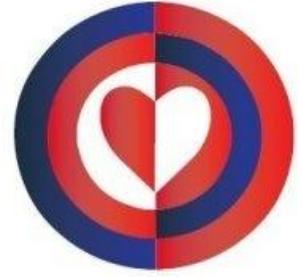


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“Connecting with the past – the fundamental Principles of the International

Red Crescent Movement in Critical Historical Perspective

Geneva, September 2015

**DEMANDING A SOLIDARITY-BASED COMMITMENT  
FOR THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR:  
BEYOND PROFESSIONALISM AND TECHNICAL  
CHARITY BUSINESS**

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The character of our sector, most commonly marked by urgency, only rarely lets us look back at what we did, at how we did it and what the short term and long term affects have been. It is essential for me and for us, as humanitarian actors, to capture the essence of our action, which needs to ensure human dignity for all. It is within this framework that **Amel Association International, created within the same period as Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde, is still contributing, more than 35 years after its foundation, to a citizen driven humanitarian action.**

Therefore, it is with nostalgia that I discuss today a past humanitarian era, which has defined my existence and my humanitarian commitment. I appreciate this initiative from ICRC to retrace the history of the humanitarian sector, to understand its evolution, its defining events, its challenges and successes, which will allow us to better comprehend the present and better prepare for the future.

## I. A Brief Overview of the Historical Context

Today is an occasion to further reflect on the evolutions and transformations of humanitarian practices since the Second World War, and more precisely, the turbulent period of decolonization and the cold war. It is therefore convenient to describe the social, economic and political context which defined this period. The Second World War finished with an eclipse of political hegemony within Europe, for the benefit of the United States. Destroyed by the war, European states had to be rebuilt, and it was through the Marshall Plan, a plan of European recovery organized and financed by Washington, Europe was able to take the path of reconstruction. This was molded by a development and promotion of an open and globally integrated market, as well as by the adoption of policies allowing the protection of national capital and the promotion of growth. This capitalist boom has been defined by Wallerstein as «the strongest economic expansion in history in the global system since 1500».

This period saw the emergence of the welfare state and a new concept of the state in which its scope of intervention and regulation was extended to economic and social domains, with the aim of fairly distributing wealth and taking responsibility of communities at risk. Nevertheless, this economic and social model was unable to last indefinitely, and progressively we became witness to of incompatibility of the capitalist concept class and social democracy. This ideological conflict provoked a severe slow down, and eventually the stagnation of economic growth. The oil crisis of 1973 is often cited as a key date to illustrate this transition from the «Golden Age» to an economic recession that brought with it mass unemployment and price inflation.

As social rights advanced in the West, the disparities between the colonialists and the colonized only continued to grow. The desire of national liberation and auto-determination took hold of the countries of the Third World and of the South (Vietnam Revolution, Cultural Revolution in China, Cuba, Palestine, South Yemen and Dhofar, the Vietnam of the UK). Since the 1950s, in Asia, Africa and South America, tens of countries rose up to fight for independence.

It is important to highlight that the majority of decolonization processes took place within contexts of violence and armed conflict. However, the discourse maintained by Western states claimed that these processes had been carried out with consensus and peace. The discourse was perfectly recorded in the mentality of the time, dominated by the superiority of the West and the hierarchy of races. In the 1960s, it became widespread the idea that individuals in the Third World were incapable of managing a country, of doing politics, of employing impartial and objective justice and of putting in place public policies etc.

Basil Davidson, evoked a « *New Africa* » as a consequence of independence, to illustrate the period of vitality and energy that the period of decolonization was considered to be. Davidson considered that the process of independence was a true «*claim to their affiliation to the human family*». Furthermore, the auto determination of these people allowed numerous projects to be put in place for the whole population and even to strengthen their economic growth and increase their GDP. However, concerning the former empires, the independence of colonies weakened their global power. These empires therefore pushed to and succeeded, at least partially, to turn the situation to their advantage, integrating these former colonies in the globalized world economy.

