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TOPIC OVERVIEW



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SPRING SCHOOL ON HUMANITARIAN AID

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HUMANITARIAN AID TODAY: THE END OF POLITICAL INNOCENCE?

'The end of political innocence' is an expression used by the Haitian film director, Raoul Peck, quoted by Bertrand Bréqueville in his book 'L'humanitaire sous l'emprise du néolibéralisme', Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer, 2021.

INTRODUCTION

Since its appearance on the international stage, the humanitarian sector has always been a neutral actor, both at the institutional level and in the field, in keeping with the founding principles that were established by the ICRC in the 20th century. And yet, after more than half a century of existence in its 'modern' form, it is currently the object of significant criticism, including criticism of the concepts of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Its politicisation has now become an issue, and numerous stakeholders - particularly from the 'Global South' - accuse it of having become a banal commercial sector which serves national interests and a global ultra-liberal ideology.

As we pointed out during the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid last September, *“humanitarian needs have increased exponentially in 2022 due to the impact of armed conflict, climatic shocks and the increase in the price of food and energy”*¹. According to the latest figures from the UN, more than 350 million people will require humanitarian aid in 2023². As well as the high-profile war between Ukraine and Russia, tens of millions of other people are also affected by serious crises that require emergency assistance in the Horn of Africa, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Haiti, the Sahel, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Venezuela, South Sudan, etc.³ Given this unprecedented situation, **there is an urgent need to reinvent the humanitarian sector, particularly its relationship with the political realm.**

The word ‘political’ encompasses a wide variety of concepts and connotations: political activism, the political power of the state and of government, the expression of a political opinion or viewpoint, etc. In the humanitarian world, it is clear that ‘political’ is a particularly sensitive word. On the one hand, there are sector-based policies ; on the other, there is contextual analysis and the tools of political economy. Lastly, **the aid sector is faced with the difficulty of how to position itself politically in relation to contexts and actors, a situation caused by the ‘sacred’ nature of the principle of neutrality.**

THE PRINCIPLE OF NEUTRALITY

according to the International Movement of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent:

“In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature” or “a duty to abstain from any act which, in a conflict situation, might be interpreted as furthering the interests of one party to the conflict or jeopardizing those of the other”.⁴

Having already been called into question in the post-2001 context due to the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid in the USA's dominant discourse, **further questions are being asked about neutrality due to the growing involvement of local actors in the aid sector and the emergence of radical movements (climate, anti capitalist movements, etc.), but also due to the political activism of new aid actors: citizens organised in groups, particularly thanks to social networks. The political nature of humanitarian situations, and the clarity of roles and responsibilities, are also subject to debate** due to the massive increase in the number of crises, climate change and the destruction of the living world by a deregulated system of production. Though the debate about using aid for political ends is not new, it is once again in the news with the developments in the Sahel (Mali and Burkina Faso), but also due to the persistent crises and inaction of governments in relation to the climate emergency. These phenomena mean that each of us needs to call for political actors to be accountable and to ask ourselves questions today that are absolutely crucial for the future.

To what extent does humanitarian crisis management have a political dimension? To what extent does engaging with local aid actors in crisis resolution, aid delivery and early warning systems redefine the sector? How does the aid sector view the neoliberal system, which is increasingly denounced by social movements?

These are some of the questions that Groupe URD would like you to come to discuss at the Spring School on Humanitarian Aid.

¹ <https://www.icrc.org/fr/document/2022-en-photos-la-resilience-de-lhumanite-malgre-les-conditions-des-besoins-humanitaires>

² <https://humanitarianaction.info/overview/2023>

³ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/01/13/10-humanitarian-crisis-demand-attention>

⁴ Extract from ‘ICRC neutrality and neutrality in humanitarian assistance’ by Denise Plattner, 1996, International Review of the Red Cross, No. 311 (<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jn2z.htm>).

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: MORE THAN ONE FORM OF HUMANITARIAN AID?

In order to discuss the issues outlined above, first we need to look briefly at the birth and development of modern humanitarian aid.

