



Towards cutting-edge European humanitarian leadership

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Added to the already enormous challenges faced by the humanitarian system and its constituent parts (proliferation of conflict and non-state actors, climate stress, mass migration, ...), the global Covid-19 pandemic coupled with repeated assaults on the basic tenets of multilateralism have brought existing systems to a breaking point, if not irrelevance.

Traditional principled humanitarian positioning has fallen short of engaging with or addressing nefarious global political trends with dramatic effects. The result has been inequitable access to life saving support to those who need it most, risk transfers, and overall reduced capacity for aid agencies to meet growing challenges.

A paradigm shift is needed. The imminent Communication of the European Commission on humanitarian aid is an opportunity to clarify perimeters, reaffirm with force the authority of IHL and take the measure of how much the EU can leverage support to strengthen principled humanitarian action across the world. It should set the frame to address structural tensions that require more thinking and interactions and create at EU level a space for non-institutional and informal dialogue.

The recent past has brought to light an impressive array of critical global humanitarian challenges: the impact of climate change on vulnerable populations, the multiplication of obstacles in the application of global sustainable development objectives, the overt contestation of legal instruments adopted in a post-World War II order - in particular the status of refugees or the fate of civilian populations in conflict zones - , the mostly failed reform efforts of the 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, among others. At the same time, the sheer scale and scope of the COVID-19 crisis reminds us with new acuity of the need to quickly find global solutions and the means to implement them.

To respond to this, the ongoing thinking pursued at the global level, has been essential to our understanding of the main issues at stake. The European Union and its member states have not always matched their financial weight with a capacity to lead reflections and leverage its unique position to promote and financially support major aid orientations at global level. Rather it has often ended up confined to the role of operationalizing and putting into practice recommendations formulated in Geneva or New York.

More than ever, Europe is in a unique position to promote and financially support major aid orientations at global level. Nonetheless, there is currently no dedicated space at European level to assess and exchange on humanitarian matters in an independent way, and inform the decisions of the EU and the Member States in their respective roles on the fundamental issues that will define the future course of humanitarian work.

1) THE NEED FOR HUMANITARIAN REFLECTION AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

Although very different in nature, two possible developments could provide opportunities for the EU to (re)take its place as a leader driving innovative thinking in a renewed humanitarian ecosystem. On the one hand, the unique, but likely to recur, experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on all sectors of human activity confronts the need to rethink crisis management mechanisms from a dual perspective, both vertical (coordination of territorial levels of intervention) and horizontal (maximum coordination of the various actors and instruments). On the other hand, the recent change of administration in the United States should allow the regeneration of a damaged multilateralism and the restoration of shattered global governance.

We are also witnessing a growing tension between the increasing needs of the most vulnerable populations - alarmingly aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis – calling for greater international solidarity, and the reality of an inward-looking political environment.

The agreement between the 27 Member States on the multiannual budget and the "Next Generation EU" recovery fund revealed this tension in a striking way, by removing the 15.5 billion euros allocated to external aid (including 5 billion humanitarian aid) from the recovery fund. While Member States welcomed a result that is essential for the pursuit of the European project,

the agreement between the two branches of the Budgetary Authority on the multiannual budgetary framework ignored the proven need for increased external aid. The necessity to extend the solidarity effort beyond Europe's borders had nevertheless clearly been acknowledged in the Commission's original proposal formulated in May and calling for an ambitious recovery plan to support the principle of a global solution to a global crisis.

In recent years, we have witnessed many other setbacks, notably while considering Europe's difficulties to translate into reality its role as guarantor of the fundamental principles of international law (International Humanitarian Law, Refugee Law), or as promotor of a humanitarian budget adapted and at scale with the developing needs.

However, not everything is "Brussels' fault". The last decades have been marked by profound changes in the practice of humanitarian aid characterized by the technical professionalization of teams, the lower tolerance to risk, the systematization of exclusive coordination mechanisms ("clusters", "transformative agenda") driven by rationalization, but that have contributed to an increasing gap between aid actors and their environment.