The crisis which hit the global economy in 1973 had catastrophic consequences. The West had to find a solution to turn the corner and developing credits in the post-colonial world seemed to satisfy this. In their growing economies, newly dependent countries, notably in Africa, accepted credit aimed at stimulating their economies and financing public programs. But, it is important to bear in mind, that a developing country doesn't have the same room for maneuver, economically speaking, as a nation that has been established for decades.

In fact, these developing countries were trapped by this capitalist system, and became overwhelmed by their debts. To cope with these credits, the creditors had to implement Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that were defined by wage cuts, social budget reductions, the privatization of public enterprises and services etc. In this way, through this credit system, the relationship of dependency between the former colonies and colonizers was re-established. Following this and the damaging legacy of colonialism, such as the chaotic definition of borders, the inter and intra-division of communities, the privileges granted to certain members of society and the expense of others also led those new states to being plunged into a civil war after their independence.

Simultaneously, at the global level, ideological and political confrontation between the leaders of communist regimes of the USSR and non-communist regimes, led by the United States, for more than forty years provoked proxy wars, with numerous civilian and military victims. This was the case notable in Korea, Indochina, Vietnam and Afghanistan.

## **II. The Evolution of the Humanitarian Field**

The humanitarian world saw a great number of transformations during these global evolutions. The beginning of a globalized community not only affected social structures but equally economic and political developments. Within the framework of study that we find ourselves, three historical phases of the humanitarian sector seem apparent to me. The first started during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the end of the Second World War. This period was characterized by a missionary and essentially religious concept of the humanitarian sector, alongside the application of the laws of war. This period notably saw the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863, thanks to the initiative of the Swiss, Henry Dunant, who wanted to humanize the act of war, after having witnessed the horrors of the battle of Solferino, where 40 000 victims were abandoned on the battlefield. His initiative developed the premises of International Humanitarian Law, which currently governs the laws of war and of which the ICRC is the guardian. The international conference of the Red Cross, in Vienna in 1865, stated the seven founding principles on which the action of the Red Cross rests, namely humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.

However, the principle of neutrality is still debated in the humanitarian community, and the ICRC has often been accused, rightly or wrongly, for its method of action. The Red Cross does not recognise any right to interfere in the internal affairs of states. The organisation does not intervene unless it has received the approval of the state, in order to respect their sovereignty. In return, the state grants access to its personnel and any other good related to the Red Cross.

In response to this, the second phase of humanitarian history, triggered by the war of Biafra in Nigeria, which killed more than a million people between 1967 and 1970, produced a rupture in the traditional model of the RC movement that had been employed up until then. Faced with the acts of violence which the warring parties had committed and the powerlessness of humanitarian actors who were prevented to act by the Nigerian government, a group of doctors who worked at the time for the RC, decided to establish an association that would be more free in its discourse and in its acts. On the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1971, Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) was created, aimed at being an « awakener of consciences » and a witness to atrocities committed. Doctors without Borders became the initiator of an international movement and a new generation of associations with « no border » principles emerged. The driving question of this new movement was: should we remain neutral or should we condemn actions even at the detriment of humanitarian effectiveness?

I am proud to confirm that the organisation that I lead, Amel Association International, also initiated this movement, with the aim of helping vulnerable populations in the name of humanity and of fundamental human rights. Before Amel, I had founded the Social Help, an NGO active back then in the Palestinian camps, followed in the same spirit by the Amel

Association. This Lebanese NGO, civil and non-confessional was thus created in 1979 after the first Israeli invasion in the south of Lebanon in 1978, during the tragic Lebanese civil war. Amel was developed and extended across all areas of the country, to create a counter-current to the norm, in which all people are accepted and in which there is a devotion to a balanced development, to dialogue and to the acceptance of 'the Other', given that we all want to reach the same objective: *live as well as possible, far from war and from inequalities and injustice.*

Amel is based on a vision of a participatory society, in which the humanity of each individual is respected, and in which the economic and social autonomy of local populations is engendered. Amel aims to contribute to the construction of a democratic society and a prosperous Lebanon, in which all individuals live in harmony, irrelevant of their confession, political affiliation, socio-economic level or their nationality; a country in which citizenship comes from a real concept, shared by all, and in which fundamental rights (health, education...) and the liberty of expression are ensured by the State.

