

The French Red Cross Foundation International Conference

26th October 2023 – Paris

**Humanitarian Transition: current status
of a concept being challenged by crises**

Conference Report

written by the students
of the "Master in Human rights and humanitarian Action"
at Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA)
of Sciences Po:


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10th Anniversary Edition - October 2023 - Paris

Special 10-Year International Conference

**Humanitarian transition: current status
of a concept being challenged by crises**

Event co-organized with :



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Round Table 1:

“Humanitarian transition ten years on: the challenges of a local and international field of study”

Speakers:

- **Dorothea HILHORST**, sociologist professor of humanitarian studies, International Institute of Social Studies, University Erasmus of Rotterdam, president of the IHSA
From humanitarianism to humanitarianisms [La pluralisation de l'humanitaire]
- **Anicet ZRAN**, historian, lecturer-researcher at the Université Alassane Ouattara de Bouaké (Ivory Coast), laureate in 2018 of a scholarship from the Foundation
The challenges of the pandemic to local NGOs in the context of the humanitarian transition
- **Christine NTAHE**, president of the Burundi Red Cross
The challenges of local action in the context of vulnerability and international models
- **Ryoa CHUNG**, philosopher, titular professor, and co-director of the Centre de recherche en éthique (CRE), vice-president of the Canadian philosophical association
From universality to localisation, the challenges of the ethics of international relations to humanitarian action

Moderation:

- **Virginie TROIT**, Director of the French Red-Cross Foundation
- **Pr Jean-François MATTEI**, honorary president of the French Red Cross and former president of the French Red Cross Fund



Context and key issues

In the past ten years, the humanitarian sector has undergone profound changes, whether they be exogenous or endogenous, shedding a new light on the dynamics of “transition” or of paradigm changes which are occurring: there are calls for a “localisation of aid work”, for new international norms and aid practices, there is a shift in the relations between public powers and NGOs, polarisation, social justice movements, big data, and new technologies etc... This roundtable sought to offer an overview of this transition, which ambivalently brought on both significant changes and inertia, especially in the light of the major health, migratory and climatic humanitarian crises of the past decade.

Essential points

Looking back at the past decade, it is clear that there has been a significant paradigm shift in the humanitarian sector. Be they health, migration, or climate emergencies, not only have the last major humanitarian crises reinforced the dynamics of transition towards **a more localised approach to aid**, but they have also shed light on the oppositional phenomena brought on by the failure of achieving the goals of the *Grand Bargain*.

By sharing their experiences of humanitarian action in the past ten years, the practitioners and observers who constituted this first roundtable brought together **a multidisciplinary view** of the current dynamics at work within the humanitarian transition, both at an international and a local level

- As elucidated by the panel, humanitarian governance should be realised by **a collaboration between the many international and national humanitarian actors**. National governments have faced difficulties in responding to humanitarian crises, as illustrated by the examples of Ethiopia, Congo, and Colombia, clearly showing how every crisis necessitates a tailored approach. With this view, it is crucial to increase **the attention placed on localising aid** with a firm and cohesive understanding of the crisis context. Whilst the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is perceived as the most influential international humanitarian actor, it is essential to guide **the transition towards localisation**. A potential future model could resemble the structure of the Federation, consisting of the union of multiple societies with shared values, each operating within their own contexts.

- As emphasised by the panellists, it is crucial to **reinforce proximity** within the humanitarian sector. This was exemplified by the **Burundi National Society of the Red Cross (BRC)**, which is positioned at the intersection of vulnerabilities. Profoundly community-based, the BRC has emerged as an intermediary actor, playing a central role both within and at the periphery of its community. The members unanimously recognise that **solidarity** constitute the fundamental principle building future success and to remedy the issues of the past. The total restructuring of the BRC was undertaken to collaborate with national governmental institutions in a concerted way. Despite the significant media-tisation of disasters seen today, Burundi still remains underrepresented in the media. Even with the fact that the BRC leans on practices and norms which conform with international legal and procedural structures, it often faces significant obstacles in obtaining rapid help. It is essential, therefore, to translate and institutionalise universally these norms.