On 24 June, 1859, a Swiss businessman – Henry Dunant – witnessed the horrors of the famous and bloody **Battle of Solferino** between Piedmont-Sardinia and Austria. He decided to provide the wounded with assistance, and created a private charity for this purpose in 1863 called the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded. The symbols of the committee were a white flag for the termination of fighting and a red cross on a white background (the same motif as the Swiss flag, but with the colours inverted). This initiative paved the way for **the International Committee of the Red Cross** which still exists today. Though *the ideas of the Enlightenment are the inspiration for modern humanitarian action*, it is on *the battlefields of Solferino* that its operational character took shape.⁵ Modern humanitarian action became firmly established through **the promulgation of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Additional Protocols of 1977, without forgetting the fundamental principles of humanitarian action – humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality – which the International Movement of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent adopted in 1965.**

But as early as the 1970s, the apolitical nature of the ICRC's operational principles began to be questioned. In 1971, a number of doctors left the Movement during the Biafra crisis (because the government in place was using the famine for political ends) and decided to create **Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)**. This led to the first attempt to politicise the dunantist doctrine, which included the questioning of the principle of neutrality. In the words of DeChaine (2005), the MSF enterprise is *"an attempt to bridge 'the universal discourse of rights' with a 'borderless rhetoric of neutrality', a 'dance of témoignage' which seeks to balance the 'humanitarian' and the 'political'".*⁶ The creation of this NGO of 'French Doctors' **was accompanied by witness accounts which aimed to show what was happening in the conflict and challenge the relationship between humanitarian aid and the political.** It also corresponds to the Cold War period which began a new phase in the complex relations between humanitarian and political action. During this period, a number of humanitarian NGOs were created whose action was firmly rooted in anti-communism and support for 'freedom fighters'. In Afghanistan, Cambodia, Vietnam and Nicaragua, NGOs were effectively part of this frozen global conflict.

The end of the Cold War led to new changes : the end of the political paralysis of the UN Security Council, the multiplication of internal conflicts ('non-international armed conflicts'), the huge increase in humanitarian funds from states, and the creation of state and inter-state institutions to support the development of what was going to become 'a new industry'. In this context, it was necessary to appear **neutral, independent and impartial in relation to operations and security in the field.** Whereas certain development movements and organisations are highly politicised in their support for 'tiers-mondisme' and decolonisation, the 'without borders' movement adopted a very different approach based on rights. At the same time, the concepts of neutrality and independence proved to be difficult to implement because states reinforce their political positioning by funding or supporting United Nations operations. Thus, **the depoliticization of humanitarian aid and this asserted**

⁵ Larché Jérôme (2017), *Le déclin de l'empire humanitaire. L'humanitaire occidental à l'épreuve de la mondialisation*, L'Harmattan, p. 20.

⁶ Quoted in Davies, K. (2012). *Continuity, Change and Contest. Meanings of 'humanitarian' from the 'Religion of Humanity' to the Kosovo war*, (HPG Working Papers), Overseas Development Institute, p.16 (<https://odi.org/en/publications/continuity-change-and-contest-meanings-of-humanitarian-from-the-religion-of-humanity-to-the-kosovo-war/>).

neutrality crystallised during the 1990s with the recognition by aid actors of the principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, notably with their acceptance of the new Code of Conduct in 1994. According to Caroline Broudic, 1989 opened the way to 'a post-political world to which the humanitarian sector contributes',⁷ a world where Margaret Thatcher's liberal slogan, There is no alternative, looms large.⁸ The apparently apolitical nature of the humanitarian sector and, as a result, its use for political interests – particularly via the principle of 'the responsibility to protect (R2P) – reached a peak at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s with the different interventions, and 'just' and 'humanitarian' wars that took place.⁹

The neutrality of humanitarian aid therefore became established dogma, and with it, the western system of humanitarian aid as we currently know it. However, we must not forget that the western dunantist era does not have a monopoly of humanitarian models. Other social, cultural and religious forces exist that determine solidarity-based relations during crises: and these are mechanisms that existed well before the western system established in the 19th century. In response to the question, 'How was the enemy treated in conflicts or how was assistance delivered before the Dunant effect in the non-western world?', many authors provide concrete answers which reinforce the emerging need to de-westernise humanitarian aid. Tom Woerner-Powell, for example, gives the example of the Emir Abdelkader who, in the first half of the 19th century, and notably during the conflict between Algeria and colonial France, was widely praised by his own European prisoners of war for the dignified and tolerant way he treated his enemies.¹⁰ According to Woerner-Powell, the Emir behaved in a way that was much closer to humanitarian ideals than his western contemporaries.¹¹ The researcher, Hanna Krebs, for her part, has shown that the word 'humanitarian' (rendao in Mandarin Chinese) first appeared in the works of Confucius, written more than two thousand years ago. This word means 'human duty', 'humanity', 'filial duty' and 'ancestor worship'.¹² And Pichamon Yeophantong has highlighted that western interpretations of humanitarianism should not be used as the dominant discourse in places where Asian cultures and customs have significantly influenced and contributed to local humanitarian practices.¹³ Whether through the legitimacy of a Chinese dynasty to govern, the emergency action of the Japanese government or the influence of Buddhism in the humanitarian vision in Laos, Cambodia or Myanmar, it is the moral obligation to help others that has been the source of humanitarian traditions in Asia.¹⁴

