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**The best of men is the most  
useful to others  
When the desire for  
usefulness runs counter to  
utilitarianism**

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## Résumé

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L'engagement se définit comme un *acte par lequel on s'engage à accomplir quelque chose ; promesse, convention ou contrat par lesquels on se lie*<sup>1</sup>. Les bénévoles ont en eux une promesse qui les conduit, voire les oblige, à agir lorsque celle-ci se fait viscérale (Müller, 2014). Ils ont vis-à-vis des associations qu'ils rejoignent une forme de contrat moral. Toutefois, la signature d'une charte, d'une convention, l'adhésion à une association ne peut les obliger à exercer le bénévolat. Seuls leur volonté, leur envie, leur désir permettent qu'ils soient présents dans la durée et se lient avec la structure qui les accueille. Les bénévoles de la Croix-Rouge française affirment avoir rejoint cette structure pour être utiles, souvent ils indiquent qu'ils auraient pu rejoindre une autre organisation. Ces bénévoles font-ils ce qu'ils font pour eux et participent-ils de ce fait à l'intérêt collectif ?

À l'heure où les inégalités et la violence qui les accompagne grandissent, qu'est-ce qui pousse une personne à vouloir jouer un rôle dans le traitement de l'urgence sanitaire et sociale ? En quoi cet engagement est utile ou utilisé pour et par les pouvoirs publics ? Quelles sont les limites de l'utile face à l'utilitarisme des bonnes volontés (Fassin, 2010) ? L'objectif de cet article est de procéder au dévoilement de l'usage fait du don de temps, d'amour, de valeurs des bénévoles de la Croix-Rouge française. En rendant visibles les tensions générées par la quête d'un plaisir individuel au nom de l'intérêt collectif il montre la limite représentée par son propre bien-être si celui de l'autre est inaccessible.

**Mots-clés :** engagement, utilitarisme, don, bénévolat.

## Abstract

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Commitment is defined as an act by which one commits to accomplish something; promise, agreement, or contract by which we bind ourselves. Volunteers have within them a promise that leads them, even obliges them, to act when it becomes visceral (Müller, 2014). They have a form of moral contract vis-à-vis the organisations they join. However, signing a charter, a convention or joining an organisation cannot oblige them to volunteer. Only their will, their desire, allow them to be present over time and to link up with the structure that welcomes them. French Red Cross volunteers claim to have joined this structure to be useful, often indicating that they could have joined another organisation. Are these volunteers doing what they do for themselves and are they therefore contributing to the collective good?

At a time when inequalities and the violence that accompanies them are growing, what makes a person want to play a role in dealing with the health and social emergency? How is this commitment useful or used for and by the public authorities? What are the limits of usefulness in the face of the utilitarianism of goodwill (Fassin, 2010)? The objective of this article is to reveal the use made of the gift of time, love, and values of the volunteers of the French Red Cross. By making visible the tensions generated by the quest for individual pleasure in the name of the collective interest, they demonstrate the limits represented by their own well-being if that of the other is inaccessible.

**Keywords:** Commitment, utilitarianism, gift, volunteering.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/engagement/29510>

## *The best of men is the most useful to others: When the desire for usefulness runs counter to utilitarianism*

The qualitative data cited in this article were collected during a one-year action research project from September 2020 to September 2021. The data were obtained from 30 non-directive interviews and field observations conducted during participant observation as a volunteer. This study aimed to understand, in collaboration with volunteers, the drivers of commitment and disengagement. It was designed to stimulate discussion and then to link and relate the problematics experienced by volunteers with those of the French Red Cross and more generally the socio-economic issues underlying commitment in social action and in first aid.

