

## The challenges of humanitarian transition in Africa

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**M**odern humanitarian aid took shape and formulated its vision on European battlefields with the creation of the Red Cross. Almost a century later, in the 1960s, international aid, which was finishing its mission of European reconstruction, turned to Africa and the Third World. Development NGOs, national development aid agencies, and different programmes and funds of the United Nations increasingly staged massive interventions throughout a continent which was in search of independence, torn between Cold War logics of alignment. Since then, humanitarian aid has been inextricably linked to Africa, whilst the latter's relation to humanitarian aid has never ceased to grow, transform and question itself in a context of globalisation where everyone's place needs to be constantly redefined. States, NGOs, international institutions, civil society, religious organisations, the media and the private sector have therefore learned to interact, to oppose each other, to form alliances or to accept the challenge of crises – be they political, climate or health-based, economic or social – which decimate or affect millions of people held in hostage. Africa ended up embodying the image of the “humanitarian continent”. This new issue is a first modest, partial and therefore necessarily unsatisfactory attempt to overturn this image and better understand the issues currently affecting Africa, from the inside and from the outside. It seeks to go beyond the traditional clinical and dramatic tableau of foreign NGO intervention in Africa, to enter into the relationships between the humanitarian sphere and Africa, and between Africa and humanitarians, so as to be at the heart of these interactions and the varied interests which they illustrate, the mechanisms they produce, given that a number of the continent's nations wish to take control of the assistance afforded to their populations. This is the case of Madagascar, as we will see in Christiane Rafidinarivo's article.

**Stepping outside of action to better understand the issues**

In order to better understand this humanitarian relationship in Africa, we have therefore tried to look beyond action itself and to leave figures and statistics aside which overwhelm, set goals, measure, create hope or alarm, and form categories which are essential for analysis but which, certainly in Africa more than elsewhere, can project realities which do not exist, classify without learning to understand, and label without taking into account the changes that are at work locally. Achille Mbembe describes Africa as “a body in movement, never in its right place, whose center moves around everywhere [...] in the enormous machine of the world<sup>1</sup>”. Mbembe even invented a term, “afropolitanism”, to describe this “way in which Africans make, manage and irrigate the world<sup>2</sup>”.

The ambition of this issue of *Humanitarian Alternatives* is this: to gain an awareness of the movements at work amongst our African colleagues, to deconstruct obsolete categories by favouring humanities and social scientists from African universities and research centers, and to

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée*, La Découverte, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Ilmatik*, June 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, [www.illmatik.com/afropolitanisme-mbembe/](http://www.illmatik.com/afropolitanisme-mbembe/)

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

grasp, in their multiplicity, the experiences and analyses which will move humanitarian action forward in Africa, even if it means transforming it. The challenges remain immense while, in the Horn of Africa alone, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced, in February 2017 that 22.9 million people were threatened by food insecurity, and warned of the risk of escalating violence in Kenya, South Sudan and Somalia, population displacements in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Burundi<sup>3</sup>.

### Shift our focus to concentrate on the human

Indeed, humanitarian aid continues to draw from Africa the images and figures which made up its “adventure” as seen from the West, a (unilateral?) adventure which played out in front of the cameras of the 1970s, from Biafra to Ethiopia, from Somalia to Rwanda, with the birth of the “without borders” NGOs, and which spread as fast as its iconic images. Giving room back to imagination, voices and perceptions is a priority in order to challenge common preconceptions, shift the focus and recenter it on people in need of assistance and listen to their point of view on the crises which affect them. The difficulties of deployment in the response to the Ebola virus epidemic incidentally highlighted the need for an urgent consideration of these perceptions. For example, for the first time, the French Red Cross called upon an African anthropological approach in order to learn from its actions. As regards Africa, we might also propose a “work of deconstruction of popular perceptions on humanitarian aid [in order to launch] local humanitarian dynamics<sup>4</sup>”. This exercise, which forces us to revisit terms and concepts, takes on meaning only if it is shared with African actors and thinkers. The globalisation within which Africa is imposing itself, namely through its regional institutions and South-South cooperation, shows trends which “sometimes bolster and sometimes radically differ from those which the ‘West’ considers to be universal. The taking into account, and taking seriously, of the imagination and dreams of a better world [...] is essential in order to understand this fluid, complex, evolving globalisation<sup>5</sup>”. Proof of this: the complex relationship with local faith inspired NGOs<sup>6</sup>. And humanitarian aid is definitely part of this globalisation.

### Managing the ambivalence between emergency and emergence

The new millennium effectively put an end to “chronic growth failure”<sup>7</sup> which characterised the majority of African economies, with a record growth of 3% over 15 years. The “African Renaissance” saw the continent’s population exceed a billion in 2011, with a projected 2.5 billion in 2050 and countries which will double if not treble in population. Connected to increased urbanisation, these tendencies are giving birth in Africa to the biggest megacities in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> On the humanitarian situation in Africa, see also the analysis by Stephen O’Brien, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, in the interview he granted *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n°4, March 2017, p. 94-101, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2017/03/10/il-nous-faut-un-acces-inconditionnel-sans-obstacle-et-continuer-a-toute-personne-vulnérable-en-syrie/> (Editor’s note).

