

Humanitarian assistance: what its financial model tells us about political ethos

Pierre Micheletti

Honorary president of Action Against Hunger, administrator of SOS Méditerranée, former president of Médecins du Monde

The original text was translated by Claire Helligsø-Dubost (She, Her), whom I would like to thank sincerely.

« What difference is there between NGOs and European governments? None. NGOs receive money from governments and then come to Africa to preach. They carry out the missions of governments. It is a very efficient tactic »¹. On his terms, Mr. Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, passes harsh judgement on the action of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). But is the Rwandan leaders' analysis not supported by recent events in the Sahel, as well as the decision of the French government to suspend its assistance to Mali², then Niger³, following the coups in these two countries? Mr. Kagame issues a definite judgement on the problem discussed in a *La Revue internationale et stratégique* dossier, on the relationships between international solidarity and soft power. Incidentally, the Rwandan president makes a direct and explicit connection between the origins of funding and their underlying political motives.

In the introduction to his *Cours de science des finances et de législation financière française*, Gaston Jèze wrote in 1922: « A budget is, first and foremost, the application of a political vision ». It is the instrument by which the state or local authorities rank and implement their political priorities⁴. This is the premise of the following discussion: studying an economic model is essential to interpret the political motives of those funding public action, said model, in this case, being international assistance as public policy.

The following article offers elements of analysis and leads regarding emergency humanitarian assistance, which is one of the different forms of international solidarity. It is appropriate to start by identifying humanitarian assistance as one of the main kinds of aid, before studying its flaws regarding the current dynamics, and finally offering some potential solutions.

Defining the range of action of international assistance

International solidarity can be broken down into three main forms: official development assistance (ODA), funding for emergency humanitarian assistance, and remittances – meaning the sums

¹Pierre Lepidi et Piotr Smolar, « Paul Kagame : “Je laisse au président Macron le choix des mots. Des excuses ne peuvent venir à la demande” », *Le Monde*, May 18th, 2021.

²Morgane Le Cam, « Mali : La France suspend son aide au développement dans un contexte d'isolement croissant de Bamako », *Le Monde*, November 17th, 2022.

³« Coup d'État au Niger : La France suspend son aide au développement, sommet de la Cedeao dimanche », *Le Monde*, July 30th, 2023.

⁴« Quelle est la fonction politique et économique d'un budget ? », *vie-publique.fr*, April 16th, 2018.

migrants transfer to their home countries. In 2022, the total amount of ODA funding reached 210 billion dollars⁵, emergency humanitarian aid (ODA + private funding + multilateral organisations) was 46,9 billion⁶, and remittances were 626 billion⁷.

The most influential development support, that allows families and communities to select their priorities, is provided by diasporas, through remittances. After a slight decrease of 1,7% in 2020 due to the global economic recession induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers have seen a new and clear increase since 2021⁸.

For low- and medium-income countries, funds issued by migrants are a vital resource. These money transfers to home countries contribute to reducing poverty, improving the nutritional situation, and correlate with better results regarding low birth weight and gross enrolment ratio in children from disadvantaged homes. Research shows remittances help beneficiary households build up their resilience by, for example, allowing them to better their living conditions and to face losses following a natural disaster⁹.

Each year, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issues data on ODA, i.e. the total financial support from public organisations to a given number of recipient countries to support their development. The biggest ODA sponsors are gathered within a committee of 32 countries, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which sits at the OECD. In 2022, government budgets for humanitarian emergencies represented about 12% of the 32 donating countries' ODA funding. These 32 countries are almost exclusively Western countries.

Therefore, questions emerge regarding the logic leading only these countries to participate in ODA budgets, of which humanitarian aid represents a fraction. This observation is essential when questioning the relationships between humanitarian action and state foreign policy.