When volunteers commit to an organisation, they form a bond with it, adhere to its values and enter a form of moral contract that allows the organisation to count on them. They will be there even though they do not have to be. All French Red Cross volunteers say they get involved with the organisation because they feel useful. The Red Cross identity as they describe it underlines the importance of strong and sometimes extraordinary, shared experiences. The Red Cross provides people with the opportunity to respond to social ills and the ill-being of others. “I felt I had to do something...”, “It was high time I volunteered my time to help others in some way...”, “My life only has meaning if I can be useful to others...”, are some of the thoughts that crossed the minds of volunteers before committing. By committing to a non-profit organisation, the French Red Cross, they provide a practical response: volunteers have been useful as first-aiders since 1864 and more recently as agents of social action<sup>2</sup>. They are transformed by their unique experiences after making their commitment. First-aiders are given the same training as the firefighters with whom they operate. Social action volunteers describe how their commitment brings them into contact with the sort of poverty they could never have imagined existed. Contact with others, sensitive experiences, emergency action, anticipation, and training transform a world that is abstract because unknown into a reality in which the suffering of others is not an utterance, but an emergency to which they must respond. For those searching for personal well-being in commitment, the satisfaction of being able to feel useful is found in a new state of mind. They no longer think of themselves and seek to improve the well-being of others, the most vulnerable, occasionally to the detriment of their own well-being. Volunteers who make themselves useful are faced with the external constraints (Havard Duclos and Nicourd, 2005) of increasing demand for aid and assistance, added to a background of social and economic uncertainty (shrinking budgets, the introduction of new standards, the pandemic, etc.), which make voluntary action difficult. The political dimension that underpins these new constraints makes us question the use of volunteers in France today. What and who benefits from the commitment made by

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<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to say when social action first emerged; the shift has occurred over time by necessity. The nineteen-eighties marked a turning point, with the French government entrusting the organisation with the distribution of food aid.

volunteers? Caught in this storm, can voluntary work still make people happy or at least satisfied?

During one interview, Amine answered this question with a quote: “The best of men is the most useful”. Struck by his words, I did an internet search and quickly realised that it was a *hadith*<sup>3</sup> displayed on the website of Secours Islamique Français<sup>4</sup> except for the final two words: “The best of men is the most useful **to others**”. Amine’s reformulation raises a question that sheds light on the changing meaning of commitment in contemporary neo-liberal societies. Is commitment becoming an individual action that allows us to prove our usefulness to ourselves as one person among others in an egocentric outlook? Or does it further the collective interest, in other words, the duty to be useful to others, who in this case are the focus of attention? By transforming the end of the quote, Amine reveals the tension underlying the concomitance of voluntary commitment and utilitarianism<sup>5</sup>. This theory developed by Bentham and restated by John Stuart Mill (1863) holds that what the individual does for him or herself should, by its very nature, be beneficial to others. Although their quest for happiness is central, the individual who seeks to maximise their own pleasure and to minimise their own pain should act for the good of society in order not to suffer the pain of others. The theory has been criticised by the Mouvement Anti Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales (M.A.U.S.S.)<sup>6</sup>, among others, for not guaranteeing social justice. Working to achieve social justice is like an uncertain struggle that could be a source of pain and remain an unattainable quest for those undertaking it. This indirectly raises the question of what kind of well-being volunteers are seeking to maximise by making their commitment. By relief to those they assist, are they seeking to feel better or to improve society? It is because volunteers pursue both ends that their commitment contains a fuzziness and sometimes even a tension. Each volunteer strikes their own balance; they give their time, energy, and love and in return they receive smiles, recognition, but also sometimes a lack of understanding, indifference, or criticism, including from their peers. The satisfaction and dissatisfaction of volunteers with what they receive in return for their more or less long-term commitment allows us to better understand what motivates them to act and leads them to stop.

This paper will first describe how commitment is experienced and expressed to shed light on what it means to “be useful”. This description will give insight into the reality and perception volunteers have of their involvement. The second part addresses the thorny issue of utilitarianism by examining the reasons why volunteers reconsider their action and the adaptation strategies they employ when new issues emerge.

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<sup>3</sup> “A collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Koran.”