- According to the panellists, the example of **Ivory Coast** underlines the emergence of **two major crises**, respectively the propagation of AIDS from the 1980s onwards, and the civil war in 2002, which brought the attention of the population towards humanitarian action. However, in the past decade, the government has solicited many new humanitarian interventions, constraining international NGOs into taking a step back from their activities. We are currently observing a **reconfiguration of international financing**, marked by the growing influence of Gulf States. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the humanitarian supply chain, revealing the gaps within this dynamic and putting

into sharp focus a **political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid** as well as a **growing rivalry between international actors**.

● As highlighted by the panellists, it is crucial to **denaturalise natural disasters**. The recommendations put forwards during the round table underline the necessity of question **political action within humanitarian intervention** and to **recontextualised the actors involved**. It is recommended that humanitarian aid remains **apolitical**, especially taking into consideration the institutional hierarchies which frequently reflect inequalities. Consequently, it is equally crucial to oppose epistemic injustice, widely considered as the structural consequence of unequal historical power relations and its developments which persist in our society.



Suggestions, from dialogue to action:

Promote lateral institutional relationships, like the National societies of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Strengthen the training in social sciences of humanitarian actors and practitioners in order to gain a better understanding of intervention contexts.

Recognise that cultural pluralism is not just a form of relativism, but rather the recognition of cultural specificities and that it can be a way to think imagine universalism linked with local contexts



@Naomie Nolté

Round Table 2:

“Epidemics and health beyond medicine: what can be done to overcome the obstacles to health care utilisation”

Speakers:

- **Alice DESCLAUX**, health Anthropologist, Director of Research at IRD
New links and challenges for institutional and community response in Africa, from Ebola to COVID-19
- **Aude STURMA**, environmental Sociologist, CNRS Research Fellow
Water in Mayotte : a story of how vulnerable populations are adapting to a crisis that has become ordinary
- **Firmin KRA**, PhD in socio-anthropology, lecturer at the Alassane Ouattara University in Bouaké (Ivory Coast)
From Bouaké to Marseille : funeral rites in response to epidemics
- **Vincent FALGAIROU**, technical expertise manager at the French Red Cross
Emergency COVID-19 : the contribution of the international humanitarian approach to the national response

Moderation:

- **Virginie TROIT**, Director of the French Red Cross Foundation
- **Laurent VIDAL**, anthropologist, Director of Research at IRD



Context and key issues

When epidemics occur, the way that they reveal the new links which are created between humanitarian actors (bringing along social science researchers), international development policies and local public action which, over the course of epidemic crises, have resilience and adaptation mechanisms is often underexplored. Lines of action intersect, and sometimes overlap, at an individual level, between those affected and health professionals or volunteers, at the operational level across a wide range of territories, and at the institutional level in terms of standards and strategies. It is also at the heart of social ties and their breakdown, which are crystallised by the epidemic. The aim of this round table, without limiting itself to the subject of epidemics, was to describe these new links with a twofold concern: on the one hand, by looking at the ability of players to capitalise on past experience when crisis (for example, the HIV-AIDS, Ebola and COVID-19 epidemics) and, on the other, by presenting practical cases that show how research on these issues renews the links with public health players and decision-makers and prepares them to act more effectively.

Essential points

- According to the panellists, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to implement lessons from the past, highlighting that pandemics are experienced **in distinct ways** depending on the country and context. For example, **Guinea showed a greater resilience to withstand COVID than Ebola**, due in part to a health system improvement following the Ebola crisis. These included enhanced local diagnostic capacities, a permanent treatment center, national coordination centers, and better overall preparation for future epidemics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **civil society was also more effectively implemented as a primary stakeholder**. However, **France experienced many difficulties during the pandemic**, underscoring the importance of contributing to effective interventions, combined with ethical reflection. The International Federation of the Red Cross occupies a central position in these issues, highlighting the issue of global health governance which did not exist at the time of the League of Nations or of the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross.
- **A lack of access to healthcare and other basic services has a compounding social and economic effect on communities**. For example, research in Mayotte shows that approximately 17 percent of monthly expenses are used on water – normally this figure should be between 3 and 5 percent. Lack of access to water brings with it questions of migration and survival. In this context, the role of community initiatives is crucial in accelerating access to care and basic survival needs. Legal status has also been seen as a way to exclude certain groups from affordable water.
- **Health crises are influenced and constructed by contexts, and by the way that the public reactions to information relative to health and epidemics**, depending on diverse social, economic, and cultural factors. Clearly **there is no universal approach, but lessons can be learnt from the past in order** to improve crisis response. The absence of funeral rites in global south countries during epidemics such as Ebola and Covid-19 engendered a moral catastrophe, creating an environment of distrust between communities (due to the handling of cadavers) and the figures of authority who refused to recognise the dignity of the deceased.
- Epidemics have shown the urgency of having **preventative methods of intervention** such as epidemiological surveying within communities. A **lessons-learnt approach** has been taken within Red Cross governance, based on the working group which brought together national and international experts. Following on from the elaboration of new frameworks and directives within the operational centre of the French Red Cross, actors have been able to **bring in these action plans within their**