The deterioration of the global humanitarian situation and the increase in migration flows

The relationship between structural weaknesses and humanitarian emergencies

Half of individuals in need of assistance in 2021, 152,6 million (for a total of 306 million), lived in countries highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Two-fifths of people in need, meaning 119,9 million, lived in countries facing simultaneously high-intensity conflicts, important states of socio-economic fragility, and high levels of vulnerability to the effects of climate change. The overlap between climate risk and these other factors is particularly significant since a state of fragility and conflict limits access to resources (agricultural production, water, etc...). High-intensity conflicts can heighten climate risks, reinforcing fragility and increasing the risk of new conflicts. Almost three-quarters (217,7 million, 71%) of people needing humanitarian assistance in 2021 lived in countries

⁵Focus 2030, « Augmentation de l'aide publique au développement en 2022 », January 22nd, 2024.

⁶Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023* (Bristol : 2023) : 28.

⁷World Bank, « Malgré une conjoncture mondiale défavorable, les remises migratoires augmentent de 5 % en 2022 », Press Release, Washington, November 30th, 2022.

⁸World Bank, « Les remises migratoires enregistrent une croissance significative de 7,3 % en 2021 », Press Release, Washington, November 17th, 2021.

⁹<https://www.banquemonde.org/fr/news/press-release/2022/11/30/remittances-grow-5-percent-2022>

facing high-intensity conflicts¹⁰.

The effects of climate change increasingly act as crisis catalysts, especially in less resilient states. The shock they induce aggravates existing crises, causing long-standing crises to be more frequent than ever. Therefore, the number of countries in a state of « prolonged crisis », in other words, having been the target of coordinated appeals by the United Nations for at least five consecutive years, has risen to 36 in 2021, which represents 74% (227,3 million) of all individuals in need of aid. Additionally, 20 more countries are experiencing a recurring crisis motivating requests for funding over one consecutive year.

Crises and their consequences are directly connected with immigration. The number of people displaced by force – uprooted – has continuously increased in 2022. Out of the 400 million people affected by vital emergencies during that year¹¹, more than 100 million endured « forced displacements »¹². Among them, a third crossed borders to seek shelter – as defined under the Geneva Convention of the 28th of July 1951 – in a different country. The great majority sought asylum in a neighbouring state to their home country. In 2019, it is estimated that 53% of cross-border migrants from African countries have remained on the continent and that 23% decided to journey to Europe¹³. The recurring tragedies of shipwrecks and drownings – documented or not – in the Mediterranean are among the most tragic manifestations of the flight of desperate people, accepting all risks in their search for basic safety. Most deaths on the road of migration are tallied in the Mediterranean. Since 2014, and up to August 2023, the number of deaths has been estimated at 27,845 people¹⁴.

Europe as a protagonist

The central Mediterranean has once again become, since 2014-2017, migrants' main point of entry to Europe¹⁵. More than half of undocumented migrants counted on this route in 2023 originate from sub-Saharan Africa, chiefly Guinea and the Ivory Coast. The other most represented nationalities are from, in decreasing order: Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burkina Faso, Syria, Cameroon, and Mali¹⁶.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 266,940 migrants and refugees have landed in twelve months – 97 % by sea – in the southern European states: Spain, Italy, Greece, Malta, and Cyprus. Absorbing 59% of this migration flow, Italy is on the first line. On the other hand, Tunisia has become the main starting point towards Europe, taking on the previous role of Libya. In 2021, two-thirds of the flow of arrivals in Italy originated from Libya against a third from Tunisia; yet the ratio has reversed itself: the flow coming in from the Libyan coast – 52,000 people – stayed constant from 2022 to 2023, when the one taking off from Tunisia

¹⁰Global humanitarian assistance report 2022, Executive summary, page 10 to 12.

¹¹Development Initiatives, *op. cit.* : 23.

¹²*Ibid.* : 19.

¹³International Organization for Migration, *Rapport sur la migration en Afrique, remettre en question le récit*, (Geneva : IOM, 2020) : 19.

¹⁴IOM, Missing Migrants Project, « Décès sur les routes migratoires », *missingmigrants.iom.int/fr/donnees*.

¹⁵Romain Imbach, « La Méditerranée centrale redevient la première porte d'entrée irrégulière en Europe », *Le Monde*, September 19th, 2023.

¹⁶« Migration flows: Eastern, Central, and Western routes. Yearly irregular arrivals (2015-2024) », *consilium.europa.eu* (website visited on April 17th, 2024).

more than tripled.

