

Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas

A socio-phenomenological approach to change

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“Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas. *A socio-phenomenological approach to change*” is an independent research project developed and conducted between 2021 and 2023 by Raphael Gorgeu, Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva.

An original piece, this research explores the dynamics of change specific to the humanitarian sector. It resonates with the work HERE-Geneva has undertaken since its creation and contributes to more global reflections on some current and future aid issues.

Applying insights from theoretical frameworks in social sciences – especially philosophy, sociology and International Relations – this research intends to bring new perspectives on how to approach change in humanitarian aid and to contribute to more theoretical debate on the construction of social reality.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian sector, since its formalisation at the beginning of the 1990s¹, has undergone profound changes. These transformations have accelerated since the 2000s, and even more so in the last decade, notably under the influence of an expansion of the sector, its globalisation and various reforms.

Many of the current debates aim to revisit some ways of thinking and approaching humanitarian aid, whether around issues related to the “decolonisation of aid”, the relevance and interpretations of the humanitarian principles, the role of local actors in humanitarian action, the centrality of national governments in the coordination of response plans, or the links between humanitarian and development agendas, the way of approaching emergencies, the imperative of integrating issues related to climate change, etc.

Parallel to these debates, countless studies attempt to propose avenues of reflection for this sector to be more efficient and more in line with the realities of today’s crises and the challenges faced by aid actors.²

Alongside these studies emanating mainly from the sector itself, some more academic research has nevertheless sought to construct a “history of humanitarian aid”, often focusing on a description of the transformation of the sector’s structuring. Others, rarer, have looked at the evolution of the “concept of humanitarian aid” showing how its contours and meanings continue to evolve over time and according to agents.³ Most of them however do not address the recent history of humanitarian aid nor the forces at play behind these evolutions.

As for the works aiming to provide avenues for reflection on mechanisms of change at play within this sector, they remain particularly rare. Very few seek to understand the dynamics through which change takes place and none really attempts to think about it in its entirety. Thinking about change appears thus a relevant theme for exploration.

Considering both the contemporary issues of humanitarian action and the state of current professional and academic research, this work aims therefore to contribute to practical and theoretical reflections for “thinking about change of the humanitarian sector” since its structuring in the 1990s.

¹ Especially the UN resolution 46/182 of 1991 which formally establishes a UN-led coordination architecture of humanitarian action.

² To only mention a few of some key reports of the last years:

- P. Saez, J. Konyndyk, R. Worden, *Rethinking Humanitarian Reform: What Will it Take to Truly Change the System?*, Center for Global Development, September 2021.
- P. Knox Clarke, *The State of the Humanitarian System 2018*, ALNAP, December 2018.
- C. Bennett, *Planning from the future: is the humanitarian system fit for purpose?*, ODI/HPG, January 2017.
- T. Gingerich, M. Cohen, *Turning the humanitarian system on its head*, Oxfam, July 2015.
- Feinstein International Center, *Humanitarian Horizons: a practitioners’ guide to the Future*, January 2010.

³ See for instance:

- Montemurro & Wendt, *Unpacking humanitarianism*, April 2020, HERE Geneva.
- C. Bennett, *Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action*, ODI/HPG, (2011-2016).
- M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press, 2011.
- A. Binder, C. Meier, J. Steets, *Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal?*, GPPI, August 2010.
- T. G. Weiss et M. Barnett, *Humanitarianism: A Brief History of the Present*, Cornell University Press, 2008.
- D. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley University of California Press, 2011.
- P. Ryfman, *Une histoire de l’humanitaire*, La Découverte, 2004.

The main purpose of exploring how the humanitarian sector moves is to understand it further, to reflect on the way it develops, to explore its degree of organic evolution, and more broadly to better grasp how social reality is constructed as a whole.

In no way does this work aim to pass judgement on the humanitarian sector and how it is translated into action. It is therefore not an evaluation exercise.

Nevertheless, for some, a more accurate reading of change could be an opportunity to better navigate it, to offer aid actors alternative ways of looking at their positionings and strategies in face of the challenges of a sector constantly developing. It could provide new perspectives on how to approach the notion of humanitarian aid and help build the humanitarian sector of tomorrow.

To think about change *of* the humanitarian sector, this work mobilises an original approach, described here as *socio-phenomenological*. It consists of acknowledging the centrality of ideas for understanding how the social reality changes considering that they have a significant influence on the behaviour of agents and the trajectories of a sector.

More specifically, this research aims to understand the changes *of* the humanitarian sector through the evolution of the “idea of humanitarian aid” over the period 1991-2021. In this logic, and as will be explained in more detail later, changes *of* the sector cannot be explored without examining the evolution in the way in which humanitarian aid is thought of by its agents, and especially the dominant modes of thoughts.

In seeking to unpack how this evolution takes place, this work reveals the presence of forces and mechanisms autonomous to agents which would shape the idea of humanitarian aid over time, allowing for a global reading of how change unfolds within this sector.

By going underneath the surface of a visible reality in order to discover those somewhat hidden forces and mechanisms of evolution, it is a sort of “speleological exploration within the world of ideas of humanitarian aid” which is proposed here.

This speleological journey is organised around three main stages.

- The first one (Chapter 1) consists of laying the anchors and preparing the tools necessary for this exploration. It introduces the general approach developed for this research, the theoretical references mobilised, and the methodology used.
- The second one (Chapter 2) presents a historical overview of the evolution of the idea of humanitarian aid over the period 1991-2021, mainly within what is commonly referred to as the “international humanitarian system”.
- The third stage (Chapter 3) seeks to reveal the mechanisms and forces of change at work behind this evolution and to extend the reflection on some of the issues and questions which this research has raised.
- Finally, the general conclusion attempts to propose avenues of reflection which this work could offer, both for the humanitarian sector and for a contribution to social sciences’ methods and theories.

Indeed, this work should also be seen as a theoretical and practical contribution to social sciences. Through this analysis of the humanitarian sector, this research provides an opportunity to examine in greater depth the ways in which change can be tackled and the approaches and methodologies which can be used, to propose new concepts which can potentially be applied in other circumstances, to scrutinise the links between agents and social phenomena, to observe the modelling of social reality and its degree of autonomy, etc.

This work targets therefore humanitarian professionals as well as academics in social sciences.

From a more personal point of view, this research and this desire to think about change *of* the humanitarian sector, and more generally to think about how social reality is being transformed, have a crossed origin.

Firstly, it finds its roots in a keen interest in social sciences (especially philosophy, sociology and International Relations), which have formed a large part of my readings in recent years. Immersing myself in such readings was a way to make a kind of intellectual journey that was particularly stimulating. This journey, which initially had no specific goal, was (and still is) an opportunity to take many different paths opening very different perspectives on social reality. With each new path taken, new landscapes were discovered, each as fascinating as the other, with their own colours and characteristics.

Of these paths, one particularly attracted me, that of the world of ideas, which I found as much in phenomenology as in certain currents of sociology and International Relations.

This reflection on the world of ideas has turn to be remarkably relevant to my daily work as a humanitarian professional. I became increasingly aware that the manner we think about humanitarian aid has a significant impact on the way we do things. Trying new approaches, thinking about new ways of operating, changing our practices, necessarily require us to open up new perspectives, to see new fields of possibilities, to consider our thought patterns as not immovable; in short, to question our relationship to the world and our representations of reality.

The humanitarian sector was then the accessible object of more concrete and profound reflection. But behind this singular object, it was the longing to explore social reality that guided me.

Accordingly, this research work is intended to be broader than a specific look at humanitarian aid. It aims to contribute to more general reflections in social sciences and to raise the attention of scholars.

The reader will be more or less comfortable with the concepts and ideas presented. She/he will find some of the proposed conclusions challenging or reinforcing her/his views, will appreciate the style used as facilitating the understanding of the content or, on the contrary, will consider it difficult to access it, will see this work innovative and original or ordinary.

Embarking on such a speleological exploration is in the end diving into the reasoning and reflections that I have tried to articulate, in order to overcome these possible obstacles and be carried along by the paths proposed.

I hope that this journey will be above all a source of new perspectives and creativity for an open-minded reader.

CHAPTER 1 - OVERALL APPROACH, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This first chapter consists in fixing our anchors correctly and preparing the tools necessary for this speleological exploration into the world of ideas of humanitarian aid. More concretely, it sets out the overall approach of this research and the methodology used.

This first step is essential for understanding how this work is structured. Inspired by numerous philosophical and sociological reflections that have accompanied me over the last few years, the aim was to develop a specific approach for this research, which will allow a certain intellectual rigour.

This theoretical and methodological framing helps to mark out the path that this research wishes to take. Marking out this path, making it more practicable, has thus required the construction of concepts and notions specific to this speleological exploration which are explained below.

For the reader, the purpose is to understand how this reflection was initiated and is articulated; in a way to visualise the paths it has taken in an attempt to think about change of the humanitarian sector.

A SOCIO-PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THINK ABOUT CHANGE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: *WORLD OF IDEAS, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF THOUGHTS, AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCT*

Various approaches could be mobilised to address this issue of change of the humanitarian sector. Some would be inclined to examine, through a “clinical” approach, the geopolitical characteristics of each context in order to analyse their impacts on the modes of action, opportunities and limits of each agent⁴ and of the sector in general.

It would be equally relevant to look at the evolution of crises and needs in an attempt to explain how this sector seeks to adapt to an external reality in continuous transformation.

Others could try to mobilise macro political analyses to explain how this sector is influenced by a more global geopolitical context (period of decolonisation, end of the cold war, shift towards a multipolar world, etc.).

It would also be possible to analyse the evolution of the structuring of the sector as a factor to explain change by highlighting games of influence or domination between agents.

All these approaches would have in common to seize the evolution of this sector through mechanisms of adaptation and influence in light of an external reality (“*out there*”).

However, to address this question, this research takes an alternative path, drawing mainly from the phenomenological current of philosophy and the constructivist paradigm in International Relations and sociology.

1. On the importance of ideas to think about change

Constituting the first anchor of this overall approach, the purpose here is about emphasising *the world of ideas* and *social representations* as orienting the evolution of a sector and the behaviours of agents. According to this theoretical current, consciousness and the meaning that agents give to reality are themselves constituting a necessarily subjective reality; reality only becomes reality through the ideas the agents make of it. An agent would then orient its action through representations and ideas it has of the reality. Understanding the evolution of the behaviours of agents, the dynamics of change and the transformations at work within a given sector, would thus require exploring the evolution of ways of thinking; the manners agents read the world, the reality and their roles within it.

Applied to the humanitarian domain, the way in which reality and humanitarian aid are approached, within the humanitarian sector, and thus for an agent to subscribe to it, would be the very basis of any action and transformation. The behaviours, choices, strategies, actions of agents, the orientations and mechanisms of evolution of this sector, would be fundamentally part of ways of thinking, ways of reading a reality. The evolution in the ways of thinking about crises, of considering what humanitarian action means or of approaching the nature of needs would then be central constituents of response strategies deployed by agents and shape trajectories through which the sector evolves.

⁴ The term “agents” is to be understood in this work as referring to structured and recognised organisations, and not to individuals.

For example, describing and thinking about a crisis as mainly an emergency situation or on the contrary as a protracted situation impacts the manner an agent (and the sector) articulates its action in this reality.

Another illustration: describing and considering a crisis as mainly a humanitarian situation or as mainly linked to political issues influences the manner in which an agent designs its operational strategy in this reality. Thus, for some organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, the migratory situation in Europe is above all considered as a consequence of the inhumane policies of European States and the European Union. The action of Médecins Sans Frontières takes then, and this voluntarily, a form of political engagement where the presence of the organisation is not only justified by and articulated around a response to humanitarian needs but is designed as a political act that aims at confronting European migration policies.

Another example: looking at the situation of displaced Syrians in Lebanon as primarily a “protection crisis”, and not a “humanitarian assistance crisis”, implies a specific intervention strategy. Addressing this reality as a protection issue requires operations focused in part on the transformation of the environment as a necessary condition to address some essential needs and improve the living conditions of this population. The issue is not so much the volume of assistance (which would suggest an assistance crisis) but rather a broader environment that does not allow access to substantial humanitarian aid and decent living conditions.

One more illustration: the humanitarian response of the United Nations and its partners (NGOs and donors) to the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter was mainly part of a global reading of this crisis, understood as a human and societal crisis (and not only as a matter of public health), as presented in in the reports of the UN Secretary General of March and April 2020⁵. It was no longer a question of “simply” responding to a medical emergency but of thinking about humanitarian action in a much broader economic and social framework, articulating both short-term and long-term actions, and multi-dimensional in its nature.

Thus, to understand the behaviour of an agent, the evolution of its approaches, to grasp how the humanitarian sector is articulated, to understand how it moves, requires acknowledging the central place of ideas and social representations in the construction of the reality and in the exploration of mechanisms of action and transformation.

This focus on the world of ideas is directly inspired by the phenomenological paradigm in philosophy, and in particular the work of Edmond Husserl⁶. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Husserl sought to build the foundations of a new theory of knowledge, starting from the observation that objective knowledge would be impossible because knowledge of the world is formatted precisely according to the subject.

This problematic is not new in itself in philosophy. The question of human's ability to grasp an external world, real and independent of the subject, is already present with Plato in the myth of the cave or in the work of Immanuel Kant - to name only a few. Reality is only attainable through phenomena that are given to us and of which we create a unity to represent and know the world (such as the concept of *noem* in Kant).

Husserl, however, strives to go further in this endeavour by proposing an original reading of phenomena opening the way to a new approach. Aimed at by consciousness, the phenomenon is to be considered as a subjective reality, but which is nonetheless reality for the one who experiences the world. Any object is in fact only the reflectivity of the consciousness of the subject aiming at this

⁵ - United-Nations, *Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19*, March 2020.

- United Nations, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*, April 2020.

⁶ Especially its book *Cartesian meditations; an introduction to phenomenology*, published following a conference at the Sorbonne university in 1929.

object. The very question of an external and independent reality is therefore no longer relevant (*operation of reduction* or the concept of *epoché* in Husserl's works). It is then necessary to examine the aiming and reflectivity of consciousness on objects in order to reach "*things in themselves*", to reach the reality. By extending the principle of *intersubjectivity*, it acknowledges a necessarily intersubjective reality, transcending each individual.

To come back to our problematic, applying a phenomenological approach to the humanitarian sector requires acknowledging the importance of the way in which the concept of humanitarian aid takes shape in the agents' consciousness. To put it more simply, *the reality of humanitarian aid is the consciousness that agents have of it*. It is therefore essential to look at how agents approach humanitarian aid - how they think about it - in order to understand the reality of humanitarian action.

This centrality of the world of ideas is also found, and perhaps in a more accessible and concrete manner, in certain currents of sociology and International Relations which participate in developing the theoretical framework for this research.

In sociology, Alfred Schultz is for example the initiator of a "phenomenological sociology" which places the intersubjective experience as a central element to understand the social reality, directly inspired by Edmond Husserl's work. The aim here is to examine the perceptions of the world of the subject and of social groups. These perceptions, these readings of the world, would shape the reality specific to the subject. At the level of social groups, these representations of the world are intended to be sufficiently stable and internalised to be revealed in order to construct an intersubjective reality common to the members of the same group. They would be a social construct shaped by the interaction between individuals and social groups (Alfred Shultz's approach will influence *social constructivism*, which will be discussed below). Capturing the reality as conceived by a social group necessitates therefore to examine the representations of the world of the latter.

In International Relations, the constructivist paradigm, notably carried by authors like Alexander Wendt, Nicolas Onuf or Peter J. Katzenstein⁷, also emphasises the world of ideas (contrary to materialist approaches which give a predominant place to the material world) as having an impact on an agent's behaviour in the sense that "*the meaning that agents give to material factors is more important than the factor itself, because substance determines a social object only through the intermediary of the idea that agents have of it*"⁸. It thus comes down to grasping the way in which an agent (in the case of International Relations, mainly States) interprets the world (and its position in it) in order to understand how it orients its action. These ideas and representations shape the identities and behaviours of the agents, who themselves influence these ideas and representations through a dialectical game, a social construction between agents (notion of *constructivism*).

When applied to the humanitarian sector, these two currents invite us to look at the ideas, perceptions and representations that different social groups have of humanitarian action in order to understand the manner in which these ideas and representations orient their actions and behaviour. Looking at the mechanisms of evolution as a social construct (how these perceptions and representations of humanitarian aid change over time) allows the possibility to better understand the conceptual and behavioural changes within the humanitarian sector and of the social groups which compose it.

⁷ Other could be mentioned as representatives of this paradigm like Michael Barnett, Kathryn Sikkink, Martha Finnemore or John Ruggie, to name a few.

⁸ D. Battistella, *Théories des Relations Internationales*, Paris, SciencesPo Les Presses, , 2009, p 325 (personal translation).

2. On the notion of *conceptual frameworks of thoughts*

The second anchor of this overall approach comes down to posing the notion of *conceptual frameworks of thoughts*, central to this research project.

It should be understood here that each agent considers its action and its mode of action within the frame of specific meanings given to humanitarian aid, within specific frameworks of thoughts.

We will call these various ways of thinking about humanitarian aid *conceptual frameworks of thoughts*. In coherence with the theoretical current mobilised for this project, they constitute the very foundations of the action of the various agents involved in humanitarian action. The more they are internalised within an agent, the more they would orient its approaches, behaviours and ways of doing. It would then be a matter of attempting a “speleological exploration” of their relationship to the world and to humanitarian aid, of what would constitute some foundations of their ways of thinking (and their evolution), to better understand what guide their modes of action.

Some works have highlighted this plurality of ways of thinking, of these conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

As an illustration, the project led by HPG⁹ and the work produced by GPPI¹⁰ make it possible to highlight some of these central conceptual frameworks of thoughts of different agents, such as:

- The notion of emergency aid as independent from development, peace and political agendas, or the complementarity between humanitarian assistance and *témoignagne*, orienting the action of an organisation like Médecins Sans Frontières.
- The synergy between humanitarian aid and development, the fight against poverty, the advocacy endeavour, inscribed in the deep culture of an organisation like Oxfam.
- The notions of State sovereignty, legitimacy and responsibility, as the foundations of China's approach to humanitarian action.
- The centrality of a global approach for UNDP.
- The importance of a multilateral approach and the pivotal role of the United Nations in humanitarian aid for Sweden.
- Etc.

Many other examples could be mentioned here. But those are sufficient to acknowledge that humanitarian aid is a plural concept which varies according to its agents. And each agent would mobilise particular conceptual frameworks of thoughts that would orient their modes of action. And the manners in which agents approach humanitarian action are not fixed but evolve over time.

⁹ HPG: The Humanitarian Policy Group

- C. Bennett, *Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action*, ODI/HPG, (2011-2016).

- K. Davies, *Continuity, change and contest: meanings of 'humanitarian' from the 'Religion of Humanity' to the Kosovo war*, ODI/HPG, August 2012.

- E. Davey, *Beyond the 'French Doctors': The evolution and interpretation of humanitarian action in France*, ODI/HPG, October 2012.

- H. Krebs, *Responsibility, legitimacy, morality: Chinese humanitarianism in historical perspective*, ODI/HPG, September 2014.

- J. Moussa, *Ancient origins, modern actors: defining Arabic meanings of humanitarianism*, ODI/HPG, November 2014.

- C. Marklund, *Neutrality and solidarity in Nordic humanitarian action*, ODI/HPG, January 2016.

¹⁰ GPPI: The Global Public Policy Institute

- A. Binder, C. Meier, J. Steets, *Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal?*, GPPI, August 2010.

- C. Meier, C. Murthy, *India's Growing Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance*, GPPI, March 2011.

- K. Al-Yahya, N. Fustier, *Saudi Arabia as a Humanitarian Donor: High Potential, Little Institutionalization*, GPPI, March 2011.

This notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts is close to the concept of *épistémé* developed by Michel Foucault in his works *“The order of things”* (1966) and *“The archaeology of knowledge”* (1969), to the notion of *social representations* articulated by Serge Moscovici (and subsequently by other researchers¹¹), and to a more distant degree to the notions of *values* and *attitudes* dear to sociology.

For Michel Foucault, the concept of *épistémé* allows to *“grasp the transformations of a knowledge within both the general domain of sciences and, also, within the somewhat vertical domain that constitutes a society, a culture, a civilisation at a given moment”*¹². It refers to the specific ways a community represents and thinks about the world at a given time (for Michel Foucault the scientific community). These manners of representing and thinking the world would significantly orient the way in which knowledge is constructed. For Foucault, it is a question of carrying out an *archaeology of knowledge* in order to seize the frameworks of thoughts that profoundly influence the construction of knowledge. Foucault's work is mainly interested in the construction of scientific knowledge in the Western world from the Renaissance to the modern era, identifying three distinct periods that reveal particular *épistémés*. Nevertheless, in his book *“The archaeology of knowledge”* he calls for an extension of this concept of *épistémés* to other fields.¹³

With regard to our general approach, we shall retain the importance of once again capturing the representations and ideas that a social group has of the world, and the knowledge that they underlie, in order to better understand their modes of action and the transformations at work. However, the aim is not to go as deeply as Foucault did, thus limiting ourselves to the humanitarian sector as a defined object and not to a society as a whole.

The concept of *social representations*, put forward initially by Serge Moscovici, also sheds light on this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Deriving directly from the notion of *collective representations* as understood by Emile Durkheim, social representations refer to *“a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical aim and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group”*¹⁴. They refer to the ideas, beliefs, representations and meanings that a social group has of a specific object. Social representations therefore go beyond each individual and are distinct from individual representations. They guide the behaviours and conduct of social agents and groups and can be studied and seized as a distinct phenomenon. They are translated into the reality of action through behaviours and norms shared within a social group with regard to a same object. According to Jean-Claude Abric, the social representations of a specific object are articulated around a more stable *“central core”* and *“peripheral elements”* that are subject to more mutations.¹⁵

To a lesser extent, reflections on the concepts of values and attitudes in sociology have also contributed to the construction of this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The concept of values refers to *“ideals in the form of guiding principles that give meaning to the thoughts and behaviours of individuals (...). Values structure representations and guide actions”*¹⁶. These values are at the centre of the attitudes of individuals and social groups which frame the possible, real, desirable or undesirable behaviours of agents within a social group. These notions of values and attitudes once

¹¹For example Denis Jodelet, Jean-Claude Abric or Michel-Louis Roquette.