local communities. COVID-19 was a unique kind of crisis, as it significantly affected health professionals, who had not previously been considered to be “vulnerable”. Subsequently, the Red Cross’ first priority was to **limit the impact of the epidemic on its teams** by sanitary measures but also through action, such as the creation of a website dedicated to spreading verified and factual information on the epidemic.



Suggestions, from dialogue to action:

The training and anticipatory phases of crisis response must be accompanied by necessary and appropriate financing. As such, it is crucial to encourage donors to consider “resilience” as a reason to interrupt future financing. Communities are, by nature, resilient, but they are often not qualified as such by fear that donors will move on too quickly to other projects.

There must be a continued strengthening of the links between the research and operational sectors, such as through technical training for doctors/researchers and the academic wings of humanitarian organisations. Oftentimes upstream action is made difficult when there is a disconnect between parties or a misalignment between research conclusions and practical applications.



Round Table 3:

“Exiles and hospitality: the migratory experience in question”

Speakers:

- **Filip SAVATIC**, postdoctoral Researcher on the Migration Governance and Asylum Crises (MAGYC) project at the Centre de recherche internationaux (CERI) at Science Po Paris
Experiences and routes of exiled Ukrainians in Europe
- **Aissata IGODOE**, sociologist, Associate Researcher at UMR 196 CEPED, Laureate 2020 of a scholarship from the foundation
Socioprofessional insertion of youth in Agadez, in the context of a migration crisis
- **Nina SAHRAOUI**, philosopher, CNRS research fellow (GTM-CRESPPA), Laureate 2022 of a scholarship from the foundation
Women asylum seekers in Ile-de-France, the social determinants for risk to sexual and gender-based violence
- **Fabienne LASSALLE**, deputy Managing Director of SOS Méditerranée
The challenges of maritime rescue in the central Mediterranean

Moderation:

- **Marie-Caroline SAGLIO-YATZIMIRSKY**, eEthnologist, Director of the Institute Convergence Migrations
- **Julien ANTOULY**, coordinator of scientific programmes and research valorisation at the French Red Cross Foundation



Context and key issues

The increase in forced displacements in the world has created multiple humanitarian crises in all continents in the past few years. Numerous works in human and social sciences have focused on this issue, seeking to understand the life and/or survival trajectories of exiled people, thus allowing humanitarians to better act alongside them. This round table allowed to bring together the views of sociologists, geographers, and political scientists, in order to understand the various layers of the migratory phenomenon, and to draw lessons from these different crises.

Essential points:

- **The European Union's move towards a protective border policy has increased the violence of the migratory experience, but these policies are not applied unilaterally.** There is a marked difference between the policy responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis compared to the response to migration from outside the EU, particularly in the lack of support given to those crossing the Mediterranean. This move towards securitisation is visible on multiple levels - international pressure put on countries to block migration routes through their territories, the criminalisation and sabotage of the work of maritime rescue organisations, and at a national level, the increasing culture of mistrust of the voices of asylum seekers in France.
- **Gender is central to the experience of migration, and its importance is often underestimated.** Women, who are recognised as a protected group with special protections, experience migration in a gendered way. Whether it be Ukrainians in Europe or asylum seekers in Ile-de-France, women are significantly more vulnerable to sexual violence, especially if they do not have access to housing. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by the national policies of host countries. This institutional violence is also found in asylum policy which places physical expressions of violence as more credible evidence than speech, and the lack of awareness training in officers dealing with asylum cases. This vulnerability demands collective responses to better protect migrant women.
- **The impact of national policy on the migratory experience is underestimated.** The law 2015-36 criminalised overnight all activity tied to Migration in the region of Agadez, Niger, rendering a significant economic sector unlawful, and affecting not only those directly implicated in migration and creating conflict between local actors, but also creating more dangerous migration routes in order to circumvent this law. The impact of policy is also found in the policies of host countries - the creation of social integration policies for Ukrainian refugees protected from a potential "migration crisis", and inversely, the lack of structures of accommodation and support structures make migrant women more vulnerable in Ile-de-France. Most significantly, however, these migration policies can prove to be deadly - as is the case for the Italian policy seeking to disrupt maritime aid organisations such as SOS Méditerranée.
- **In the face of the disengagement of states, pockets of collective solidarity are mobilising.** Solidarity can present, amongst many others, as community support, as is the case for Ukrainian refugee women, or in a more structured way as organisations such as SOS Méditerranée. It is important to note that these shows of solidarity cannot be a substitute for larger structures of support - for example, the right to healthcare cannot be a substitute for the right to housing.



Suggestions, from dialogue to action:

Combatting disinformation through research and the establishment of objective truths.

Gender is a question which is central to the experience of migration, and its importance is often underestimated.

Collective forms of solidarity have multiplied, but they cannot replace the lack of structural support at a national level, nor State responsibility.



Round table 4:

“Risks and Disasters: thinking about and dealing with disasters”

Speakers:

- **Georges DJOHY**, socio-Anthropologist, University of Parakou, Laureate 2018 of a scholarship by the Foundation
Issues within localisation of humanitarian aid in the face of vulnerability in far north Benin
- **Annabelle MOATTY**, geographer, Institute de Physique du Globe de Paris, Laureate 2020 of a scholarship by the Foundation
From post-disaster reconstruction to the reduction of vulnerabilities: what levers of action for adaptation?
- **Jan VERLIN**, sociologist, Chair in Geopolitics Risks, ENS
Between polycrisis and rampant crisis. What kind of crisis management for humanitarian aid?
- **Omar ABOU SAMRA**, director of the Global Disaster Preparedness Centre (IFRC)
Evidence: doing better, not just as before

Moderation:

- **Sandrine REVET**, director of Research at CERI, Sciences Po
- **Camille RAILLON**, scientific Project Officer, French Red Cross Foundation



Context and key issues

Due to a myriad of factors, particularly climate change, “natural” disasters are multiplying throughout the world and provoking significant humanitarian crises. They remain nonetheless a product of social vulnerability, and technical responses are not sufficient in reinforcing population resilience. This roundtable explored the different dimensions of population preparation the effects of “natural” disasters on social cohesion, and also the factors which increase territorial vulnerability. It provided new insights, avenues of action, but also reflections on public policies, the importance of the local context and on the new emerging issues within risk management.

Essential points:

Our planet is currently facing several high-level disasters, and their subsequent negative consequences. Extensive research has shown that **thorough disaster preparedness for natural risks is critical**. Implementing **spaces of interdisciplinary dialogue** is a prerequisite in improving the handling of disasters. During the session, **three main issues emerged in the humanitarian field** concerning risks and disasters: financial issues, lack of disaster preparedness, and the preference of involving aid from local or international organisations depending on the cultural setting and/or region.

● Financial Resources

The panellists underlined that **many NGOs are facing extreme financial pressure due to their financial dependence on donations**. In the event of a disaster, donors will tend to offer financial support only during and just after an event, creating a **significant lack of funding for post-disaster reconstruction once the crisis point has passed**.

● Disaster Preparedness

The participants of the roundtable stressed the **lack of disaster preparedness and post-disaster reconstruction**. There must be an increased collaboration between local, national, and international communities to identify potential risks. Having adequate risk preparedness also implies the improvement and facilitation of reconstruction in vulnerable communities post-disaster.