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095914816;jsessionid=64D4A6E8C5BFA60C16C11A6DB088A395>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.secours-islamique.org/index.php/qui-sommes-nous/identite.html>

<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, *L'utilitarisme*, 1863, Edition Flammarion, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.revuedumauss.com.fr/Pages/APROP.html>

## I – “You know what, when I’ve got time, I’m going to get into it”

People make a commitment to pursue a goal. The French Red Cross was founded to provide emergency response on the battlefield. In the early days, it was about saving lives. Today, the scale of social action is so great that some volunteers believe they commit to save the world from misery. Volunteers have access to logistical resources (premises, vehicles, emergency equipment, clothing and the like) and technical resources (training and professional skills and experience)<sup>7</sup> to complete their tasks. However, in the words “into it”, Boris expresses the vastness and the unknown represented by the commitment. “What shall I do?”, “How shall I do it?”, “Why should I do it?” and “With whom” : are the questions future volunteers ask themselves. Before they gain hands-on experience of assistance and/or relief, they do not know what commitment represents. They know neither how it will change them nor how there is no going back. The missions organised by the Red Cross are specific and in the general interest. At no charge, volunteers will assist people and respond to accidents<sup>8</sup>, take part in public events and social outreach work, distribute food, give French lessons, and so on. They will also lead projects that require the setting up of new actions in their area, such as opening a mobile clothes shop, or organise rounds, such as Croix-Rouge sur Roues (a mobile outreach service providing food, clothes, care, and administrative support) and Bébés sur Roues (a mobile food and hygiene product distribution service for young children). Divided into two entities, relief and social action, the structure of the French Red Cross offers people the means to “get into it”.

### *Immersion: a volunteer experience*

On 14 September 2020, I registered online to be a Red Cross volunteer in my sector. A few days later, I got a text message thanking me and informing me that a meeting would be held very soon to introduce me to the organisation. Shortly afterwards I received more messages with a selection of dates. On 3 October, I visited what would be my local unit (LU) for the first time. Five of us were present. The presentation was straightforward and effective; it emphasised how commitment is personally rewarding and an opportunity to give life meaning. There was no appeal for social justice; instead, we watched a presentation on the Red Cross and the resources volunteers are given to act in the field.

I made my commitment by filling out a form and paying a €20 membership fee. Almost immediately, I receive proposals for social action activities. On 20 November 2020, I volunteered for the first time as a member of the French Red Cross. It was at the height of the pandemic. A hotel had been requisitioned to accommodate undocumented families. The organisation responsible for housing them had asked the Red Cross to provide a specific form of emergency relief: milk and nappies. When I arrived, the manager suggested I go with her to buy milk for children aged 6 to 12 months old. They needed two boxes. On the way,

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Red Cross volunteers are active and in demand to raise funds during the national fundraising campaign and to collect food during supermarket food drives.

<sup>8</sup> During the interviews, volunteer first-aiders all reminded me that they received the same first-aid training as firefighters. It is important to understand that they have the same technical training, not the same physical training.

she explained that the social workers who had approached the French Red Cross had added more people to the list. This would be a form of one-off assistance because the LU did not have the products requested and had to draw on its institutional funds to buy them. When we arrived back at the premises, we prepared the nappies, boxes of infant formula and cartons of milk and loaded them into the van. Another volunteer joined us. Before setting out, we put on a Red Cross vest displaying its emblem - a red cross. When we arrived at the hotel, we had to wait for the social workers in the entrance hall. We then went upstairs together. We were five adults, and we went from door to door. We handed over the donated items at the door and our visits lasted no longer than one minute. We had a list with the number of each room, the names of the people, the number of children and what we had to leave with them. I realised that some of the babies were less than a month old and others had just left the maternity ward. Although I did not raise the issue as we were handing out the items, on the way back I asked our manager some questions. Did she know who had requested the infant formula? The social workers or the mothers? The object of my question was to understand if our assistance would negatively affect breastfeeding by encouraging mothers to bottle-feed their children; bottle feed would be in very short supply, since we knew during the distribution that we would not be handing out anymore. What would the mothers do if our assistance interfered with their lactation? Before giving the milk, shouldn't we have made sure we were not compromising the autonomy of the mothers relative to their newborn children? The manager was unable to answer my questions. During an interview with the volunteer who took part in the distribution with me, he mentioned this action as an example of how useful he feels with the Red Cross and how happy he was to provide this assistance to these people, and in particular to help young mothers and their babies. He had forgotten the concerns I had raised earlier. Neither he nor the manager raised the issue with me again.