¹² See the Foucault-Chomsky debate of 1971, Eindhoven University of Technology (personal translation).

¹³ See chapitre vi *“Sciences and knowledge”* in *The archaeology of knowledge*.

¹⁴ D. Jodelet, *Représentations sociales et mondes de vie*, éditions des archives contemporaines, 2015, p. 63 (personal translation).

¹⁵ J-C Abric, *Pratiques sociales et représentations*, PUF, 1994 (personal translation).

¹⁶ R. Llored, *Sociologie : Théories et analyses*, Ellipses, 2018, p. 168 (personal translation).

again allow us to emphasise the shared beliefs and representations within a social group as profoundly orienting their actions and behaviours.

3. On the importance of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts

The third anchor of this overall approach refers to the notion of *dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts*.

Recognising the importance of ideas and conceptual frameworks of thoughts in how humanitarian action translates into reality comes down to examining the dominant ways of thinking (and their evolution) within this sector over time.

In this space, ways of thinking about humanitarian aid, various conceptual frameworks of thoughts, would face each other. Some conceptual frameworks of thoughts would be more dominant than others (carried and integrated – to different degrees – by a majority of agents) constructing thus significant trajectories and contours as to the manner in which the idea of humanitarian aid evolves and influences the positionings of the different agents. The more these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts would be internalised within a sector, the more they would influence the behaviours and ways of doing of agents and of the sector.

Each agent interacting within this sector would be influenced by these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts vis-à-vis which it necessarily positions itself – whether consciously or not, involuntarily or voluntarily, strategically, through a forced or assumed manner, or any other. These positionings would reflect a particular relationship to ways of thinking, to a vision of humanitarian action and more broadly of a reality.

As an illustration of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts (and their evolutions), the link between humanitarian aid and a comprehensive approach to needs has undergone a consequent evolution in the last three decades. While in the late 1980s and early 1990s humanitarian action was mainly considered an “emergency action” relatively disconnected from broader developmentalist and political agendas, the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s have seen the emergence of the concept of a linear continuum between “emergency, rehabilitation and development”. This concept has again evolved, even more since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, and a certain consensus has appeared around the manner to describe humanitarian crises as mainly “long-term crises”, associated with a constant narrative about the volume and cost of humanitarian assistance and the lack of development means in such contexts. Such consensus has contributed to an evolution in how to address vulnerabilities of populations. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals¹⁷, currently occupying a central place in humanitarian action, a new paradigm has emerged seeking a “nexus between humanitarian, development and peace”.

Another example is the central role of national governments in humanitarian assistance. In the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the global geopolitical landscape and the dominant position of international NGOs within this sector allowed very little space to think of the central role of national governments in humanitarian action. However, this concept has considerably gained in importance in recent years and is now firmly anchored in the dominant thoughts of the humanitarian sector, reinforced by the United Nations resolution 46/182 of 1991 and the road towards the Agenda 2030.¹⁸ It has become a reality in many contexts. This trend is not only “imposed” by a broader

¹⁷ [THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development \(un.org\)](#)

¹⁸ The Agenda 2030 United Nations is the overall framework for pursuing a Development defined as sustainable. [Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development | Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(un.org\)](#)

geopolitical context (such as the greater capacity of some States to coordinate humanitarian assistance or the desire for others to assert their sovereignty), but is widely promoted within the sector itself. The way to address the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the situations of exceptions it has created, have consolidated this trend, catapulting the role of States into a new dimension of leadership.

Another illustration is the climate change agenda which is gradually becoming a major theme in the debates on aid, while these environmental and climate issues existed only at the margins of the latter until the mid-2000s, carried by very few agents and rarely translated in the reality of action.

The idea of the scope of humanitarian action has also evolved over the last thirty years. Mainly focused on “life-saving” activities (emergency health, access to food and water, shelters) during the structuring phase of the sector in the early 1990s, it now embraces a wider range of actions considered inherent to humanitarian action, including mental health care, education, income-generating activities, social protection mechanisms, etc.

Engaging in an analysis of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts (and their evolutions) would therefore be the opportunity to better understand how the concept of humanitarian aid is perceived over time, how the dominant narratives evolve, what are the minority streams of thoughts, what are some invariants, etc. Identifying these mutations, continuities and ruptures would allow then to trace a “history of the idea of humanitarian aid” and to better capture the evolution of this sector as a whole along with its mechanisms of transformation.

4. On the importance to approach humanitarian aid and its conceptual frameworks of thoughts as a social construct

The dynamics of change at work within the humanitarian sector would thus inevitably take place through an evolution of its conceptual frameworks of thoughts (notably the dominant ones). Understanding the evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts and exploring the manner in which the idea of humanitarian aid develop, would therefore become essential to better understand how change is moving within this sector.

For this, this research project proposes to consider the humanitarian sector and its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts as a “social construct”, in the sense that the evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts would be, in part, function of the transformations of the internal and external social environment of this sector. This makes the last anchor of this overall approach.

Using a social constructivist approach, the first step is to recognise the socially constructed nature of reality and, in our case, of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. These are not pre-existing, pre-given. They are the result of a social construction which emerges from interactions between agents, from changes in the social environment and from other processes which this work will try to reveal. As a social construct, they are not fixed or immovable. They evolve and transform continuously. And they are identifiable.

To understand this evolution, it is necessary to consider them as a *sui generis* social fact. That means to consider the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector as “*proper object, independent of individuals*”, to quote Durkheim.¹⁹ For Durkheim, a social fact consists of “*ways of acting, thinking and sensing which are external to the individual and which are endowed with a power*

¹⁹ *Lexique de Sociologie*, Dalloz, 2010, p.132 (personal translation).

of coercion by virtue of which they are imposed on her/him”²⁰. Accordingly, we shall therefore consider that “social phenomena are things and must be treated as things”²¹.

In this logic, this “proper object” would respond to patterns of realisation which, even if resulting from a social construction, would go beyond individual will, which would impose itself on agents; patterns of realisation which would have acquired a certain degree of autonomy and which should then be identified.

Approaching the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector as a *sui generis* social fact comes back to trying to understand how this “social object” is evolving, and what are the mechanisms and forces at work behind this transformation - which is what Chapter 3 will attempt to do.

5. Summary of the overall approach and the theoretical framework mobilised for this research project

Based on a theoretical framework which we hope consistent, the general approach of this research project mobilises the world of ideas in order to think about change in the humanitarian sector: the way in which humanitarian aid is conceptually approached over time would have a significant impact on the behaviours of agents and the evolution of the sector.

It is with this in mind that the notion of *conceptual frameworks of thoughts* has been developed specifically for this work.

We can now bring together all the elements that have been introduced previously to give to this notion a definition and a clear articulation.

- i) The notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts refers to an ontological and epistemological approach that acts on a reality that is necessarily intersubjective and that can only (or mainly) be grasped through the intermediary of the ideas that agents and social groups have of their reality.
- ii) Conceptual frameworks of thought applied to the humanitarian sector refer to the ideas and representations that each agent involved in the sector has of humanitarian aid. As such, they are different from individual representations.
- iii) They are the solid foundations of ways of thinking and as such are relatively stable (although they can evolve). They significantly orient the operational approach of agents engaged in the humanitarian sector.
- iv) Their stability is correlated to their *degree of internalisation* within each agent.
- v) They are expressed (and thus can be discovered and their degree of internalisation captured) through recurrent narratives representing humanitarian aid, specific policies and modes of action. As such, they have a direct impact on the actions of each agent that can be observed.
- vi) Conceptual frameworks of thoughts common to different agents can be revealed at the level of a social group within the humanitarian sector.

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Idem.

- vii) The humanitarian sector can be understood as a space where different conceptual frameworks of thoughts confront each other, and where dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts emerge which need to be identified to understand the underlying trends orienting the whole sector.
- viii) These conceptual frameworks of thoughts, although relatively stable, are not fixed. Considered as a social fact, they evolve through a social construction whose mechanisms and forces at work should be identified and analysed.
- ix) Seizing the evolution of these conceptual frameworks of thoughts, and in particular the dominant ones, shall help understand how the humanitarian sector is evolving.

Now that our anchors have been established, hopefully sufficiently firmly, we need to select the tools which will enable us to carry out this speleological exploration within the world of ideas of humanitarian aid. This is what the next section is about.

METHODOLOGY

The ambition of this research is therefore to embark on a speleological journey to understand the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector and to try to uncover some of the mechanisms and forces at play behind this evolution.

The general approach and theoretical framework presented above have provided the anchors for this speleological exploration.

It is now necessary to get equipped for exploring the depths of the idea of humanitarian aid over the last thirty years by presenting the methodology adopted here.

Firstly, a clarification regarding two terms – “agent(s)” and “humanitarian sector” (which have been already used many times) - is useful before going any further.

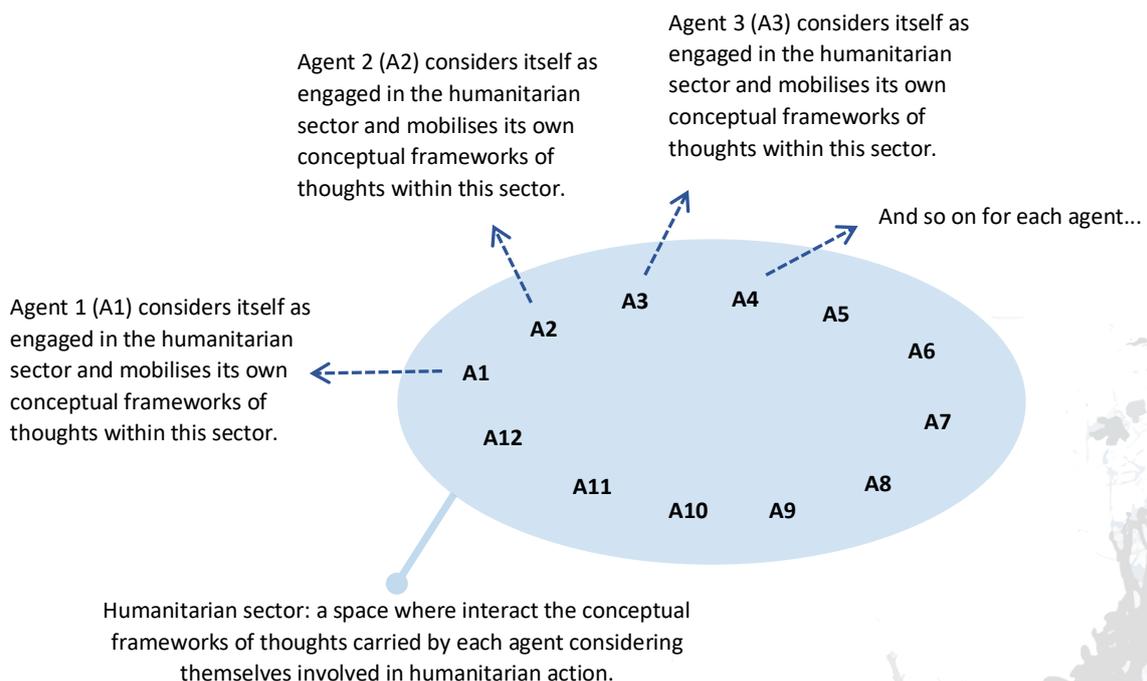
The term “agent(s)” should be understood as referring to structured and recognised organisations, and not individuals. It is preferred to the term “actor(s)” because it emphasises the active nature of the former.

For the purpose of this research, the term “humanitarian sector” refers to a space in which any agent who claims to be involved in humanitarian action (even if only partially) operates. The humanitarian sector is therefore self-defined and self-constructed by the agents who make it up. It is thus a place of interaction between agents.

Within this space, each agent mobilises their own conceptual frameworks of thoughts about what humanitarian aid means to them.

The humanitarian sector can thus be seen as a space in which conceptual frameworks of thoughts held by different agents interact and confront each other and guide their operational approaches.

We could give it the following form:



In order to capture the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, it would therefore be necessary to examine, compare and aggregate the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of each agent in order to identify the underlying trends allowing to reveal them; a task which would be particularly laborious.

However, a shortcut is possible.

If it were possible to identify the dominant agents, or dominant groups of agents, within this space, then we could start by looking at them to seize the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

To take up the diagram above, it should be considered that each agent has a more or less central position in this space, with a greater or lesser weight. This is even more the case if certain agents can be grouped together and thus understood as a relatively coherent social group with partially similar conceptual frameworks of thoughts, which are no longer established at the level of individual agents but at the level of the social group.

The humanitarian sector makes this possible. It is safe to say that what is commonly recognised as the “international humanitarian system”, under the coordination of the IASC (Inter Agency Standing Committee), is currently (and has been since 1991, but even more so since the early 2000s) the dominant social group in the humanitarian sector.

This international humanitarian system was established by the UN Resolution 46/182 of 1991. At the centre of this system is the IASC, which, under the leadership of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, “serves as the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance in response to complex and major crises”²². It aims to “formulate policies, set strategic priorities and mobilise resources in response to humanitarian crises”²³.

At the global level, the IASC brings together (in 2022) the following members: OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, FAO, WHO, UN-Habitat and IOM. In addition to these full members, there are “permanent invitees”: ICRC, IFRC, OHCHR, UNFPA, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, the World Bank, ICVA, Interaction and SCHR (the last three being the main consortia of NGOs involved in the humanitarian field). It is “supported by subsidiary groups and expert groups that inform and implement the priorities set by the IASC”²⁴.

At the level of countries in crisis where an international humanitarian response is deployed, this system translates into the establishment of a *Humanitarian Country Team* and various coordination mechanisms (including the *cluster mechanism*) bringing together a very large number of humanitarian agents beyond the global IASC membership. This includes mainly UN agencies, international and local NGOs, and donors.

The characteristics of this international humanitarian system allow it to be considered as a social group envisaged as a “real, but partial, directly observable collective unit based on collective, continuous and active attitudes”²⁵, whose members “interact according to established rules” and “define themselves as members of the group; in other words, they have specific ideas about the forms of interaction and these ideas are morally binding expectations for them and for the other members of the group but not for the ones outside”²⁶.

Surely, the agents within and around this system refer to it to a greater or lesser degree. As the “central core” of the mechanism, the UN agencies are certainly the most closely linked to its decisions, orientations and policies. NGOs have a more mixed - and sometimes contrasted -

²² [The Inter-Agency Standing Committee | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](https://www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/)

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ George Gurvitch, from *Lexique de Sociologie*, Dalloz, 2010, p. 150 (personal translation).

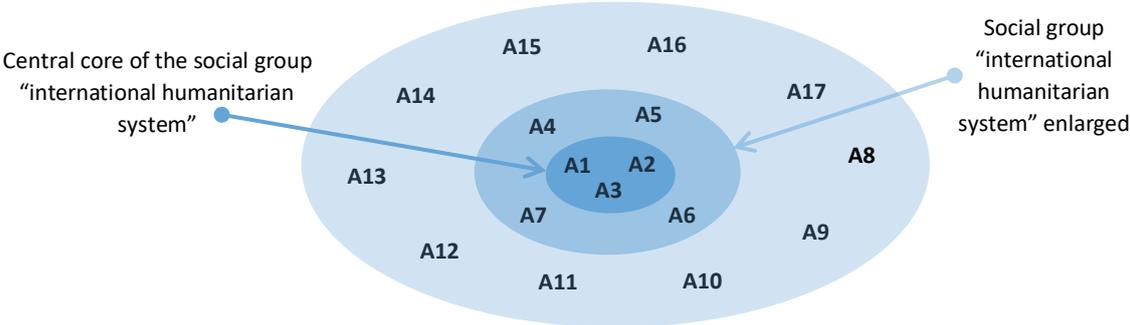
²⁶ Robert King Merton, from *Lexique de Sociologie*, Dalloz, 2010, p. 150 (personal translation).

relationship to it, and do not spare in their criticism. But the fact remains that a majority of them, and in especially many of the main international NGOs, refer to, interact with and have become involved with this system significantly, and even more so since the *cluster reform* in 2005²⁷, as it will be shown afterwards. Most of them must therefore be considered as part of this social group - of this international humanitarian system.

The same applies to donors, especially the main ones (often referred to as “DAC donors”). The IFRC, and even more so the ICRC, play a role which could be described as more of an observer, but which does not prevent a constant and deep involvement with this mechanism.

Due to its weight in the humanitarian sector (such as funding²⁸), the organisations which compose it and gravitate around, its normative role which orients (or at least influences) a large number of humanitarian agents, and its legitimacy granted by the resolution 46/182, this international humanitarian system has raised itself as the dominant mechanism in the humanitarian sector.

To adjust our diagram above, it is then necessary to show how the dominant position of this international humanitarian system prevails within the sector. It is not so much a question of comparing the number of agents integrated or gravitating in proximity to this international humanitarian system, but of considering that this social group (whether through its central core or its more or less elastic peripheral borders) appears to be, at present, dominant in comparison to the other agents or social groups which make up the humanitarian sector as a whole.



Having established the presence of a dominant social group, we should then aim to capture its conceptual frameworks of thoughts (on the basis of the definition given above), their evolution and the forces at work behind this evolution.

To this end, the methodology employed consists, first of all, of a literature review of all the documents produced or referred to by the IASC (and its subsidiary groups) over the period 1991-2021 (or at least the documents accessible over this period²⁹). These documents range from meeting notes, action plans, strategic documents, policy frameworks, evaluation or mission reports, operational procedures, etc.; but also documents external to the IASC such as UN policy documents, reports of summits and key conferences, independent studies or evaluations, contributions from a multitude of agents, etc.

²⁷ The cluster reform, established in 2005, aims mainly at a better coordination of the international humanitarian system. [What is the Cluster Approach? | HumanitarianResponse](#)

²⁸ For instance, the global appeal for the international humanitarian system raised to 41 billion USD for the year 2022.

²⁹ All these documents were mainly found on the IASC website, [Welcome to the IASC | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

Furthermore, considering that conceptual frameworks of thoughts translate in action, this literature review has been complemented by the analysis of all Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs or CAPs³⁰) developed within the international humanitarian system. These Humanitarian Response Plans present the operational approach designed for a response to a humanitarian crisis under the coordination of the system.

Finally, these two blocks have been reinforced by other existing research (notably linked to the evolution of the humanitarian sector and analysis of specific crises or themes) and by the mobilisation of other documents when the literature review exercise was not sufficient or needed to be completed (such as donors' annual reports, strategic documents of certain NGOs, etc). Annotations will be used to reference these additional documents throughout these pages.

In total, approximately 8,000 documents were reviewed as part of this research project.

To grasp the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector and how they have evolved, the aim is to capture common and recurrent narratives and operational approaches with regard to the way humanitarian aid has been thought and articulated over this period within the international humanitarian system, and to identify invariants, continuities, changes and ruptures (chapter 2).

Based on this literature review and the observations made, this work will thus ambition to reveal and analyse the mechanisms and forces in action behind this evolution. It will then prolong the reflexion based on the issues and questions which would have emerged from this exercise (Chapter 3).

Now that our anchors are secure, our tools of exploration chosen and our path illuminated to some degrees, it is time to really begin this speleological exploration within the world of the ideas of humanitarian aid and to discover some spaces somewhat unknown or hidden for thinking about change of this sector.

³⁰ CAPs (*Consolidated Appeals Process*) and HRPs (*Humanitarian Response Plans*) are the main tools for articulating the international humanitarian system's response strategies to a crisis and for aggregating all the funding needed to implement them. CAPs were created following the resolution 46/182 of 1991, while HRPs appeared later.

CHAPTER 2 - THE EVOLUTION OF THE DOMINANT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF THOUGHTS OF THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

Based on the general approach and methodology developed in the previous chapter, we shall now start our speleological exploration into world of ideas of humanitarian aid in an attempt to seize the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their evolution over the last thirty years (1991-2021).

However, attempting to understand change of the humanitarian sector by capturing the evolution of its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts does not mean recounting the evolution of the sector through its organisational transformations, nor does it mean examining the particularities of each response to the various humanitarian crises, or even less so assessing the international humanitarian system. Nor is it intended to capture dilemmas, issues and difficulties faced by humanitarian agents in their responses to crises.

For all this, the reader can refer to numerous existing studies.

Capturing these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts means above all identifying the major and profound trends in the way to think about humanitarian aid, which guide action, and which can be observed over a long period of time.

These trends do not evolve in a linear pattern, there are shifts and reversals. And these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts face opposition and alternative discourses.

Furthermore, no agent will fully identify itself with all these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Indeed, they go beyond the agent's level. They should be understood as an aggregation of similarities in thinking about humanitarian aid within the sector, and more specifically within the international humanitarian system; like a photo taken with the benefit of hindsight of the humanitarian sector as a whole and which highlights some remarkable forms representing these dominant frameworks of thoughts.

These dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts can be found in the threads of discourses, narratives and patterns of response to crises. They are modes of thoughts which, imposing themselves as dominant, orient the modalities of action, but leave a margin of manoeuvre, a flexibility in the way they are translated into reality. It is not about posing a simple equation "conceptual frameworks of thoughts = one type of action" of a determinist type, nor of believing that a conceptual framework of thoughts is a guarantee of a certain quality in its implementation. It is more a question of approaching it as currents which significantly orient the evolution of the humanitarian sector in the same manner that ocean currents influence the movement of the oceans and the climate.

Based on the analysis of the material collected throughout this work, the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector - and their evolution - have been organised into four distinct categories:

- i) Humanitarian aid, a question of scope and target groups.
- ii) Humanitarian aid, a question of contexts.
- iii) Humanitarian aid, a question of agents and partnerships.
- iv) Humanitarian aid, a question of proximity and links with related sectors.

