to the extent that they are not western, in recent years, there have been a growing number of informal initiatives. These citizen-based initiatives, which are not officially registered with the authorities, are highly reactive, usually funded by the private sector and diasporas, and sometimes supported by local politicians. They are found on every continent and even in rich countries: indeed, from Paris to Athens, many people volunteered to distribute food aid to the most vulnerable people at the height of the European migrant crisis, or, more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the margins of the system, but fully consistent with the humanitarian principle of mutual assistance, these new forms of protective solidarity are transforming the aid landscape. We therefore need to understand them better.

- ***What are the different facets of local mutual assistance? How should we define it and what should we call it? Who are the main actors involved? Where are they active? What is their added value? Why has there been this recent increase in citizen-based initiatives that are not part of the traditional aid system? What does this say about our own shortcomings? What can we learn from the diversity of these mutual aid practices in contrast to the standardisation of the humanitarian sector?***

### **THE URGENT NEED TO BALANCE POWER WITHIN THE SYSTEM**

Often rendered invisible due to the habits and over-professionalisation of the sector, sometimes denigrated because they do not conform to international humanitarian standards, local solidarity initiatives will no doubt continue to be under-estimated as long as they are judged on the basis of our own frames of reference. Despite progress and growing awareness in recent years, most of the time, local and national actors are limited to the role of implementing partners, while international actors design and supervise projects. The participation of local and national actors in coordination mechanisms remains marginal (in 2019, only 8% of clusters had a national or local organisation as lead agency), and capacity building is still too often used as a way of making them conform to the standards of western countries. Behind such observations, which are a frustrating reminder of all that remains to be done, there is no doubt an even bigger and more fundamental issue: that of power relations and the balance of power between international and local actors. In looking at how to renew our support to local actors, it seems unavoidable that we should reconsider the ways we think and function, which – unknowingly (?) – perpetuate this imbalance of power.<sup>5</sup>

- ***How should power relations be managed? Should the sector be 'de-professionalised' in order to leave a bigger and fairer role to local actors and their organisations? What place should be given to humanitarian standards in this process? Should more inclusive, alternative quality criteria be found, which give non-western organisations their rightful value? What risks are we prepared to take on?***

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<sup>5</sup> This issue is connected to the relations of domination inherited from the past which continue to insidiously determine the relations between countries that are considered 'developed' and those that are considered not to be. Do we need to de-colonise aid, as is increasingly being suggested? Do we need to de-westernise it? Mindsets and perceptions no doubt need to be deprogrammed... For more on the issue of decolonising aid, see the work of Peace Direct, and particularly the report, *Time to decolonise aid : Insights and lessons from a global consultation*, published in May 2021.

## NEW FORMES OF MULTI-ACTOR COLLABORATION

Given the current limits of the sector, and the growing desire and capacity of actors from the 'South' to gain in autonomy in relation to current partnerships, (once again!) we need to think of new ways of doing our work. If the future belongs to local solidarity, does that mean that international aid needs to be reduced? In a context where the future is more uncertain than ever, and where climate deregulation is raising serious questions about the viability of the sector<sup>6</sup>, there is an urgent need to reinvent our models (or perhaps accept that we should not to have any models, and that we should open ourselves to other people's models...?). New ways of working together need to be found: by placing territorial dynamics and local actors at the heart of operations, whether they are governmental, municipal, civil society-based, organisation-based or just citizen-based (as such, the sector has a lot to learn from local government cooperation and mutual exchanges between territories); by increasing the collective and autonomous self-assistance of people affected by crisis<sup>7</sup>; by supporting diaspora actors and encouraging their relations with local humanitarian actors<sup>8</sup>; by developing new funding models on the basis of rapid micro-grants or through the establishment of incubator funds or networking platforms for local solidarity innovations<sup>9</sup>; and by inventing new ways of accompanying and reinforcing local organisations. These are some of the ideas that we would like to explore with you.

- ***Will international actors' role in the future be primarily one of providing general and technical support to local actors? How can the sector encourage the networking of initiatives from the 'South' and facilitate cooperation between territories? What bridges and collaboration mechanisms can be built between informal assistance and humanitarian action? On what basis and on what conditions?***

## AN INVITATION FROM GROUPE URD

We would like to invite you to come and share your thoughts on these issues, and to collectively establish the outlines of a new form of solidarity that gives each of the actors involved their rightful place. Over two days, speakers from different countries will provide an overview of the diverse nature of mutual assistance, and share concrete examples to inform discussions about how to build bridges between the traditional aid system and these recently developed forms of solidarity at its margins.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Humanitarian Aid on the Move: Climate change, multiple crises and the risk of collapse* (no. 21, March 2020). [https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HEM\\_GroupeURD\\_N21\\_EN\\_web.pdf](https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/HEM_GroupeURD_N21_EN_web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. SCLR, [Survivor and community-led response](#).

<sup>8</sup> See the [DEMAC](#) programme funded by DG ECHO and DANIDA, June 2015 to September 2018.

<sup>9</sup> For example: Innovation Hubs; CLIP programme (Start Network).



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