In parallel to this, there has been a growing number of social movements, local actors and civil societies in countries in the 'Global South' who reject the 'traditional' aid model implemented by 'conventional' actors from the 'Global North', even going as far as to express a form of fatigue with the system (the example of Haiti).¹⁵ Tom Woerner-Powell has claimed that *"a humanitarianism which is not open to all humanity is arguably no*

⁷ Broudic, in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p.91

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ Though the origins of the concept of a 'just war' can be traced back to Antiquity via Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, it was following intense debate about the Vietnam war that it was given a contemporary perspective by Michael Waltzer in his book 'Just and Unjust Wars' published in 1977.

¹⁰ Davey, E., & Svoboda, E. (Ed.) (2014), *Histories of Humanitarian Action in the Middle East and North Africa* (HPG Working Papers), Overseas Development Institute, p.11 (<http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9141.pdf>)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹² Krebs, H.B. (2014). *Responsibility, Legitimacy, Morality. Chinese humanitarianism in historical perspective*, (HPG Working Papers). Overseas Development Institute, p. 3 (<https://odi.org/en/publications/responsibility-legitimacy-morality-chinese-humanitarianism-in-historical-perspective/>).

¹³ Yeophantong, P. (2014), *Understanding humanitarian action in East and Southeast Asia. A historical perspective*, (HPG Working Papers), Overseas Development Institute, p. 8 et 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8, 10, 14 et 19.

¹⁵ Thomas, F. (2022), "Haïti: La Fatigue de l'Humanitaire?", *CETRI*, 12 September 2022 (<https://www.cetri.be/Haiti-la-fatigue-de-l-humanitaire>).

humanitarianism at all.¹⁶ Pichamon Yeophantong, for her part, has written that *“the idea of humanitarianism is not static but constantly evolving, [...] in view of the cultural and political heterogeneity of East and Southeast Asia, it is more appropriate to speak of humanitarianisms as opposed to a single, monolithic conception of humanitarianism”*. These points of view echo those of Rony Brauman who speaks of several *“forms of mutual aid that develop and that are no less and no more legitimate”*, or those of Hugo Slim, the former ICRC Head of Policy and Humanitarian Diplomacy: *“Humanitarian multilateralism in the 21st century will be about achieving cooperation and coordination between African, Chinese, Indian, Russian and Western humanitarian systems in a process more like the COP of climate multilateralism than the IASC of today’s parochial Western system”*.¹⁷ Therefore, **though the type of humanitarian action that has shaped the sector is that of Henry Dunant, we must not forget that this is not the only possible model. As Hugo Slim points out, there are forms of humanitarianism that do not follow the apolitical dogma of neutrality and provide other narratives for emergency relief in crisis situations.**

1. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF HUMANITARIAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

THE LEGAL DUTY OF STATES

Since 1949, International Humanitarian Law has been incorporated into common law via the recognition and implementation of the Geneva Conventions. It has practically a universal value as it has been ratified by every state on the planet. According to Article 1 of the 4 Geneva Conventions of 1949, governments are obliged to respect this law and to ensure that it is observed, even if they are not directly involved in an armed conflict, including vis-à-vis an adversary who is not a signatory. The same is true of non-state armed groups who have the status of parties to a non-international armed conflict. In other terms, **states have significant legal and judicial responsibilities in managing crises and conflicts, and also in applying and respecting the four Geneva Conventions**. In an ideal world, this would take the form of diplomacy aimed at resolving and preventing conflicts, which would remove the need for non-state humanitarian actors to become involved. Unfortunately, we do not live in this ideal world and what is theoretically established **is constantly violated**. In the words of two legal experts, these violations *“are not due to the shortcomings of the rules [...] but rather the lack of willingness to respect the rules, the lack of means to ensure that they are respected, [...] and the lack of knowledge of these rules among political leaders”*.¹⁸ The number of crises continues to grow and the responsibility of states tends to be forgotten. As such, it was only natural that the current president of the ICRC, Mirjana Spoljaric, said, both in Geneva last November, and during her trips to Russia and Ukraine in January 2023, *“that it is time to elevate the laws of war to a political priority”*, insisting on *“the importance of respecting international humanitarian law”*.¹⁹

A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT RESOLVING THEIR STRUCTURAL CAUSES

¹⁶ Davey, E., & Svoboda, E. (Ed.) (2014), *Histories of Humanitarian Action in the Middle East and North Africa*. (HPG Working Papers). Overseas Development Institute, p. 11 and 16 (<http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9141.pdf>).