It is in this regard that the association adopts the slogan « **Positive thinking and permanent optimism** » and the theory of three Ps (**principles** which define a **position** which is put into **practice**) with the aim of uniting efforts of all to bring those discourses to reality. Our action extends to acting against the currents that characterize the Arab world, principally the absence of strategy, the spirit of division, destructive criticism, bossism and an all-or-nothing mentality. Yet there has been notable progress. The transformations produced by the Arab Spring are undeniable, even if the results have not been as expected. No one can ignore the force and energy which initiated the change.

Amel places hope in the power of women, and more particularly in young generations who are armed with values of social justice, liberty, and who disseminate their innovative ideas through social media. Nowadays, in the Arab world, we are moving gradually towards democratic societies. Nevertheless, at the same time, the question of Palestine continues to haunt the region, and stability will not become a reality in the Middle East until a solution to this conflict is found.

Amel's strategy therefore finds itself on the **provision of basic services** (health, education) in the most disadvantaged areas of Lebanon, through its 24 socio-medical centres and 6 mobile clinics, as well as on **development programs**. Through these programs, and once basic needs have been covered, Amel assists vulnerable individuals in achieving their potential and in integrating themselves in social and economic spheres as well as in contributing to civil engagement. This process hopes to succeed in reinforcing a **culture of rights** and a concept of **citizenship**, in which the civil rights of *all* citizens are promoted, irrelevant of confessional or political affiliations or socio-economic conditions. Women and youth are particularly targeted in Amel's work, as they are considered the true drivers of change.

Amel focuses not only on vulnerable areas within the country but also on refugees and migrant domestic worker rights, in order to promote the fundamental rights of ALL, and to push these rights to be protected and respected. Working directly in the field, alongside these populations, Amel has developed resilient relationships and trust with these communities, gaining strong and lasting support.

Strong in its experience in Lebanon, in December 2010, Amel became international, and was registered in the directory of international NGOs in Geneva, in order to share its know-how globally, and to reinforce collaborations with other NGOs. ***Given the harmful effects of globalisation and the unequal distribution of wealth, Amel has extended to act in the international scene, to reinforce partnerships between North and South, in order to form pressure groups to return to a regulated welfare state that is not at the mercy of bankers and financial institutions.***

I am deeply critical of the state of the humanitarian sector today, and still have difficulties accepting the way in which it has developed since the end of the cold war. From the committed humanitarian and activist phase, we have turned to a third historical phase of the humanitarian sector, known as « charity business ». The industrialization of the development sector and humanitarian aid has had disastrous consequences on human principles and solidarity, and these consequences have extended into the actions of humanitarian, development and cooperation actors. Despite the elevated number of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental institutions, which only increase budgets to astronomical figures, we still see that we are surrounded by suffering from food, energy and financial crises as well as the multiplication of

violent conflicts, above all in urban contexts, with enormous loss of life and massive displacement of populations, which has recently made a smashing entry into the realm of local European politics.

The **humanitarian sector should return to the values of solidarity and those of humanity, truly and sincerely committed to the just cause of the people**. The humanitarian model that was prevalent in the 70s and 80s, before the globalization of the free market and a weakening of the state which has led to exaggerated technical expertise in the humanitarian sector and « *charity business* ». Professionalization and excessive technicalities are the new forms of power.

Today, on this occasion, it is essential to reverse these trends. In order to do this, we must observe the use of humanitarian principles in the context of 1960-1970, in trying to extract lessons and best practices of this period.

### III. Debating the Principles

From this critical perspective, we should firstly discuss humanitarian principles. The process of decolonization structured the international agenda and had a big impact on the development of NGOs. NGOs of the North came to support the emerging states in the south. We were able to see how their standards differed from their practice in the field.