Fueled by (geo)political and financial power relationships, a divide has emerged between a charity bureaucracy and the reality on the ground, marginalizing beneficiaries, and local actors, and disqualifying any practice that does not correspond to the standard (Western) model of management and distribution. And reform attempts have, at this stage, failed.

Paradoxically, the pandemic represents a unique opportunity to engage in a proactive approach to break these dead ends by taking advantage of the wave of global solidarity (largely non-governmental). COVID has indeed been a revealer of underlying trends that affected

humanitarian aid in a transversal way, in all fields: coordination, ethics, logistics, security, evaluation, gender, etc., while forcing aid actors to rethink their interventions in the short, but also in the medium and longer terms: prioritization of essential interventions, protection of personnel, implementation of integrated risk control systems (prevention, detection, management, resilience) assuming perfect implementation of the nexus (double or triple), renunciation of open or hidden competitive practices, etc.

COVID-19 and its consequences have also revived the debate on neutrality: keeping out of controversies by pretending to adopt a purely technical stance often led to the endorsement of structural inequalities exacerbated by the crisis.

2) TOWARDS A EUROPEAN HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

An innovative approach is needed to address some of the malfunctions of the humanitarian ecosystem. Today, Europe can be a useful and necessary space to bring about this renewal through various forms of leadership.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

AT THE GEOPOLITICAL LEVEL:

The weakening of multilateralism in favor of a multipolar trend will be decisive for the future of humanitarian action, with the risk of geopolitics squeezing out the humanitarian space and specific interests running against adherence to global norms. The COVID-19 crisis in its immediate effects in response to the health emergency and its secondary socio-economic effects, by exposing the relative inadequacy of humanitarian response models, will have the value of a test for humanitarian actors and their working methods. And it may be an opportunity to rethink the humanitarian paradigm from a progressive perspective.

The European framework can help take these developments into account and incorporate them into an integrated institutional approach, that could for instance encourage Member States to strengthen and align their positions in support of humanitarian issues within the framework of UN institutions.

The whole point here is to make humanitarian action one of the thermometers of geopolitics, by giving a more central place to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the definition of the EU's foreign policy. We aim for a European diplomacy at the service of humanitarian aid.

The EU needs to replace the defense of humanitarian principles at the center of its pursuit for strategic autonomy.

The European Union seems determined to move from ad hoc crisis management diplomacy to a proactive approach integrating new realities (climate change, new types of conflicts, financing modalities, etc.). The defense of the humanitarian principles enshrined in the Treaty must imperatively find its place in this effort.

Traditionally, the EU has mainly been active in crisis settings via its financial component, as a donor. Over time, Europe has strengthened its security and defense capabilities and, more generally, its geopolitical footprint. It has become an actor in crisis and, as a result, offers a relevant framework to rethink the place of humanitarian aid in an integrated external approach.

There is very little interaction between political and aid actors as illustrated by the difficulty of giving substance to the "nexus". However, there is a consensus on the need to work towards a harmonization of strategies. This process should seek to strengthen European humanitarian aid by integrating it into a more global approach.

The complexity of the integration of humanitarian aid into politics lies in the difficulty to articulate humanitarian principles and strategic issues while being vigilant to the risks of humanitarian aid

becoming the instrument of a more integrated approach.

However, with humanitarian principles enshrined into primary European law, the EU offers a suitable and privileged framework for in-depth reflection on the articulation of humanitarian aid with other aspects of external action. Bringing the reflection on humanitarian aid at EU level would allow discussions to be rooted in very concrete institutional and political realities.

AT THE HUMANITARIAN ECOSYSTEM LEVEL:

Aid actors recognize the need to question the architecture of the humanitarian sector (regarding the place of local NGOs, the recruitment of private actors by States, etc.), but are struggling to break away from traditional solutions to respond to new issues. The European framework could reconcile humanitarian policy development with operational realities, by questioning, for example, the idea that the principle of neutrality necessarily goes against localization.

Establishing a leadership through reflection would also imply moving away from a peer-to-peer approach and mobilizing the "brain power" by extending the reflection to non-humanitarian actors as well as "non-traditional" donors.