This categorisation is of course artificial and is overlapping. But it allows for a smoother understanding and sense making.

As such, other types of categorisations could be considered. However, whichever classification scheme is chosen, the same dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts would certainly be revealed.

Moreover, this chapter will deliberately be limited to a synthetic description of these conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their evolutions, without seeking for the moment to examine the why and how of these evolutions. These questions will be addressed in Chapter 3 through an original approach which will then be presented in more detail.

HUMANITARIAN AID, A QUESTION OF SCOPE AND TARGET GROUPS

Humanitarian aid has always aimed to “respond to the needs of populations affected by crises”, a kind of ultimate reference point for the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of humanitarian action and shared by all agents engaged in the sector.

Nevertheless, although it is difficult to imagine humanitarian aid without this ultimate reference point, the manner in which humanitarian aid responds to these needs, and the way in which the notion of target populations is approached, has evolved over the last thirty years.

1. The expansion of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid is regularly presented as “life-saving” operations which refer to a notion of “basic needs”. However, while it can be observed that the invariable core of humanitarian aid does indeed consist of life-saving assistance activities, the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid is by no means limited to this. Over the period under review, the scope of humanitarian aid has in fact continued to expand (although with a few exceptions).

In the first part of the 1990s, humanitarian action was mainly focused on domains³¹ such as health, food, nutrition, access to water, emergency shelter and agriculture, all within a life-saving approach. All CAPs³² during this period incorporate some or all of these domains (this remains true for the entire 1991-2021 period).

The aim is to provide affected populations with what is necessary for their survival, their basic needs, as illustrated by the discussions of the IASC in 1995, where an emergency response is envisaged as *“operations where there is a common agreement among the agencies that the needs are genuinely of a relief nature; that these needs are essential for survival of beneficiaries or necessary to put them back on the path of rehabilitation”*³³.

These domains will nevertheless each evolve and expand. For example, the field of health applied to humanitarian aid will step by step integrate actions related to HIV (mainly from 1998 onwards), mental health (especially from 1999 onwards) and the eradication of polio (1998-2004).

Other domains of action will also be added to the scope of humanitarian aid.

In fact, this was already the case for the education domain, which was considered to be an integral part of the humanitarian field in the early 1990s (for example, education programs were already present in the vast majority of CAPs at that time).

From 1996 onwards, livelihoods and income generating activities appear in more and more contexts (as in the Caucasus and Afghanistan), along with activities linked to rehabilitation of public infrastructure and even support to governance in some cases (as in Sudan, Angola, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Liberia).

³¹ While the term “sector” would be more appropriate (as it is the one used in the international humanitarian system), the term “domain” will be preferred in order to avoid any confusion with the term “humanitarian sector” as defined for this research work.

³² See note 30.

³³ *Central Emergency Revolving Fund, IASC Discussion paper, IASC Working Group, May 1995.*

The integration of activities relating to “early recovery”, “transition” or “rehabilitation” became more pronounced from 1997 onwards, in line with the debate on the link between humanitarian and development (see the sub-section dedicated to it).³⁴

Activities related to disaster risk reduction were included as part of the scope of humanitarian aid a little later (in the early 2000s, and even more so from 2005).

Activities which seek to contribute to peace and social cohesion have also been present since the 1990s. But their inclusion in the field of humanitarian aid is not constant (see the sub-section on the link between humanitarian aid and peace).

However, this expansion of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid did not go without some resistance. There were frequent calls for humanitarian action to be restricted to life-saving and basic needs, as illustrated by the discussions on the response in West Africa (Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone) in 2001, where the IASC considered that *“there is no luxury of choice. Humanitarian agencies can address only the most immediate needs”*³⁵.

The only notable exceptions to this extension concern the domains of demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants, along with demining. Until 1998, these domains were regularly included in the scope of humanitarian action and were considered, in part, as under the responsibility of the Emergency Relief Coordinator. In 1998, following an internal reorganisation within the United Nations³⁶, these domains were removed from the scope of humanitarian aid and were no longer included in CAPs or HRP³⁷, although demining sometimes made a comeback (notably in 2002 and 2003).

2. The “approach by domains”, a central and particularly stable conceptual framework of thoughts

This “approach by domains” is a central part of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

Since 1991, as mentioned above, humanitarian action has been mainly organised around domains (such as health, food, emergency shelter, etc.), each of which has expanded while new domains have been added. And whatever the extent and expansion of the humanitarian field, this notion of domains has remained, showing a surprising continuity over time. Each domain has its own approaches. Policies and operational frameworks specific to each domain have developed and evolved over time and the 2005 cluster reform³⁸ actively contributed to the consolidation of this approach by domains. Although complementarities and coordination mechanisms are sought between domains, they remain a cornerstone of the humanitarian action.

Humanitarian responses are to some extent predefined in broad terms through this domain-based structure, mobilising general frameworks of approach and operational procedures which need to be contextualised and coordinated in their application. Almost without exception, every HRP or CAP is organised by domains, clusters are organised by domains (whether at field or global level), needs are classified by domains, humanitarian agents are broadly structured by domains (either with

³⁴ For instance, in 1997, the IASC approved a recommendation aiming to integrate rehabilitation and reconstruction activities into CAPs.

³⁵ IASC Working Group, February 2001.

³⁶ In 1998 demining comes under the responsibility of DPKO and issues linked to demobilisation and reintegration under UNDP.

³⁷ See note 30.

³⁸ See note 27.

organisations with a distinctive mandate based on one or a limited number of domains, or in their internal structures where there is generally an articulation by domains), etc. Humanitarian action is approached in terms of domains which must be coordinated, and synergies and complementarities developed. In short, in the humanitarian sector, “we think domains”.

Or at least until recently and the growing importance of *multi-purpose cash-based assistance* and social protection... (see below).

3. Assistance and protection as two sides of the same coin: the first major shift in the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid

The first major shift related to the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid took place in the second half of the 1990s, and especially from 1997 onwards.

Until then, even though the scope of humanitarian aid had already broadened to go well beyond life-saving activities, it was still deeply rooted in a logic of “assistance”. However, in the mid-1990s, Human Rights issues become more prominent in the debates and discussions taking place in the humanitarian sector. The emergence of this theme should be seen in the context of the crises of that time (such as those of the Great Lakes region and the former Yugoslavia), the increased engagement of OHCHR into the international humanitarian system, the Agenda for Peace of 1992 and the 1997 reform of the United Nations which enshrined the *indivisibility of Human Rights* (following on from the 1993 Vienna Declaration), both of which were initiated by the United Nations’ General Secretaries at that time.

At first, the issue of protection (and more generally of Human Rights) is seen as not being part of the responsibilities of the international humanitarian system. The IASC's discussion in November 1994 is particularly revealing of this state of mind: *“In some instances when cooperation of authorities is at stake, it may be considered desirable that the humanitarian assistance requirements be met through one mechanism and the human rights concerns be dealt with through another mechanism. The Taskforce recognized that the provision of protection objectives should be pursued in an independent institutional framework from the humanitarian assistance. This, however, should not exclude the highly desirable coordination of the two activities, in order to ensure that they be supportive of each other”*³⁹.

But step by step the international humanitarian system is nevertheless being pushed to consider its responsibilities towards Human Rights. In 1995, the ECOSOC requested that *“in recognition of the fundamental importance of protection and respect for human rights in creating the conditions conducive to sustainable solutions in countries affected by complex crises, activities of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights/Centre for Human Rights should be incorporated into the UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals (CAP), whenever appropriate”*⁴⁰. And in 1996 the IASC recognises that *“humanitarian action contributes to the implementation of basic human rights related to the safety and dignity of the affected persons and should be supported through appropriate implementation measures”*⁴¹.

From these reflections, a *Human Rights-based approach to humanitarian action* and the concept of *the centrality of protection in humanitarian action* (although this will only be formalised in these terms in 2013) will emerge from 1997 as the main translation of Human Rights issues within the

³⁹ *Draft Report of the Task Force on Internal Displaced People*, for the IASC Working Group, November 1994.

⁴⁰ IASC Working Group, 23 and 24 January 1997.

⁴¹ *IASC Guidelines on Respect for humanitarian mandates in conflict situations*, January 1996.

humanitarian sector. This theme will then be more systematically integrated into CAPs and response strategies, becoming a central pillar of the latter.

This concept of protection was mainly initiated in the frame of what was then called “*complex emergencies*” (see next section). However, it was then extended afterwards to the rest of the international humanitarian system by developing specific approaches to protection according to topics or contexts (such as the application of protection in situations of internal displacement⁴² – 1999 - or in the context of natural disasters⁴³ - 2006).

In recent years, the link between humanitarian action and Human Rights and the centrality of protection in humanitarian action have been more deeply incorporated through numerous initiatives. For example, in 1998, an IASC working group was set up on these issues, bringing together the ICRC, ICVA, OCHA, OHCHR, UNICEF and UNHCR. Or the production of numerous reference documents such as “*The interface between Human Rights and humanitarian action*” developed by OCHA and OHCHR in 1998⁴⁴, or the 2002 report “*Growing the sheltering tree*” on the protection of Human Rights through humanitarian action⁴⁵. Or the inclusion of these issues in training courses at the time, the inclusion of Human Rights issues in Sphere standards (especially from 2002), the formalisation of the responsibility of Humanitarian Coordinators with regard to protection activities (2005), or the production of documents formally anchoring the concept of the centrality of protection (2013)⁴⁶.

Assistance and protection are seen as complementary, and this complementarity as indivisible. However, it is not about merging these two notions, they will continue to exist as two distinct pillars, two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated and thought of without each other.

And more broadly, the concept of protection is a way of framing the interaction between the humanitarian and Human Rights sectors, recognising the need for complementarity between the two, but nevertheless limiting the responsibility and scope of action of the international humanitarian system.

4. *Multi-purpose cash-based assistance and social protection or the emergence of a new conceptual framework of thoughts and the end of the approach by domains?*

The second (potential) shift in the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid may be taking place now. Since 1991, as mentioned above, humanitarian action has been mainly organised around a logic by domains. And no matter how wide the scope of humanitarian aid has become, this notion of domains has remained, and each domain having its own approaches.

However, this continuity in the way humanitarian aid is understood has been challenged in recent years by the growing importance of *multi-purpose cash-based assistance* and social protection applied to humanitarian action. This has led to a change in the way the needs and vulnerabilities of populations, pre-categorised by domains of activities, are understood, as well as in the way humanitarian aid is integrated into wider national policies and programmes, going beyond the traditional boundaries of humanitarian aid.

⁴² IASC Policy Paper on Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, December 1999.

⁴³ IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters - Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters, June 2006 (first formal IASC document on this topic).

⁴⁴ *Interface between Human Rights and Humanitarian Action*, IASC Working Group, June 1998.

⁴⁵ *Growing the Sheltering Tree: Protecting Rights through Humanitarian Action: Programmes & Practices Gathered from the Field*, IASC, September 2002.

⁴⁶ For example, the IASC declaration on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action in December 2013.

The emergence of cash assistance in the debates of the international humanitarian system can be traced in a more visible manner particularly from 2010 onwards, as illustrated by the HPG report on cash transfers in 2011⁴⁷, the more frequent presence of this issue on the agenda of the IASC⁴⁸, and the production of a guide for “operationalising the mutual cash grant”⁴⁹ in 2015.

The debates on social protection and the link with cash transfer programmes will come more strongly a few years later.

In the field, these new ways of thinking and acting are step by step operationalised and are becoming a central part of many HRPs, such as in Turkey for the response to Syrian refugees (from 2015 onwards) or during the humanitarian response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, cash transfer activities accounted for around 20% of humanitarian aid.⁵⁰

These new ways of thinking and acting change the way humanitarian aid is approached. They call for the development of partnerships with the private sector, development actors⁵¹ and civil society in a country or a locality. They encourage greater integration of humanitarian aid into national social protection policies and programmes, breaking with the sector's traditional approach by domains. They call for a review of the modalities of engagement with country authorities.

The December 2018 IASC statement on cash assistance summarises this approach: “*We recognise the primary role of governments in supporting vulnerable populations and will build on, utilize and leverage existing government systems, whenever possible. (...) Finally, we recognize that the design and delivery of cash assistance is further enhanced when other national and international actors with complementary expertise are engaged. We will collaborate in a manner that supports the primary role of governments and also engages operational actors providing cash assistance, including other humanitarian agencies and organizations, the World Bank, cash assistance networks and alliances, the private sector, and donors on this agenda*”⁵².

These new ways of thinking and acting also impact on the manner to approach the needs of populations, the modalities of engagement with the latter and the manner to think about the notion of vulnerability. Affected populations are no longer seen as only recipients of predefined humanitarian aid, but as active actors in their situation.

The approach by domains thus loses some of its foundations.

Multi-purpose cash-based assistance and social protection then open up a new field of possibilities in terms of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid.

However, it remains to be seen how this emerging conceptual framework of thoughts will or will not acquire a stable and dominant nature as a possible replacement for this approach by domains.

⁴⁷ Harvey, Bailey, *Cash transfer programming in emergencies*, HPG, June 2011.

⁴⁸ For example, the special IASC Working Group session in 2013 (the main IASC body at that time) on the topic in collaboration with the *Cash Learning Partnership*, the key session of December 2015 of the same Working Group looking at discussing “the strategic coordination of cash transfer programmes”, or the two sessions at the IASC Principals level in 2016..

⁴⁹ *Operationalising the Multipurpose Cash Grant: A toolkit*, IASC, November 2015.

⁵⁰ Obrecht, Swithern, Doherty, *2022 The State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)*, ALNAP, September 2022.

⁵¹ See for example the document prepared by the World Bank in 2016 for the IASC about cash as the possibility to facilitate the articulation between humanitarian aid and development (*Strategic note: cash transfers in humanitarian contexts*, World Bank, June 2016).

⁵² Statement from the Principals of OCHA, UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF on Cash Assistance, 5 December 2018.

5. The idea of humanitarian aid also a question of *target populations and prioritised groups*

The way in which humanitarian aid is thought of also refers to a logic of *target populations and prioritised groups*.

Behind the notions of “populations affected by humanitarian crises” or “vulnerable populations” there are sub-categories which focus on certain populations considered as needing special attention.

Each of these sub-categories of target groups implies distinctive approaches, specific modes of operation, and a singular focus. And these sub-categories are not pre-existing but appear at different times and evolve gradually.

Thus, while the establishment of children as a priority group within humanitarian action (and in particular children victim of war) can be traced far back, the issue of the elderly has only become more central from 2007 onwards.

The issue of gender was placed more prominently on the agenda of the international humanitarian system from 1997 onwards. The aim was to establish its centrality within humanitarian aid (known as “*mainstreaming a gender perspective*”) and to ensure its application. For example, a sub-working group on gender issues was created in 1998, and reference documents to explain this concept started to be produced at this time (such as “*Gender in complex emergencies*” in 1998⁵³).

We could mention other priority groups, such as people in situations of internal displacement, as early as 1991 (see below), or migrants (who are only really considered as a target group as of 2016), or people with disabilities who were established as a priority group in 2016, etc.

Other target populations receive only limited attention within the international humanitarian system, such as prisoners (a topic addressed only twice by the IASC through collective discussions between 1991 and 2021, in 1995 and 2020).

Finally, each of these prioritised groups are thought of and approached continues to evolve.

For example, the gender issue now tends to be much broader than a single focus on women as it was mainly the case in the late 1990s. It also encompasses men in their relationship to gender as a social construct, or focuses on issues that have emerged more recently in the social space such as LGBT+.

This focus on prioritised populations thus guides humanitarian thinking and action by shaping approaches which are specific to these groups, and which need to be operationalised in a variety of contexts.

⁵³ *Background Paper on Mainstreaming Gender in the Humanitarian Response to Complex Emergencies*, IASC Working Group, November 1998.

The idea of humanitarian aid is also a question of contexts, a way of defining and qualifying crises and mobilising approaches according to this label. The manner in which a crisis is thought of and qualified refers to distinct conceptual frameworks of thoughts, to distinct ways of interpreting humanitarian aid and deploying operational strategies.

The work carried out as part of this research project has highlighted several main types of crises, each of which has a different conceptual framework of thoughts. Depending on the nature of the crisis, a specific approach will be used to orient the actions of the international humanitarian system.

1. From the qualification of *complex emergencies* to the one of *protracted crises*

The first part of the 1990s is interesting to understand the function of labelling contexts and crises for thinking about humanitarian action.

Up until the mid-1990s, it is difficult for researchers to be certain of the differences in the labelling of crises and contexts in which humanitarian aid is to be provided.

Indeed, as the humanitarian sector was not yet well structured, there were no formal definitions or strategic frameworks that could be used to categorise crises.

However, if we look for example at donor documents (such as donors' annual reports), we can see that the contexts in which humanitarian aid is deployed are mainly qualified through the following terms: earthquakes, droughts, famines, displacements, and floods. All these terms (which include very few references to conflicts) refer to what could be classified as "emergencies".

It is in 1994 that a first more formal categorisation of crises appeared through the concepts of *complex emergencies* and *major emergencies*; a sort of "conflicts/crises vs natural disasters" differentiation that still persists today.

Although already present in the resolution 46/182 of 1991, these two terms were explicitly defined in 1994, after more than a year of discussion at the IASC.

The term *complex emergency* is defined as: "*a) a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression; b) a humanitarian crisis which requires an international response which goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency; c) a humanitarian crisis where the IASC assesses that it requires intensive and extensive political and management coordination*".⁵⁴

The notion of a *complex emergency* validates a type of context in which humanitarian action (and more specifically the one coordinated by the international humanitarian system) applies.

The IASC is still relatively young, following the gradual establishment of the sector in the 1980s. It is therefore important to legitimise its role and identify the contexts in which it is going to operate. There is a question of space for the IASC and the international humanitarian system. Especially that

⁵⁴ IASC Working Group, November 1994.

new types of crises emerge due to a change in the geopolitical context of that time, which go beyond the classic humanitarian contexts of the 1980s.

Qualifying a crisis as a *complex emergency* means asserting the prerogative and the responsibility of the international humanitarian system in responding to needs of affected populations. This qualification necessarily triggers a response, an action, an operational deployment. It creates some boundaries for humanitarian action according to the type of crisis in which it is to be deployed. This label refers to the exceptional nature of a context which justifies the activation of the international humanitarian system.

It was in this context of complex emergencies, for example, that the function of a standalone Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) was conceived, which was separate at that time from the position of Resident Coordinator (RC) - before, a few years later, the two functions were integrated under the responsibility of the same person. Humanitarian Coordinators only operated "*in exceptional circumstances in complex emergencies*". The function of Humanitarian Coordinator thus indirectly became the label that a crisis can be qualified as humanitarian.

Furthermore, defining the collective scope of humanitarian aid through the definition of a crisis automatically excludes certain contexts. Depending on how a crisis is interpreted, it may or may not lead to the deployment of humanitarian aid through the international humanitarian system.

One of the most interesting examples of such a logic is the one of the *New Independent Countries* (NICs, referring to States which became independent following the fall of the Soviet Union), where the debate in 1993 was to define whether these contexts should be considered as humanitarian crises and thus trigger an action by the international humanitarian system. The NICs were seen more as "developed countries" and where therefore humanitarian action was less justified. In the end a twelve months emergency response was agreed, while everything else was to be managed through a separate mechanism defined following the 1993 Tokyo conference.

Another example is Sri Lanka (1995), which was not recognised as a complex emergency and where the mechanisms of the international humanitarian system were thus not put in place, as illustrated by the following conclusion between IASC members: "*it was clarified that since Sri Lanka has not been recognized as a complex emergency, the Resident Coordinator is not a humanitarian coordinator. UN activities should continue to be coordinated by the UN Emergency Task Force. At present, no need to establish additional mechanisms for emergency relief operations*".⁵⁵

The structuring of the international humanitarian system in the 1990s (including its coordination mechanisms and operational approaches) was mainly based on the concept of complex emergencies. A body of documents gradually emerged which sought to articulate the approach to be taken in this type of situation or which focused on particular issues in this type of context.

A good illustration of this is the development, from 1995 onwards, of a dedicated training curriculum for humanitarian responses to complex emergencies - the CETI⁵⁶ (which replaced the DMTP: *Disaster Management Training Programme*) or the production of guidelines for coordination in complex emergencies⁵⁷.

This notion of complex emergencies (as opposed to major emergencies) is also reflected in the structure of certain agencies, notably DHA⁵⁸ where a department for complex emergencies existed in 1995.

⁵⁵ IASC Working Group, November 1995.

⁵⁶ *Complex Emergency Training Initiative*.

⁵⁷ *Strengthening Field Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies*, IASC Working Group, September 1994.

⁵⁸ DHA: Department of Humanitarian Affairs (former OCHA).

Furthermore, and certainly one of the most important elements, the notion of complex emergencies refers to contexts which are perceived as politically charged and which need to be navigated more subtly (this is for instance one of the primary justifications for the creation and deployment of the Humanitarian Coordinator position). At the heart of these considerations lies, for the international humanitarian system, the idea of preserving an independent operational and working space.

It was during this period, for example, that a series of guidelines and other documents were produced to articulate the relationship between humanitarians and armed forces.

Generally speaking, it is the protection of the humanitarian mandate⁵⁹ that is at stake in this type of context, the independence of humanitarian action from wider political issues, and the need to interact with national governments with caution and a certain distance. This idea is not new and find some of its roots in the history of humanitarian action and the central place given to International NGOs (particularly during the period of decolonisation and even more so in the 1980s before States began to reinvest more significantly humanitarian aid).

Finally, the notion of complex emergencies recognises the long-term nature of certain crises. The short-term nature of humanitarian aid which had prevailed until then was supplemented, not by a long-term approach (that would come later⁶⁰), but by the need to think about a humanitarian action which would inevitably last. Humanitarian response must therefore be planned and organised differently. Most of the CAPs at the time adopted consequently an annual renewal strategy (but not yet a multi-annual strategy).

