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Abstract

Humanitarian action has been the subject of much research over the past thirty years, particularly in the fields of international law, sociology, economics and logistics. The most commonly debated issues concern the legitimacy of humanitarian action and the choice of the most effective means to ensure its success. These questions are relevant but they tend to underestimate the strategic dimension of any humanitarian action. The research note suggests a way of thinking in this direction, with reference to the dual analysis of the contextual game rules and the practices of strategic actors.

INTRODUCTION

On 7th December 1988, an earthquake hits Armenia causing 55,000 deaths and 500,000 homeless and destroying thousands of villages and two large cities: Spitak (50,000 inhabitants), nearly entirely destroyed, and Leninakan (300,000 inhabitants), 50% destroyed. Following the humanitarian catastrophe, an international movement of an unprecedented scale unfolds and succeeded in saving over 5,000 people within the days following the earthquake. 38,000 special wagons and 1,250 planes were mustered to provide supplies to the victims, and as soon as the first phase of pressing emergency was over, a background work was started to face an extremely harsh winter, with temperatures as low as -35° C. Several warehouses were placed under the responsibility of the Armenian Red Cross, storing a variety of products, from sleeping bags from France to clothes from Austria as well as pears from Uzbekistan. Even though tons of resources were finally not used, the excess helped with the reconstruction of a devastated region, for four years, and helped its economic development. Similarly to several other examples of humanitarian catastrophes, the Armenian case underlines the double nature to which humanitarian action refers.

In spite of a long-standing debate within the humanitarian field, with an opposition between *developmentalism* and *urgentism* (Pérouse de Montclos, 2015), today, NGOs no longer focus on emergency programs. The most significant example is that of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an NGO that originally defined itself through a philosophy mainly emergency-oriented, and that currently implements aid programs on the medium and long-term (Audet, 2016). In the MSF 2016 yearly report, it is thus possible to spot activities that are clearly part of a developmental approach after a humanitarian crisis: the reconstruction of health, hospital maintenance, water sanitation

or the implementation of a medical information system easing the collection and analysis of data. The growth of humanitarian operations reflects the actors' will to conclude long-term actions in order to prevent risks (pre-crisis period) and re-build after the emergency of the action (post-crisis period).

The humanitarian action has broadly evolved since its creation in the XVIIIth century. While they were originally influenced by the movement of the Red Cross and its founding principles, nowadays we notice the presence of a variety of humanitarian actors, not limited to NGOs and donors (Stephenson, 2006; Müller-Stewens *et al.*, 2019). In parallel, a growing interest is given to the humanitarian action through various subjects such as law, sociology and management. The evolution of humanitarian action shows the complementarity of the two approaches: emergency humanitarian action and humanitarian development action. Humanitarian development action is continued over time and appears as a support for emergency action (Middleton and O'Keefe, 1997; Strömberg, 2007). Indeed, the development enables to reduce the risks associated to emergency, for example the repetition of humanitarian crises, and to support the reconstruction in the long run, as it was the case in Armenia. This action can be defined as a genuine strategic action through the characterization of game rules, context and practices. This is the reflection suggested by the research notes, after having clarified what is meant by humanitarian action, and then highlighted the organizational dimensions specific to urgentism and developmentalism.

TO THE SOURCES OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Humanitarian action draw on these sources in a variety of religious and philosophical inspirations: if the concepts of charity are present in all monotheist religions (Maietta, 2015), the philosophy of Enlightenment is linked to benevolence, philanthropy and humanity. Humanity is defined by Diderot in his *Encyclopaedia* as “a noble and exquisite enthusiasm obsessing about and relieving others' grieves, wishing to wander the universe to abolish slavery, superstition, vice and misfortune”. These sources constitute the genesis of the humanitarian. The creation *per se* of the humanitarian occurred during the XIXth century, during the battle of Solferino opposing the Austrians and the French. This is illustrated by the person of Henry Dunan who, with the help of the inhabitants, improvised a brief rescue service to equally tend to victims of both sides (Ryfman, 2008). Starting the international victims' rescue committee in 1863, today known as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Harouel, 2015).

