

# FROM 2003 TO 2023: SOME KEY ELEMENTS OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY



PHOTO:  
**Thousands of migrants cross the Darien jungle between Colombia and Panama.**

COLOMBIA © JUAN CARLOS TOMASI

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*The articles reflect the the authors' opinions and do not necessarily necessarily represent the MSF or IECAH point of view*

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Since the IECAH and MSF Spain began to prepare and publish the two-yearly Report on Humanitarian Action in the first years of this century, the international scenario has undergone important changes, both at the geopolitical level and in terms of the threats that we face, with the climate crisis, extreme poverty and inequality, along with situations of fragility and violence as the most obvious, the world is quite different today from the one we used to know. And that has had important repercussions in humanitarian affairs. We would at times remember that, as the tango lyrics say, “twenty years is nothing” and that may be true in certain areas. In the humanitarian field, however, things change at such a speed that if we look back at these last 20 years we can see that the necessary capacity for adaptation that humanitarian action has had since its inception has accelerated in these two decades and that many of the issues that we considered immutable or, at least, quite stable, have been modified in an important way. Humanitarian action, as can be seen in this year's report, has grown in funds or institutional complexity and has been incorporating aspects such as decolonial approaches, intersectionality or localisation that were not present, or were a minority or testimonial, two decades ago. At the same time, some debates continue and issues related to principles, legal frameworks, protection of affected populations, and attempts to avoid the instrumentalisation, politicisation or manipulation of aid, among others, have had to be revisited.

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**Humanitarian action has incorporated aspects such as decolonial approaches, intersectionality or localisation that were minor two decades ago**

Along these lines, this article aims, briefly, to give a panoramic view, based on the experience and lessons learned in these years, many of them contained in specific chapters of the aforementioned Reports, on some of the key elements that allow us to understand the challenges that humanitarian action faces today, as well as some of the initiatives and proposals underway to address them. During these years, on many occasions, we have encountered questions or doubts from some readers, journalists, or professionals from other areas of solidarity, related to preconceived ideas about humanitarian action, who relate it, in some cases, only to emergency aid, who, in other cases, always link it with development efforts or put it at the service of development programmes, who interpret it as short-term assistance, or who undervalue humanitarian principles or consider them outdated, or whatever. In short, this article tries to respond succinctly to some of these concerns that allow us to define the role that humanitarian action plays today.

# 2

## SOME KEY ELEMENTS

Below we summarise in a grouped manner some of the fundamental elements that we believe can account for today's humanitarian reality.

### 2.1. An increasingly necessary action

One of the most frequent criticisms we receive in the humanitarian sector is being accused of being “catastrophic” and of exaggerating the most negative aspects of the international reality, and hiding progress. Therefore, I want to express clearly at the beginning of the article that this supposed catastrophism is not the majority position in this sector. We recognise the progress that has been made in terms of development in some countries, expressed, for example, in several of the indicators of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but we have been insisting for years on the limitations of the 2030 Agenda itself, in terms of providing security to countries affected by violence or the most dramatic consequences of a lack of development, such as hunger.<sup>1</sup> *The recent Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* could not be clearer on this matter and “shows we are leaving more than half the world behind. Progress on more than 50% of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30%, it has stalled or gone into reverse. These include key targets on poverty, hunger and climate. Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been.”<sup>2</sup> From the humanitarian and development sector, we have been warning that “an accumulation of catastrophic events – Great Recession, pandemic, conflicts, debt crisis – has extraordinarily complicated the roadmap for international progress.”<sup>3</sup> This lack of progress in development continues to leave many sectors of the population behind and is making humanitarian work more relevant than ever; to alleviate or mitigate at least the most harmful effects of crises.

In this sense, the data that we have reflected year after year in these *Reports* shows the growth of populations and people in need of humanitarian assistance throughout the planet.<sup>4</sup>

The relevance of humanitarian action on the international stage

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**The humanitarian needs of many populations have continued to grow in increasingly complex contexts**