¹⁷ Slim, H. (2022), « A new Solferino moment for humanitarians », *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, ICRC blog, February 10th (<https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/02/10/new-solferino-moment-humanitarians/>).

¹⁸ Tavernier, P. et Henckaerts, J-M. (2008), *Droit international humanitaire coutumier: enjeux et défis contemporains*, Éditions Bruylant, Collection du Credho, Centre de Recherches et d’Études sur les droits de l’homme et le droit humanitaire, p. 25-26

¹⁹ <https://www.icrc.org/fr/document/il-est-temps-de-hisser-le-droit-de-la-guerre-au-rang-de-priorite-politique>, <https://www.icrc.org/fr/document/presidente-cicr-conclut-visite-moscou-urgent-aller-de-lavant-question-prisonniers-guerre>

The responsibility of states and governments to prevent and resolve crises is above all political. The existence and persistence of humanitarian needs are the result of political choices and a lack of will on the part of political representatives, who do not take these needs sufficiently into consideration and fail to fulfil their responsibilities. As mentioned during the 2016 French National Humanitarian Conference: *“everything must be done to prevent crises and to put an end to conflicts, with greater political engagement of states in fragile and crisis situations, [...] humanitarian action should not be used to make up for political inaction”*.²⁰ We should not forget, for example, that while crises have an even more significant impact on women than on men, this is primarily for political, social and cultural reasons. The latter therefore need to be questioned and highlighted. The recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria is another example of this. We have known for a long time that natural phenomena only cause disasters if this is made inevitable by the human and societal context. In this precise example, when buildings built less than six months before without respecting earthquake resistant standards collapsed causing more than 45 000 deaths, this was a case of human responsibility. The same is true of **climate-related disasters which are the result of a lack of action to manage climate change, a lack of preparedness of the population and intrinsic structural causes that have been left unsolved**. Let us focus for a moment on the climate crisis. This is a major developmental and humanitarian challenge, but it is also an extreme example of political inaction and irresponsibility. Though the authority and responsibility of national and local politicians is of central importance, the climate crisis raises the question of the overall responsibility of the international community and the countries of the ‘Global North’. The countries of the ‘Global South’ are already vulnerable due to pre-existing and ‘maintained’ socio-economic fragilities, and the poorest populations are the most exposed and vulnerable and the least resilient.²¹ The responsibility of the countries of the Global North towards the countries of the Global South and the obvious link between climate change and public policies that do not respect the environment show how humanitarian needs are caused by political irresponsibility. The emergence of climate litigation against states from the Global North calls into question the idea of ‘individual resilience’,²² which overlooks the systematic nature of crises,²³ and calls on politicians to take up their responsibilities and provide real solutions to current and future crises.²⁴ And finally, we must not forget that the mismanagement of risks and humanitarian responses have led to the fall of numerous regimes and political systems.

QUESTIONING THE HUMANITARIAN APPROACH AND CLARIFYING THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

This political reading of needs and crises raises questions about the aid sector’s approach. Though development actors have historically understood humanitarian needs to be the direct consequence of inequalities, which create the need for social justice, humanitarian actors, on the other hand, only seem to tackle apolitical symptoms. And yet, as has already been pointed out, the existence of a humanitarian need, and its recognition, are not apolitical. **The choice between addressing the roots of a crisis or its short-term triggers is obviously**

²⁰ Revue Humanitaires en mouvement (HEM), n°17 spécial « Sommet humanitaire mondial » (2016), Messages Clés de la Conférence nationale humanitaire française (https://www.urd.org/fr/revue_humanitaires/messages-cles-de-la-conference-nationale-humanitaire-francaise/).

²¹ Hugon, P. (2017). Les trappes à vulnérabilité et les catastrophes: niveaux d’analyse et approches systémiques. Mondes en développement, 180, p.14 et 24 (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-mondes-en-developpement-2017-4-page-13.htm>).

²² Magali Reghezza-Zitt, in Binctin Barnabé (5 avril 2022), « Croire que c’est l’individu qui doit porter la responsabilité morale de l’effort est une illusion », Basta! (<https://basta.media/GIEC-rapport-climat-changement-climatique-presidentielle2022-transition-sobriete-Magali-Reghezza-Zitt>).