● Local vs. International Aid

As underlined by the panel, there are **different perceptions of aid depending on the region**. In some situations, communities can associate local aid with corruption and political game power, consequently choosing to privilege international aid over local aid. However, in other regions, international aid is associated with the memory of colonialism, and as such, they will be reluctant to accept international aid.



Suggestions, from dialogue to action:

Financial Resources

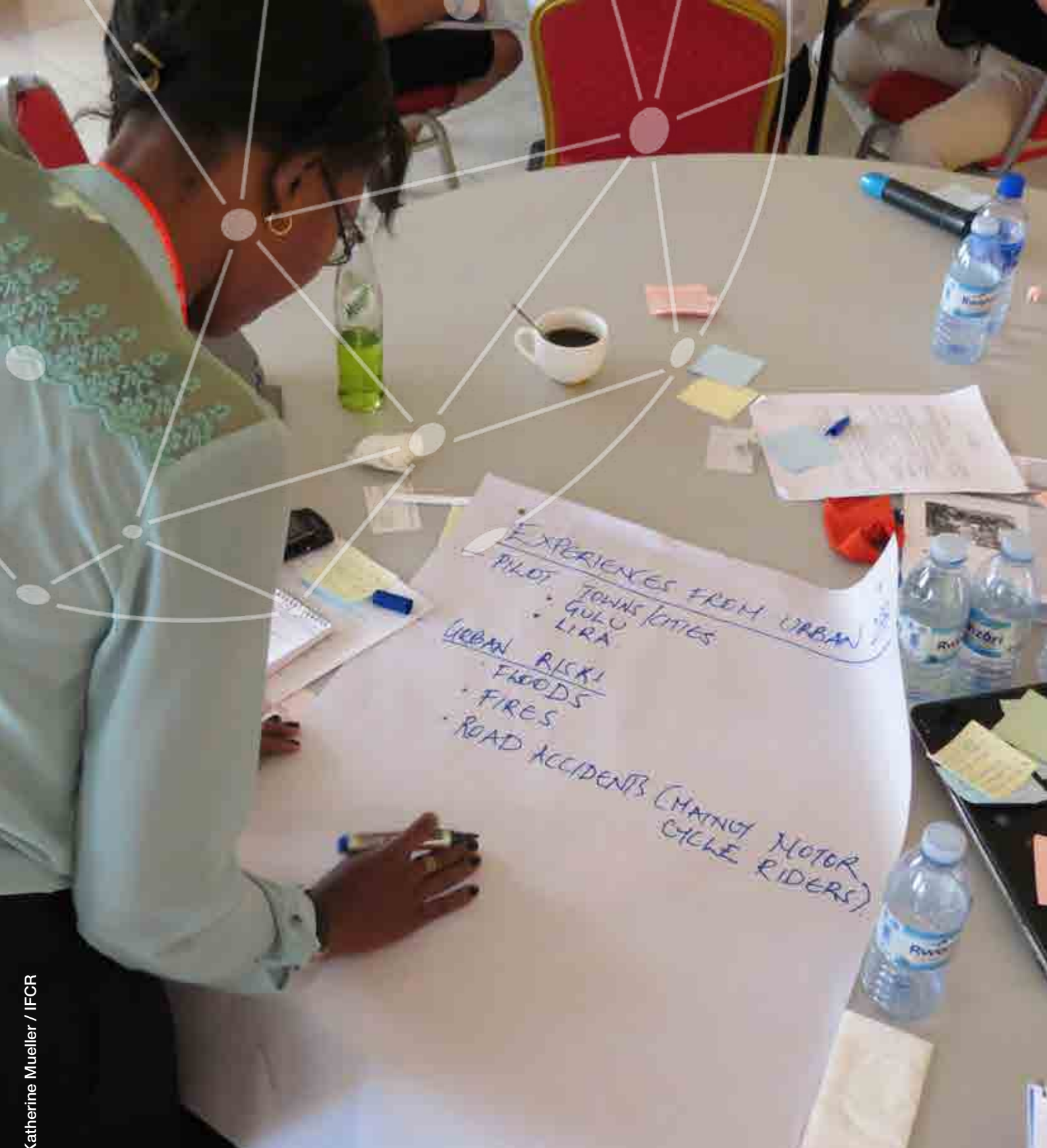
Donors must continue to provide financial support past the point of crisis as it is at this critical juncture that communities affected by disaster will continue to need support. Intensive financial collaboration is needed between sector and geographical actors to provide the well-functioning of a project during the funding period.