A few months later, I registered for another action. We were going to collect food from the food bank. Once again, there were three of us. On the way, we discussed the various actions our LU had been asked to undertake; one in particular caught our attention: a request to direct patients arriving at a hospital for their Covid-19 vaccination. None of us went or wished to go. Was it the role of volunteers to make up for the lack of hospital staff? The discussion became highly political. Adam replied to Linda who said she no longer knew which news sources to believe; she said there were alternative media and that you had to inform yourself in order to understand the stakes involved in the situation, and that since the beginning of the crisis beds had been cut. The problem was an ethical one: should you help to direct people in a hospital as an important civic act during a crisis, or is it free work done at the expense of people who should be paid for it as part of a quality public service?

These two situations reflect the questions volunteers may have about their commitment and their impact on society. Depending on how they viewed the same situation, they may feel they are doing good (as measured by the many times they were thanked), or causing harm ("What are the consequences of my actions?") It may give them a sense of personal well-being that makes them want to start again or on the contrary a sense of uneasiness that calls into question not their commitment but the means they have chosen.

I was able to probe these questions further during the interviews. When they talked about their commitment, the volunteers underlined the importance of the Red Cross in their lives, as a place where strong friendships are formed. The volunteers also stressed the practical

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dimension of their action; by taking action in an emergency, they provide response that can be seen quickly, and that is important. Lastly, commitment is also a readiness to give up much of one's spare time.

### *Commitment as part of a collective self*

Faced with the distress felt when confronted with the suffering of others, volunteers can take action that is not intended to be an immediate, rational response to save the world. Together, they create possibilities (Benasayag, Del Rey, 2011). They provide relief to the people they meet and feel a strong and lasting sense of "being able to". This ability developed within the organisation becomes part of themselves. This is how Mylène explained it to me. When she made a commitment, she initially wanted above all "not to be alone". Her aim was to build a small network by meeting people with potentially the same interests as her. Mylène now holds multiple responsibilities within the organisation:

"It is a big part of my life because I spend time on it, but I spend time on it because it is part of my life, so ultimately it's a vicious and a virtuous circle!" (Mylène, 35, employees, active volunteer with responsibilities)

By making a commitment, Mylène says she feels fulfilled and has discovered abilities she did not know she had. For her, her commitment has a *transcendent*<sup>9</sup> dimension. This commitment becomes a way of being; a means to fulfilment. I heard the same thing from Lorine, whose experience was entirely different. She joined the Red Cross by chance when she was living on the street. Aged 60, she describes the situation she experienced forty years earlier. She thinks that she would not have had the strength to turn her life around again without the Red Cross. When she asked for help, with difficulty and a sense of fear, they suggested she make a commitment. She now helps others. She has found her place and she speaks to this dual movement:

"I have a responsibility and, between quotation marks, it's thanks to the Red Cross that I'm here!" (Lorine, 62, retired, active volunteer with responsibilities)

The Red Cross has given Lorine the possibility to take action in aid of people whose world has fallen apart. She knows what it is like because she has experienced it herself. For her, every action counts, however small. She remembers a blanket she was given and how important it was to her, "It protected me from the cold, it was so cold!" She does not underestimate the power of the mobile clothes shop she manages: "I managed to get someone off the street just with clothes," she says. As I listen to her account, I realise that it was not simply the clothes that help, but the attention Lorine gave to the other person; the human gaze that recognised the other and allowed her to be. This exchange is essential because it is within the Red Cross that she is able to make it. Like Mylène, the organisation allows her to achieve transcendence. She is supported by a team who believe in her. Lorine carries out actions of which she would be incapable alone. Commitment is not a solitary experience; it is part of a shared story that existed before those who commit and in which

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<sup>9</sup> This is the term used by Mylène.