Progressively, and in parallel with the debates on the link between humanitarian aid, development and peace, the reference to the term complex emergencies loses traction, and gives space to the concept of *protracted crises* (even if the term complex emergencies is still sometimes used), which mobilises a narrative emphasising the increasingly long duration of crises and the importance of an integrated approach as defined by the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (and Peace to a lesser degree) which emerges in 2016 following the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS).

An increasing number of humanitarian crises are now mainly described as “crises that last”. It is no longer a question of thinking of humanitarian aid primarily in terms of navigating a politically charged context, but of thinking about humanitarian aid as a complementary pillar of a multi-temporal and multi-dimensional approach for addressing the needs of populations, mixing both short and long-term programming, and seeking synergies between actions described as humanitarian, development and peace.

Nevertheless, despite this evolution in thinking about crises, some of the characteristics of the conceptual frameworks of thoughts relating to the notion of complex emergencies remain and continue to be used today; in particular the idea of a protected working space and a certain independence of humanitarian action. However, these ideas now have to compose with other conceptual frameworks of thoughts which the notion of protracted crisis has brought to the fore. This desire to continue advocating for a separate operational space can be seen in some initiatives in the

⁵⁹ See for instance the *IASC Guidelines for respect for humanitarian mandates in conflict situations* (January 1996).

⁶⁰ From the beginning of 2000s (see for instance the IASC working group of November 2002 which considers that “*multi-year strategies for chronic emergencies should be explored*”).

2010s to advocate for “*principled humanitarian action*”⁶¹ or to protect humanitarian aid from “anti-terrorist policy frameworks” which gradually appear after 2001⁶².

2. Development and evolution of a conceptual framework of thoughts specific to crises labelled as “natural disasters”

*Major emergencies are defined in 1994 as “a situation threatening the lives and well-being of a very large number of people or a very large percentage of a population and often requiring substantial multi-sectoral assistance. It is normally characterized by: i) not being caused by politically motivated decisions nor is humanitarian access to affected populations impeded by political calculations. ii) Governments, within the limits of their capacity, try to facilitate delivery of aid to affected population. In most cases, governments will try to respond to these emergencies with their own resources, with UN and/or bilateral assistance if necessary.”*⁶³

This term will gradually fade away in favour of others such as “natural hazards”, “onset and sudden emergencies” or “natural disasters”. It was not until the 2000s that a body of reference documents and policies was developed, reflecting the emergence of conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to crises described as natural disasters. In 1999, for example, a reference group dedicated to natural disasters was set up while ECOSOC’s humanitarian segments were frequently dedicated to such issues during this period.

More recently, some major natural disasters, such as the earthquakes in Haiti (2010) and Pakistan (2011), or Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), contributed to deeper reflections within the international humanitarian system to ensure a better response to this type of crisis. The *Transformative Agenda* and the *L3 mechanism*⁶⁴ established in December 2011 were for instance mainly designed for this type of crisis (although the latter will also be used in other types of contexts) seeking to improve the preparedness, responsiveness and coordination of the system and its agents.

The centrality of national governments in the deployment of humanitarian aid is anchored within these conceptual frameworks of thoughts, as illustrated by the report of the Reference Group on Natural Disasters in 2000 calling for more attention to “*be given within the UN system, including country teams, to the primary and central role accorded by the UN General Assembly to national governments in the response to natural disasters*”.⁶⁵

The same applies to a better consideration of national and local actors in the modes of response to this type of crisis, as shown, for example, by the reflection at the time around the *Disaster Management Teams* and the need to take better account of this type of agent in the development of contingency plans and responses to natural disasters.

The notions of contingency planning and emergency preparedness were added as central characteristics of these conceptual frameworks of thoughts, as was that of disaster risk reduction.

⁶¹ From 2010 onwards, the issue of promoting and protecting principled action (and the humanitarian space as a whole) is integrated into the IASC's strategic priorities.

⁶² The attention of the international humanitarian system to these issues will increase from 2010 onwards in particular.

⁶³ IASC Working Group, November 1994.

⁶⁴ [IASC Transformative Agenda | IASC \(interagencycommittee.org\)](https://www.interagencycommittee.org/)

⁶⁵ *Report and recommendations of the IASC reference group on natural disasters*, May 2000.

These conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to natural disasters will continue to be supplemented by other elements, such as the adaptation of the concept of protection to this type of crisis (2006)⁶⁶, or the modalities of use of armed forces in this type of context (2006).

The link between natural disasters and climate change will become more pronounced from 2010s onwards, as some recent crises are beginning to be described as “climate crises” (such as the food insecurity situation in Madagascar in 2021, see the sub-section on “Humanitarian aid and environment”).

In addition, broader intergovernmental frameworks have been developed since the second half of the 2000s into which the international humanitarian system's response to natural disasters must seek to fit, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, or the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015-2030.

These intergovernmental frameworks go hand in hand with the development, at national and regional level (like in South-East Asia⁶⁷), of prevention, preparedness and response plans or mechanisms which provide a framework for humanitarian aid in response to natural disasters.

All these initiatives, plans and mechanisms, whether at global, regional, or national level, emphasise the characteristics mentioned above, namely the central role of national governments and authorities, greater consideration of national and local capacities, and the importance of preparedness, prevention and risk reduction.

These conceptual frameworks of thoughts are also currently articulated within the framework of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as broader initiatives to fight global warming (such as the 2015 Paris Agreement).

3. The other qualifications of crises and their specific conceptual frameworks of thoughts

Other labels of crises that refer to distinctive conceptual frameworks of thoughts should be mentioned here to give a more complete description to this section.

One of these is related to the issue of internally displaced people (IDPs).

IDPs have been a constant and pervasive theme in the discussions of the international humanitarian system since 1991. IDPs are the third most discussed topic in the IASC after issues relating to the structuring, coordination and planning of the IASC (at global and national levels) and issues relating to the financing of humanitarian aid (without considering issues related to various crises).

Responding to situations of internal displacement has always been considered a responsibility of the IASC and in particular of the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

In 1993, for example, a working group was set up to focus on this topic, with the aim to “*propose a more coherent framework for humanitarian assistance to IDPs*”⁶⁸. Over the years, other initiatives appeared, such as the creation of the Senior Inter-Agency Network for IDPs (2000), or the establishment of a dedicated IDP Unit in 2001,

⁶⁶ IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters - Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters, June 2006 (first formal IASC document on this issue).

⁶⁷ See for instance the initiatives in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines or of the ASEAN.

⁶⁸ Report of the IASC Task Force on Internal Displaced People, November 1994.

A substantial body of key documents has been gradually developed⁶⁹. In parallel, numerous country evaluations and more global reviews have been regularly carried out on how to respond to this type of situation.

It appears that the conceptual framework of thoughts relating to the problems of internal displacement is relatively stable throughout the period studied. As early as 1991, this conceptual framework of thoughts encompassed the need to think not only short-term but also to integrate sustainable solutions in the responses deployed.

The same applies to the central role of national governments in the response to internal displacement, which are considered to be primarily responsible for responding to this type of situation.

A few developments can nevertheless be observed.

One of them is the emergence of the notion of protection applied to humanitarian aid and the link between humanitarian aid and Human Rights, a notion which was more formally integrated into the conceptual framework of thoughts linked to IDP issues in 1999⁷⁰. The idea was to consider protection as an essential and non-negotiable pillar of the response to internal displacements.

The other significant evolution of this conceptual framework of thoughts refers to the notions of inclusion in and support to “host communities”. These dimensions have been gaining in traction, in parallel with the reflections on the 2016 New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees, which emphasise these notions (applied to refugee issues). This involves recognising the need to support local communities in responding to internal displacement (notion of *burden on host communities*) as well as the inclusion of IDPs into local communities as a durable solution.

In general, it is a global approach that continues to assert itself, even if its application in action remains laborious (see below).

In terms of displacement issues, reference could also be made to the conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to refugees and migrants situations, which will be briefly addressed here.

The “refugee approach” is rarely discussed at the IASC level. This may seem quite natural given the special role of UNHCR in this field. It is as if the refugee issue were a sector in itself, which should certainly be integrated into humanitarian aid, but whose mechanisms, approaches and concepts are different and unique. It is therefore necessary to search UNHCR’s archives to better understand this evolution.

Similar to IDPs, the short/long term links have been present since 1991, as well as the issues related to durable solutions. The notion of protection predates 1991 (as opposed to internal displacement situations). It is from 2016 onwards with the New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees that this paradigm will be extended and completed. Here again, integration, a *whole of society approach*, sustainable solutions and *no camp policies* are central features of this conceptual framework of thoughts, as is the support to host communities, national authorities and governments.

⁶⁹ For instance (and to only mention a few) : *Field IDPs response document* in 1998, *IDPs guidelines and training curriculum* in 1999, *IASC policy on protection for IDPs* in 2000, *UN guiding principles on Internal Displacement* in 2001, *IDPs: Roles and Responsibilities in the Collaborative Approach* in 2004, *IASC Procedural Steps for Developing an Internally Displaced Persons Response Strategy*, in 2004, *Guidelines for HC on collaborative approach to IDPs* in 2004, *IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons* in 2010, *Breaking the Impasse: Reducing Protracted Internal Displacement as a Collective Outcome* in 2018, *20th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: A Plan of Action for Advancing Prevention, Protection and Solutions for Internally Displaced People 2018 – 2020* in 2018.

⁷⁰ See notably the report *IDPs and protection* in 1999 which underlines that “*the protection of internally displaced persons must be of concern to all humanitarian/development agencies*”, and the *IASC Policy Paper on Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* in December 1999.

The issue of migration, as a separate labelling of crises and the establishment of its own conceptual framework of thoughts, will only really appear from 2015-2016 onwards, somehow like this group had not been considered as a distinct group until then, or was not the responsibility of the international humanitarian system. The importance given to climate change (and the notion of *climate displaced people*), the migration crises in Europe and Libya, but also the Global Compact on Migration (formalised in 2018) will put these issues on the agenda of the international humanitarian system. The situation of migrants is now more integrated into the HRPs, and the Global Compact on Migration is establishing itself as the reference document for this conceptual framework of thoughts - even if its application in action remains fragile.

Another type of crisis labelled as “public health crises” was introduced in 2005. The development of a specific conceptual framework of thoughts follows the emergence of such crises.

The SARS epidemic in 2005 was the first “opportunity” for the international humanitarian system to develop a conceptual framework of thoughts specific to this type of crisis, with the production of a body of reference documents in 2005 and 2006⁷¹.

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2015-2016, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2022, have all been possibilities to complete this conceptual framework of thoughts.

As with natural disasters, the response to this type of crisis is also part of wider frameworks which orient humanitarian action, such as the *International Health Regulations*⁷².

One of the key documents of the international humanitarian system which guides humanitarian action in this type of context is the “*Humanitarian system-wide activation for infectious hazards*” which highlights the importance of “*ensuring appropriate procedures are in place and reflect the critical link between the IASC mechanisms and WHO responsibilities under International Health Regulations*”⁷³.

Generally speaking, humanitarian action is considered in a broader approach, in support of a public health response, or even in response to a situation which has gone from a public health crisis to a “societal crisis” (as for the COVID-19 pandemic⁷⁴). Humanitarian aid is seen as complementary to, rather than central to, a response to a public health crisis.

Another classification of crises, which has become more visible since 2009, is “crises in urban settings”. Within the IASC, for instance, a reference group dedicated to urban contexts was set up in 2009 and a body of reference documents was gradually developed and translated into action⁷⁵.

Humanitarian aid in this type of context requires a slightly different approach. It underlines the importance to think about the links with civil authorities in this kind of environments (e.g. municipalities, groups of municipalities or other governance mechanisms) but also with civil society and social actors.

⁷¹ For instance, the following documents: *Preventing, preparing for and responding to pandemic influenza* (September 2005), *Responding to the avian influenza epidemic and humanitarian preparedness for pandemic influenza: need for IASC engagement* (November 2005), *Towards a coordinated approach to avian and human influenza* (December 2005).

⁷² [International health regulations \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/health-topics/international-health-regulations)

⁷³ *IASC Principals*, December 2016.

⁷⁴ - United-Nations, *Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID19*, March 2020.

- United Nations, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*, April 2020.

⁷⁵ For instance: *IASC Strategy for meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas* (November 2010), *IASC Second action plan for meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas 2015-2017* (January 2015).

Furthermore, this type of environment requires different ways of thinking about the notion of vulnerability, the identification of target populations, and the modes of assistance and protection. Humanitarian aid is considered through a broader lens, not only through a long-term approach, but also in terms of social protection, public infrastructure, governance, etc.

Some might be tempted to add other crises categories (and therefore specific conceptual frameworks of thoughts) to this list, such as acute nutritional crises or famine situations, or the consideration of contexts affected by HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s.

However, these types of labelling, to use these examples, do not lead to articulated conceptual frameworks of thoughts that would be consolidated over time. They remain confined to an ad hoc approach, only in certain contexts and for a limited period of time. Moreover, they are often integrated into a more general description of a crisis (in particular complex emergencies or protracted crises) without leading to their own labelling, or to a consistent body of thoughts.

4. Confrontation in the qualification of crises and the conceptual frameworks of thoughts mobilised

The labelling of a crisis has its importance.

Indeed, each labelling of crises refers to the mobilisation of specific conceptual frameworks of thoughts which will guide the operational approaches deployed. However, these different conceptual frameworks of thoughts can be opposed by sometimes contradictory characteristics. For example, the key role given to national governments in responses to natural disasters, versus a certain independence (or at least a more caution relationship) with them in crises described as complex emergencies.

In a given context, these specific conceptual frameworks of thoughts can therefore enter in tension, and depending on which one is prioritised, the operational approach will change.

For example, if a crisis is understood as a complex emergency, and even if the IDP issue is highly visible in this context (which is frequently the case), then the conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to complex emergencies will come into tension with those related to internal displacement situations and often take precedence. Conversely, if a crisis is primarily framed as an internal displacement crisis, then the conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to IDP response will be mobilised as the main framework for action. This was the case for instance in Colombia in 2002 where the Humanitarian Response Plan was organised into five components reflecting the conceptual framework of thoughts specific to this type of labelling: i) coordination and institutional strengthening, ii) prevention and protection, iii) integration and economic and social reconstruction, iv) health and education, v) family welfare and food security.

Another illustration refers to the tensions that arose during the response to the Ebola outbreak in DRC in 2019. One part of the humanitarian community sought to mobilise some conceptual frameworks of thoughts linked to crises qualified as public health crises, with another reading this context mainly through the prism of a complex emergency, considering more centrally the ongoing conflict in some of the regions affected by this epidemic.

The dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector are also a question of agents and partnerships: who is part of the international humanitarian system, with whom and how should collaboration and coordination schemes be set up, what inter-agent approaches should be considered and designed?

The way in which the humanitarian landscape is conceived thus influences the very idea of humanitarian aid and its translation into action.

1. Towards a coordination UN/International NGOs/Donors

In the 1990s, the international humanitarian system formalised through the UN resolution 46/182 of 1991 was mainly centred around UN agencies, at least in comparison with the post-2000 period. The role of NGOs (especially international ones) in this system remained limited, although they were (and are still) represented in the IASC through three consortia (ICVA, Interaction and SCHR)⁷⁶. The same applies to engagement with “traditional” aid donors (many of whom were in a structuring process during this period) and whose functions were still mainly bounded to that of financing humanitarian projects.

It was not until the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s that these three pillars of the international humanitarian system (and the way they are linked) became more established.

Firstly, with regard to the United Nations, following the resolution 46/182 of 1991 and the creation of the IASC, a kind of “core group” was established around OCHA, UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, WHO and UNDP. From the 1990s onwards, other UN agencies and intergovernmental institutions gradually integrate this landscape around this core group.

This was the case, for example, with OHCHR, which joined the IASC around 1995, and the World Bank in the early 2000s as a result of regular calls for closer links with the institutions that had emerged from the Bretton Woods agreements. In 2002, the members or permanent invitees of the IASC are : UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR, FAO, WFP, WHO, OCHA, World Bank, ICRC, IFRC, IOM, UNHCHR (OHCHR), InterAction, SCHR, ICVA and the UN Secretary General’s Representative for IDPs.

In the 1990s, and even more so in the second half of the decade, the integration of international NGOs to this international humanitarian system gains step by step in momentum. References to such issue become more central in the debates taking place within the IASC at the time: CAPs become more open to NGOs, various operational guidelines underlining the need for coordination UN/NGOs are developed, and NGO involvement with the United Nations in certain crises gets stronger. While NGOs often express a certain amount of frustration and consider to progress in this field too slow, this topic will nevertheless continue to gain in importance in the debates.

The question of the extension of the IASC (at global and field level) is also regularly raised: on the one hand, there is a recognition of the need to open up memberships, and on the other, there is resistance

⁷⁶ It is not a question here of questioning the importance NGOs’ action in their vocation to provide aid to populations affected by humanitarian crises, but of recognising their limited weight in the organisation of this international humanitarian system under development in the 1990s.

to such eventuality, mainly justified by a logic of efficient management of this mechanism. However, there is a desire to build a more inclusive and coordinated sector.

Various initiatives will also reinforce this articulation under construction, such as the development of a common security management framework with NGOs (from the 2000s onwards) which is gradually structured around the *Saving Life Together initiative*⁷⁷.

In the field, UN/NGO coordination mechanisms begin to be devised in a more structured way in the early 2000s. While internal UN coordination is mainly established around the UNDMT (United Nations Disaster Management Team), the idea of a “local IASC” appears around 2002, which would be “inclusive of the members of the UNDMT, representatives from the Red Cross movement, most (if not all) the operational NGOs, and the International Organisation for Migration and the World Bank when present in the country”⁷⁸, approached as a “coalition of the willing” and where decisions are taken by consensus.

The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw a stronger presence of donors (mainly DAC donors) within this system. Interactions with them on global humanitarian aid policies become more frequent. Partnership frameworks are set up with ECHO for example, which was created in 1992. It was also under the impetus of certain donors (such as DFID) that calls for a first real reform of the international humanitarian system and the IASC were made in the early 2000s.

There were even discussions on several occasions for integrating certain donors as permanent invitees to the IASC⁷⁹. Although this will not be formalised, other mechanisms are put in place to encourage further exchanges⁸⁰.

At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the three pillars of the international humanitarian system are formed: the United Nations, international NGOs and donors (mainly DAC), to which the ICRC and the IFRC should be added.

The 2005 cluster reform (which sought to improve the coordination of the international humanitarian system)⁸¹ institutionalised and internalised this structure, creating a sort of “UN/NGO/international donor community” with its own coordination mechanisms. The humanitarian sector is then thought of mainly around these three pillars.

2. From an international humanitarian system based on 3 pillars to a *whole of society approach* and a *humanitarian ecosystem*

As for the involvement of local NGOs and “Southern NGOs” in the international humanitarian system, the breaking point comes at the time of the WHS in 2016 with the agenda of the *localisation of aid*. In the 1990s and 2000s many references with regard to the engagement with local organisations can be observed. However, it is more a logic of “capacity building” that is emphasised in order to ensure a better operational approach. Local organisations are thought of more as indirect beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, the engagement with them falling within a development, resilience and rehabilitation approach. There is little attention given to the role of this type of agent as humanitarian

⁷⁷ [Saving Lives Together \(SLT\): FAQs - Global Interagency Security Forum \(glsf.ngo\)](#) and [SLT | United Nations](#)

⁷⁸ *Issue Paper on Revision of Humanitarian Coordinator ToR*, June 2002.

⁷⁹ See for instance in 1997 the ECOSOC report mentioning that the “*participation in the IASC should be expanded to include the WB, IFAD, ECHO and USAID*”.

⁸⁰ For example, the interface between the IASC and the Good Humanitarian Donorship.

⁸¹ See note 27.

actors participating in the humanitarian response in the same way as the United Nations, international NGOs and donors.

For example, the DRC CAP in 2000 envisages the involvement of local NGOs as a way of “strengthening the will and capacity of local communities or groups to overcome their own, local crisis”, and highlights that “programming should utilize local resources, capacities, and skills throughout the transition process to the maximum extent possible”⁸².

The debates around responses to natural disasters from the 2000s onwards will place the role of local NGOs in humanitarian aid more significantly on the agenda, with South East Asia acting as a precursor given its national and regional structures under construction.

Following the WHS, and under for instance the impetus of initiatives carried out by the NEAR network or Charter for Change, but also the 2030 Agenda, this notion of localisation of aid is gradually being integrated into the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the international humanitarian system: humanitarian aid must be local and must include local agents in its development. Adjustments to coordination mechanisms, mainly at national and local levels (such as the evolution of the composition of *Humanitarian Country Teams*, or access to Country Based Pooled Funds), as well as certain commitments to wider initiatives such as the Grand Bargain⁸³, are taking place. Its translation into action, although still too limited in the eyes of some, is becoming more concrete (at least in comparison with previous periods).

Concerning the link with national governments, while the resolution 46/182 of 1991 already recognised the primary responsibility of the latter in responding to humanitarian crises, the notion of complex emergencies in the mid-1990s had underlined the necessity of an engagement with national governments somehow deliberately distant in order to emphasise the relatively independent nature of the humanitarian sector.

The tensions surrounding the Sudanese government's involvement in *Operation Lifeline Sudan* (OLS) are an interesting illustration in this regard. In 1997, a UN General Assembly resolution “stresses the need for OLS to be operated with a view to ensuring its efficiency, transparency and effectiveness, with the full participation of the government of Sudan in its management and operations, including conducting of assessments, allocation, distribution and evaluation process, as well as consultations in the preparation of the consolidated annual inter-agency appeal for the Operation”⁸⁴. The IASC will oppose this resolution by asserting the need for independence of action and decision making with regard to humanitarian assistance: “The UN has no objection to GoS participation in UN assessments; including those conducted in areas under southern movement control providing the southern movements agree. Similarly, southern movement participation in assessments in GoS-controlled areas is equally acceptable from the UN perspective. However, the UN/OLS assessments remain just that; work conducted by the UN in which final authority is vested with the UN. OLS is not a development programme. (...) The customary practice of international aid agencies to determine their programmes of cooperation on the basis of national development priorities as defined by the host government is definitely not applicable. (...) whereas the UN would prefer that the Appeal be endorsed by the parties, their approval is a not pre-condition for its issuance in the name of the UN”⁸⁵.