²³ Caroline Broudic, in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁴ Cassella S. (2021). Vers un régime de responsabilité de l’État pour risques globaux: Réflexions à partir de l’exemple des changements climatiques. Archives de philosophie du droit, 63, 207-222 (<https://doi.org/10.3917/apd.631.0226>).

political ; which explains why the ‘sticking plaster’ form of humanitarianism is increasingly being called into question. Of course, there is still a risk of aid being manipulated and it therefore still needs to be overseen. Since the interventions, ‘just wars’ and humanitarian aid manipulated to justify and legitimise political agendas at the end of the 1990s, and particularly after the attacks of 11 September 2001, **many humanitarian organisations are afraid to take a stance and cross this political line.** In September 2021, Pierre Micheletti rejected the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ call to use humanitarian aid as a means to encourage the Afghan Taliban to respect Human Rights : *“humanitarian aid should not be used to serve the political agenda of states”*.²⁵ Already in 2014, ACF produced a press release to react to President François Hollande’s visit to Iraq in which they argued that *“humanitarian aid is not a tool for managing political crises [...], the blurring of lines between the roles and responsibilities of politicians and humanitarians does not help, and can make the situation of people in need worse”*.²⁶ Even though it is important to remember that humanitarian actors are not crisis managers, or peacekeepers or a means of responding to political problems, questions remain about how they should approach the role of states and their inaction. This appeared all the more obvious after the debates that followed the World Humanitarian Forum of 2016 with the ‘Grand Bargain’ and the introduction of the concept of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. **In relation to migration in Europe, humanitarians, associations and citizens also need to find this delicate balance between the duty to provide assistance and protection – which consists of making up for the shortcomings of states (substitution role) – and their obligation to criticise certain immigration and hosting policies (advocacy role).**²⁷ As witnesses of the impunity of states, and their lack of solutions, **should humanitarian actors not highlight these problems more?** And should they not challenge politicians, take action for more social justice and equal development, while also making sure that they are not manipulated politically? In order to avoid repeating the failures due to the manipulation of aid in Afghanistan and the Sahel, or due to ‘just wars’, states need to take up their responsibilities in managing both the root causes and the short-term manifestations of political and societal problems. Humanitarians, for their part, need to speak out and make politicians face up to their obligations.

2. THE ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL ACTORS IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

THE POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL ACTORS IN RESPONSE TO CURRENT CRISES

24 February 2023 marked the end of a year of war between Russia and Ukraine. There have been countless articles and reports on this subject, but what we are interested in here is the exceptional civic and fraternal engagement of Ukrainian local and civil society in response to the Russian invasion. **In Ukraine, as was the case in Lebanon after the explosion in the Port of Beirut in August 2020, aid networks proved to be essential and very effective in meeting people’s needs.**²⁸ These social organisations and movements are made up of local volunteers, the municipal and local authorities and members of the diaspora who had been very politicised following the

²⁵ <https://www.france24.com/fr/asia-pacifique/20210914-afghanistan-l-aide-humanitaire-ne-doit-pas-servir-l-agenda-politique-des-%C3%A9tats>

²⁶ <https://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/presse/irak-deplacement-presidentiel-l-humanitaire-n-est-pas-un-outil-de-gestion-de-crise-politique/>

²⁷ Léon, V. (2018), Les solidarités face aux flux migratoires : quelles marges de manœuvre en France aujourd’hui, Groupe URD (<https://www.urd.org/fr/projet/les-solidarites-face-aux-flux-migratoires-quelles-marges-de-manoevre-en-france-aujourd'hui/>).

²⁸ Grünewald, François (2022), Evaluation of the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine, 2022, Groupe URD, p. 59 (<https://www.urd.org/en/publication/report-of-the-evaluation-of-the-humanitarian-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine-2022/>).

Maidan revolution in 2014 or the October revolution in Lebanon in 2019. Very quickly, they began to deliver organised assistance. In Ukraine, they have often taken part in the war effort, the hosting of refugees and the distribution of food to the elderly. In Lebanon, they have often become involved in political issues as the country has begun to collapse. **Myanmar is another example, where delivering humanitarian aid is synonymous with constant and determined opposition to the illegitimate military junta**, which is to a great extent responsible for the atrocities that have been endured by the population. According to the researcher, Adelina Kamal, by introducing a new law on the registration of humanitarian organisations, the junta has made the situation extremely complex by forcing them to choose sides or otherwise they will be arrested.²⁹ Those who choose to 'resist' therefore openly boycott government institutions and try to assist victims of the dictatorship's violence.³⁰ **The crisis in Myanmar is clearly political and implies making choices which, by their very nature, are themselves political, including for local actors and civil society who are on the frontlines of aid delivery.**³¹ This is also the choice of numerous women and organisations who work in the aid sector in Afghanistan who fight so that they can continue to do so despite the Taliban restrictions on women's right to work and access to basic services, notably for health and education.³² **In all these cases, delivering assistance is synonymous with political will and a constant struggle**: being able to help people as well as being politically engaged. And this is a form of engagement that calls into question humanitarian principles.³³