Risks Preparedness

Extensive communication and transparency between actors are needed, especially between international and local actors, to prevent potential risks and to attend to the needs of the communities. There are three critical points to focus on for the issues of preparedness:

- Reducing disaster risks through localization
- Vulnerability reduction by reconstructing governance
- Community recovery: promotion of local, regional, and national solidarity

Meaningful local action becomes more effective when disaster preparedness investments are made with communities and active participants.



Round table 5:

“Research challenges: Conducting research on and with humanitarians: what are the ethical, financial and methodological issues?”

Speakers:

- **Estelle FOURAT**, sociologist, MSH SUD Project Officer, 2019 Laureate of a Research Fellowship from the French Red Cross Foundation
Food aid to migrants informed by research
- **Maria Gabrielsen JUMBERT**, geopolitologist, Director of Research at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Giving meaning to crises, violence, and conflicts
- **Sandrine SIMON**, director of Health Advocacy at Médecins du Monde
Science in the service of human health and solidarity
- **Eleanor DAVEY**, historian, Specialist in international humanitarian action
Towards a history of humanitarianism

Moderation:

- **Vincent LEGER**, researcher at the French Red Cross Research Foundation
- **François AUDET**, *doctor of Philosophy, Director of the Canadian Observatory on Crisis, and Humanitarian Action (OCCAG), Professor at UQAM*



Context and key issues

Since the advent of modern humanitarianism marked by the creation of the ICRC, humanitarian action has become a field of research. In the past ten years, research initiatives have multiplied, not only “on”, but also with the humanitarian sector, stemming from the questions and thinking of actors at the heart of humanitarian responses. This roundtable has allowed us to take stock of the important development of collaboration between the humanitarian and scientific sectors, and the different forms these can take and their conclusions, in order to engage critical thinking on the conditions of their success and the major challenges which remain in order to reinforce the link between research and humanitarian action.

Essential points

According to the panellists, **the field of “humanitarian studies” is emerging, and still largely dominated by health sciences**. It constitutes a complex and multidimensional field, articulated by its different approaches: “by”, “for”, “with” and “on”. Research “by” humanitarians remains a necessary endeavour even if it is orientated towards specific interests. At the same time, research “for” humanitarians denotes more objective commissioned research, seeking to understand and to answer the questions within and the implications of humanitarian work with a view **to optimising work**. Research “with” humanitarians, however, adopts a collaborative and reflexive approach, favouring the co-construction of knowledge and advocating for objectivity. Finally, research “on” humanitarians is theoretical and critical.

- Our panellists explained that the collaboration between the fields of humanitarian research between academics and practitioners is crucial in creating a **community of shared knowledge**. The benefits of this do not limit themselves merely to research results but a community like this could also **encourage debate**, as well as new and independent perspectives, thanks to shared conversations between actors.
- One of the principal conditions for success in these collaborations is that each – whether they be humanitarian researchers or practitioners – **understands the interests and limitations of the person they’re working with**.
- Researchers must manage to **explain the modes of production of their research**, including the ethical principles which guide it. They must also engage in a dialogue on important terminology in humanitarian action, which can have different meanings within a more scientific approach.
- Communication and a research community go hand in hand. Through a **more general dissemination of research** and partnerships with other sectors, research findings can be made more accessible to the general public and can be put into action in the field. Researchers must, however, keep a critical distance from their research.



Suggestions, from dialogue to action:

A community of shared scientific knowledge on humanitarian work would benefit from developing itself further through a wider and more accessible dissemination of its results on humanitarian research. This would not only favour the diffusion of the research results but would contribute to the emergence of new ideas within the humanitarian sector.

Whatever the approach – “by”, “for”, “with” or “on” humanitarians – it is important to promote the collaboration between researchers and humanitarians.

Beyond shared projects, a continuous exchanges between researchers and practitioners would guarantee a mutual understanding of the needs, interests, and limitations of each party, which would promote an acculturation conducive to developing a common language and common understandings, thus promoting research initiatives at the service of the humanitarian sector.

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