By drawing on the humanitarian approach of ICRC, four principles were erected by NGOs, the UN agencies and the majority of donors as constitutive part of a humanitarian action: humanity, independence, neutrality, impartiality (Le Coconnier and Pommier, 2017). These principles, set out in the United Nations' resolution No. 46/182 in 1991, were recalled in 2007 during the European consensus on humanitarian aid. In spite of the institutional framework linked to humanitarian, changes impacting its action seem to question the necessity of the principles of independence and neutrality. These changes are strongly influenced by the growth of civil victims over time, the multiplication of humanitarian actors of different nature, the diversification of financial sources and the political, cultural and religious commitments taken by the actors (Pech and Padis, 2004; Martin *et al.*, 2006; Ryfman, 2008; Le Coconnier and Pommier, 2017). The evolution of humanitarian action is closely linked

to the legislative framework governing it as well as the role assigned to it. A strong interest for humanitarian is noticed through two disciplines, law and sociology:

- International humanitarian law is linked to the legal framework of humanitarian action. Humanitarian is defined as the action of assisting victims in war times with the authorization of the states participating in the conflict. It is also called law of armed conflicts and applies only in these situations to regulate and to humanize these specific types of conflicts (Buirette and Lagrange, 2008; Gaggioli, 2018). International humanitarian law is composed of a set of multilateral and bilateral international treaties (Brauman, 2009).
- Sociology of humanitarian aims at understanding the motivations of humanitarian action, humanitarian consists in saving lives, alleviating suffering and preserving human dignity during and after crises caused by mankind or natural catastrophes, as well as preventing such elements and improve the preparedness to them (Audet, 2016), even if narcissistic motives in relation to the consequences of humanitarian action are often present (Radice, 2019). This definition tends to distinguish the humanitarian action according to its temporality (short-term emergency, prevention, long-term reconstruction).

The management, for its part, looks into humanitarian action through its associated subjects such as marketing, information systems, strategy, project management or logistics. Humanitarian action therefore embraces multiple activities such as fundraising, purchasing, transport, storing and distribution of products, sanitation, medical assistance and recruitment (Pellegrin-Romeggio and Vega, 2014; Carbonnier, 2016). In a managerial approach, the humanitarian action can therefore be studied *via* the different phases and actors that compose it (Kovács and Spens, 2007), and which coordination reveals capital for its success. For example, we can distinguish four phases, the latter two of which come under humanitarian development: (1) warning; (2) emergency rescue; (3) rehabilitation; and (4) recovery (Chandes and Paché, 2006; Oloruntoba *et al.*, 2018). From this point of view, “the phases of disaster relief can be seen in terms of a cycle that links recovery back to the preparedness phase [...]. Thus, ideally, rehabilitation and reconstruction include a learning element for further disasters to come” (Kovács and Spens, 2009).

HUMANITARIAN ACTION: BETWEEN EMERGENCY AND DEVELOPMENT

Lyon (2009) suggests the presence of several causal factors influencing humanitarian action, by distinguishing the international factors, domestic factors and mitigating factors (see Table 1). The value of this analysis is to show that the origins of humanitarian action are diverse, while a naïve vision might appear that one needs to act simply to save lives, in an altruistic objective, without taking into consideration more geopolitical and media reasons. The migrant crisis Europe has been experiencing for several years clearly shows that humanitarian action is also and more importantly an issue of power and construction for a reputation for many countries around the Mediterranean. The issue of humanitarian action is all the more complicated when it comes to approaching its purpose, that is to say taking action in pressing emergency to handle the worse moments, or help develop a region, in particular to avoid new humanitarian crises from occurring.

Humanitarian concerns	International factors	Domestic factors	Mitigating factors
<i>Level of human suffering</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity of case 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geo-strategic concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probability of success
<i>Refugees</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic interdependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duration of intervention
<i>Immediate violence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressures from international organizations • Multilateral efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public opinion • Media coverage factor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for casualties • Financial cost

Table 1: Causal factors in humanitarian action (adapted from Lyon, 2009)

A longstanding debate exists within the humanitarian sector opposing developmentalism and urgentism. An emergency response, following a natural or man-made humanitarian disaster, is organized to take action as quickly as possible and therefore save a maximum of lives (Weiss, 2018). Short-term humanitarian action can however be followed by rehabilitation operations participating in the reconstruction of the region or country. For its part, a humanitarian development action is a long-term commitment aiming at the autonomy of local populations. It addresses structural and long-lasting problems, hindering the economic, educational, social, cultural and sanitary development; this justifies a long-term intervention of political nature, as it is the case with the European Union’s ECHO program (Versluys, 2016). For example, a humanitarian development action will aim at raising awareness about health practices, rehabilitating buildings or fostering behaviors that help fight the spread of deadly viruses.