CIVIL SOCIETY'S AWAKENING TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS: VOICE, ACTION AND ACTIVISM

For a number of years, both in the Global North and the Global South, civil society has been developing new forms of political expression. In the Global South, the emergence of new forms of grassroots humanitarianism and the engagement of development organisations have gone hand in hand with the rise of intense activism, particularly on the issue of climate change and climate justice. Last October, for example, 16 countries led by Vanuatu, appealed to the International Court of Justice asking it to rule on the obligation for states under international law to protect the rights of present and future generations against the effects of climate change.³⁴ Civil societies in both the Global North and South are looking for ways to make their voices heard, such as at the recent COP27 in Egypt, and have also sometimes initiated legal proceedings in response to the social, environmental and humanitarian consequences of the actions of big business and the laissez-faire attitude of states. **Civil societies and local actors are strongly committed to mitigating the root causes of crises, and their humanitarian consequences, and they also implement adaptation initiatives in the field.** There are a large number of these, such as: the reintroduction of a species of tree to counter soil erosion and fires in Niger; the use of community-based development programmes for post-disaster recovery in the Philippines and Indonesia; the establishment of climate smart-villages in Africa, Latin America, and South America; the implementation of national and regional climate information systems; and the development of a meteorological and agricultural advice system in India to show the importance of collaboration, trust and shared responsibility between different

²⁹ Webinar « Beyond neutrality: alternative forms of humanitarian action », ODI, Humanitarian Practice Group, 1 December 2022 (<https://odi.org/en/events/beyond-neutrality-alternative-forms-of-humanitarian-action/>).

³⁰ Slim, Hugo (2022) "Humanitarian resistance: Its ethical and operational importance", Humanitarian Practice Network, 20 September 2022 (<https://odihpn.org/publication/humanitarian-resistance-its-ethical-and-operational-importance/>).

³¹ Kamal, Adelina, Hser Hser Naw, Ohmar Khin, (2023) "Myanmar's neglected crisis demands a different response", The New Humanitarian, 1 February 2023 (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2023/02/01/Myanmar-coup-Ukraine-cross-border-aid>).

³² Latifi, A.M (2023), « After the Taliban ban on women NGO work, local and foreign aid groups take different approaches », The New Humanitarian, 2 March 2023 (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/03/02/afghanistan-ingos-find-workarounds-taliban-ban-on-women-ngo-work>).

³³ Ibid., p. 61

³⁴ <https://www.vanuatuicj.com/>

stakeholders.³⁵ In Vietnam, Senegal and Costa Rica, adaptation initiatives have, for example, been put in place to cope with rising sea levels and flooding, as well as initiatives to preserve biodiversity and increase resilience.³⁶ These different actions are supported by a development NGO from the Global South ; an international farmers' movement which includes more than 180 local and national organisations in 81 countries : Via Campesina. It is a movement that openly campaigns for social and climate justice, and also for farmers' rights via aid activities and campaigns.³⁷

DOES THE PRINCIPLE OF NEUTRALITY STILL MAKE SENSE?

As Hugo Slim says, there are many new forms of humanitarian action and mutual aid. **It seems obvious to us that these show the aid sector in a new light: that of engagement and politicisation.** This forces us to question the way that the humanitarian sector has appropriated one of the ICRC's fundamental operational principles – neutrality – which was conceived as a way of managing difficult contexts where gaining access to people in need, for example prisoners, required a specific approach and a great deal of discretion. Since the 1990s and the work of Mary Anderson on 'Do No Harm', analysis of the negative risks of aid, including political risks, has helped debates to move forward. The risk that aid might reinforce violent groups, perpetuate conflicts and accentuate divisions has been studied in detail, notably in the field of political economy. Though the humanitarian sector is rarely naive, it nevertheless often uses slogans, rhetoric and figures of speech – sometimes even double talk – to suggest that it can still be neutral. What is more, **is it not absurd to expect local actors to remain neutral when they are on the front lines responding to the crisis?** Certain conventional actors from the sector appear to still believe that they should³⁸ and have difficulty trusting local aid actors.³⁹ They continue to see them not as stakeholders with real added value, but as simple intermediaries with whom they are obliged to work.⁴⁰ But this lack of recognition of local aid limits their room for manoeuvre and prevents them from having access to a formal funding mechanism. **The principles and procedures are clearly incompatible with these new, politicised forms of local action that are not organised like international organisations.** Local actors do not adhere to the approach promoted by international organisations, and, as a result, **the humanitarian sector misses out on this form of response for which the principle of neutrality no longer makes sense.** And yet, as pointed out by Hugo Slim: *"You don't have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian"*.⁴¹