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they take part by committing themselves, as Benasayag et Del Rey make clear in their definition of existential commitment:

“Deep existential dimensions cannot be reduced to individual identity; on the contrary, they create the conditions that make it possible to have an identity.” (Benasayag, Del Rey, 2011, p102.)

What is transcendent is this sense of belonging to a shared project, which no longer needs to be mentioned, because it is within in each volunteer as they take action over time. The project becomes, in this action, part of life; part of oneself. The commitment is therefore in a constant state of flux since it is composed of a group of acts by volunteers which are deeply rooted in their personal story, but also in the story of an organisation, in this case, the Red Cross. The Red Cross identity is therefore composed of a multitude of identities which have in common an ability, desire or need to take action, and sometime even to resist.

### *Commitment as facing up to challenges*

During the interviews, the volunteers expressed a certain satisfaction at being able to take action and, through direct feedback, at knowing that what they do is useful. However, some words used by the volunteers shed a different light on the issue. Amine (a 31-year-old volunteer) told me he sees that he makes “the difference” in social action. Stéphane (a 51-year-old volunteer) tells me how he was approached by a Red Cross beneficiary while out shopping, because for them he represents someone who can solve a problem. Boris tells me that he knows how to find the right words during outreach to find accommodation. Beyond an immediately visible observation, they assess themselves against their own ability to respond to the emergency. Volunteers are highly critical of themselves, and many say they “try to help”. The strength of the Red Cross relative to its volunteers lies in the fact of having developed ways to “satisfy” them, when sometimes the objective can be unsatisfactory. By holding responsibilities and taking multiple training courses, the volunteers evolve, even as the social and economic situation confronting them remains the same or worsens. In his studies on firefighters, Romain Pudal (2016) explores the long-term effects of this mechanism which conceals both unpaid labour and the State's disengagement from a public service that relies on volunteers to function. The professionalisation and professionalism with which volunteers act reflect a social security system in crisis. In fact, when Boris manages to find the words that enable some people to find accommodation, beyond his know-how, he shows that professionals working for the emergency services were not able or did not know how to assess the emergency situation and provide an appropriate response. He reveals the unequal treatment experienced by the most vulnerable individuals in seeking shelter since those who did not cross his path may have had to spend the night outdoors. Volunteers interact with professionals and deal with the social emergency fully aware that they are saving lives. They become essential. Preoccupied by this observation, they situate themselves continuously in the emergency in order to fill a gap by doing work that would not otherwise be done without them, because no one is supposed to do it. The temporality within which they act is that of the action and leaves little room for reflective thinking. If they see someone drowning, volunteers will not ask themselves if the lifeline is sturdy enough; they will throw them the lifeline, sometimes without knowing if it will suffice.

### *Commitment is time*

Training time, action time and regularity. Time is a determining factor of commitment. The volunteers with whom I talked raised two points: firstly, the time they thought they would devote to the organisation has “rocketed” and a few hours a week became a few hours a day which, if they hold responsibilities, becomes the equivalent of a full-time job. Secondly, the increase in this time is related to the management of emergencies. Yvette said she had a run of bad luck, because they needed to put together a team, move premises and do works; she had thought she was going to do less than part-time, but admits to doing almost full-time some weeks. For Ilda, her teammate fell ill, and her replacement role rapidly became a management role. She agreed to get involved for two years, but it was possible she would need to go beyond that because there was no one to take responsibility for some actions on her team. Lastly, Mathieu put himself forward as president to ensure continuity with the previous postholder; he was the only candidate, he said, because many people did not want to take on the responsibilities and put in the hours necessary to ensure this level of commitment.

For the people who shared their experiences with me, unpredictability is the norm; there is always a good reason to get more closely involved: an ill colleague, works, internal conflicts, and so on. It is a choice within a non-choice. Although the first stage, the commitment, requires reflection, it appears that the subsequent holding of responsibility is combined with a much greater time commitment that goes without saying. Micheline explains that, “it’s a job you do for free, you can’t take time off, you have to be replaced if you’re on holiday; there are on-call duties.” Aline says she often stays longer because some volunteers do not turn up. These last-minute replacements show the importance of time in commitment and its allocation. Time is something that belongs to volunteers; they sell it when they work and give it when they volunteer for the Red Cross. Time is what makes the difference between volunteers, especially since it is by investing their time that volunteers acquire skills, know-how and interpersonal skills that form part of this shared identity. However, lack of time is related to a socio-economic context in which voluntary action has become part of the response rather than a support for the response. Far from playing a supporting role, the volunteers take responsibility for social actions, like first-aid stations.