Tensions between developmentalism and urgentism rose in 1979 during the division of Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières* [MSF]) into two distinct NGOs, regarding the issue of *boat-people*, referring to Vietnamese migrants fleeing their country for economic and political reasons. While a portion of MSF members demand a relief response with a “*Un bateau pour le Viet-Nam*” (“A boat for Vietnam”), it is refused by a majority of the members considering it to be of political nature, as migrants were not considered as refugees by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). This controversy marks the beginning of Doctors of the World (*Médecins du Monde* [MDM]), an NGO embodied by the media-friendly Bernard Kouchner, strong advocate of humanitarian interventionism, while MSF claims to be an emergency NGO. Through various controversial writings, its founder, Rony Brauman, indeed strongly denounces the excesses of humanitarian development action claiming it is a type of neo-colonialism (Brauman, 2006, 2009). The debate remains highly topical with the migrant crisis in Europe and the creation of a humanitarian border scape that redefines in depth the legitimate spaces for NGO intervention (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018).

The debate between developmentalism and urgentism finally suggests a dual vision of humanitarian action dissociating humanitarian emergency action and humanitarian development action, which must however be seen as complementary and inseparable from one another. Indeed, the “differences between emergency relief and

‘sustainable’ development seem all the more blurred: one cannot be conceived without the other. On the one hand, urgentists take care of the reconstruction, or social protection when crises last. On the other hand, developmentalists end up managing extreme situations in the event of disasters: dispensary clinics imagined within a public health policy may host war-wounded in times of trouble” (Pérouse de Montclos, 2009). Thus, these two types of actions constitute a kind of *contiguuum*: the complexity of the situations implies an overlapping of short-term emergency actions and long-term development actions (Ryfman, 2014).

All humanitarian actors seem to have become aware of this complementarity. Indeed, the highest echelons of political power highlight this will to bind emergency and development in order to avoid humanitarian crises and build in the long term. In France, in February 2018, the French Inter-ministerial Committee on International Cooperation and Development (CICID) underlines that the country will focus on enhancing the articulation of short-term tools of emergency relief and long-term tools and contributing to the implementation of a humanitarian-development nexus. Mattei (2014) therefore offers to illustrate sustainable humanitarian action through the butterfly metaphor the body of which represents emergency and the wings symbolize development (the pre-crisis and post-crisis periods). In that respect, for the author, taking interest in humanitarian development action helps foster a sustainable humanitarian action by playing a preventive role upstream, and by ensuring an economic and social development downstream. To understand all the issues, a strategic perspective seems particularly suitable.

CONTEXTUAL GAME RULES AND PRACTICES OF STRATEGIC ACTORS

Through its interventions in pre-crisis and post-crisis periods, humanitarian development action plays a genuine strategic role. Indeed, it sets up a sustainable action over time, reducing the risks of crisis while ensuring economic, educational, social, cultural and health development to benefit the populations. The proposed definitions give a major role to context and actors. In that respect, we will define strategic humanitarian development action by characterizing the contextual game rules as well as the practices of strategic actors:

- *Contextual game rules.* In a humanitarian development intervention, it is vital to take the context into account. Indeed, because of their binding nature, the game rules may limit the possibility of development action or, on the contrary, facilitate the implementation of programs. The game rules refer to the socio-economic, political and cultural context of the place where the action takes place. Thus, the constraint exerted by the game rules depends on several factors such as the social and economic situation of the intervention zone, the geopolitical situation of the intervention zone and the political relations maintained with the States involved in the intervention, the dominant culture within the intervention zone and the religious heterogeneity of the participants. Moshtari and Gonçalves (2017) also indicate that contextual factors significantly influence collaboration among humanitarian organizations.

- *Practices of strategic actors.* There is evidence of the presence of different actors in humanitarian development action, including governmental and non-governmental, national and international organizations, members of these organizations, local actors (companies, population) and private and public donors. The diversity of actors reinforces the complexity of implementing practices, especially since the strategist nature of the actors leads them to develop, at times, autonomous practices. Ngamassi *et al.* (2014) thus compare the network cliques and the network effectiveness to analyze the collective mechanisms of collaboration between humanitarian organizations. Overall practices will be conducted according to different criteria such as the establishment of collective conduct, the relationships maintained between the various strategic actors, the conflicting individual objectives and the actors' willingness to assert their room for manoeuvre.