<sup>1</sup> Santander, G., Rey, F. and Daza, A. (2019). *La Agenda 2030 de desarrollo sostenible y la acción humanitaria [The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and humanitarian action]*. IECAH, 2019. Available at: <https://iecah.org/la-agenda-2030-de-desarrollo-sostenible-y-la-accion-humanitaria/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations (2023). *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*. Available at: [unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Fanjul, G. (2023). *La Agenda 2030 es una herramienta imperfecta, la pregunta es si hay una alternativa mejor [The 2030 Agenda is an imperfect tool, the question is whether there is a better alternative]*. El País. Available at: <https://elpais.com/planeta-futuro/red-de-expertos/2023-09-19/la-agenda-2030-es-una-herramienta-imperfecta-la-pregunta-es-si-hay-una-alternativa-mejor.html>

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 2 of this report for more quantitative and qualitative data in this regard

leaves no room for doubt and although there may always be some discrepancies regarding figures, priorities for action, categorisation of risk groups, etc., humanitarian action is a growing concern for the international community and has been consolidated as one of the fundamental elements of action of the United Nations and many states and civil society organisations.

## **2.2. Changes in the nature of the crises that humanitarian action faces**

The growing complexity of crises, the confluence of various causal factors in their evolution, the multiplicity of threats that can cause risks and that act synergistically, aggravating their effects on the affected communities, have led to new approaches being proposed for years by the humanitarian world or disaster risk reduction (DRR) sector. Recently, some organisations have proposed talking about “polycrises” to reflect this idea that “implies that various risks interact, giving rise to an impact greater than the sum of its parts”. In any case, beyond the various terminologies, on a theoretical level this idea has gained weight of there being a multiplicity of elements that must be understood to improve any action, of any type, that wants to address crises, both from a preventive and response perspective.

However, putting these approaches into practice is proving to be very difficult and, whether for institutional reasons, resistance to change, inertia or other reasons, concretising coherent actions that address complexity is, pardon the joke, very complex. The difficulty of coming to an understanding between the financing of climate action, DRR, development or humanitarian action regarding population movements would be an example. One case among many, at a country level, would be Haiti, in which the consensus regarding the enormous complexity of the causes of the crisis (economic, social, geopolitical, environmental, historical...) and its consequences does not lead to adequate answers, generating, in this and in many other cases, a certain paralysis.

### **2.2.1. Old and new contexts of action**

In line with what we expressed in the previous section, together with the “classic” contexts of humanitarian action, basically violent conflicts (in many cases of long duration or chronic) and natural disasters, the reality of humanitarian work today places it in less known contexts, such as the so-called “other situations of violence” (OSV), in which there is no recognised armed conflict (neither international nor non-international), but in which serious humanitarian consequences occur. Situations such as those in the Central American Northern Triangle, the effects of the excessive use of force by authorities in social or other protests in numerous countries, mixed migratory flows (refugees, asylum seekers, migrants...), forced displacements for environmental reasons... a whole series of contexts in which there is little or no presence of other non-humanitarian organisations, and in which part of the humanitarian work is concentrated.

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## **Other situations of violence that are not considered as armed conflicts bring challenges for humanitarian work**

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**Humanitarian action must maintain its autonomy concerning politics or military action so as not to be manipulated**

The term “complex emergencies,” which was widely accepted in the past, has become less used, although in the Venezuelan crisis it has been used profusely, since for the UN it began to have simple organisational and institutional connotations: “A complex emergency can be defined as a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict, and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country programme.”<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, in many of these scenarios, issues related to access to affected populations and those related to the security of humanitarian personnel take on special relevance. Chapter 7 of this report is a good example of that daily reality.

### **2.2.2. New risks of instrumentalisation**

Although since its origins humanitarian action, or a large part of it, has tried to maintain its independence so as not to be a mere instrument at the service of other political, military, security, strategic, economic, image-related or other purposes, it is a fact that throughout history there have been numerous situations of instrumentalisation.<sup>6</sup> Some, such as the attempts to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003 on humanitarian grounds, or the frequent situations of “humanitarian interference” in the 1990s, were so obscene that they did not leave many doubts about the instrumentalisation. At present, instrumentalisation tends to be more subtle and is basically linked to financing and a certain legitimisation of other issues such as military aid. In relation to the war in Ukraine, for example, it is common to hear political leaders say things like “the commitment is to maintain military and humanitarian aid to the extent possible”, without differentiating anything and mixing it all together.

It is worth remembering that some donor countries were aware of this risk of instrumentalisation and proposed initiatives to limit it. The so-called Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, launched in 2003, with the Nordic countries leading the way, seeks precisely to establish, through 23 commitments, non-instrumentalised financing of humanitarian action. The GHD is still active today, but with little prominence in practice. Currently, 42 states have adopted its principles and good practices.