Caught up in these emergencies, volunteers are often unaware of the heroic nature of their actions, and when some of them leave, they lack the time to analyse the causes. As in their action, they find themselves in an emergency situation, having to deal with the consequences by constantly recruiting new people to make sure that those who come to get food will get it, that those who need to learn to read will receive lessons, and so on.

## II – Providing assistance is not enough: *tired heroes*<sup>10</sup>

Utilitarianism can be understood as the importance given to the quest for individual happiness, in which access to individual happiness leads to collective happiness. For John Stuart Mill,

“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, London, Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863, p.9-10.

This utilitarian perspective is the sticking point that leads to disengagement. The many works and articles produced by the M.A.U.S.S. (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales) review extensively documents the theories and concepts of political philosophy<sup>11</sup> showing that the pursuit of individual happiness cannot meet a goal of social justice, since resisting may require accepting suffering and observing one's suffering for what it teaches. From this perspective, this work contributes to the debate by showing that the actions of volunteers hold the key to understanding a complex phenomenon: giving one's time, not out of pleasure, but out of duty, and remaining dissatisfied while having derived pleasure from the action. Several volunteers who are or have been involved with the French Red Cross and other organisations working to combat poverty have told me how unhappy they feel seeing the same people coming here on Thursday and going there on Friday year after year with the same requests. This led them to question their commitment. What and who does their time benefit if not the people they are taking action for? While they claim to be nourished by the interactions that occur in different actions, they remain dissatisfied. The sense of well-being they derive from doing a good deed is no longer enough for them. Taking a step back often leads them to reexamine themselves and, more broadly, to question the system in which they were more or less directly involved.

### *When commitment no longer makes you happy*

There is real strength in the personal accounts of people who have made a commitment to the French Red Cross. They speak of their certainty that they are taking part in something useful for the common good, and they illustrate their point with examples of success. People have turned their lives around because of their actions. The volunteers are doing their best despite the obstacles mentioned in the introduction: limited resources and a rising number of

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<sup>10</sup> This title is a reference to a work by Romain Pudal, *Retour de flammes, les pompiers, des héros fatigués?* (“Backlash. Firefighters: tired heroes?”), published by Editions la Découverte in 2016.

<sup>11</sup> I am referring mainly to the work of Philippe Chanial, *Justice, don et association, La délicate essence de la démocratie*, 2001, La découverte/ MAUSS. *La Société vue du don, manuel de sociologie anti-utilitariste appliquée*, under the direction of Philippe Chanial (?) 2008, éditions la Découverte, bibliothèque du MAUSS

requests. Under these circumstances, successfully helping someone to overcome their problems is considered a real achievement. Nevertheless, is this enough to satisfy them?