This reflection should notably focus on the issues of financial responsibility and risk transfer that Europe could address by emancipating from an approach focusing too much on efficiency.

On the geopolitical level as well as on the level of the aid ecosystem, the EU presents a framework that is distinct from the framework of the United Nations or the Member States, which is relevant for reflecting on the humanitarian sector and anticipating its developments. Creating a space for discussion would already be a clear leadership signal.

INNOVATION LEADERSHIP

IDENTIFY PRESSURE POINTS AND ADAPTED TRAININGS:

Integrating humanitarian aid into European external policies will not be achieved through an evolution of the institutional structure, but rather through reflection on the commonalities between politics and humanitarian aid. To do this, it is necessary to identify the humanitarian "pressure points" that resonate with politicians and give more weight to humanitarian issues in European foreign policy. At the same time, humanitarians could also benefit from greater political sensitivity, analyses and savviness, and accept to consider the articulation of their response with broader efforts.

Promoting a more central role of humanitarian issues in European diplomacy would, for instance, imply to train and **sensitize ambassadors and diplomats** on these issues. In concrete terms, humanitarian modules should be integrated into academic curricula for diplomats. Liaison officers could also link these two worlds by bringing humanitarianism closer to the center of attention of policy makers, and vice-versa.

Discussions around the criminalization of aid, the application of anti-terrorist legislation or the nexus may also contribute to **break down silos** by recognizing the universal nature of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to any conflict situation, regardless of the donor.

The work carried out since 2016 as part of the Grand Bargain has raised awareness on many issues - in particular, the need to emphasize the **role of local players**. It has also highlighted the financial risks associated with these reforms. This risk-taking identified and accepted by donors should be part of the future of our thinking on humanitarian aid.

Working more closely with local actors may also sometimes be perceived as being less neutral, which is not entirely true, nor is it correct to say that all international organizations are. The **principle of neutrality** is a construction inspired by a specific

model and may arguably not be indispensable everywhere, always.

Adapting the humanitarian framework raises fundamental questions and **deep ethical dilemmas**. Respecting humanitarian principles means sometimes accepting not to meet the basic needs of a population. Should the universal nature of humanitarian principles be questioned when confronted with the humanitarian imperative (e.g., armed escort in Niger)?

The European Union can provide a useful frame to consider innovative approaches, consider the full range of implications, and assess how to best support the various stakeholders involved in the response.

DEVisING AN INCLUSIVE COORDINATION ADAPTED TO HUMANITARIAN REALITIES:

Coordination mechanisms must integrate humanitarian aspects, but also development, peace & security and even migration issues (“quadruple” nexus). Failure to do so will lead to a scattering of efforts, an ineffective use of resources, and to the idea that one agenda must be able to impose itself on another to succeed.

It is necessary to define a global coordination that is truly respectful of humanitarian action and aware of internal competition between agencies, where beneficiaries are often that last client served or considered. Where UN mechanisms have been struggling to offer perspectives in this respect, the EU could help define a model and propagate it (“Brussels effect”).

In-depth thinking is needed about what it would mean to take humanitarian action out of its traditional scope, and better articulate it with the other aspects of external action. The EU needs to be sensitive to the fact that masses of growing unprotected poor will fuel instability and render external action more complex and problems more intractable – the Sahel is a case and point.

Putting people at the centre of external action, with humanitarian aid as the first element of response, supported by other instruments and political action, will give credibility and bolster the EU as a principled actor and lend support to its strategic interests.

THINK BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL DESIGN:

The approach in terms of cost-efficiency comes up against humanitarian operational realities. To compensate, we need to think about how to reconcile financial frugality and humanitarian impact, while ensuring greater coherence between the different “nexus”, the national and local priorities, and without jeopardizing the ability of aid agencies to fulfill their mission. **Reaffirming humanitarian principles may require deconstructing them first. Bringing this reflection to the European level means ensuring that it is anchored in operational and institutional realities.**

Innovating also means integrating new skills, for example by encouraging an anthropological approach, keener analyses of conflict drivers, political realities, and stakeholders mapping for a better understanding of the operational environment and ensure a better adapted response. It also implies assessing partnership frameworks to ensure they privilege effective operational responses while seeking for efficient and harmonised accountability mechanisms.