3. THE POSITIONING OF HUMANITARIAN ACTORS VIS-A-VIS THE NEOLIBERAL SYSTEM

SOCIAL AND ACTIVIST MOVEMENTS WHO CAMPAIGN AGAINST A SYSTEM THAT PREYS ON THE LIVING WORLD

In this period of climate change, biodiversity loss and a likely increase in the number of serious humanitarian

³⁵ Mfitumukiza, D., A. S. Roy, B. Simane, A. Hammill, M. F. Rahman, S. Huq (2020), « Scaling local and community-based adaptation », Global Commission on Adaptation Background Paper, Rotterdam and Washington, DC. (www.gca.org/global-commission-on-adaptation/report/papers).

³⁶ <https://www.afd.fr/fr/actualites/trois-pays-adaptation-changement-climatique>

³⁷ <https://viacampesina.org/fr/>

³⁸ Terry, Fiona (2022), « Taking action, not sides: the benefits of humanitarian neutrality in war », Blog ICRC, Law and Policy (<https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/06/21/taking-action-not-sides-humanitarian-neutrality/>).

³⁹ Grünwald, *op. cit.*, p. 59 (<https://www.urd.org/fr/publication/rapport-de-levaluation-de-la-reponse-humanitaire-a-la-guerre-en-ukraine-2022/>).

⁴⁰ Prospery, Raymond (2016), « Vers un vrai partenariat avec les ONG haïtiennes », Revue HEM n°17, numéro spécial « Sommet humanitaire mondial » (https://www.urd.org/fr/revue_humanitaires/vers-un-vrai-partenariat-avec-les-ong-haitiennes/).

⁴¹ Slim, Hugo (2020), « You don't have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian », The New Humanitarian, 27 August 2020 (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/08/27/humanitarian-principles-neutrality>).

crises, there is a growing number of politicised, activist movements campaigning against the global system that pillages resources, exploits human beings and natural environments, and allows a very small number of people to become very rich. The responsibility of this system in accelerating current degradations is widely accepted. As the former resistance member, writer and philosopher, Stéphane Hessel, wrote in 2011, *“The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century have been replaced by the tyranny of a form of financial capitalism that knows no limits [...]”*.⁴² Radical critiques of the neoliberal system and predatory capitalism have thus emerged in recent years in the form of youth, student and ecologist movements. According to a study published in 2021 by the British scientific and medical journal, the Lancet, almost 70% of the world’s youth suffer from ‘eco-anxiety’⁴³ and it would appear that political engagement and action are the best remedies for this condition. As the situation worsens, radical means of action have become more common with the goal of gaining media attention and provoking political action. A striking example shows how global this movement is – the incredible mobilisation against Total Energies’ EACOP project,⁴⁴ which has been described as a ‘climatic time-bomb’.⁴⁵ In March 2022, four Ugandan activists came to France to inform political decision-makers about this project and to denounce the capitalist system that underlies it. This increasingly critical position in relation to capitalism can also be seen in campaigns against the dominant discourse on climate change adaptation. Indeed, as analysed by Romain Felli in his book, *‘La Grande Adaptation’*, adaptation is itself part of the capitalist system, because rather than contributing to forms of solidarity, capitalism would use the climate crisis to spread the power of the market without “submitting to binding commitments”⁴⁶ related to the climate.⁴⁷ As for the aid sector, the question is therefore as follows: what place should humanitarian organisations occupy among these activist movements who are the front line witnesses of the harmful effects of the capitalist system on the climate, human beings and the living world?

COULD THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR BE THE NEW POLITICAL ACTOR OF OUR TIMES?