This idea of a more assumed articulation with national governments will gain in consistency with the attempt at the end of the 1990s to reverse the humanitarian-development paradigm (see next

⁸² Idem.

⁸³ [The Grand Bargain \(Official website\) | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

⁸⁴ *Discussion Paper on the Implications of the General Assembly Resolution on Emergency Assistance to the Sudan*, IASC Working Group, January 1997.

⁸⁵ *Discussion Paper on the Implications of the General Assembly Resolution on Emergency Assistance to the Sudan*, IASC Working Group, January 1997.

section) and through the development of conceptual frameworks of thoughts specific to natural disasters which emerge more strongly at this time (see previous section).

For example, in 1995, ECOSOC emphasised the primary responsibility of States in the face of humanitarian emergencies and to carry out the transition from humanitarian to development: *“The IASC members agreed on principles such as the systemic links between humanitarian activities and recovery and long-term development, and the appropriate arrangements required to improve the State's primary responsibility to take care of the victims of emergencies occurring on its territory”*⁸⁶.

This discussion of the IASC in 2000 also illustrates this evolution: *“Capacity building at the community and government level was consistently identified as a viable tool that can be integrated even during the conflict/humanitarian phase to ensure that government is well-positioned to participate in the design and implementation of the reintegration process. The government's involvement - if capacities exist - is key to facilitating the transition between relief and rehabilitation”*⁸⁷.

From 2002 onwards, the involvement of national governments in the development of CAPs will intensify.

It is important to note, however, that in the early 2000s, the role of national governments seems to be more thought out and prioritised in a logic of humanitarian-development transition and that there is still a tension between collaboration with governments and the distance that humanitarian action with them implies, as mentioned in this IASC document in 2000: *“in a country still engaged in civil war, but where relief and development activities can exist simultaneously within the same country, addressing the authority vacuum is exacerbated by perceptions of non-neutrality. At the same time, this same authority vacuum can negatively impact on the international community's efforts to work with and through the government in providing assistance”*⁸⁸.

Concerning the reflections on responses to natural disasters, it is increasingly a question of articulating the action of the international humanitarian system around national governments and of supporting them in their primary responsibility of assisting victims of disasters, as illustrated in the report of the IASC reference group on natural disasters in 2000 wishing to emphasise the importance *“to be given within the UN system, including country teams, to the primary and central role granted by the General Assembly to national governments in the response to natural disasters”*⁸⁹.

Step by step, the notion of a *State-centred approach* gains in importance. The role of national governments is no longer simply imposed by a wider geopolitical context and a greater capacity (or willingness) of some governments to become more involved in humanitarian aid. This centrality of governments is now being promoted by the international humanitarian system itself, in coherence with the 2030 Agenda which places national governments (and civil society) in the driving seat for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In addition, recent debates on the *decolonisation of aid* are increasing the pressure for a wider opening of the international humanitarian system, outside the “Western sphere” where it has found its roots.

In the early 2000s, the IASC saw this opening as a necessity in order to maintain its central position in the humanitarian sector and to better navigate the post-11th September 2001 geopolitical landscape, and in particular the concern of losing space in the Arab-Muslim world.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ IASC Working Group, *Follow-up to ECOSOC Resolution 1995/56*, January 1997.

⁸⁷ *Final Analysis and Overview of the IASC Reference Group on Post-Conflict Reintegration's Findings*, September 2000.

⁸⁸ *Idem*.

⁸⁹ *Report and recommendations of the IASC reference group on natural disasters*, May 2000.

⁹⁰ See particularly the document *Strengthened Humanitarian Dialogue and New Partnerships* produced for a meeting of the IASC Working Group in November 2004.

Nevertheless, in recent years, this opening has imposed itself more on the international humanitarian system. Thus, both NGOs described as “Global South” and non-DAC donors have become more present in this global humanitarian landscape and within the international humanitarian system. To this, we could also add the expansion of the link with the private sector, which was formalised at the time of the WHS in 2016, even if such considerations can be found back in the history of the IASC but at a much more timid and poorly articulated degree.

Finally, the notions of *Accountability to Affected Populations* and the *Participation Revolution* have appeared in recent years. The idea here is to be accountable, not primarily to donors (by seeking efficiency in the use of resources), but to the populations affected by crises, and to ensure that the latter can, at the very least, participate in “feedback loop mechanisms”, but also in the development of response plans. Populations are no longer considered solely as recipients of aid, but also as agents of aid. Numerous initiatives (such as the Core Humanitarian Standard⁹¹) and documents are then developed to frame this approach, HRP must give a central place to these notions, exercises consisting of collecting the perspectives of the populations become more frequent, many evaluations include this element into their terms of reference, etc.

Generally speaking, the idea of a humanitarian ecosystem and a whole of society approach is gradually becoming one of the dominant conceptual framework of thoughts of the international humanitarian system, seeking more concrete applications in the field and thus challenging the initial approach of the three-pillar UN/international NGOs/donors.

However, this idea of ecosystem and whole of society approach is still considered under the coordination of the United Nations, an element which has remained unchanged since 1991 and rarely challenged over the last thirty years.

⁹¹ [Home Page - CHS \(corehumanitarianstandard.org\)](https://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/)

The idea of humanitarian aid is also a question of articulation with its closest sectors, mainly the development sector, the peace sector, the Human Rights sector, and more recently that of environment.

These interactions between sectors have a major impact on the way the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the international humanitarian system evolve and guide operational approaches.

Note: this part addresses the articulation between humanitarian and development, humanitarian and peace, and humanitarian and environment.

Concerning the link between humanitarian action and Human Rights, the reader can refer to the first section of this chapter on the emergence of the concept of protection within the scope of action of humanitarian aid.

1. Humanitarian aid and Development

The way in which the humanitarian-development link is thought about is a sinuous, non-linear path, made up of advances, setbacks and reversals. Nevertheless, it has tended to stabilise in recent years through a more global, multi-temporal and multi-dimensional approach.

Although the relationship between emergencies and development is not a new issue⁹², until the mid-1990s, the question of the link between humanitarian and development at the IASC level is not raised very much, in comparison with the periods which follow. Humanitarian aid is mainly seen as a short-term action. The compartmentalisation with what is considered as “development” is quite strong (the separation of the positions of HC and RC is a translation of it). There are, however, some exceptions to this, such as the manner in which this articulation is approached in the context of responses to internal displacement crises (see earlier in this chapter).

From 1995 onwards, and even more so from 1996, reflection on this link gains in importance. Many CAPs refer to development issues and the way in which humanitarian action should relate to them. From 1997 onwards, the functions of RC and HC are increasingly exercised by the same person and, as presented earlier in this chapter, rehabilitation issues are more significantly integrated into the scope of action of humanitarian aid.

In 1997, the IASC created a sub-working group on relief and development issues, while the focus on complex emergencies opens the door to thinking about the long-term deployment of humanitarian aid.

However, humanitarian aid remains very distinct from development aid, as illustrated by the discussions on Rwanda in 1996 and the Great Lakes in 1997 and 1998, when donors were asked “to allocate designated resources to recovery funds as a category distinct from emergency relief funds on the one hand, and longer-term development funds on the other”⁹³.

⁹² Some reflections on this issues can be found back, for example, in the debates within the League of Nations after the First World War. (See K. Davies, *Continuity, change and contest: meanings of “humanitarian” from the “Religion of Humanity” to the Kosovo war*, ODI/HPG, August 2012).

⁹³ *Working Paper for IASC-Working Group Review Multi-Donor Study on Rwanda*, March 1996.

The dominant approach is that of a continuum: emergency precedes rehabilitation which precedes development, as shown for example by the exchanges on Rwanda (once again), Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka in 1995, where the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance towards rehabilitation or development when (and if) the contextual situation allows it is discussed⁹⁴.

The rehabilitation period, in the framework of this linear approach, becomes, in part, a responsibility of the international humanitarian system. Thus, in the early 2000s, “transition plans” or “extended CAPs” appear as a complement (or rather a replacement) to certain CAPs, still under the coordination of the IASC. These transition plans are supposed to apply to “post-crisis contexts” and are seen as a manner to bridge the gap between humanitarian and development. In 2003, five countries are concerned by these transition plans: Angola, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Tajikistan.

However, the dominance of this way of thinking is relative and attempts will be made to revisit this continuum approach into a “contiguuum approach”.

These attempts are at first timid and remain confined mainly to debates and discourses, and not to action.

For example, in 1996, a paper produced by SCHR on the Great Lakes crisis encourages IASC members “to ensure that their actions as humanitarian agencies contribute to the overall aim of bringing about durable solutions to crises in the region. (...) that the IASC should agree upon any additional mechanism required to ensure that UN humanitarian activities are determined by a common analysis of the underlying causes of the conflict in the region (...) and are part of a coordinated and integrated strategy towards durable solutions”⁹⁵.

Another illustration, in 1998, again in relation to the Great Lakes crisis, is the emphasis on the crucial importance of “ensuring that humanitarian and developmental activities in the country are complementary, reinforcing common objectives”⁹⁶.

But gradually the debates become more present, more pressing, and will lead to the emergence of the *Strategic Framework initiative* in 1997, which will seek to establish a “contiguuum approach”, and which will even go so far as to try to blow up the notions of humanitarian and development sectors (particularly in the case of Afghanistan).

In 1997, this initiative is proposed by the ACC (Administrative Committee on Coordination) with the aim of reviewing the humanitarian and development articulation in countries in crises. Afghanistan and Mozambique are identified as pilot countries to test this approach. In Afghanistan, this will result in the development of a strategic framework which considers that “assistance must help to establish a basis for future peace and security, and that all assistance must work towards a shared purpose - creating the basis for sustainable livelihoods in Afghanistan”⁹⁷. The idea is that all international assistance to Afghanistan “will be organized to achieve the common purpose of building sustainable livelihoods: this includes emergency assistance to vulnerable populations in areas where fighting continues or where victims of fighting remain at risk, rehabilitation to build peace, and assistance to prepare for future peace. All assistance to Afghanistan presumes the sovereignty of the Afghan State, and will work to rebuild the country as a whole”. An effective response to the Afghan crisis requires

⁹⁴ Rwanda: “The emergency phase as such was over and that activities should now focus on rehabilitation and reintegration” (IASC Working Group, January 1995).

Yugoslavia: “If a peace settlement were to come about, the agency (WFP) would foresee phasing out as relief needs declined” (IASC Working Group, September 1995).

Sri Lanka: “It is recommended that at present, humanitarian operations continue on the basis of urgent needs, and that medium-term and long-term measures be considered as and when the situation becomes clearer” (IASC Working Group, November 1995).

⁹⁵ *Information paper, the search for durable solutions in the Great Lakes*, SCHR, June 1996.

⁹⁶ *Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes, 1996-1997: An Independent Assessment*, OCHA, May 1998.

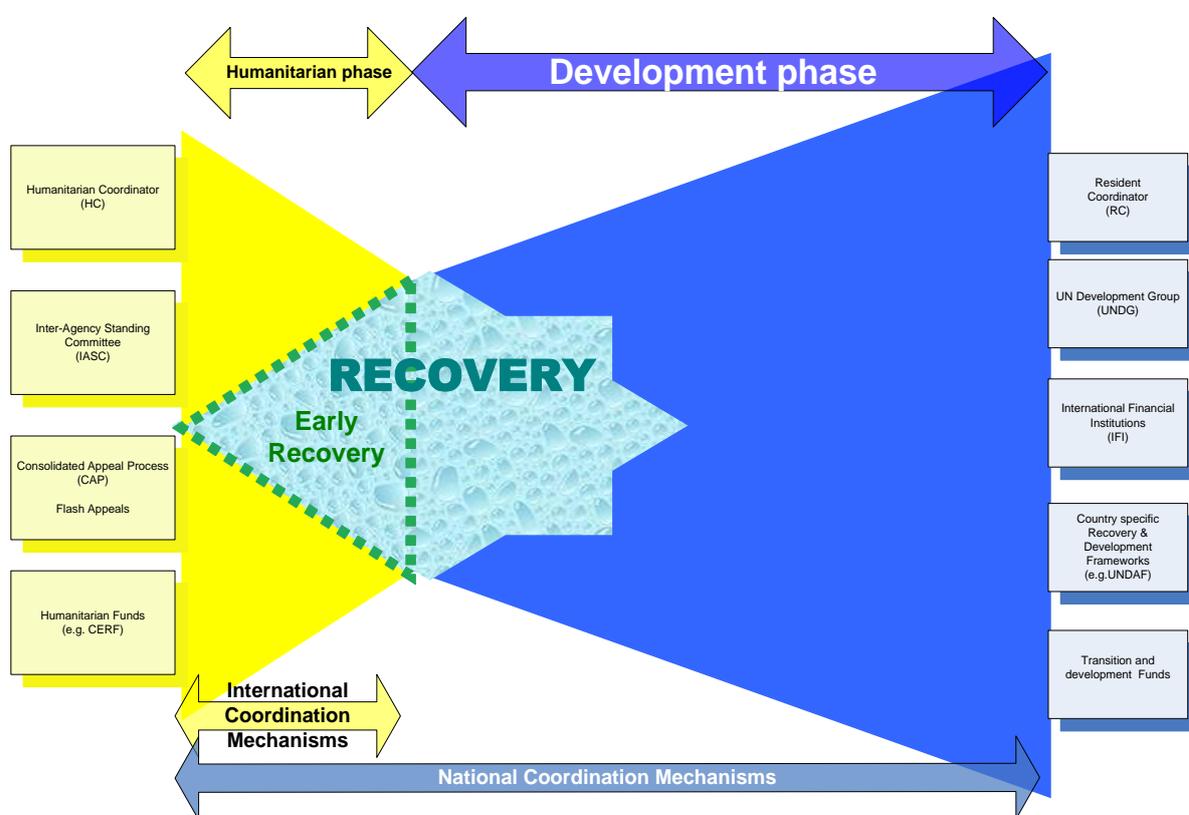
⁹⁷ *Discussion paper, Strategy for Assistance to Afghanistan*, IASC Working Group, November 1997.

that “relief and development work in synergy to address different dimensions of a common problem”⁹⁸. In Afghanistan, “no real distinction is being made between humanitarian and development agencies”⁹⁹.

Nevertheless, this attempt of the late 1990s and early 2000s to explode the classic linear patterns of the time will not last and will not lead to a new conceptual framework of thoughts internalised within the international humanitarian system¹⁰⁰.

From this period of intense confrontation between ways of thinking, humanitarian aid will retain these notions of rehabilitation and early recovery, responsibilities, in part, of the international humanitarian system and integrated into a linear approach to crises. The notion of continuum will somehow prevail over the contiguous approach.

The cluster reform will formalise this, and the link between humanitarian and development, via the early recovery stage, is then mainly addressed as shown in this diagram produced by the IASC¹⁰¹.



Certainly, the coming period will not see the debate die out completely. Various attempts will be made to find new solutions to this problem, which remains on the agenda.

Amongst these, we can note, for example, all the reflections and attempts to apply the concept of resilience which is more significantly present on the agenda of the international humanitarian system in the 2010s.

⁹⁸ Idem.

⁹⁹ Report of the IASC Reference Group on Post-Conflict Reintegration, November 1999.

¹⁰⁰ With regard to Afghanistan, the IASC considers in 2002 that “modalities of short-term assistance were different from long term reconstruction” (IASC Matrix, March 2002).

¹⁰¹ Presentation of UNDP Contingency Planning mission to Darfur for the IASC, November 2007.

However, it will not be until the WHS and the concept of the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (to which Peace will be later attached) that a new breakthrough will be made in the way of thinking about this articulation, in a certain manner relatively similar to that developed in 1997 through the Strategic Framework initiative.

This break should be seen in the context of the development of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Whereas the Millennium Goals, which end in 2015, are considered to be limiting because of their approach by silos, the 2030 Agenda tries to propose a global approach - multi-sector, multi-temporal, multi-dimensional and multi-actors - to the needs of populations and development issues, and in which humanitarian aid comes into play.

The Nexus concept is thus part of this holistic approach, breaking down the linear articulation which has mainly prevailed until then, and relying on the protracted crisis narrative mentioned above.

A corpus of documents articulating this new way of thinking and doing is emerging¹⁰², associated with a myriad of studies and evaluations on the subject¹⁰³. HRPs are taking shape in accordance with this new paradigm and are becoming more frequently multi-annual, while funding patterns try to adapt and the RC and HC streams are merged in 2021 - to name but a few examples.

The challenge now is to operationalise this approach, to contextualise it to the specificities of crises. Contrary to the Strategic Framework initiative, this new conceptual framework of thoughts is becoming established as a dominant mode of thoughts, despite a somewhat laborious implementation, criticism from certain agents and some resistance in certain contexts. It is also being reinforced by a reform of the UN development sector carried out in an assumed manner by its Secretary General, strengthening in particular the role of the Resident Coordinators¹⁰⁴.

2. Humanitarian aid and Peace

Similar to the link between humanitarian aid and development, the articulation between humanitarian and peace is not a smooth one. Its recent history is crossed by many episodes of tension and has not yet resulted in a truly stable conceptual framework of thoughts.

The emergence of the link between humanitarian aid and peace in the international humanitarian system actually predates reflection about humanitarian and development (although it is difficult to separate the two).

As mentioned above, crises described as complex emergencies highlight the difficulty of navigating a charged political landscape. Nevertheless, in many conflicts, reference is also made to humanitarian aid as a means of facilitating political peace and social peace, before talking more consistently about links with development.

In 1992, the Agenda for Peace was launched, which attempted to establish itself as the reference framework for thinking about the relationship between humanitarian aid and peace. It was considered that *“humanitarian action by the United Nations cannot take place in isolation but must be seen as part of a comprehensive response to complex emergency situations. Given the interrelated causes and consequences of complex emergencies, humanitarian action cannot be fully effective unless it is related to a comprehensive strategy for peace and security, human rights, and social and economic development, as proposed within the framework of the Agenda for Peace. (...) Peace-making and peace-keeping are seen as complementary to humanitarian action. (...) One objective of*

¹⁰² For example the *UN-IASC Light Guidance on Collective Outcomes* (June 2020).

¹⁰³ See for instance the works of the Center for Humanitarian Action, of Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, of NRC, of Oxfam, and many others.

¹⁰⁴ [UN development system reform 101 | United to Reform](#)

humanitarian action should be to offer a broader range of incentives for promotion of peace, cooperation and reconciliation”¹⁰⁵.

However, this complementary approach faces a lot of resistance.

First of all, the emergence of the concept of “humanitarian intervention” or the humanitarian justification of some military operations (such as in Kosovo in 1999) create a strong mobilisation of the humanitarian sector, with certain NGOs in the front line, but also of the IASC as a whole¹⁰⁶.

In 2000, the Brahimi report, which proposed an integrated approach to UN missions, once again fuelled these tensions and resistance.

These tensions are reflected in the IASC's discussions at the time, but this opposition is even more visible in the SCHR's position on this report: *“One of the most important problems that has confronted humanitarian response during the past decade has been the presence of political and security vacuums in complex emergencies. (...) Strengthening peace operations is certainly a necessary condition for reducing the political vacuum, but it is not sufficient for a strong political will is also required of governments if successful peace operations are to be carried out. (...) The Brahimi report points out the need to create space in a conflict for peace operations, particularly peace building. Such a space is bound to overlap the humanitarian space that has been created by a humanitarian response. Peacemaking, peacekeeping, and even peacebuilding are occurring simultaneously with the humanitarian work of assisting and protecting those affected by the violence. The most recent examples of transitional administrations have shown the crucial need for ongoing humanitarian response, at least in the early stages of the transitions. (...) While it may be necessary for the Report to focus on the UN and its agencies involved in peace operations, it reflects little on the inter-relationship of peace and humanitarian operations. (...) The Report's basic assumptions regarding humanitarian assistance and its relationship to peace operations is flawed and reflects a misunderstanding of humanitarian principles and their application by humanitarian organisations. (...) The report envisages a monolithic structure, where the Head of the UN Mission has at his or her disposal all manner of tools and assets – military, political and diplomatic, humanitarian and developmental. (...) Humanitarian action, however, cannot be considered among these appropriate tools. Provision of humanitarian assistance is undertaken based on principles of neutrality and impartiality and cannot be conflated with the efforts of a monolithic peace operation to divert political agendas. (...) The raison d'etre of humanitarian action is not the achievement of peace, and most certainly not the achievement of the enforced peace of the Security Council. (...) It is not humanitarian action when a UN Humanitarian Coordinator, sitting as a senior cabinet member of a peace operation, plans activities that complement the mission's political objectives. It is most certainly not humanitarian action when a civilian population in need is denied assistance as a result of its location or perceived affiliations.”¹⁰⁷*

This period of tension, of resistance, did not lead to a new conceptual framework of thoughts with regard to this articulation between humanitarianism and peace. The sectors remain not only differentiated, but hardly considered as complementary, at least from the point of view of the

¹⁰⁵ IASC Guidelines on Respect for Humanitarian Mandates in Conflict Situations, January 1996.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance :

- Kosovo: “IASC WG expressed concern for the potential consequences of the involvement of NATO to humanitarian activities” (IASC Working Group 1999).

- Former Yugoslavia: “Serious reservations were expressed in the EU-Sponsored energy for democracy plan being considered as a humanitarian measure, as it is geographically limited and its decisions based on political and not humanitarian criteria” (IASC Working Group 1999).

¹⁰⁷ Some NGO Views on the Humanitarian Implications of Implementing the Brahimi Report, SCHR, November 2000.

international humanitarian system. Even if the concept of *Do no harm* integrates the responsibility of humanitarian agents not to fuel conflict and tensions, humanitarian aid is not placed within a global approach to peacebuilding, peacemaking or peacekeeping.