An obsolete crisis-aid scheme

A model impaired by limitations

The current system has limited the amount set for donations, even as the proliferation of crises, and climate change, inflate needs. The system is also vulnerable to politicisation since only 20 countries represent 97% of the funding¹⁷. These donations are voluntary, allocated under the condition they be assigned to contexts chosen by benefactors. This funding is annual, therefore unstable, to answer often long-term and cumulative crises. Indeed, more than 80% of populations in need are confronted with crises that have unfolded for over five years¹⁸. This funding scheme is therefore chronically and greatly irrelevant to answer these scenarios, incapable of gathering the estimated 52 billion dollars deemed necessary in 2022 by the United Nations¹⁹. With the help of NGOs, 47 billion dollars were finally raised that year, representing an increase in spending of 27% since 2021²⁰. The priority is to secure about 50 billion dollars of annual spending and to save a funding program running out of steam. And this without detracting from the concurrent necessity for reliable assessment of financial needs, and greater efficiency of emergency aid. This amount of 50 billion is an extensive sum in essence, but comparing it to available data puts into perspective the arguments of those satisfied with our collective incompetence. For example, it equals a sixth of the French budget allocated to « standard health spending »²¹. It is also comparable to the 2022 net profit of major private groups such as the French TotalEnergies (20 billion)²², foreign Pfizer (31 billion)²³, and Exxon Mobil (59 billion)²⁴.

An asymmetrical distribution of resources feeds political suspicions and controversies on soft power

The United States (42, 9%), despite a recent decrease in budget, followed by Germany (13,5%), surpassing for the first time the European Union's institutions (EU, 11,8%), are the major sponsors. Together, these three donors supply about 68,2% of all humanitarian aid of the DAC²⁵. The overwhelming majority of funding allotted to United Nations aid agencies by sponsoring countries is « assigned », in other words, directed, towards crises chosen by these sponsors within the global panorama of world humanitarian emergencies. In 2021, 87% of sums allotted to international

¹⁷Development Initiatives, *op. cit.* : 35.

¹⁸*Ibid.* : 25.

¹⁹*Ibid.* : 30.

²⁰*Ibid.* : 28.

²¹Franck Arnaud, Geoffrey Lefebvre, Myriam Mikou et Mickaël Portela (dir.), *Les dépenses de santé en 2021. Résultats des comptes de la santé. Édition 2022* (Paris : DREES, 2022).

²²« TotalEnergies, Stellantis, LVMH... cinq questions sur les bénéficiaires colossaux des entreprises françaises du CA », France Info, March 9th, 2023.

²³« Pfizer prévoit une chute des ventes de son vaccin anti-Covid de 64 % en 2023 », *Le Figaro*, January 31st, 2023.

²⁴« Exxon annonce un bénéfice record pour 2022 à \$59 mds », *Les Échos*, January 31st, 2023.

²⁵Défis Humanitaires, March 2024, p5 ;

<file:///C:/Users/michelep/Documents/Documents/Projets%20de%20publication/2024/RIS%20Revue%20Internationale%20et%20Strat%C3%A9gique/HUMANITAIRE%202022,%20LES%20CHIFFRES%20DE%20L'E2%80%99AIDE%20PUBLIQUE%20AU%20DEVELOPPEMENT.%20-%20D%C3%A9fis%20Humanitaires.pdf>

emergency assistance were in this way specifically steered toward crises deemed to have priority by the 20 contributing states²⁶. These decisions made by states lead to the neglect of certain emergencies for the benefit of others, depending on the donors' political, strategic, economic, or defensive interests. Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan are consequently, although crises persist in these countries, partially off the radars of international aid.

The negligence of maritime rescue in the Mediterranean: a multi-speed compassion reasoning

We are effectively witnessing in the Mediterranean the setup of a « buck-passing » strategy from the EU, favoring Libyan authorities and their obscure and violent behaviour, as well as – by a delegation of mandate – NGOs. These organisations are however subjected to deliberate campaigns of harassment and obstruction, without any financial contribution from the EU to support the operations they deploy. Some United Nations agencies have in 2023 publicly condemned the current situation in the Mediterranean. In a shared address, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) publicly called on the states to « take responsibility »²⁷.