### **2.3. Increasingly complex action**

The complexity of the work scenarios to which we have alluded above has led to a growing sophistication of humanitarian work that is manifested in all its dimensions.

#### **2.3.1. Back to humanitarian principles**

The conviction that principled and independent aid is essential

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2001). *Coordination in Complex Emergencies*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/coordination-complex-emergencies>

<sup>6</sup> See Antonio Donini (Ed.) (2012), *The Golden Fleece. Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, Kumarian Press. USA.

has gained weight, although it is sometimes not reflected in reality on the ground. Of course, the debate remains around neutrality or the need to broaden our view of the principles by including other cultural visions. But let's not get confused, if humanitarianism is not based on clear principles and a vision of human beings as subjects of law and bearers of dignity, it will cease to make sense. The use of simplifying mantras such as “saving lives” has contributed to trivialising humanitarianism and forgetting the very idea of a dignified life. Of a life worth living.

Beyond theoretical and sometimes philosophical debates about the principles and values of humanitarianism, experience in the field shows that respect for it is a guarantee of solid and coherent humanitarian work. The example discussed in Chapter 7, in the case of the detention of MSF staff in Cameroon, is a good example.

In any case, debates around the principles continue and the war in Ukraine has revitalised the questioning of neutrality, which for some must give way to a recovery of the idea of political solidarity with the population of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

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**Despite the debates, there is agreement that principles should remain a hallmark of humanitarianism**

### 2.3.2. Incorporating protection and rights through various means

The protection of people affected by crises as an essential element of humanitarian action has been consolidated in this period and the so-called “human rights-based approach” (HRBA) is considered compatible with the classic needs approach, contributing to carrying out protective actions.<sup>8</sup> However, especially in major emergencies, numerous humanitarian agencies return to working with very welfare-based approaches.

The emphasis on protection is linked to the fact that the deterioration of legal frameworks for the protection of rights has continued to grow. These are not only serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by irregular groups, but also breaches of the legal frameworks that govern humanitarian action (IHL, international human rights law, law of refugee populations) by part of the states. The mean-spirited performance of the European Union in matters of asylum and refuge has been one of the most serious issues in humanitarian affairs in this period.

On the other hand, the so-called global war on terror and many of the measures undertaken by states to combat terrorism are having serious humanitarian consequences, as has been analysed in various articles of these *Reports* and in Chapter 6 of

<sup>7</sup> Slim, H. (2022). *Solidarity, Not Neutrality, Will Characterize Western Aid to Ukraine, Ethics and International Affairs*. CICR. Available at: <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/online-exclusives/solidarity-not-neutrality-will-characterize-western-aid-to-ukraine>

<sup>8</sup> Rey, F., Daza, A. and Gilsanz, J. (2021). *La incorporación del enfoque basado en derechos humanos y la protección en los proyectos de acción humanitaria apoyados por el Ayuntamiento de Madrid: estado actual y propuestas de futuro [The incorporation of the human rights-based approach and protection in humanitarian action projects supported by the Madrid City Council: current status and future proposals]*. IECAH. Available at: <https://iecah.org/informe-final-de-investigacion-ebdh-y-proteccion-ayuntamiento-de-madrid-2/>

this edition.<sup>9</sup> **The criminalisation of aid** has made its deployment even more difficult in many contexts.

In this scenario, the urgency to dedicate more attention to protection tasks and the need to complement various modes of action has become stronger: from **humanitarian diplomacy, to political pressure, advocacy or denunciation**. The recovery of the testimonial and critical aspects of humanitarianism has become evident and must be reinforced in the future.

### 2.3.3. Institutional complexity: a humanitarian system overwhelmed with transformation difficulties

The so-called humanitarian system has been strengthened, but at the same time it has become more complex and bureaucratic. The 2005 Humanitarian Reform and the 2016 Humanitarian Summit, among other initiatives, have had positive impacts, such as the Grand Bargain. But the leadership of certain outdated visions of humanitarianism should be replaced. The UN has been gaining weight in the humanitarian field as shown in Chapter 2 of this report, both in funding and in policy coordination, and this entails certain risks. The prominence of certain countries is becoming a brake on the necessary transformations. It does not seem that changes in the system, that some are trying to make happen, will come from those who have led and skewed the system they now want to reform.