It will not be until the post-WHS period that this issue of articulation between humanitarian and peace will be brought back to the agenda in a consistent manner. Initially conceived as a Humanitarian-Development nexus, the Peace pillar is added to the latter¹⁰⁸. But, once again, resistance is strong, and attention remains mainly on the humanitarian-development link. Nevertheless, since 2021, an additional effort, led in particular by the United Nations, has been made to articulate and demystify the notion of peace¹⁰⁹.

However, it is still too early to say whether this attempt will turn into a new, stable and dominant conceptual framework of thoughts. Its implementation, such as its integration into the HRPs, remains relatively weak for the moment, and it is more the notion of *conflict sensitivity* which currently occupies a more central place in the way of thinking about humanitarian and peace issues.

3. Humanitarian aid and Environment

The issue of the link between humanitarian action and the environment became a priority for the international humanitarian system in the 2010s¹¹⁰, under the prism of the climate change agenda.

Initially, the main purpose was to participate in a collective effort to raise awareness of the issue of climate change, notably by highlighting the humanitarian consequences of such transformations¹¹¹.

It is only more recently that reflections have emerged on how to operationalise this humanitarian and environmental link in order to better meet the needs of populations affected by humanitarian crises. Once again, a global approach is encouraged and favoured, in line with the various existing strategic frameworks. This is the case for instance of the *Blueprint for Action* in 2016/2017, which seeks to establish a common strategy to deal with the *El Niño* phenomena and its consequences¹¹². The objectives of this *Blueprint for Action* are “to provide a tool to support integrated, nationally-led and equity-driven plans to prepare for ENSO and other climate hazards, absorbing risks without jeopardizing development gains, and informing climate-smart development plans to reduce risk”¹¹³. In this logic it is considered that “a purely humanitarian response would not be sufficient to address the underlying vulnerability linked to the recurring and predictable ENSO phenomenon, and proposed an integrated approach which focused on prevention and bridged the humanitarian-development nexus”¹¹⁴.

In this continuity, a new labelling appears with some crises branded as “climatic”, such as the food insecurity situation in Madagascar in 2021¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁸ See for instance: *IASC Issue paper: Exploring peace within the Humanitarian-Development- Peace Nexus* (October 2020), *IASC Mapping of Good Practice in the Implementation of Humanitarian-Development Peace Nexus Approaches, Synthesis Report* (November 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Like the distinction between “little p” and “big P” (of peace), the former referring to actions contributions to societies free of violence, and the latter referring to political solutions to situations of violence (see *Exploring peace within the Humanitarian-Development- Peace Nexus* (IASC, October 2020).

¹¹⁰ The issue of climate change takes start to take a central place in the IASC debate from 2009 and the COP in Copenhagen the same year.

¹¹¹ See the numerous press releases and other communications of the IASC (or other humanitarian actors) on this issue, notably linked to the various COPs.

¹¹² United Nations, *Preventing El Niño Southern Oscillation Episodes from Becoming Disasters: A “Blueprint for Action”*, December 2016.

¹¹³ *Idem*.

¹¹⁴ *Idem*.

¹¹⁵ [Madagascar: Severe drought could spur world’s first climate change famine | UN News](#)

But more specifically, the challenge is to include the environmental issues in the very programming of humanitarian responses. This involves, for example, integrating environmental considerations into the analysis and evaluation phases, which have been fairly non-existent until now. It is then a matter of being able to think about the humanitarian response through an environmental prism, to consider the environment as a central element of humanitarian strategies. But even if the concept is there, its translation into action, its operationalisation, is still rather vague. Some talk about ensuring the environmental resilience of populations, others about looking to populations and communities' adjustment mechanisms to climate change, or even about transforming an environment so that populations are less affected by the consequences of climate change.

While environmental issues are fully integrated into the global approaches which have been promoted in recent years and which strengthen the links between humanitarian action and sustainability, the action plans of the international humanitarian system therefore remain to be made more concrete.

Alongside these operational issues, attention is also being paid to the humanitarian sector's responsibility for its own impact on climate change and the environment in general. The purpose is to design operational approaches which are environmentally responsible, firstly at local level, but also at global level.

Each organisation is thus encouraged to review its practices, develop environmental charters and draw up action plans to reduce its CO2 emissions. Initiatives are emerging to support the humanitarian sector in this transition, such as the *Climate Action Accelerator*¹¹⁶. At local level, it's also a question of putting in place a series of measures to adapt ways of doing.

The link between humanitarian action and the environment is gradually becoming a central theme in the sector: humanitarian action cannot be thought of without its relationship with the environment. Nevertheless, the content of this emerging conceptual framework of thoughts has yet to be clarified. Although the humanitarian sector's commitment to raising awareness of climate change seems to be well established, its operationalisation is still relatively unclear, as is the translation into action of the environmental responsibility of agents.

However, given the challenges posed by climate change, a question remains: to what extent will this conceptual framework of thoughts fit in with the other? Or, on the contrary will it act as an overarching conceptual framework of thoughts which will bring about far more profound changes in the way humanitarian aid is understood?

¹¹⁶ [Accueil - Climate Action Accelerator](#)

CONTINUATION OF THIS SPELEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

This exercise could have ended here.

Indeed, it has provided a coherent and relatively robust picture of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

Certainly, a further examination based on additional interviews and documents could complete this picture, as “an agent-based approach” - instead of this “short cut” (taken through the dominant position of the international humanitarian system) could provide additional nuances.

But what I would like to highlight here is of another matter. It is about continuing this speleological journey in an attempt to go as deeply as possible into this exploration of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of humanitarian aid.

The stability of a conceptual framework of thoughts has been identified as one of its major characteristics. A conceptual framework of thoughts is not just an opinion, a simple idea which comes and goes, which fluctuates. It is a way of thinking about humanitarian aid which stands the test of time, which finds its stability in the depth of its internalisation in collective thoughts. To push this internalisation to the extreme is to refer to an idea which cannot, or only with great difficulty, be imagined otherwise. It is an idea that has become so deeply entrenched that it is difficult, even on an individual level, to “think differently”.

And without this having been anticipated, this literature review exercise has revealed a conceptual framework of thoughts which is so deeply rooted in the collective mind of the humanitarian sector that it appears to be the centrepiece of the structure presented in the previous pages. It is so deeply rooted in collective beliefs, in the representations of humanitarian aid, that it has become its very foundation; that “little idea” which, if it were not there, would render everything else obsolete, would have led to a new paradigm, to a fundamentally different reality. It is an idea which, if it did not exist, would overturn the whole edifice of the other conceptual frameworks of thoughts which are ultimately dependent on it.

This central conceptual framework of thoughts refers to a very simple but significantly powerful idea: the idea that humanitarian aid is a sector in itself, different from others. That humanitarian aid and the humanitarian sector exist as an “object in itself”. This idea is so deeply rooted in the humanitarian sector itself, but also in other sectors, that it has become impossible to imagine doing without it. Behind every discussion, every operation, every way of doing things, every policy, every document examined in this work, appears in watermark this central idea. All the conceptual frameworks of thoughts mentioned above are based precisely on the idea that humanitarian aid is a specific sector, a specific object.

It is difficult to trace when this idea became so important that it finally imposed itself. Based on research into the history of humanitarian aid, I would say that this idea really began to appear in the 1980s, which is considered as the first stage in the structuring of the sector. With the establishment of the international humanitarian system and the UN resolution 46/182 in 1991, it gained depth and acquired a particularly strong degree of stability.

The periods that followed have, for the most part, been opportunities to reinforce it, to anchor it even more deeply in the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

This idea is so strong that it goes beyond the international humanitarian system. It imposes itself on the vast majority of agents of the humanitarian sector. Every step taken to examine the narratives of agents inevitably leads back to this central idea.

This idea may seem obvious. And that is precisely the point. Yes, it is obvious, of course it is, as long as we pay attention to it! And it is because it is obvious if we make the effort to look at it, that it is so profound.

CHAPTER 3 - OBSERVATIONS, ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS

Now that this historical perspective on the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector (over the period studied) has been established, how can we think about the mechanisms of change at work behind these transformations? Can trends be identified over the period covered in order to understand how these developments take place? How do these conceptual frameworks of thoughts mutate, what mechanisms and forces influence this change, how does it take place? And what avenues of reflection could this lead to? This is what this chapter aims to focus on, by embarking in the last stage of this speleological journey.

However, it is not a question of examining each conceptual framework of thoughts or each situation in their respective characteristics, taken independently, in order to unseal the mechanisms of change specific to each.

What this chapter wants to bring out here is of a different nature.

The objective is to identify underlying trends, in the form of forces and mechanisms of change, which go beyond particular situations, the will of agents and the particularities of each conceptual framework of thoughts; to identify certain regularities which are found over time in the way change in the humanitarian sector develops.

In order to properly understand the approach used here, it is worth recalling the theoretical anchors set out in Chapter 1, section 4.

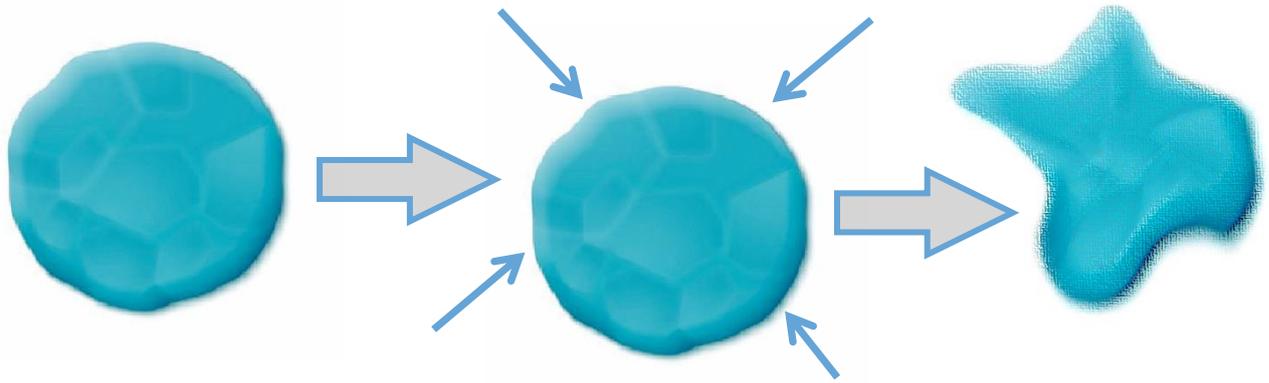
The dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector are considered as a social construct, and more particularly as a *sui generis* social fact, whose mechanisms of construction must be identified. It is a question of approaching them as a “*proper object, independent of individuals*”, to quote Durkheim, whose modes of realisation; evolution and transformation must be understood.

In this logic, this proper object would respond to patterns of realisation which, even if resulting from a social construction, would go beyond individual wills and would impose themselves on agents; in a way, patterns of realisation which would have acquired a certain degree of autonomy. The objective is to identify these patterns of realisation.

A “visual construction” can be useful here in order to give more clarity to the approach undertaken, and thus create meaning around the observations and analyses highlighted in this chapter.

This visual construction is based on a simplified representation of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector in the form of a protean and multi-characteristics object that we will call “humanitarian object”. As the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts evolve, this object, like a play-dough, change shape and characteristics.

The idea is then to try to grasp the mechanisms and forces at work behind the transformations of this object, to understand what encourages its evolution, what stabilises it or what slows it down.



The “humanitarian object, representing the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, is assembled as a play-dough which changes form and characteristics over time under the impact of forces and mechanisms to be revealed.

Now that the approach is posed with more clarity, we can go deeper into this analysis.

In a first phase, this chapter outlines the main mechanisms and forces at play in the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector presented in the previous chapter.

These main mechanisms and forces of change observed have been grouped into four categories:

- i) Games of interactions between agents.
- ii) Changes in the contextual environment.
- iii) Processes and degrees of internalisation.
- iv) Games of interactions between conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Again, this artificial categorisation has been devised to make the reading and understanding easier and meaningful. Thus a different categorisation could be imagined while grouping similar observations; the same mechanisms and forces of change.

Furthermore - and importantly – cross-examinations through the same methodology or the use of a complementary or different methodology would perhaps make it possible to nuance some of them, to bring out others, or even to challenge some. This categorisation should therefore not be considered exhaustive, nor final in its current state.

Nevertheless, the observations captured through this research work seem sufficiently solid and relevant to be presented here.

In a second phase, and on the basis of the forces and mechanisms of change observed, this chapter will dwell on certain avenues of reflections and some questions which this exercise has opened up, in particular the degree of autonomy (or on the contrary of control) of the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, the role of agents in these transformations, the limits to the construction of a model for thinking about change, and the possibility of scenarios for looking at the future of the sector.

Thinking about change, especially when mobilising a constructivist approach, inevitably leads to dwelling on the role of agents and their interactions on the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

As a social fact, and through a logic of *co-constitution*, these conceptual frameworks of thoughts are necessarily constructed by the agents and their interactions, but in turn influence them through a continuous dialectic.

Looking at this dialectical relationship thus requires examining the logics of influence between agents, the logics of domination and resistance, but also exploring the impact of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts on agents' positioning patterns. This also calls for consideration of how the diversity of agents making up the humanitarian sector is articulated with the evolution of conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Based on the analysis of the material collected in this study, two main observations should be made:

- The mechanisms of emergence and anchoring of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts;
- The articulation between the diversity of agents, their positioning patterns, and the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

1. The mechanisms of emergence and anchoring of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, or *the norm life cycle*

It is easy to observe that, on a regular basis, an agent, or a group of agents, try to bring forward new conceptual frameworks of thoughts, or more frequently, to participate in the evolution of a particular conceptual framework of thoughts.

The objective is then to ensure that this idea can find its way onto the agenda of considerations carried out by the international humanitarian system and eventually establish itself, in the long term, as a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts (both on a narrative and practical point of view).

The path that this idea will follow towards an eventual establishment as a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts is more or less rocky. Along the way, it will encounter allies who will seek to give it weight, but also resistance that will tend to minimise or even erase it.

Moreover, this idea, through these interactions between agents, will also be modified, transformed, in comparison to its initial state. And this “capacity for modification” will be all the more useful for gathering a critical mass of agents around it and hoping to assert itself as a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts.

To better understand what is at stake behind this brief introductory scene, it is useful to mobilise the *norm life cycle* model developed by Marta Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink in 1998¹¹⁷, a model that we will apply here to the world of ideas.

¹¹⁷ Finnemore et Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamic and Political Change*, International Organization, Vol. 52, N°4, International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, Autumn 1998, pages 887-917.

This model seeks to highlight the processes of emergence and development of a norm within the society of States, and has been used many times to explain the behaviour of State actors and the development of certain norms within the society of States, and to propose avenues of reflection for thinking about change in International Relations¹¹⁸.

This concept of norm is inherited from sociology where it is considered as “*a principle or model of conduct specific to a social group or society*”¹¹⁹.

In International Relations, a norm is commonly defined as “*a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity*”¹²⁰ and is central to its constructivist current.

The underlying idea is that the identity of an agent and its membership to a more or less extended social group would encourage it to behave in a way that is perceived, both by itself and by the group to which it belongs, as appropriate. Agents “*are primarily guided by what James March and Johan Osmon call a logic of appropriation, they behave according to what they consider to be legitimate prevailing within the social structures in which they are embedded*”¹²¹.

In order to adjust this model to our problematic and to the importance of the world of ideas, it is necessary to consider the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector as “*norms of thoughts*” for the social group that constitutes the humanitarian sector (and more precisely its dominant group, the international humanitarian system), and to apply this model of the *norm life cycle* to it.

This model proposes three phases for thinking about the emergence and development of a norm - it should be noted that these three phases can partially overlap, so they are not strictly linear in their process of realisation.

The first phase is the emergence of a norm. This corresponds to the period during which a norm is carried by agents, called *norm entrepreneurs*, seeking to convince the greatest number of agents to adhere to it.

Their objective is the generalisation of this norm, of the ways of thinking and the behaviours it underlies, which they consider appropriate and desirable for a social group.

These norm entrepreneurs are essential to the emergence of a norm because they draw attention to an alternative way of approaching an issue, and try to convince other agents of the need for a change in thinking and behaving by using concepts and cognitive frameworks, in a given context, that echo their perception of reality.

There are many examples of agents within the humanitarian sector playing this role of norm entrepreneurs.

¹¹⁸ See for instance :

Risse, Ropp, Sikkiink, *The Power of Human Right*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Khagram, Riker, Sikkink, *Restructuring world Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Finnemore, *The purpose of intervention: changing beliefs about the use of force*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2003.

¹¹⁹ *Lexique de Sociologie*, Paris, Dalloz, 2010, p. 227 (personal translation).

¹²⁰ Finnemore et Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamic and Political Change*, International Organization, Vol. 52, N°4, International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, Autumn 1998, page 891.

Voir également Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

¹²¹ Battistella, *Théories des relations internationales*, Paris, SciencesPo Les Presses, 2009, page 319 (personal translation).

For example, NGOs such as Help Age have played a key role in ensuring that the elderly are taken into account as a priority group in humanitarian aid¹²², or Handicap International with regard to people with disabilities¹²³.

The role of the NEAR network¹²⁴ and the Charter for Change project¹²⁵ in pushing forwards the localisation of aid can also be highlighted. Reference can also be made to the pivotal role of UNHCR in trying to put forward a new paradigm for responses to displacement crises through the New York Declaration of 2016 and the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018¹²⁶.

When a “sufficient number” of agents endorse this new norm, and when it is institutionalised, a breaking point is reached, in the sense that the adherence of other agents is, from there, much faster, characteristic of the second phase of this model, the *norm cascade*. This breaking point marks the moment when this new norm is considered suitable for a given group of agents.

A process of socialisation then encourages other agents to adhere to this norm; a kind of “social pressure” inviting them to respect this norm in development.

For this breaking point to be reached, this new norm must be adopted by a sufficient number of agents. Although some empirical studies seem to show that this sufficient number is generally one third, it is more relevant to reflect, not on the number of agents adhering to a new norm during the first phase, but rather on the type(s) of agent(s) and the weight or position of the latter within their social group.

Indeed, the adherence of certain agents to a norm during the first phase is critical in order for the other agents to be led to adhere to it. We speak of *critical agents*.

These critical agents are “*those without which the achievement of the substantive norm goal is compromised*”¹²⁷.

This breaking point should be understood as following the adherence of a sufficient number of critical agents to a new emerging norm.

These critical agents also play the role of *lead agents* in the sense that they themselves voluntarily become active in promoting a norm, seeking to convince and influence other agents.

This *cascade phase* is particularly visible, for example, in the establishment of the concept of protection in the scope of humanitarian action, which has been happening more rapidly since 1997.

The same goes for the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (even if its stability is still in search of more solid operational anchoring), which sees a significant acceleration post-WHS, after many years of discussion and debate on the subject in the periods that preceded (as presented in Chapter 2).

We could also highlight the growing importance of the link between climate change and humanitarian aid in the last three years, after a first significant appearance on the agenda in 2009 and 2010.

Finally, for a norm to be truly anchored in the long term, it needs to be internalised within the social group concerned and within each agent, thus marking the third phase of the *norm life cycle* model,

¹²² Help Age was at the origin of a series of recommendations approved by the IASC in 2007 for a better inclusion of elderly in humanitarian action. [IASC advocacy paper on Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An essential brief for humanitarian actors | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

¹²³ Handicap International for instance was instrumental in the production of IASC guidelines (approved in 2016) for a better inclusion of people with disabilities in humanitarian action. [IASC Guidelines, Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, 2019 | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

¹²⁴ NEAR

¹²⁵ [Charter for Change – Localisation of Humanitarian Aid \(charter4change.org\)](#)

¹²⁶ [The Global Compact on Refugees: The bumpy road of a social norm in development - Refugee Law Initiative Blog \(sas.ac.uk\)](#)

¹²⁷ Finnemore et Sikkink, *International Norm Dynamic and Political Change*, International Organization, Vol. 52, N°4, International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, Autumn 1998, pages 887-917.

the *internalisation process* (a mechanism which will be discussed in more detail in the section “Processes and degrees of internalisation”).

The internalisation of a norm takes many forms: endorsement of policies, anchoring in global strategies, organisational reshaping, operationalisation, standard operating procedures, etc., favouring a certain type of behaviour.

It is then considered as a non-questionable norm, “taken for granted”, and gains in stability and depth.

At the centre of this model are therefore games of interaction between agents. These interactions reflect some logic of domination and influence between agents, highlight positionings which are more or less key to the emergence and establishment of the norm, reveal some functions of resistance, etc.

In line with this constructivist approach, agents evolving within the humanitarian sector should be considered as social agents rather than rational agents mainly guided by efficiency and rational choice as understood by neo-realist and neo-liberal currents in International Relations. Agents construct modes of interaction that in turn influence their choices, behaviours and ways of thinking in a continuous dialectical game.

They certainly retain a margin of manoeuvre, a space for their own reflection, and are able to develop voluntary strategies and assumed positionings, but these choices must also be analysed within a broader framework of interactions with which they must deal, and which often exceed their capacities for control - which are, in a sense, imposed upon them.

Mobilising such a model is certainly useful for unravelling the emergence of each conceptual framework of thoughts, for examining the different roles that each agent plays according to situations. Indeed, depending on the situation, each agent takes on a role that may be different. In this sense, each agent participates, consciously or not, in the development and evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

We have already mentioned the role of norm entrepreneurs of NGOs such as Help Age and Handicap International, of networks such as NEAR, or of UNHCR.

We could also refer, as an illustration, to the role of resistance that some donors played at the end of the 1990s when attempts were made (notably in Afghanistan - see Chapter 2) to revisit the articulation between humanitarian aid and development, or to curb an expansion of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid in the early 2000s. Or conversely, to refer to their role as critical and lead agents in recent years in the promotion of multi-purpose cash-based assistance and investment in social protection.

In short, an analysis by agent and by situation would be possible, and certainly relevant.

Nevertheless, on the basis of the observations made in the course of this research, two types of agents appear to be significantly decisive in the development and evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector: the IASC (and more specifically its core group) and the UN Secretariat (under the leadership of its Secretary General). It is not here about minimising the roles and functions of other agents, which are substantial as mentioned above, but to acknowledge the preponderant role of these two types of agents.