Currently, the principles stated in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, dictate International Humanitarian Law and since 1970 have been put to test. Two fundamental principles are put ahead of all others: **neutrality** («[*abstinence*] from taking sides or engaging at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature »<sup>1</sup>) and **impartiality** (« no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinion... being guided solely by needs, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress»<sup>2</sup>). While IHL provides legal status to humanitarian action, these key principles which should be respected without distinction, don't always seem to be employed.<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned previously, this was first seen in the context of Biafra. The ICRC, following its traditional stance, and the rules of International Law (of non-interference in the affairs of states) decided not to condemn the abuses witnessed and maintained its reservation policy.

We also reprimand the Red Cross for not denouncing the concentration and extermination camps of the Nazis, an approach that was driven by their want to continue its work with prisoners. Access to victims was a constant concern of theirs, and the physical integrity of individuals was their principal objective. It was this failure and inaction that triggered the « without borders » movement. The war of Biafra became the « *the symbol of the powerlessness of humanitarian law to protect the victims of civil war* »<sup>4</sup>. Biafra established a new generation of humanitarians in which new norms to guide action were developed.

In the 1980's, some NGOs began to implement actions, clandestinely entering within the territory of some states who would have otherwise refused help; in this way, those NGOs violated two principles of international law: that of non-interference and that of the inviolability of borders. These NGOs, Doctors without Borders, Doctors of the World, Medical Aid International, argued that humanitarian aid was not always used wisely: that aid could be caught up in conflict, to the detriment of those in need ; it could be turned from its humanitarian goals and not reach its victims ; furthermore, it could be a pretext for displacement.

Furthermore, these NGOs realized that material aid was not enough: sometimes it was necessary to condemn the actions or situations within a territory, and in this way awake the international community, provoking them to react. In other words, the classic style of humanitarian action, incarnated by the ICRC (discretion, neutrality and trusting relationships with

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p4046.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p4046.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Leader N., "The politics of principles: the principles of humanitarian action in practice", *HPG Report 2*, March 2000

<sup>4</sup> Françoise Bouchet Saulnier dans l'article "Cent cinquante ans de réalisations normatives", *Questions internationales*, La Documentation française, juillet-août 2012

states) would be substituted by a more committed, active, and possibly even clandestine type of action, given that the intervention should be able to take place without the authorization of the state concerned, in cases of emergency or opposition from the state.

#### IV. Principles in Action

Such examples demonstrate how these principles are redefined with in the evolution of a crisis. The application of these principles is always a fine line, as we are able to observe. Humanitarian crises, during the period of the Cold War in particular, have made these principles evolve considerably.

External interventions, such as the case in the Palestinian camps, which in 1969 were serving as training camps, were being funded and maintained by Arab regimes. Or the implication of faith-based NGOs, such as Church Aid and its action in Niger, where it took a debatable stance in the conflict of Biafra, demonstrates the tensions between the law and the norms that are eventually applied. Equally, the principle of sovereignty, which allows states to legitimize their politics by dictating laws and ethics whilst, in some cases, going against humanitarian principles.

In this regard, the additional Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions of 1977 state that the « *offer of aid* » mustn't be considered as an interference in a conflict if they fulfill the conditions of « *neutrality and impartiality* » (art. 70). Nevertheless, this protocol is limited in its range and only applies to international armed conflicts, and by the possibility that the state sets up technical regulations and conducts audits, particularly in regards to the presence of relief personnel within their territory (which is subject to prior authorization- art. 71)<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, returning to the principle of **protection of humanitarian actors** and the distinctions that are made between humanitarian personnel: on one hand, those who are always protected (the expatriates) and those who aren't, the locals, who remain involved in the field. I can verify this, when in 1982, Amel intervened in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, in the area that had been bombed. Amel stayed on to protect and support these communities, whilst other European NGOs had left the conflict zone. This is the same as the current response to the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon, with Amel continuing to work in such contexts, above all in areas such as Ersal, which has seen huge influxes of refugees and as a consequence, is prey to Islamist groups. The national NGOs continue to take positions and commit themselves to providing help. This poses a real threat to them. However, we can observe that humanitarian interventions from INGOs are more likely to protect their staff than to protect civilians, although our job should be considered as a commitment following the principle of voluntary service.