### 2.3.4. Other forms of solidarity. Resituating "localisation". Mutual aid and local support networks

The emphasis on local action, including by governments and sub-state authorities, has been a breath of fresh air in the humanitarian system, although it is complex in situations of violent conflict, as MSF colleagues have expressed in these *Reports*.<sup>10</sup> But we are turning the famous "localisation" into something excessively rhetorical, when not using it with a certain opportunism from the aid donor countries. Localisation must mean that "the response is as local as possible, as international as necessary". And that means not only transferring funds but also strengthening and recognising the leading role of local organizations.

In this sense, the humanitarian sector's recognition, visibility and support for "mutual aid" experiences, which had not been recognised in the past, represents an important change. Mutual aid networks have always represented the first barrier to protection and assistance in crises. For decades, a biased view and a certain distrust on the part of humanitarian organisations

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**We must be open to considering and collaborating with other forms of solidarity, especially those that emerge at the local level**

<sup>9</sup> Pozo, A. (2022). *Civiles y culpables: impacto de las medidas antiterroristas en poblaciones estigmatizadas*. In: *Informe La acción humanitaria en 2020-2021: la pandemia retrasa las reformas necesarias*. [Report on humanitarian action in 2020-2021: the pandemic delays necessary reforms] MSF and IECAH. Available at: <https://www.msf.es/sites/default/files/documents/informe-iecah-msf-2021.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Pozo, A. and Murray, T. (2020). *Personal nacional, localización y principios humanitarios en contextos de conflicto armado*. In: *Informe La acción humanitaria en 2019-2020: una agenda condicionada por la pandemia*. MSF and IECAH. Available at: <https://static.msf.es/web/archivos/documentos/oo-iecah-2020>

has meant that this reality has been underestimated. Recovering and strengthening these networks is one of the most urgent challenges of the present time and perhaps, as Pablo Servigne suggests, "the only way to survive this century will be to help each other".<sup>11</sup>

### **2.3.5. The necessary and difficult relationship with other sectors. Beyond the three-way nexus between humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding**

The relationship between humanitarian action and other areas of work has always been the subject of debate, controversy and, above all, has led to a wide range of practical approaches in the field. Since the 1980s and for several decades, the so-called "linking relief, rehabilitation and development" (LRRD) approach has occupied the attention of many humanitarian and development agencies and has given rise to abundant literature on the subject, both at the academic level and in terms of practical implementation. On the other hand, the relationship between humanitarianism and peacebuilding, and especially the possible impact of humanitarian action on violent conflict and post-conflict situations, has also long been the subject of analysis and, of course, the subject of heated debate. The so-called "triple nexus" between humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding has reopened many of those old debates, giving them a new dimension with the support of many major donor agencies.

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**In addition to the triple nexus, the relationship with other sectors and types of cooperation is a must for humanitarian actors**

We have included these discussions in the *Reports* and propose that new ways of working together with other humanitarian actors must be established. The solution to humanitarian crises will not come from humanitarian organisations. It will come, in the best of cases, from joint work between development, peacebuilding, human rights, feminist and environmental organisations, among others. We must be open to these collaborations, avoiding previous approaches. Proposals such as the triple nexus must be approached with caution to avoid the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action for other purposes.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.3.6. Progress and limitations in the inclusion of new intersectional and decolonial approaches**

Although perhaps later than in other sectors, humanitarian action has strongly embraced feminist, intersectional and, more recently, decolonial and anti-racist approaches. In successive *Reports*, we have looked at progress in these areas and the challenges

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<sup>11</sup> Vicente, A. (2021). Pablo Servigne: *La única manera de sobrevivir a este siglo será la ayuda mutua*. El País. Available at: <https://elpais.com/cultura/2021-05-03/pablo-servigne-la-unica-manera-de-sobrevivir-a-este-siglo-sera-la-ayuda-mutua.html>

<sup>12</sup> Rey, F. (2020). *El nexo entre la acción humanitaria, el desarrollo y la construcción de la paz: algunas precauciones desde una perspectiva humanitaria*. In *Informe La acción humanitaria en 2019-2020: una agenda condicionada por la pandemia*. MSF and IECAH. Available at: <https://iecah.org/el-nexo-entre-la-accion-humanitaria-el-desarrollo-y-la-construccion-de-la-paz-algunas-precauciones-desde-una-perspectiva-humanitaria/>



ahead.<sup>13</sup>

Incorporating these dimensions into humanitarian work is not easy as it requires changing many of the usual working dynamics and institutional and organisational aspects of the sector.