Indeed, it is clear that these two agents have played a central role in many of the major changes - or turning points - in the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

The role of the IASC, and particularly its core group, consists mainly of critical agent, lead agent and internalising functions.

For a conceptual framework of thoughts (or one of its characteristics) to establish itself as dominant within the sector, the involvement of the IASC (and its core group) is unavoidable (at least as long as the current structuring of the international humanitarian system exists).

In the internalisation phase, the IASC's involvement is essential because it is precisely through the IASC's policies, guidelines and approaches that a conceptual framework of thoughts is internalised, takes a concrete form and gains in stability. Without this, there is little or no anchoring possible.

In the cascade phase, the IASC's involvement is also crucial. The IASC then assumes the status of critical agent, and more generally that of lead agent. Without the IASC's support, it is difficult to change the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the international humanitarian system for which it is the custodian and coordinator (through the UN resolution 46/182 of 1991).

However, it is much rarer to see the IASC, as a collective, playing the role of norm entrepreneur, source of proposals and evolution.

With regard to the UN Secretariat, under the aegis of its Secretary General, this research has observed how important its influence is in establishing (or attempting to establish) new conceptual frameworks of thoughts at key moments in the evolution of the sector (more than in the marginal evolution of certain characteristics of existing conceptual frameworks of thoughts). In this respect, the UN Secretariat, and its Secretary General, regularly plays the role of norm entrepreneur, but also of critical agent.

We can cite here the emergence of the concept of protection, which must be understood (in part) in relation to the notion of “*indivisibility of Human Rights*” within the United Nations (1997), promoted by the Secretary General at the time, or to the Agenda for Peace drawn up in 1992.

The Agenda for Peace and the initiatives which followed (notably the policy of integrated approach as presented in the Brahimi report of 2000), also attempted to propose a new link between humanitarian aid and peace at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (but which did not take hold in the humanitarian sector as already mentioned in Chapter 2). The various attempts to revise the articulation between humanitarian and development issues are also related to the UN Secretariat's orientations and are certainly the most revealing of these functions of norm entrepreneur and critical agent. Recently, it is the general framework of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, which the UN Secretary General has voluntarily and strongly supported, which should be of interest. This framework has become a reference point for humanitarian aid through a multi-dimensional articulation of development logics based on three central pillars (economic, social and environmental). Under the impetus of the Secretary General, it is gradually becoming a central element in the way humanitarian aid is thought of.

Examining the key functions of these two agents necessarily raises questions about the relationship between the two. There is no need to demonstrate the special relationship between the IASC core group and the UN Secretariat: they are both part of the wider UN system, of which the Secretary General is the coordinator and leader.

It is interesting to note, however, that this link has been tightened recently, as a result of the many efforts to create greater coherence within the UN, as illustrated by the 2006 initiative *Delivering as One*¹²⁸. And it is likely that the closer this intra-UN link is, the greater the role of the UN Secretariat will be in the international humanitarian system as a whole, at least in its current configuration.

¹²⁸ [UN General Assembly - Delivering as One](#)

2. Articulation between diversity of agents, their positioning patterns, and the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts

Examining the interactions between agents also makes it possible to examine the positionings specific to each one and to articulate the two in order to highlight a general trend which is particularly important for understanding the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

Within the humanitarian sector, the different agents involved in or with the sector position themselves according to their own conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Their positionings reveal their manner of approaching and thinking about humanitarian aid. But, their positionings also reflect their relationship with other agents and their respective conceptual frameworks of thoughts, and more generally their relationship with the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts which, as we have seen, are constantly evolving. The agents' positioning schemes are therefore necessarily part of shifting frames of reference. As such, they do not exist independently of the evolution of the humanitarian sector and its conceptual frameworks of thoughts, nor of the agents which compose it. These positioning patterns may be voluntary, strategic, thought out, assumed, suffered, conscious or not - or all of the above - but they inevitably exist.

As an illustration, MSF currently positions itself as an agent that is regularly perceived as being in opposition to, or at least on the margins of, many of the dominant narratives and conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

Its withdrawal from the WHS in 2016, its positioning around the Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus, its way to approach emergencies, and the tensions that arose during the Ebola epidemic in the DRC in 2019 between MSF and the approach promoted by the Congolese government and the United Nations (which reflects a confrontation in the way of thinking about responses to a public health crisis in such a context¹²⁹), are just some illustrations of these singular positionings.

Its approach to emergency crises is, to some degree, the opposite of the prevailing discourse on how to consider the links between humanitarian aid, development and peace. Its strong belief in a humanitarian that is independent of politics clashes sometimes violently with the promotion of the central role of governments in humanitarian responses and a desire for a more global approach to crises.

In contrast, an organisation such as UNDP is more rooted in holistic and integrated approaches in which humanitarian aid supports the central role of national governments. Its membership of the UN system reinforces this alignment of positionings with other UN agencies which share many similarities in their approach to humanitarian aid.

From these specific positionings it is possible to map out the positioning patterns of each agent within the humanitarian sector and to put this into perspective over time in order to identify trends of evolution.

This mapping and temporal perspective makes it easier to identify, at a given time and in a given situation, the dominant agents, the followers, the innovators, the opponents, the fringe agents, the disruptive ones, etc., and how they transform over time.

As an example, we can note the evolution of the positioning of an NGO such as MSF, which was perhaps in a more central position in the 1980s (or in any case capable of creating dynamics and calls for action such as the *sans frontiérisme* movement that it initiated) and currently relegated to a more

¹²⁹ [‘Toxic’ atmosphere undermining DRC Ebola outbreak response: MSF | Ebola News | Al Jazeera](#)

marginal position that could be described as “regular opposition or resistance” to dominant narratives.

On the other hand, the ICRC's position has clearly evolved in recent years, particularly with regard to global approaches to needs, while having maintained a position of reference with regard to the idea of humanitarian aid as a distinct sector.

We can also emphasise the place and role of States which has also increased considerably since 2000, as has the role of the United Nations, which have become increasingly present and central to the structuring of the sector¹³⁰.

Going into the detail of such an analysis would allow to deepen over time the balance of power, logics of domination and influence, the marks of distinction, the dynamics of groups or alliances, the lines of convergence or opposition, etc...

But from this exercise, and on the basis of the previous observations and the material collected through this research, two significant trends for thinking about change must be presented.

The point here is to understand that the evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector is directly influenced by the number and diversity of agents which interact within, or on the periphery of, this sector.

Surpassing the control that agents can have of this landscape or their capacities to influence it, two autonomous and opposing forces develop then.

One encourages the stabilisation of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector - a stabilisation of the humanitarian object constructed previously - pushing agents in the sector to share relatively similar conceptual frameworks of thoughts, to embrace the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, and thus to reinforce the latter.

The other tends towards an extension of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector (and more generally of all conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector) - a deformation in the form of an extension of this humanitarian object - a kind of explosion in the diversity of conceptual frameworks of thoughts, shaking up the dominant nature of some.

The globalisation of humanitarian aid is an interesting phenomenon to illustrate these dynamics. The globalisation of humanitarian aid has led to an increase in the number and diversity of agents interacting in and with the international humanitarian system (and more generally the sector). This globalisation has accelerated since the second decade of the 21st century. Alongside traditional UN agencies such as WFP or UNHCR and Western international NGOs, certain States such as the BRIC countries are making their appearance on this chessboard, as are some regional organisations such as ASEAN and other institutions like the World Bank. “Southern NGOs”, local organisations and private sector actors are also more present in the current humanitarian space.

Within this space, logics of *social reproduction and integration* (which have already been briefly mentioned above) are developing, encouraging “newcomers” to integrate into the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The deeper and more stable the internalisation of certain concepts within a group, the more agents will be encouraged to integrate into these ways of thinking and to follow certain behaviours, certain social norms. Taken together, these integration and reproduction patterns maintain a certain continuity and uniformity of thoughts and actions within the humanitarian sector. The dominant nature of certain conceptual frameworks of thoughts is consolidated and stabilised, as is the humanitarian object.

For example, following the cluster reform in 2005, a certain uniformity of conceptual frameworks of thoughts within the international humanitarian system can be observed, at least for agents which were involved in the reform and its implementation.

¹³⁰ Borton, Foley, *A history of the humanitarian system: Western origins and foundations*, ODI/HPG, June 2013.

More generally, the closer an agent is to the dominant social group, the more it will be encouraged to align with the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Moreover, as mentioned in the *norm life cycle* model, the more a conceptual framework of thoughts is shared by a large number of agents, the more powerful its influence will be on the rest of the agents.

And this proximity can “stretch out in space”. Even for an agent which is often considered as distant from the international humanitarian system, there is a degree of porosity to certain conceptual frameworks of thoughts. MSF is once again an interesting example. While it regularly positions itself as somewhat distant from the international humanitarian system, but nevertheless maintains a certain degree of proximity with it (such as its regular participation in *Humanitarian Country Teams* or clusters in countries of intervention) - a sort of “one foot in and one foot out logic” - the organisation is also pierced by debates which exist elsewhere within the international humanitarian system, even if translated into its own specific terms.

It is the case, for instance, of the *Participation Revolution*, which is highlighted in the Grand Bargain initiative formalised in 2016 and consists of better integrating affected populations into the development of response plans. At MSF, the equivalent can be found, with a few nuances, and at the same time, in the concept of *people and populations as partners*¹³¹.

The issue of how to respond to the needs of populations in long-term crises and how to strengthen partnerships with national and local actors and institutions, although regularly in tension with the idea of a humanitarian aid differing from development logic, is also gradually gaining ground within the organisation¹³². This is complemented by an increasingly central consideration of climate change and the doors that this topic opens for thinking sustainability and long term in humanitarian action.

However, this diversification of agents also affects and profoundly transforms the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the whole sector, the way in which humanitarian aid is conceptualised and articulated. Indeed, each agent - because of its culture, history, mission, characteristics, internal dynamics, willingness and positioning within a broader reality, possible strategy, etc. - brings to the table its own perspectives on the manner humanitarian aid is (and should be) conceptualised and articulated. The meanings of humanitarian aid are therefore directly influenced by autonomous dynamics of interactions between agents, by what is at “played out around the table”, as well as by the porosity with other sectors in which all or some of these agents evolve. Thus, the greater the number of agents and the greater the diversity of agents, the more the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector are likely to evolve and diversify. The humanitarian object then takes on a wider form, pushing its boundaries to the point of being unrecognisable for some, and questioning the dominant nature of certain conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

The variety of debates and approaches which have emerged during the preparation of the WHS is one of the most interesting illustrations of this.

3. Conclusion

Thinking about change therefore requires examining the influences of each agent, the way in which they are a force of proposal, internalisation, stability or resistance in the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

¹³¹ See MSF OCG 2020-2023 Strategic Plan.

¹³² See for instance the MSF report “*Lone ranger no longer : MSF’s engagement with ministries of health*”, 2020.

In the current structure of the international humanitarian system, the role of the IASC (and in particular its core group) and the UN Secretariat is paramount - although this should not minimise the functions performed by other agents.

However, these interactions between agents also indicate general trends of an opposing nature, which on the one hand tend to stabilise this humanitarian object, and on the other hand widen its form and characteristics.

The humanitarian sector and its meanings must therefore be necessarily understood as a social fact, a social construct: the very concept of humanitarian aid - and its translation into action - is constantly being shaped through logics of *co-constitution*. Behind each interaction lies, to varying degrees, the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector. Thus, through operational response strategies to meet humanitarian needs and ways of approaching the reality of a crisis, or through each interaction between agents (physical or virtual), part of the future of humanitarian aid is shaped. Being involved in humanitarian aid for an agent is therefore inevitably to occupy a positioning in this humanitarian space. This positioning - whether conscious or not, voluntary or involuntary - reflects a distinct way of thinking, a vision of humanitarian action and, more generally, a vision of humanitarian aid in a more global reality. Any involvement in humanitarian aid therefore becomes an “engagement of ideas”.

CHANGES IN THE CONTEXTUAL ENVIRONMENT

The contextual environment is regularly used to inform thinking about dynamics of change, whether in International Relations, political science or sociology.

The humanitarian sector is no exception. It is not isolated from the “rest of the world” and therefore needs to be approached through its interaction with a broader contextual environment.

The observations made during this research have highlighted four main functions that the contextual environment plays on the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector:

- i) A function of stabilising and anchoring (and possibly accelerating) existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts;
- ii) A function of “putting specific issues on the agenda”;
- iii) A constraining function which puts pressure on the humanitarian sector to consider certain issues and either reinforces, accelerates or brings out dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts;
- i) A function of redistributing the positioning patterns of the different agents making up the humanitarian sector through wider geopolitical changes.

1. The contextual environment, a function of stabilising and anchoring (and possibly accelerating) existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts

It is quite common to refer to the contextual environment as a source of change in the humanitarian sector. Many studies and reports have highlighted this correlation. This is certainly valid, and the next few sub-sections will make this point.

Nevertheless, a close examination of the last thirty years of the humanitarian sector suggests that one of the main functions of the contextual environment is not so much to bring about change as to maintain and entrench already existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

To fully understand this argument, it is interesting to dwell on the succession of humanitarian crises and try to grasp the impact of these on the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Humanitarian action is first and foremost a response to needs arising from a context described as a humanitarian crisis. However, each new crisis does not always give rise to new conceptual frameworks of thoughts, open the door to new debates or challenge existing ways of thinking and acting. On the contrary.

In most cases, a new crisis is often a way of applying the existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The current conceptual recipes are applied to a new context. It is a way to further internalise the existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

This stabilising and anchoring function must be understood in this logic.

There are many illustrations of this.

The Humanitarian and Development Nexus (to which the Peace pillar could also be added, even if still fragile) is a conceptual framework of thoughts that needs to be operationalised in the various fields of intervention. The contextualisation of this approach is certainly essential; its implementation will not be the same everywhere. But the general framework is there, it is imposed on each crisis (or most

of them), it is mobilised for each crisis, and each *Humanitarian Country Team* is called upon to integrate these principles within their respective HRPs.

Another example is revealing: the humanitarian response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The scale, novelty and unpredictability of this crisis could have led one to believe that this “out of the ordinary” event could have provided an opportunity for new ways of thinking and functioning to emerge at that very moment, for a radical paradigm shift from an operational point of view. But, it was partly the opposite that happened. The crisis had the effect of accelerating certain trends already at work and of further anchoring the dominant or emerging conceptual frameworks of thoughts at that period¹³³.

Thus, very quickly (after three months in the pandemic), and under the impetus of the UN Secretary General's reports of March and April 2020¹³⁴, a global approach took over, seeking an articulation between the short and long term, and multi-dimensional in nature, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the debates on the Humanitarian and Development Nexus underway in the humanitarian sector at that time.

The Covid-19 crisis was also an opportunity to advance the localisation agenda of aid or to mobilise existing conceptual frameworks of thoughts, particularly those concerning public health crises.

Of course, this period of the pandemic has required humanitarian agents to adapt to a complex and new context (like for what concern human resource management, procurement methods and distant-working). It has also paved the way for wider debates on how to respond to this type of crisis and, more generally, how to think about humanitarian action. Nevertheless, at that moment, it was mainly existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts that were mobilised, and whose anchoring, for some, was accelerated.

The purpose here is not to refute the impact of the contextual environment on the change of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of humanitarian aid - this will be dealt with in the following sub-sections. The point is to acknowledge and briefly illustrate that the contextual environment also plays a role in anchoring and stabilising dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

2. A function of “putting specific issues on the agenda”

Changes in the contextual environment can therefore, in parallel with this function of anchoring and stabilising (and possibly accelerating), be an opportunity to participate in or provoke changes in the manner humanitarian action is thought of.

In this logic, certain crises or wider changes provide a possibility to put an issue on the agenda for future debates and reflection.

The most telling example of this refers to the development of the conceptual frameworks of thoughts mobilised during crises considered as public health crises.

These have always evolved following (and not during) a major public health crisis, giving rise to an exercise seeking to revisit existing approaches and adapt strategic frameworks accordingly. This was

¹³³ See for instance the article “*The world tomorrow: COVID 19 and the new humanitarian*”, Raphael Gorgeu, May 2020. [The world tomorrow: COVID-19 and the new humanitarian - Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog \(icrc.org\)](https://www.icrc.org/en/blog/2020/05/07/the-world-tomorrow-covid-19-and-the-new-humanitarian)

¹³⁴ - United-Nations, *Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID19*, March 2020.

- United Nations, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19*, April 2020.

the case in 2005 following the SARS outbreak in Asia, then in 2016 following the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and currently following the Covid-19 pandemic. However, other examples could be cited.

As already mentioned, the earthquakes in Haiti (2010) and Pakistan (2011) were a trigger for (re)prioritising the international humanitarian system's approach to natural disasters. From these events, and the reflections which followed, emerged notably the *Transformative Agenda* and the *humanitarian system-wide emergency activation protocol*¹³⁵.

Another illustration is the 2004 tsunami in South East Asia, which accelerated the need for a global reform of the international humanitarian system – the cluster reform - (we speak here about an acceleration in the sense that debates on the need for reform existed before this disaster).

The conflicts in the Great Lakes region and the war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s are also often underscored as key elements in understanding the emergence of Human Rights issues within the humanitarian sector and their link with humanitarian action - even if it is reductive to analyse this link solely through the prism of these crises.

To take other examples than the ones of crises, changes in the technological environment can also provide an opportunity to question certain conceptual frameworks of thoughts. This is the case with multi-purpose cash-based assistance, which opens up the possibility of challenging the approach by domains as mentioned in the historical perspective in Chapter 2.

This “agenda-setting” function is therefore important.

However, it is not deterministic in the way that a change in the contextual environment will lead to a profound evolution of certain dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Indeed, this agenda setting function is coupled with another mechanism: the mechanism by which agents and the international humanitarian system appropriate these contextual transformations and read this new reality. According to the ways in which humanitarian agents deal with these changes in the contextual environment, it may or may not lead to changes in the manner humanitarian action is conceived, and this to varying degrees.

The example of cash assistance is once again an interesting illustration. Since its gradual spread within the international humanitarian system, from 2010 onwards, there has been a debate (mainly in 2016 and 2017) between two different visions of how to read this new technology, this new form of assistance. One tended to consider cash in terms of its technical characteristics; the aim was to integrate cash as an additional (and certainly central) tool into existing modes of action, without questioning the existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts (like the approach by domains). The other was to see cash, and in particular multi-purpose cash-based assistance, as a possible “revolution” in the way to approach humanitarian aid, thus opening the door to potentially profound changes in certain dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts (especially, again, the approach by domains).

Of course, these debates may be seen as a result of agents’ influence and strategy to gain a foothold in a new field where stakes are high. This is certainly true. But whatever the logics and reasons encouraging certain agents to join one camp or the other, the interest here is to highlight that a contextual change is not sufficient in itself to bring about a change in the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. This potential change is also a function of how the international humanitarian system will seize an issue that has been put on the agenda by a change in the contextual environment, how it will read this “new deal”.

¹³⁵ IASC, *Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency Activation: definition and procedures*, April 2012. [INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](https://www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/)

3. A constraining function which puts pressure on the humanitarian sector to consider certain issues and either reinforces, accelerates or brings out dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts

In the same vein of provoking or contributing to mechanisms of change, it is interesting to observe the power that certain changes in the societal environment can have on the humanitarian sector and its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Again, the humanitarian sector is not an isolated sector. It is not impervious to broader societal changes taking place (within a society or globally).

This porosity between the humanitarian sector and societal changes is all the stronger as the societal changes are visible, powerful and global.

The issue of climate change is certainly the clearest illustration of this porosity. Having developed as a dominant societal issue, this issue has also become a constant theme on the agenda of the international humanitarian system and the IASC since 2009.

The same goes for the concept of gender within the international humanitarian system, which is itself evolving to include issues which were previously relatively absent from the humanitarian sector's debates, such as those relating to LGBT+ communities.

In some cases, these societal changes and movements can exert significant pressure on the international humanitarian system to change certain ways of thinking more quickly.

In this respect, the *Black Lives Matter* movement was particularly reflected in the humanitarian sector by an additional push to make what was being built as a humanitarian ecosystem evolves faster, by an increasing pressure to break certain systemic logics of domination amongst agents embedded in the international humanitarian system.

Generally speaking, the influence of certain visible and powerful societal changes and movements on the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector should be underlined. The porous nature of the humanitarian sector should be acknowledged here, if it still needs to be demonstrated.

4. A function of redistributing the positioning patterns of the different agents making up the humanitarian sector through wider geopolitical changes

The fourth function of a changing contextual environment which this research aims to highlight relates to the impact that the latter can have on the positionings of the different agents.

Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that the humanitarian sector does not “lock in” agents. An agent is not only a member of the humanitarian sector. It also navigates within other sectors and more widely within an increasingly globalised world.

As we saw earlier, the positionings of agents and their games of interactions have a strong impact on the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

Thus, changes in this “galaxy of agents”, in these positioning patterns, mechanically have an impact on the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, even if to varying degrees.

It is therefore essential to think of changes in the contextual environment as having consequences on this agents’ landscape and their modalities of interactions.

Changes in the contextual environment, which go beyond the humanitarian sector, can lead to certain agents or groups of agents becoming more present within the humanitarian sector or, on the contrary, fading away somewhat.

On a continental scale, we could look at the case of South East Asia and how the rapid development of this part of the world has enabled States and regional organisations (such as ASEAN) to take on an increasingly central role in the manner humanitarian action is approached in this region.

On a smaller scale, we could as well highlight the change of strategy of the World Bank from 2015 onwards, precipitated, in part, by a reflection on its role in a changing global economy, and its impact on the way to articulate humanitarian aid and development.

But, in order to fully understand the global contextual changes and their impact on the positionings of agents, it is necessary to take a step back and consider wider geopolitical changes.