The current financial model is characterised by four « temptations »²⁸

The « neo-liberal temptation »²⁹ is noticeable in the financial model of global humanitarian aid, a fourth of which relies on the unforeseeable generosity of private patrons, and the remaining three quarters, on a limited number of states. We find within global NGOs ingredients to a form of liberalism sometimes denied, sometimes claimed, and at times cause for disagreement: performance cult, the race to collect private donations seen as « freedom to conduct business », defiance towards state authority, demands to break free from any kind of regulation/coordination, occasional hostile comments exchanged between NGOs on the subject of « competition »³⁰. The « West-centrism » is apparent, as demonstrated by the origin of funds and the near monopoly of Western NGOs in humanitarian assistance. In 2022, nine Western countries and EU organisations gathered 32 of the 38 billion issued by states, meaning 84% of governmental revenue. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul has, at this time, failed to implement one of its objectives to allocate greater means to local and national aid NGOs. Indeed, organisations of countries in crisis manage only 2% of the total amount of funds committed today, even as the goal was 25% for 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the start of the war in Ukraine generated a new risk: « the temptation

²⁶Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022* (Bristol : 2022) : 96.

²⁷« Naufrages en Méditerranée : des agences de l'ONU appellent les États à veiller au sauvetage des migrants », ONU Info, August 10th, 2023.

²⁸See Pierre Micheletti, *0,03 % ! Pour une transformation du mouvement humanitaire international* (Roubaix : Éditions Parole, 2020) : 247-49.

²⁹See Nonna Mayer and Johanna Siméant, « L'espace de l'altermondialisme », *Revue française de science politique* 54, n° 3 (2004) : 373-78 ; « Les ONG : instruments du projet néo-libéral ou bases solidaires des alternatives populaires ? », *Alternatives Sud* 4 (December 1997) : 5-34 ; and Bernard Hours, « Les ONG, mercenaires du village planétaire ou gardiennes des ghettos ? », *L'Homme et la Société* 105-106 (July-December 1992) : 36-50.

³⁰Stéphanie Dupont, « Les enjeux d'Internet dans la communication des associations », DESS thesis, Nouveaux médias de l'information et de la communication, École de journalisme et de communication de Marseille, Université de la Méditerranée (2002). See also « Médecins sans frontières suspend sa collecte de dons pour l'Asie », *Le Monde*, January 4th, 2005.

to retreat ». The pandemic spreading at the beginning of 2020 caused massive intervention from states, even in countries championing unbridled capitalism, to avoid an economic and social breakdown. These interventions can be interpreted as the return of the welfare state. Along the way, beyond each country's reaction and strategy, it is the role of governments in the funding of international assistance that is being questioned. These last ten years, the coordinated appeals of the United Nations have consistently revealed a deficit in governmental funding, of about 40% from the initially expected sums, representing for the year 2018 alone a shortfall of about 10 billion dollars. This amount seems ridiculously low in comparison to the means committed by countries to preserve their economies during COVID-19. Similarly, the political and financial attention of the main donating countries to the Ukrainian conflict had immediate effects on their ability to sustain financial support to major and durable crises elsewhere: Haiti, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen are eloquent examples of this backtracking. The crisis in Ukraine changed distribution priorities since the total percentage of aid intended for Europe by official development assistance of DAC member countries has gone from 3% to 12%. On the other hand, the proportion of humanitarian ODA committed to Asia – gone from 51 % to 41 % –, and to a lesser extent to Africa – 29 % to 27 % – have decreased³¹. Finally, the main sponsors' « temptation to police » becomes a major concern. This logic of control leads NGOs onto a slippery slope. The fight against terrorism greatly limits the work of NGOs by applying heavy and costly technocratic procedures to fund management. Organisations are ordered to submit employees, partners, and suppliers to background checks, using software designed to identify individuals classified as members of terrorist groups. They are standing up to pressure from some donating states to apply this screening process to populations in need. It is easily understandable how such a measure would force humanitarian actors into a supporting role for military forces against some rebel groups, distorting the fundamental mission of NGOs and threatening the safety of their staff.