The EU can be an innovative player in several aspects: the use of new technologies, the localization of aid or the promotion of new approaches, anthropological for example, in humanitarian aid. The European financial framework allows the question of location, risk management and efficiency to be raised in a tangible and immediately relevant way.

REVIEW THE HUMANITARIAN DISCOURSE TO MAKE IT AUDIBLE AND ATTRACTIVE TO OTHERS:

Enabling humanitarian aid to remain relevant in more complex operational spaces with different realities requires a more flexible partnership approach, while maintaining firm commitments to the fundamental humanitarian principles.

Reflecting on humanitarian aid at European level implies accepting to confront a political reality that is divided between the search for a common interest and the temptation to withdrawal upon oneself. It is both an opportunity and a challenge, as the search for common solutions presupposes to move away from a restrictive approach among humanitarians, comfortable but unable to propose an operational framework adapted to the new realities. The concept of partnership must be broadened to include actors such as citizens' groups, local governments, the private sector, etc.

Opening to non-humanitarians means learning to work with new interlocutors. For instance, the development of sanctions and counter-terrorism measures can make the work of humanitarians very difficult while international humanitarian law allows them to be in contact with all parties to the conflict. Reaffirming the primacy of humanitarian principles is necessary but will not be sufficient. Humanitarians must move away from their silo and accept to broaden their spectrum of interlocutors.

Getting humanitarian principles heard by both State (including different entities within States) and non-State actors requires a local and pragmatic approach. It implies local partnerships with leaders defending a distinct ideology or vision. Reflection on the future of humanitarian action requires an approach "à la carte" adapted to a multipolar approach, and open to distinct working methods and narratives.

The European Union remains one of the last spaces to look for common and realistic solutions towards a new architecture of the aid system. Re-thinking a partnership policy requires to map all useful actors in their

respective roles. It also implies the design and implementation of tools able to link strategic issues with operational needs.

3) A SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR CRITICAL AND INDEPENDENT REFLECTION

Europe can serve as an incubator for an approach that questions the current humanitarian ecosystem and its ability to adapt to the major challenges it faces.

The objective is to produce innovative knowledge and act as ideas lab while remaining "policy oriented". It must be immediately useful for decision makers, who should be part to the discussions. To bear fruits, such a demarche will need to work closely with EU institutions and their Member States, independently but not in opposition. It is not about acting against but besides European actors, in a transparent and independent way.

Brussels offers a diversified space where operational actors, political working groups and conceptual think-tanks come together. Based there, such an initiative would provide a safe space for in-depth discussions involving relevant stakeholders, would be open sourced and benefit from the proximity to the EU institutions as well Member States representations.

Confronting realities of European humanitarianism to the world requires a space for non-institutional and informal dialogue where interlocutors who rarely talk to each other, finally meet.

Experts consulted in their personal capacity:

- Jane Lewis: Senior Manager - European Institute for Peace
- Hervé Delphin: Professor of international relations and diplomatic studies – College of Europe. Head of Division of Strategic Planning - European External Action Service

- Alain Délétrouz: Director General – Geneva Call
- Vincent Cochetel: Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation - UNHCR
- Gilles Collard: Director General - Bioforce
- Beatrice Godefroy: Europe Director - Center for Civilians in Conflict
- Irene Horejs: Lecturer in political science at the University of Vienna, former EU Ambassador, former acting Director at DG ECHO

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Edouard Rodier engaged in humanitarian aid nearly 20 years ago. He has an extensive field experience in managing and monitoring humanitarian programs in the most difficult contexts with both NGOs, the ICRC and ECHO. In Brussels since 2013, he has been promoting principled humanitarian action towards EU institutions, NATO and Member States, and joined the Norwegian Refugee Council Europe as Director in 2015. As such Edouard has been a lead advocate for the protection and assistance of displaced and vulnerable people towards European interlocutors, and engaged in policy dialogue with government actors, NGOs and other key European stakeholders.

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