#### V. Threats to the Principles

These transformations reflect the internal crises that **cut through the whole humanitarian sector**. At the time, two arguments were defined: **the mismanagement of aid and its manipulation by the media**. As we are able to observe, in **Africa, between 1970-1980, in the Sahel region, this aid was manipulated by governments**. En 1985, despite the solidarity received from across the world, Doctors without Borders was expelled from Ethiopia. The organisation had denounced the policies of the Mengistu government, which took the money of aid to finance the transfer of its population from the north to the south<sup>6</sup>. According to the theory of Amartya Sen, the famine there was not linked to the disruption of stocks but to its unequal distribution and to pressures linked to the social organisation of the country. Therefore, in the 1990s, we see that this instrumentalisation of aid was beginning to develop in Sudan and Liberia as well.

These principles are also distorted by the **manipulation of aid by the media**. Questionable choices were taken as to the coverage of crises (between 1980-1990) and of beneficiaries in trying to shock and emotionally touch individuals to donate. By certain organisations « *the outrageous media portrayal of poverty and conflicts constitute the competitive business base for NGOs* »<sup>7</sup>. These excesses are made visible on the one hand, to paint a bleak picture of the situation of

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.operationspaix.net/35-resources/details-lexique/couloir-humanitaire.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.histoire.presse.fr/actualite/portraits/sylvie-brunel-la-dame-de-l-humanitaire-01-09-2002-8681>

<sup>7</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, « Du développement à l'humanitaire, ou le triomphe de la com' », *Revue Tiers Monde*, 2009/4 (n° 200)

victims, and on the other hand, to adorn the action of NGOs in using a paternalistic and Manichean discourse which exaggerate the real needs on the ground.

«*Currently, opinion is made through the visibility of crimes against humanity, but it's not made by reasons that can be considered even worse: indifference and weariness*»<sup>8</sup>. Nowadays, one crisis is followed by another, the Tsunami in South-East Asia, the earthquake in Haiti, the Syrian Crisis, and the earthquake that took place in Nepal last April. While during this period, principles are expressed through terms of global poverty and unequal distribution of wealth, the relationships between North and South are changing, whilst taking into account such problems and the issues involved.

## VI. Principles in Wider Perspective

**The 1970s** were the framework in which the growth of the NGO system was based on independence, restoring hope in the people, releasing the grip of Western domination, and creating a space for discussion (with the UN) and creating North and South relationships that are just and equal. The NGOs from the North come with a heavy hand in supporting the actions of Southern NGOs. We note that the exponential growth of NGOs has led to the integration of these organisations in policies aimed at creating and maintaining peace, like was the case with the ICRC.

**This professionalization of the sector has had a perverse effect, the « *jurisdiction entrapment* »**<sup>9</sup>. The NGOs are subjected to two logics: one of a humanitarian nature, and the other of a market-orientated nature (a logic that was reinforced in the 1980s). Indeed, the necessary process of adaptation, such as the development of the mechanics of the sector, has led to the optimization of performance directly linked to the competition in the search for funding. This pushes NGOs to act in a competitive manner and inequality between national and international NGOs has become apparent, questioning the universality of NGOs.

**In addition, the process of institutionalization and the radicalization of funding** have restrained and fixed borders and relationships between NGOs and institutions. The technicalities reinforcing access to funding and of its standardization, has left to one side reflections on how best to act in the field, and has forgotten that the adaptation of intervention to each crisis is vital.