For several years, a couple, David and Clémence, were initially involved only with the Red Cross and then, because they wanted to do more outreach work, they also got involved with the Restos du Cœur. Wearing a jacket with the Red Cross symbol on Saturdays and a yellow safety vest on Tuesdays, they walked the streets of their *département* several nights a week for several years. Clémence committed herself on several occasions to going beyond Restos du Cœur food distributions and Red Cross social outreach work to help families find emergency accommodation. She shared the example of a family whose father had told her how urgent it was to house them so he could go out and look for work, because he could not bear the thought of going to work and leaving his wife alone in the street with their children. However, he now lives in a room in a social hostel and spends his day watching television. As she explains the questions this situation brought to mind, her husband adds: "The state has to play its part, it's not right [...] A solution must be found". In his view, there is a real lack of coordination, and he feels that volunteer work, instead of improving the situation, is filling a leaky bucket that no-one wants to plug. He believes it is essential to respond to the needs identified. His extensive experience as a volunteer with several organisations gives him a global view of what volunteers do and the actual impact of their actions. For him, the system prevents people from turning their lives around: "You get tired of it. You say to yourself, this isn't working. Helping people is fine, but 3, 4, 5 years, what's the point?" David thinks that the man stays in his room not because he's lazy, but because he can't find a job. Either because his administrative situation does not allow him to work, or because no-one is willing to take him on. David knows that in a few months' time, during outreach, he could find the same family in the same situation with the same request. That's why he and Clémence decided to leave the organisation to get involved with another organisation that provides follow-up. For them, the emergencies in which they are involved should not be a foregone conclusion: "Really helping people to turn their lives around isn't just about supplying them with assistance!" says Clémence. Over time, David and Clémence got the impression that their assistance was doing the opposite of what they hoped it would do.

This criticism is echoed in the accounts given by Lionel (a former volunteer) and Boris (an active volunteer). They agree that what they are doing is not enough. For Lionel, this criticism is reflected in a "shift from individual first aid to global first aid". Boris, who is still active in the organisation, is thinking of moving up a level, in other words getting involved in politics.

"When you're a baby, you die in the street! I don't even know if it's a form of social infanticide or... we don't really know where we stand anymore! I'm not disillusioned, but I think the solution is probably at a higher, more political level and that won't stop me from continuing to do outreach work and all that, but I think that if I want, or I wanted, if I plan to commit in a really useful way, I think it has to be done at another level" (Boris, self-employed and volunteer with the CRF for 10 years).

These volunteers share the idea that someone is to blame for the situations they encounter. They believe there are political and technical solutions that can help us move beyond emergency management. The words they use to describe their emotions show that their involvement has not contributed to their happiness; it has opened their eyes to other concerns

and raised difficult questions about what they consider to be an inadequate response. They suffer, but none give up. These four people will pursue in different ways the cause that is close to their hearts, not for themselves but for others. Faced with what appears to be disillusionment, Clothilde, who joined the Red Cross in the nineteen-seventies, replies that some volunteers get involved thinking they are going to change the world, but that handing out pasta does not change the world. This volunteer has different expectations of the Red Cross. She wishes to take action in a structured environment and appreciates the social life that enables her to forge links with other volunteers. Trained as a first aider, she sees emotions as something that prevent people from providing an appropriate response. She explains to me that she doesn't really like looking backwards and sees herself as someone who deals with things by moving forward. The underlying question is whether, in social action, we can take action using the same conventions and tools as in first aid?

### *Structural limitation: turf wars*

Confronted with disillusionment, several volunteers give another reason for their disengagement, or what could lead them to disengage: internal tensions generated by the mode of governance. In the organisational chart of groups, there are leaders, presidents, directors and then there are the people who help out, whose commitment is limited to doing the right thing for a few hours. What needs to be done has been decided by a hierarchy and most volunteers are highly disciplined. Some have just arrived and don't feel entitled to make criticisms, while others come on an ad hoc basis and admire the courage and discipline of those who keep the machine running. The main problem with this way of working is that it is not the people who are best qualified to hold a certain responsibility or mandate who take them on, but the people who are available. It also happens that some people occupy positions for the personal satisfaction they bring, using their mission for something other than to further a common cause. Their commitment contributes to their own happiness without - genuinely - pursuing an ideal of social justice. Several volunteers have told me that they fear the "ego" which, in their words, is at the root of turf wars between local units, branches and departmental structures, and even within LUs. Holding responsibilities and standing in internal elections to become president reflect personal trajectories that are no longer at the service of a common cause but part of a quest for personal satisfaction. Maxime smiles as he recounts his own experience: "I stood as a candidate and of course I was elected as there was no one else". Clothilde does not shrink from identifying what seems to her to be a real brake on the commitment of young people who, in the end, disengage because they do not find their place:

"There are presidents who cling to their posts, who don't want to leave, who block everything! They are petty tyrants: "I know everything, I understand everything, everyone else is an idiot!" They're essentially presidents and directors. [...] That's not what RC is about! It's about trying to help everyone fulfil their potential! [...] Yes, prestige does matter! I always tell them, when I get sick of it, I tell them, listen to me carefully: "The average French person knows the name of the President of the Republic... at best the president of their football club, and then the other presidents, they don't exist!" (Clothilde, a retired volunteer who has held responsibility within the Red Cross for 50 years).