The humanitarian sector has already begun to revise its relationship with the political realm (see parts 1 and 2). But what of the relief-development-climate-migration nexus? There currently appears to be a need to rethink the aid sector more generally and structurally, and thereby question the idea of re-engagement. Should we rethink humanitarianism based on a more radical model? Is it enough to ‘tinker’ with the system and make a few changes, or does the system need to be completely reinvented by embracing political aspects? Is it possible to ‘reconcile the irreconcilable’? In short, these questions concern whether the current construction of the aid sector – which began in the 1990s – still works given the changes that have taken place over the last thirty years. With the arrival of global neoliberalism in the 1990s, ‘humanitarianism put on the clothes of professionalism’,⁴⁸ of technicalisation and managerialism, and became a substitute ideology, a refuge value in a post-political world to which it contributes according to the economist Caroline Broudic.⁴⁹ According to Frédéric Thomas, *the logic of the humanitarian sector has become the logic of the market*⁵⁰ and the victims to be saved are seen as a source of human capital. For Bertrand Bréqueville, this has even contributed to removing aid from the paradigm of giving.⁵¹ Due to the

⁴² Hessel Stéphane, en collaboration avec Morin Edgar (2011), *Le chemin de l’espérance*, Fayard.

⁴³ Hickman, C. *et al.* (2021), « Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey », *The Lancet*, volume 5, issue 12 ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00278-3/fulltext#%20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext#%20)).

⁴⁴ <https://www.amisdelaterre.org/projet-eacop-total-activistes-ouganda-venus-faire-entendre-voix-europe/>

⁴⁵ <https://generationecologie.fr/2023/01/26/totalenergies-en-ouganda-la-bombe-climatique-made-in-france/>

⁴⁶ Elloué, N.E (2019), « La grande adaptation. Climat, capitalisme et catastrophe - Romain Felli », *Émulations – Revue de sciences sociales* (<https://ojs.uclouvain.be/index.php/emulations/article/view/crelloue>).

⁴⁷ Felli Romain (2016), *La Grande Adaptation : Climat, capitalisme et catastrophe*, Le Seuil, p. 114.

⁴⁸ Georgette C. (2019), « Pour un engagement humanitaire professionnel non institutionnel », *Défis humanitaires*, 3 septembre 2019 (<https://defishumanitaires.com/2019/09/03/pour-un-engagement-humanitaire-professionnel-non-institutionnel/>).

⁴⁹ Broudic in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁵⁰ Thomas in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁵¹ Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 61-63.

interconnected nature of humanitarian and environmental causes, which has led to alliances between humanitarian and environmental NGOs, and also due to the growing influence of countries in the Global South, **the question of climate justice has been reinterpreted and linked to certain humanitarian foundations.**⁵² There is therefore **a clear invitation to re-establish contact with social movements, as has sometimes been the case among development NGOs.** Given the points made by Bertrand Bréqueville, should the humanitarian sector not take part in the big debates of the contemporary world? How might it go beyond the need to maintain its presence in crisis contexts?⁵³ Should it not be highlighting the ecofeminist struggle against the patriarchal capitalist system? Should it not support women's attempts to take on leadership in humanitarian action, for example, in Bangladesh and South Sudan?⁵⁴ Should it not ensure that localisation efforts are seen as *the first step towards the de-westernisation of conventional humanitarian action*⁵⁵ and as a source of inspiration for *'further politicisation'*?⁵⁶ **Is it not time to sound the death knell of political innocence and to call for the 're-politicisation of humanitarianism'?**⁵⁷

GROUPE URD WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU

For our 30th anniversary, Groupe URD would like to invite you – civil society actors, humanitarian and development actors, climate activists, activists from the Global South, academics – to come to share your questions and your thoughts on the relationship between the humanitarian and political realms. Over three days, speakers and participants from different countries and different sectors will discuss the different political aspects involved in humanitarianism and the challenges that these bring for our sector.



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⁵² Laigle, L. (2019), « Justice climatique et mobilisations environnementales », Vertigo: la revue électronique en sciences de l'environnement, volume 19, numéro 1, 5 March 2019 (<http://journals.openedition.org/vertigo/24107>).

⁵³ Bowden, M. et Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2020), « Humanitarian Diplomacy and Protection Advocacy in An Age of Caution », ALNAP, 1 November 2020, p. 11 (<https://www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-diplomacy-and-protection-advocacy-in-an-age-of-caution>).

⁵⁴ Jayasinghe, N., Khatun M. et Okwii, M. (2020), 'Women Leading Locally: Exploring women's leadership in humanitarian action in Bangladesh and South Sudan', OXFAM, January 2020 (<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/women-leading-locally-exploring-womens-leadership-in-humanitarian-action-in-ban-620937/>).

⁵⁵ Caroline Broudic in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁵⁶ Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 125: *'This is expressed through proximity and political solidarity with social movements and through the recognition of each person concerned by humanitarian action as a political subject'*

⁵⁷ Caroline Broudic and Thomas Gebauer in Bréqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 125