Added to this is the game of the states, in the context of independence, as they assert their national sovereignty whilst limiting the work of NGOs. These NGOs are gradually becoming players in international politics. But, the states tend to consider NGOs as elements to be controlled. The director of USAid even declared:

« ***NGOs and contractors are an arm of US government***<sup>10</sup> »

Some NGOs therefore tend to converge with these states, promoting their policies abroad. Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the UN, declared:

« ***Humanitarian aid has for too long served as a fig leaf camouflaging the absence of political will to tackle the root causes of the conflict.*** »

This demonstrates the challenges, which ICRC faced during this period, in which the transformation of conflicts and their unique nature obliged the implementation of these principles to be considered. These ethical conflicts, the multiplication of attacks on civilians, the difficulty of respecting the principle of neutrality at local level as well as in terms of the independence of governments are new games which oblige the ICRC to adapt their practices to the international geopolitics.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*

<sup>9</sup> Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, « Le paradoxe humanitaire ? Normes et Pratiques », *Cultures&conflits*, 60, hiver 2005

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*

## VII. The principles and Geopolitics

The principles were applied in the Cold War context of confrontation, in which ideologies imposed themselves. From this, aid became a « Business », a « market », and we saw the commodification of aid, serving to satisfy donors rather than giving sufficient support to beneficiaries<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore, humanitarian interventions are increasingly carried out under the wing of military operations, in complete contradiction of the fundamental principles of humanitarian action. As Pierre Micheletti highlighted « *the joint interventions between Western armed forces and humanitarian organisations from Europe contribute to the long-term confusion over the roles of each. This blurring is further provoked by the evolutions of the interventions of the armed forces, which are now often of a humanitarian civil-military type, or, as they are coming more and more, offering help to private military companies.* »<sup>12</sup>

This capitalist drift undermines the **principle of unity in a world where dangers are numerous and ubiquitous**. The transformation of the nature of conflicts demonstrates the gap between the principles and their application, when taking into account the particular contexts in which the law must be applied.

The UN, facing a global security fail, have oriented their action towards sustainable development, the new slogan that was broadcast throughout the 1990s. And we are able to verify the effects of these policies: before we had 400 million people living in poverty, yet nowadays, we are reaching a figure of 2 billion people<sup>13</sup>: “*Billions of people are being forced to be merging of the world system where notions of taste choice and assertion of status must be measured against the imperative of survival*”<sup>14</sup>.

**How can we escape these multiple traps and what lessons can we take from the humanitarian history to put these principles into action, in the most just way possible, whilst wars are taking place before our eyes, without the global community acting or reacting?**

**What has happened to the activism of the 1970s and 1980s, when the hopes and theories were multiplying and being reinforced?**

**In order to respond to this, we suggest a number of items:**

- 1) That civil society acts only for the service of the people and not substitutes the role of the state.**
- 2) That we return to a regulated state, and a social state, bearing in mind that we are one world, with one future, so that we work together for more just and equal human relations.**
- 3) That humanitarian sector be committed towards additional solidarity and not only offering professionalism and expertise through the BONGOs model (Business Oriented Non Governmental Organizations).**
- 4) That humanitarian sector stands alongside the vulnerable groups and fair causes of the people, among first the Palestinian cause.**
- 5) That humanitarian sector fights against the double standards between North and South and resist the spirit of neo-colonialism.**

<sup>11</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, « Du développement à l'humanitaire, ou le triomphe de la com' », *Revue Tiers Monde*, 2009/4 (n° 200)

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Micheletti, Les Humanitaires victimes des logiques d'Etat, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Juin 2007.

<sup>13</sup> “*Between 1960 and 1994 the gap per capita income between the richest fifth of the world people and the poorest fifth*” after this period the trend was accelerating and the inequality is becoming much more pronounced. In MARFLEET, « Globalisation and the Third World », *Issue 81 of International Socialism Journal*, 1998

<sup>14</sup> MARFLEET, « Globalisation and the Third World », *Issue 81 of International Socialism Journal*, 1998

**6) That humanitarian sector struggles for a fair repartition of the wealth in a world where 20% of the population detains 80% of the wealth.**

**7) That civil society from the North and South develop together an equal partnership to battle for a fairer and more human world.**