Clothilde desacralizes the role of president by putting it back into its real-world setting. People may be interested in the presidents of football clubs but not the presidents of organisations that save lives. She says that external recognition is not what you should look for when committing to the Red Cross, because it doesn't exist. The people who are on this path are heading in the wrong direction. She believes that the pursuit of self-interest is detrimental to the development of volunteers in general.

Alongside the problems of oversized egos, there are also the egos of people who have been offended or hurt. There is nothing to protect a volunteer from the words of another volunteer. The opposition of a new volunteer might trigger an audit, the suspension of volunteers, resignations, a cascade of departures. In this example, one person's dissatisfaction was brought to the attention of the national team who, in their desire to listen to every volunteer, took steps to provide a response. The interviews revealed a profound lack of communication, but above all the violence felt by those who, after giving several years of their lives, do not enjoy the trust of the national team. "We haven't been twiddling our thumbs all these years," explains Germain, who is deeply affected by not having the opportunity to explain himself and not being recognised for all he has done for free. Because, during this conflict, the question of time is raised in a roundabout way, "Even in the workplace we don't treat people like that," he adds. What makes such incidents possible? Power struggles, part and parcel of any group, appear to be a taboo subject at the Red Cross, since one of the unifying principles is: **"Voluntary service:** The Movement is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain"<sup>12</sup>. It then seems possible to decide, without informing the chief person concerned, that his or her position as director will no longer exist and that what he or she used to do will no longer be done. "They tell you you're no longer director for no good reason," says Stéphane. What drives this decision, he believes, are the elections, and depending on who is elected, he will leave the organisation.

Germain and Stéphane have been closely involved with the Red Cross for many years. The difficulties they have had to overcome to enable the structure to develop do not make them interested parties but concerned parties. They developed ties to the structure and acted with the conviction that they were being useful. However, the end of their commitment is tinged with bitterness and the impression that they have been used. Overnight they were excluded from the collective, a part of their lives and their identity taken away without a word of thanks. To act in the future, they think they must make changes to the organisation or to change organisation, because it has prevented them from being useful to others through operational decisions that favour those who think they are the most useful.

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<sup>12</sup>[https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file\\_plus\\_list/4046-the\\_fundamental\\_principles\\_of\\_the\\_international\\_red\\_cross\\_and\\_red\\_crescent\\_movement.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4046-the_fundamental_principles_of_the_international_red_cross_and_red_crescent_movement.pdf)

BONZI Bénédicte « The best of men is the most useful to others when the desire for usefulness runs counter to utilitarianism »

## Conclusion

Didier Fassin (2010) considers that the emergency to which humanitarian workers respond in France today is a construct; a semantic shift in which situations of distress become emergencies. His observation of the restructuring of public policy mechanisms raises questions about the role of organisations involved in missions delegated by the State. People in distress who become emergencies will no longer fall within the scope of mainstream services; they are structurally excluded from them. Volunteers become disengaged when they come up against the obstacle of having to be satisfied with helping just one person when they are convinced that more can be done. It is mainly for this reason that they regret seeing precious time taken up by turf wars. Exercising your rights and obtaining timely social assistance when someone falls into a state of distress is an obstacle course. Amid the discomfort of this new battlefield, volunteers commit themselves to be useful to others in an ideal of social justice. "Only those who are mad enough to think they can change the world are the ones who actually do," said Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross. This madness is present in the actions of many volunteers and is part of a commitment made in reaction to changes in society and the desire to provide an opportunity for civic and even political involvement.

BONZI Bénédicte « The best of men is the most useful to others hen the desire for usefulness runs counter to utilitarianism »

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