Acting on insufficient budgets and sources of political suspicion

Identifying possible optimisations in the current model

Through a strict critical analysis, it is crucial to diagnose the financial management model that has led to the deficit in revenue. Savings can be made, particularly among specialised agencies of the United Nations. Among the budget items on which saving is imaginable, are the weight of technocracy and the pay of some parties. Likewise, the struggle against fraud and corruption must remain a priority. Performance and efficiency of aid operations and delivery are indispensable prerequisites before proceeding to search for new sources of funding.

Rethinking multilateralism and public funding modalities of humanitarian aid

It is imperative to widen the circle of countries contributing to financial aid. If a mandatory contribution from richer states is advisable on principle, the conditions of its implementation immediately raise questions. If more countries contribute, the attribution of collected funds must be revised. The evolution of existing authorities to distribute the funds is more realistic than creating new organisations.

³¹ **Défis Humanitaires, op.cit, p6**

It is, therefore, significant to reform the method of fund distribution by the sponsoring countries, this steering of funds being the catalyst of suspicions towards soft power-actor humanitarianism. The decision-making process of the multilateral humanitarian aid system must imperatively rely on principles of equity between states, inclusion of populations, empowerment, and representation of all parties, and not on the preeminence of the sole donors dominating the current financial model.

Tapping into new funding, including the private sector

Reinforcing humanitarianism/development cooperation, and creating public/private partnerships to combine humanitarian grants, development funds, and private sector participation is a possible way forward, allowing for the elaboration of an alternative funding scheme for long-lasting crises. A reform of international taxation of multinational corporations and their shareholders must be included in the political agenda. The newly generated fiscal revenue could then be directed toward humanitarian aid, climate change response, and development assistance, these issues being inextricably linked.

Renovating humanitarian strategies to adapt them

A greater role for local parties would allow for both savings and more relevant responses to the needs and aspirations of local populations. Humanitarian interventions relying on local democratic institutions are now a necessary approach. Local and international organisations must work hand in hand to define their operational priorities, such as the appropriate use of allocated funds on the field, without ignoring that the very concept of « civil society » is not universal; whether it be in the role some political leaders bestow onto citizens, such as in China³²; or in the distinct manifestations and dynamics each society, community, and political system defines this concept by. And this without lowering any standards on the strict respect, by local actors, of the fundamental principles guiding humanitarian action: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and autonomy.

To facilitate these changes, it is urgent to analyse and overcome the root causes keeping from implementing the recommendations of the Istanbul Summit. We must be able to answer long-term crises and ensure this funding does not happen to the detriment of development assistance resources. Consequently, actors in development must accept more risks by investing in unstable regions. In that context, introducing guarantees for funding over multiple years becomes imperative.

To contend with contemporary issues of international solidarity in the face of humanitarian crises, we must both seek out the money everywhere it can be found, and meet the « hands-off » approach of the countries and organisations that today constitute the main sponsors, actors, and decision-makers of current policies. Letting go is possible by using alternative methods as well as local and global solidarity, and by reshaping resource collection and distribution mechanisms. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Lavrov, much like the Rwandan president, expressed his views following the ascent to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan during the summer of 2021:

« After twenty years of NATO military engagement and the failed experiment to impose precepts and values wholly foreign to the Afghan people, Western countries [collectively] bear a direct responsibility in the present humanitarian situation, as well as the deplorable state of the Afghan

³²Frédéric Lemaître, « L'Occident, ennemi désigné de la Chine », *Le Monde*, October 14th, 2022.

economy. [They must] take charge of most of the financial burden to overcome this crisis and even out the situation »³³. This goes to show how urgent a reform of the global solidarity system proves to be, in the hope of deconstructing the idea of humanitarianism as a foreign policy tool for the current circle of sponsoring countries.

³³Patrick Wintour, « UN Donor Conference Falls Billions Short of \$ 4.4bn Target to Help Afghanistan », *The Guardian*, October 19th, 2022.