The practices of strategic actors take into account all the mechanisms exerted during the development and implementation of the strategic action. The practices, defined by Whittington (2006), are routines of shared behaviors; they interact with praxis and practitioners to lead to strategizing (see Figure 1). If the practices are mostly global, it should be noted the presence of more autonomous practices implemented at the periphery (Avenier, 1997). This analysis refers to strategic episodes, the *awaydays*, which mark the transition from a routine context to an exceptional and temporary context suggesting the implementation of spontaneous and creative practices (Allard-Poesi, 2006). By using the term of strategic actor developed by Crozier and Friedberg (1980), we take into consideration the actors' room for manoeuvre through their practices implemented in the action. Thus, the practices of strategic actors can be distinguished according to their interdependent or autonomous nature: (1) *Overall practices* are implemented in a common way by all actors with a view to carrying out collective strategic action; and (2) *Autonomous practices* are exercised on the periphery by strategist actors using their margin of freedom to set up strategic practices.

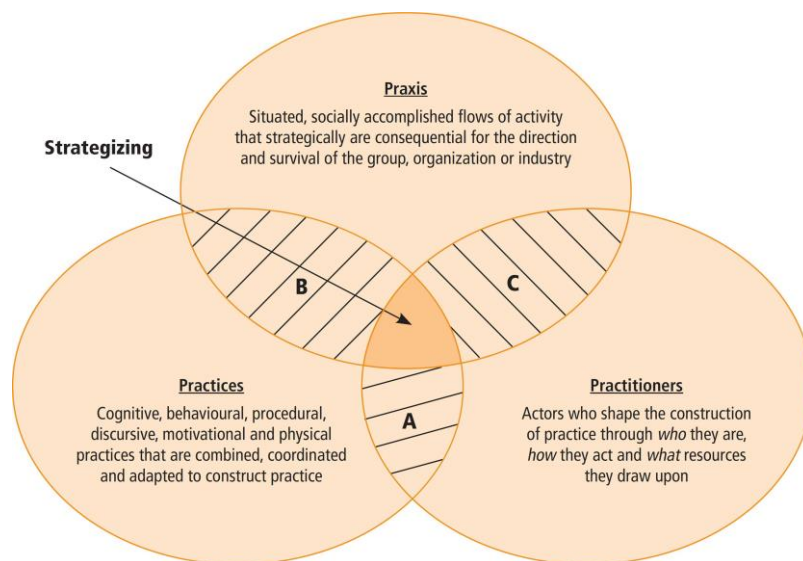


Figure 1: Praxis, practices and practitioners (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007)

The practices refer to all the mechanisms deployed during humanitarian development action, broken down into two periods: (1) the pre-crisis period, which plays a role in preventing, reducing and preparing the risks associated with emergency action; and (2) the post-crisis period, which ensures rehabilitation, reconstruction and support towards the autonomy of populations after the emergency action. With reference to the humanitarian activities highlighted by Pellegrin-Romeggio and Vega (2014), the practices implemented during the two periods seem to fall under different areas such as technological innovation and information systems management, medical assistance, water sanitation, nutritional assistance or even educational assistance, training of locals, fundraising or procurement and logistics. This is a key research theme to move humanitarian action out of a purely operational approach, focusing on tools rather than processes. Its interest is to underline the centrality of the strategic interaction between actors involved in a common approach of humanitarian aid, not on an ad hoc basis but over the long-term.

CONCLUSION

It is understood in the academic literature that the restricting or facilitating nature of the game rules will differ from one situation to another and will depend on the socio-economic, political and cultural context in which humanitarian development action will take place (for a historical perspective, see O'Sullivan *et al.* [2016]). An increased knowledge of these game rules will have a positive impact on the action carried out by promoting the seizing of opportunities and the adaptation to contextual constraints. Taking into account of game rules will thus play a key role in the implementation of the action through different decisions such as the need to work jointly with all participants or plan the intervention over time by avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources. This will make it easier to identify the coordinating body of the action, based on the cluster model (Jahre and Jensen, 2010; Clarke and Campbell, 2018), and thus improve the results of the action. Success will then depend on the fact that the practices deployed by strategic actors are in line with the contextual game rules.

The practices deployed by strategic actors will also influence humanitarian development action. Indeed, while the practices deployed must take into account the requirements of the context, they do not necessarily have to comply with them. The implementation of overall or autonomous practices will then play a decisive role in the deployment of strategic action by interfering with the participation of actors, meetings between them and the length of the intervention. Overall practices will favor a long-term approach but may lead to a routine that limits the possibility of action. Autonomous practices are less subject to such problems insofar as they can reveal creative approaches, on the fringe of traditional overall practices, and lead to convincing results. To achieve long-term results, these practices must be pursued through collective practices. From this point of view, a link between autonomous practices and overall practices seems necessary to promote long-term action, which we believe is a key research theme.

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