<sup>4</sup> Achille Valéry Mengo, « La question humanitaire en Afrique : entre débats théoriques et absence de volonté politique, comment sortir de l’impasse ? », *Grotius International*, June 7<sup>th</sup> 2016, [www.grotius.fr/la-question-humanitaire-en-afrique-entre-debats-theoriques-et-absence-de-volonte-politique-comment-sortir-de-limpasse/](http://www.grotius.fr/la-question-humanitaire-en-afrique-entre-debats-theoriques-et-absence-de-volonte-politique-comment-sortir-de-limpasse/)

<sup>5</sup> Sandrine Perrot et Dominique Malaquais, « Penser l’Afrique à l’aune des globalisations émergentes », *Politique africaine*, vol. 1, n° 113, 2009, p. 5-27, [www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2009-1-page-5.htm](http://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2009-1-page-5.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Tara R. Gingerich, Diane L. Moore, Robert Brodrick and Carleigh Beriont, *Local humanitarian leadership and religious literacy: engaging with religion, faith, and faith actors*, Oxfam, mars 2017,

[www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Oxfam\\_Harvard\\_Local\\_humanitarian\\_leadership\\_and\\_religious\\_literacy.pdf](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Oxfam_Harvard_Local_humanitarian_leadership_and_religious_literacy.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> African Development Bank Group, *African Development Report 2015. Growth, Poverty and Inequality Nexus: Overcoming Barriers to Sustainable Development*, African Development Bank Group, p. 270

[www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/ADR15\\_UK.pdf](http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/ADR15_UK.pdf)

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

These cities, with a growing middle-class population estimated to reach 1.1 billion by 2060, will lead to the technological revolution which should allow for mobile phone coverage to pass from 16% today to 99% in 40 years. In the Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Senegal, people and governments alike of these “emergent” States are increasingly intolerant of “humanitarian” communications, which are in contradiction with the efforts deployed and the signals sent to the international community. Now more than ever, the relationships between States and NGOs are at the heart of administrative and communicational negotiations which determine access to the field, financing and media coverage. Taking the example of the Sahel, Serge Michailof examines this ambivalence between persistent emergencies and declared emergence, which exists within and between countries, and especially the most fragile, like the Central African Republic, South Sudan or the DRC, which are bogged down by decades of crises. The difficulty for national NGOs to gain independence from the State, here in Senegal, is the focus of Sadio Ba Gning and Kelly Poulet’s article. And terrible trials keep affecting the dynamics at work, such as the terrorist acts of Boko Haram or the plight of child-soldiers, to whom Jonathan Littell has just devoted a documentary which he talks to us about – in our Culture section, as a continuation of this Focus<sup>8</sup>. Overcoming humanitarianism, the 2006 Goncourt Prize of *Les Bienveillantes* [*The Kindly Ones*], which has long been engaged with Action against Hunger, resituates the human at the heart of its story: a perspective which ought to inspire us...

Already in 2000, speaking of the Ivory Coast, Francis Akindès mentioned the lack of “sufficiently structured social forces” as a barrier preventing the stimulation of public authorities towards “inventing the foundations of a minimum alternative social policy”<sup>9</sup>. How can we reconcile this with a form of alternative humanitarian aid by doing things differently, by mixing *savoir-faire* and adjusting knowledge transfer? There is no doubt a fine balance needs to be achieved between afro-pessimism and afro-optimism, even if it has yet to be found.

### “New Way of Working” for more local aid?

In the follow-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, two initiatives were clearly announced by the United Nations agencies to manage the volume, cost and growing duration of humanitarian aid, whilst conforming to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). OCHA’s “New Way of Working”<sup>10</sup> invites us to better connect development efforts to emergency humanitarian action, whilst the “localisation of aid”<sup>11</sup> advocates a reorientation of international financial flows towards local structures, in order to reinforce them. What if Africa had not waited to work on this, and was already the laboratory of humanitarian alternatives? This is what this issue demonstrates, whilst maintaining a critical view of the obstacles facing serene and efficient humanitarian transition. New insurance mechanisms put in place by the African Union against drought, the progressive abandoning of female genital mutilation in West Africa thanks to the efforts of national NGOs, the struggle against corruption led by citizen movements, innovative food security initiatives thanks to mobile technology, or struggles for rights and democracy: universities and national associations are too often invisible as levers of change. Beyond premature accusations of sectarian movements, we might also mention religious actors, which the

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<sup>8</sup> See also the interview of Marc Le Pape about the book he has just published with Jean-Hervé Bradol, on the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, in the same Culture section of this issue [editor’s note].

<sup>9</sup> Francis Akindès, *Les racines de la crise militaro-politique en Côte d’Ivoire*, Codesria, Série de monographies, 2004, [www.codesria.org/spip.php?article429&lang=en](http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article429&lang=en)

<sup>10</sup> OCHA, New Way of Working, 2017, p. 15, [www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/NWOW%20Booklet%20low%20res.002\\_0.pdf](http://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/NWOW%20Booklet%20low%20res.002_0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Steven A. Zyck and Hanna B. Krebs, “Localising humanitarianism: improving effectiveness through inclusive action”, *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2015, [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9720.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9720.pdf)

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

international sphere has difficulty interacting with in spite of their action in crisis situations<sup>12</sup>. Taking note of this multi-faceted reality, *Humanitarian Alternatives* is playing its role of connecting knowledge and practice in order to influence the global debate on humanitarian action “from the South”, and to galvanise the infinitely rich local fabric. Mbembe states that any project of transformation in Africa must be undertaken by African civil society over the long term, where “we will need to get out of the logic of humanitarian aid, which is to say emergency and immediate needs which, up until now, have colonised the debate on Africa”<sup>13</sup>. The issues arising in Madagascar, in the Ivory Coast or in Ethiopia clearly illustrate that these questions are raised in terms of a transformation which is already underway: the answers can no longer impose themselves unilaterally in non-contextualised frameworks which respond neither to the deadlines nor to the needs of a continent which is no longer “humanitarian”, but which is brimming with humanity struggling with its strengths and weaknesses.

*Translated from the French by Juliet Powys*

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<sup>12</sup> Tara R. Gingerich, Diane L. Moore, Robert Brodrick et Carleigh Beriont, *Local humanitarian leadership...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Sortir...*, *op. cit.*