### 2.3.7. What if we devote more attention to prevention?

Since its inception, humanitarian action has been understood as a post-crisis response, with little incorporation of prevention elements.<sup>14</sup> The general view of humanitarianism is linked to post-emergency action. However, for several decades now, humanitarianism has been working on preventive aspects, in a broad sense, especially those related to disaster preparedness in the framework of DRR. In relation to violent conflict, humanitarian action has focused more on violence prevention or mitigation than on conflict prevention as conventionally understood, although some humanitarian organisations are increasingly introducing do-no-harm or impact assessment approaches in conflict contexts. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has had its own Prevention Doctrine since 2011.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, the idea of **anticipation** has been incorporated, so that both anticipation and the incorporation of preventive, **risk-based** and risk reduction approaches are becoming increasingly relevant. Rarely does a crisis or disaster occur suddenly. There is a growing realisation that humanitarian action must improve early warning and preparedness systems for various hazards by breaking away from response-only approaches. Moreover, the response improves if it is anticipated.

### 2.3.8. 'Technical' complexities. Quality and accountability initiatives.

Humanitarian action involves much more than the provision of goods and resources and involves a whole range of technical aspects in health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter, logistics, etc., which are fundamental and have made great strides forward. In these 20 years, what were previously mere proposals have been consolidated. The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and the other related standards (Sphere, INEE,

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## The prevention of both conflicts and natural disasters remains an unfinished business in the humanitarian field

<sup>13</sup> V Perejil, D. (2021). *Los enfoques decoloniales y antirracistas en la acción humanitaria*. In: *La acción humanitaria en 2021-2022: más allá de la guerra en Ucrania*. MSF and IECAH. Available at: [https://www.msf.es/sites/default/files/documents/informe\\_iecah-2022.pdf](https://www.msf.es/sites/default/files/documents/informe_iecah-2022.pdf); Abellán, B. Daza, A. and Mula, L. (2021). *La aplicación del enfoque feminista en la acción humanitaria*. In: *Informe La acción humanitaria en 2020-2021: la pandemia retrasa las reformas necesarias*. Available at: <https://www.msf.es/sites/default/files/documents/informe-iecah-msf-2021.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Rey, F. (2022). *De respuesta reactiva a acción preventiva: un reto para la acción humanitaria*. In: *Derecho Internacional y prevención de conflictos*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation and Spanish Association of Professors of International Law and International Relations. Available at: <https://iecah.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/RespuestaActiva-ReyMarcos.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (2011). *ICRC Prevention Policy*. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-4019.pdf>

cash transfer programmes...) are increasingly becoming unavoidable references throughout the sector and in these *Reports* we have discussed in depth what they can mean.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, accountability to affected communities has been gaining momentum and has become part of the regular work of humanitarian organisations.

## 3

### FINAL REFLECTIONS

In the face of the enormous changes in the international situation and contexts for action that have accelerated in recent decades, the humanitarian sector has always been torn between what must be preserved of its core commitment and vision of humanity, and what must be changed to adapt to new realities. It is not uncommon for there to be a certain pendulum swing between a conservative and essentialist position, which some people sum up as "back to basics", versus those who think it is better to broaden the concept of humanitarianism. Throughout these 20 years of the *Reports on Humanitarian Action*, and in this edition, we have tried to reflect the pros and cons of the various positions, taking sides at times, but leaving the options open at others. In any case, we have encouraged and promoted debates. This has been, and we hope continues to be, the spirit of these *Reports*. Let us hope that we succeed.

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**Humanitarian action must be open to change, while maintaining its essence and its commitment to humanity**

PHOTO:  
**A wrecked hospital in Lyman, Donetsk region.**

UKRAINE © COLIN DELFOSSE

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum, C. (2018). *Asegurar la calidad de la acción humanitaria ¿de la teoría a la práctica?* In: *Informe La acción humanitaria en 2017-2018: una acción múltiple pero insuficiente*. MSF and IECAH. Available at: <https://iecah.org/informe-2017-2018-la-accion-humanitaria-en-2017-2018-una-accion-multiple-pero-insuficiente/>