One could make reference to the end of the Cold War and the predominance of “Western agents” in the humanitarian sector in the 1990s, in alignment with the global dynamics at that time. Or the return of State’s involvement in the management of humanitarian issues, which has become apparent mainly from the 1990s¹³⁶. Or the increased role of civil society in world affairs¹³⁷. Or the transition to a multipolar world, which has become increasingly visible since the 2000s.

In the context of these geopolitical transformations, it is therefore necessary to identify which agents are becoming more influential, more central, in humanitarian affairs.

Over a long period of time - far beyond the last thirty years covered by this research - this correspondence is essential to illustrate how the humanitarian sector might evolve in the future (this will be discussed at the end of this chapter).

5. Conclusion

Thinking about change in the humanitarian sector and its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts cannot be done without examining the changes in the contextual environment to which the humanitarian sector is no stranger.

These contextual transformations can, in different ways, be sources of change, sometimes particularly strong. And it is actually useful to take a longer perspective than the last thirty years to better understand the power of certain changes in the contextual environment, especially geopolitical changes.

However, this function as a “driver of or contributor to change” should not overshadow the stabilising function that the contextual environment can play on the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector.

Furthermore, the contextual environment alone cannot explain the mechanisms of evolution of the humanitarian sector. It is therefore necessary to continue this exploration of the mechanisms and forces of change.

¹³⁶ - P. Ryfman, *Une histoire de l'humanitaire*, La Découverte, 2004.

- S. Cohen, *La résistance des Etats*, Seuil, 2003.

¹³⁷ B. Badie, *Le diplomate et l'intrus*, Fayard, 2008.

The third category of mechanisms and forces for thinking about the evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector revolves around logics of internalisation which were briefly introduced in the first section of this chapter.

The main idea is that the possibility of transformation of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is closely linked to confrontations between degrees of internalisation of the latter.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that each dominant conceptual framework of thoughts is more or less deeply rooted in the collective minds of the humanitarian sector, and that each has a greater or lesser degree of internalisation. And the greater the degree of internalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts, the more difficult it will be to make it evolve or challenge it.

By extending the reflection, it is then a question of examining the impact of these confrontations between conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their degree of internalisation on the mechanisms of evolution.

Throughout this exercise, two conceptual frameworks of thoughts appear as key to this game of interaction between degrees of internalisation: the central core of the idea of the scope of humanitarian action and the idea of a humanitarian sector as a specific object existing in itself.

1. Processes of internalisation and degrees of internalisation

Contrary to an opinion, a conceptual framework of thoughts can be recognised, amongst other things, by its stability over time. It is of course not irremovable, fixed for eternity, and as such it can evolve. But it is sufficiently stable to be recognised, observed and above all to eventually acquire a dominant nature.

All the conceptual frameworks of thoughts presented in this research show a certain degree of stability. They are observed over time and guide action.

The stability, the anchoring of a conceptual framework of thoughts is possible thanks to a process of internalisation. This process allows a norm (in our case, a norm of thoughts, a conceptual framework of thoughts) to become integrated into collective minds and individual beliefs, so that it can be “taken for granted”, “not (or hardly) questionable”.

In the humanitarian sector, this process of internalisation of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts takes many forms.

It is reflected in the development of documents of reference which articulate a conceptual framework of thoughts and define its modes of application (such as the documents produced by the IASC presenting the approach to the centrality of protection or the Nexus). These documents of reference, whatever their forms, emanate mainly from the IASC, as highlighted above.

This process of internalisation can also take place in the way a system organises itself structurally to enable the operationalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts (such as the choices of technical groups prioritised within the IASC, or the development of a dedicated network of protection experts – such as *Procap*).

Finally, and crucially, this internalisation process is achieved through the concrete operationalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts. It is not just a question of setting broad policies, but of being able to operationalise a conceptual framework of thoughts. This operationalisation, whatever the

judgement that some people may make of its relevance and quality, allows for concrete applications in action, responding to one of the main characteristics of a conceptual framework of thoughts: its translation into action and its ability to guide action. This is, for instance, the main challenge at stake today in the internalisation of the Humanitarian-Development Nexus, which requires concrete implementation throughout humanitarian crises. In these periods of operationalisation, the various commissioned evaluations are moreover a tool for further anchoring a conceptual framework of thoughts (the vast majority of evaluations have the objective of evaluating the application of certain concepts, but not of assessing the relevance of the concept itself).

This process of internalisation enables dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts to acquire a degree of internalisation. And the higher the degree of internalisation, the more stable and embedded a conceptual framework of thoughts will be in the international humanitarian system. Therefore, depending on their degree of internalisation, some dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts are more stable than others. For instance, the approach by domains (although potentially revisited today under the impetus of multi-purpose cash-based assistance) is much more stable over time than the connection between humanitarian aid and peace, which seems more fragile, subject to more frequent questioning and whose operationalisation remains problematic today. The concept of the centrality of protection in humanitarian action has also been firmly established since the late 1990s, whereas the concept of the nexus between humanitarian action and development is still relatively new. Indeed, although the idea of such a nexus is not regularly questioned by a majority of agents, the general modalities of implementation have yet to be affirmed as just mentioned.

The degree of internalisation therefore plays a function of resistance to the evolution of a conceptual framework of thoughts: the higher the degree of internalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts, the more difficult it will be to revisit it.

A question however arises. Does this process of internalisation impact on the very content of the conceptual framework of thoughts that it seeks to deeply anchor and/or does it facilitate the emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts?

The observations made through this research tend to show that an internalisation process does not directly influence the possibility of emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts, even if this possibility cannot be totally excluded.

On the contrary, it would seem that a period of intense internalisation would tend to hinder reflections on other conceptual frameworks of thoughts. In this type of period, it is as if the agents' strong focus on the internalisation of a conceptual framework of thoughts leaves little mental space for discussion, reflection and revisiting the conceptual framework of thoughts concerned or other issues. In this respect, the implementation period of the cluster reform - which required a considerable effort over two years (between 2005 and 2007) - was certainly one of the poorest in terms of open reflection on the ways to think about humanitarian aid.

This observation should also be linked to what appears to be a limited capacity, of the international humanitarian system, to simultaneously process other or new conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Although it is difficult to assess this capacity precisely, it seems clear that the more one issue takes up space on the agenda, the less space there will be to address others.

As for the impact of the internalisation process on the content of the conceptual framework of thoughts it seeks to anchor, the answer is more nuanced.

Even if it appears that an internalisation process does not tend to change in depth the conceptual framework of thoughts on which it acts, the latter is nevertheless adjusted through this process, through especially an *operation of adaptation* and an *operation of simplification*.

In order to ensure that it is firmly anchored, a conceptual framework of thoughts is somehow adapted to fit the characteristics of the humanitarian sector - an *operation of adaptation*. It is not enough to transpose a concept from another sector and apply it to the humanitarian sector. It needs to be profiled in order to create a kind of “sense of belonging” specific to the humanitarian sector. The transformed conceptual framework of thoughts can then be more easily applied to the humanitarian object. This responds in particular to a need to contribute to maintaining the humanitarian object as an object in itself, the very foundation of the whole edifice of the sector's dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, as discussed in the conclusion to Chapter 2. We will return in more detail in the next sub-section to the importance of this conceptual foundation in the realisation of change.

This *operation of adaptation* is, for example, one of the elements (among others) for understanding the establishment of the concept of protection within the humanitarian sector. In this sense, the concept of protection should be seen as a translation of Human Rights issues within the humanitarian sector. In other words, it is a way of appropriating Human Rights issues by developing a concept (protection) and a definition of it specific to the humanitarian sector.

Furthermore, the success of a process of internalisation seems to pass through an *operation of simplification*, or to be more exact, an *operation of decomplexification*. An overly complex conceptual framework of thoughts must, in order to gain in depth during this process of internalisation, be simplified, *decomplexified*, unpacked in order to create a common understanding for the greatest number of agents.

To put it another way, a conceptual framework of thoughts that is too complex will have more difficulty establishing itself as a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts. It will need to be simplified, decomplexified if it is to gain acceptance in the international humanitarian system.

This is currently the case for the link between humanitarian aid and peace, whose degree of internalisation is still low and whose stability is fragile. For the past two years or so, efforts have been made to rework the content of this concept, which has met with a certain amount of resistance from a variety of agents, by differentiating, for example, the notion of peace with a “small p” and a “big p”¹³⁸.

2. Confrontation between degrees of internalisation and the main forces of resistance within the international humanitarian system

So far this process of internalisation has been approached within the perimeter of a conceptual framework of thoughts taken individually.

However, it is interesting and necessary to understand these internalisation mechanisms in a broader way. The purpose here is to observe how these conceptual frameworks of thoughts interact through their degrees of internalisation.

The observations made in this research tend to show that the possibility of emergence of a new dominant conceptual framework of thoughts, or the evolution of a characteristic of an existing one, is linked to the confrontation of the latter with more internalised conceptual frameworks of thoughts. To put it another way, the more a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension or confrontation (or is perceived as such) with a more deeply rooted one, the more difficult it will be for

¹³⁸ *Exploring peace within the Humanitarian-Development- Peace Nexus*, IASC, October 2020.

it to stabilise and internalise itself. Conversely, the more a new conceptual framework of thoughts does not clash with a very internalised one, or even consolidates it, the greater its possibilities of emergence.

For example, to take a relatively simple illustration, the internalisation of people with disabilities or elderly as priority target groups is all the more facilitated as it does not challenge other deeply rooted dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

In this game of confrontation between degrees of internalisation, two dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts seem to be particularly powerful in their capacity to facilitate or hinder the development of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts: the central core of the idea of scope of humanitarian aid, and the idea of the humanitarian sector as an object in itself.

As presented in Chapter 2, the idea of the scope of action of humanitarian aid is articulated around a central core which often refers to life-saving activities. However, this scope of action has tended to expand to include an increasing variety of activities. But, this expansion doesn't come without shocks, resistance and setbacks.

It is relevant to note here that the vast majority of these moments of resistance, regardless of the agents involved, are based on a concern about the consequences of an extension on this central core. When the centrality of this core is shaken, when it is perceived as potentially losing its central position in relation to a wider scope of action - but also to the interpenetration of other conceptual frameworks of thoughts emanating from other sectors (such as development or peace) - then there is a - temporary - tendency of contraction of the scope of humanitarian action, as if to protect the place of this central core. A *point of contraction* will necessarily be reached at a time (time which varies), which will lead to a relative and temporary contraction of this humanitarian object.

The late 1990s and early 2000s is an interesting period to illustrate this. While this period was marked by profound attempts to revisit the articulation between humanitarian aid and development, which called in fact for a continuous expansion of the scope of humanitarian action, the early 2000s saw a contraction in the scope of humanitarian aid, particularly under the impetus of certain donors. This contraction was subsequently stabilised through the cluster reform before starting to expand again, since 2016.

The other main force of resistance observed in this research project is certainly the most powerful, the most sensitive. It refers to the most deeply rooted conceptual framework of thoughts which underlies the existence of all the others: that which establishes humanitarian action as an object in itself, a distinct field, a specific sector.

If the emergence of a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension with this one (or is perceived as such), then the force of resistance will be increased tenfold. In a way, if the humanitarian sector's very existence is threatened (or is perceived to be threatened), then the forces of resistance to change will be all the stronger. This threat seems to be perceived as even greater when new ways of thinking come from outside the international humanitarian system, and even more so from outside the humanitarian sector.

The reader may have noticed that humanitarian principles have not been mentioned so far. There are two reasons for this.

Firstly, the fact that, despite numerous references to humanitarian principles in discussions and documents emanating from the IASC and its periphery, they are never, or hardly ever, discussed in their content. There is no trace of common definitions around these principles, nor of discussions seeking to articulate them to produce common narratives.

But the main reason for this absence of reference to humanitarian principles so far, and what has appeared through this research, is that humanitarian principles can be understood not as a

conceptual framework for thinking about the humanitarian sector, but rather as participating in these forces of resistance. In a way, they are “ammunition” used by these forces to maintain and preserve the humanitarian sector in its own existence. Indeed, when the very existence of the humanitarian object is threatened, humanitarian principles are constantly, or almost constantly, put forward in an attempt to resist the proposed changes.

The best example of these dynamics can be found in the resistance which has been deployed, and which the SCHR’s response (as mentioned in Chapter 2) illustrates very well, to the attempt to align the humanitarian sector with logics of stabilisation and peacekeeping, as the Brahimi report tried to do in 2000.

Overall, the articulation between humanitarian aid and peacekeeping has always been difficult to establish because precisely it challenges the very existence of the humanitarian sector, while these calls for greater synergy are mainly carried out by external agents (or those on the periphery) of the humanitarian sector and not by operational humanitarian agents.

And more broadly, these forces of resistance to preserve the existence of the humanitarian sector as an object in its own right are an additional factor in understanding the difficulties of the various calls to “break down the silos” between different sectors to be translated into action.

However, as more and more debates and attempts are made to revisit these humanitarian principles, and even to question their centrality and relevance, one might ask how this force of resistance will be deployed in the future. Will this force for preserving this idea of a specific sector tend to diminish over time, or will other “ammunition” be mobilised to maintain it?

3. Conclusion

The processes of internalisation, the degrees of internalisation and the confrontations between them are thus essential to a more informed understanding of the mechanisms of evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

On the basis of the observations made in the course of this research, several trends can therefore be highlighted:

- i) The more internalised a conceptual framework of thoughts is, and the greater its degree of internalisation, the more stable and continuous it is;
- ii) Operations of adaptation and simplification can take place during an internalisation process, resulting in a slight - but not radical - transformation of the conceptual framework of thoughts concerned by this process;
- iii) Internalisation processes do not seem to facilitate the emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts;
- iv) An intense period of internalisation tends to limit reflection, debate and the development of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts;
- v) The more a conceptual framework of thoughts comes into confrontation with a more internalised one, the more difficult it will be to emerge.
In this respect, two conceptual frameworks of thoughts play a particularly strong role as a force of resistance:
 - a. The central core of the scope of humanitarian action: the more the idea of the scope of humanitarian action expands and the more its central core is perceived to be threatened

in its centrality, the closer we get to a point of contraction which will tend to contract, temporarily, this humanitarian object, aiming to protect this core.

b. The idea of the humanitarian aid as an object existing in itself: when a conceptual framework of thoughts is perceived as a threat to the very idea of the humanitarian sector as an object existing in itself - and even more so when this perceived threat comes from outside the humanitarian sector - the greater the forces of resistance to this new conceptual framework of thoughts will be.

GAMES OF INTERACTION BETWEEN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS OF THOUGHTS

The fourth and final category of mechanisms and forces for thinking about the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector which this research aims to highlight refers to games of interaction between conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

The idea here is to consider that this evolution is also guided by the interplay between conceptual frameworks of thoughts, and that the latter are interdependent and inter-influential.

1. How to approach logics of interdependence and inter-influence between conceptual frameworks of thoughts

The objective here is to identify certain mechanisms that regulate the interactions between conceptual frameworks of thoughts, to examine how these conceptual frameworks of thoughts influence each other and to try to identify trends specific to these games of interaction.

In order to highlight these tendencies, these mechanisms, it is then necessary to mobilise a particular, original method, which aims to facilitate analysis and reflection.

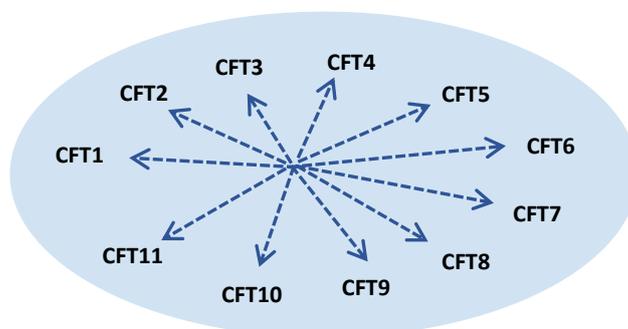
This involves understanding the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector as an object in itself, as an entity in itself, and focusing solely on this object. Working in this way allows to “put on hold” what shapes them from the inside and the outside, as well as questions about how they are produced. They are considered here as pre-existing.

To take an interest in the interplay between conceptual frameworks of thoughts amounts to “isolating” them from other variables, other mechanisms that influence them, both in their production and in their evolution and transformation.

The aim is therefore to examine exclusively conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their modes of interaction within the humanitarian sector. The approach is thus to consider the humanitarian sector as a space where conceptual frameworks of thoughts face each other, interact with each other, independently of other variables.

This means deconstructing a complex reality to focus only on the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector and trying to grasp how these interactions develop and are exercised.

This methodology can be represented schematically by the following diagram:



The humanitarian sector is deliberately reduced, for methodical purposes, to a space where different conceptual frameworks of thoughts (CFT) interact and confront each other.

The advantage of this approach is that it opens up new avenues of reflection, allowing mechanisms and forces to be discovered and which need to be taken into account when thinking about change, but which are perhaps more difficult to identify through more traditional methods.

From this diagram reduced to this original form, appear therefore dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, which are more visible, more central, which guide the humanitarian sector. Each conceptual framework of thoughts has to compose with the others, their existence cannot be thought of without examining their interactions with the other conceptual frameworks of thoughts. In some ways they must be seen as interdependent and inter-influential.

Through an analysis of the material collected in the course of this research through the prism of this two main trends can be identified.

2. Interpenetration between dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts

The first trend observed refers to a logic of interpenetration between dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

The point here is to note that the evolution of a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts encourages the others to consider and integrate this evolution into their respective characteristics. In this logic, the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts cannot be looked at in isolation. They must be approached in their interactions with the other dominant ones. Thus, a change in one can produce an evolution in another.

In a way they “talk to each other”.

When a dominant conceptual framework of thoughts evolves by integrating a new component X, this component can then be considered by another dominant conceptual framework of thoughts. The latter will then eventually have to integrate this new component X, modifying it slightly to adapt to its own characteristics.

The new component X of a particular conceptual framework of thoughts is modified into X' in order to be integrated into another conceptual framework of thoughts.

Some examples to illustrate this.

The notion of protection as a domain in the scope of humanitarian aid was first developed in the context of reflections on crises qualified as complex emergencies. The concept of protection was subsequently integrated into - and adapted to - other dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Thus, approaches specific to this concept of protection have been developed for responses to situations of internal displacement (1999)¹³⁹ or responses to natural disasters (2006)¹⁴⁰.

Another illustration is the emphasis placed on partnership with local organisations in the context of responses to natural disasters. This inclusion on the agenda in specific contexts has contributed to the integration of this issue into other contexts, such as those described as complex emergencies or protracted crisis.

A final example (although others could be cited) is the debate on urban contexts, from 2010 onwards, which has contributed to deepening the idea - throughout the humanitarian sector - of the need for

¹³⁹ IASC Policy Paper on Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, December 1999.

¹⁴⁰ IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters - Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters, June 2006.

partnerships with a wide range of actors, some of whom, such as municipalities, had not previously been taken into account in humanitarian action.

Similar patterns of interpenetration can also be observed between sectors, as was briefly mentioned in the section on interactions between agents and in Chapter 2.

The humanitarian sector must also be examined in terms of its interaction and proximity to other sectors, notably - to name but a few - the development, Human Rights and peace sectors (and increasingly the environmental sector). The porosity of the humanitarian sector with these sectors allows for additional interaction between conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The humanitarian sector is penetrated by conceptual frameworks of thoughts from other spheres. It is encouraged to consider them and adapt them that they fit into its own space (*operation of adaptation*, see previous section). Conversely, it is possible to imagine that these other sectors are themselves influenced by the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector.

3. *A limited range of possibilities and a logic of progressive evolution*

The second trend observed refers to a *limited range of possibilities* for the emergence of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

It should be considered that the *perimeter of this range of possibilities* with regard to the development of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts (or new characteristics of these) is correlated to existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is to say that a new way of approaching humanitarian aid must be able to draw on pre-existing dominant frameworks of thoughts in order to emerge and hope to be anchored in the long term. In this sense, if an evolution in the manner humanitarian aid is approached implies too great a gap from existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, then the new idea will have difficulty in uniting and finding its way into collective minds. Conversely, if an evolution in the manner of approaching humanitarian aid involves a certain proximity to existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, then this new idea is more likely to develop and take root within the international humanitarian system.

This is the way to think about the perimeter of the range of possibilities for new conceptual frameworks of thoughts that can hope to become dominant. This range of possibilities is not unlimited. Not all ideas about how to approach humanitarian aid are possible if they aim to acquire a dominant nature. The possibilities for new conceptual frameworks of thoughts that can become dominant are constrained by a logic of proximity to pre-existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

A geographical metaphor is useful here to make this clearer.

Let us imagine the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector at a given moment m as a geographical space bounded by borders. The evolution of the former thus involves a transformation of the borders of this geographical space. This transformation takes place in two ways. On the one hand, by a contraction of some of its borders when some dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts disappear. On the other hand, by an extension of its borders, a sign of the integration of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

The range of possibilities for new conceptual frameworks of thoughts that could become dominant refers to the territories in proximity to this geographical space existing at that moment m .

If a new way of thinking about humanitarian aid is outside this *zone of proximity*, then it will be all the more difficult for it to establish itself as dominant within the humanitarian sector.

The evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is therefore mainly gradual, not radical.

An interesting example of this gradual evolution is the manner of approaching long term perspectives in humanitarian aid.

While until the mid-1990s, humanitarian aid was essentially approached from a short-term perspective, the emergence of the complex emergencies label opened up the possibility of integrating long-term perspectives. Initially, as developed in Chapter 2, the aim was to think about humanitarian aid in a long-term perspective, while maintaining a linear approach between humanitarian aid, rehabilitation and development. Nevertheless, the possibility of considering long-term perspectives opened up the possibility of revisiting this linear approach and considering the temporal concomitance between humanitarian aid and development and, a little later, their articulation in a global approach.

This notion of a limited range of possibilities could also be used to explain - in part - why attempts to revisit this linear approach in the late 1990s were not successful.

Another way of illustrating this logic of progressive evolution consists in “thinking the other way around”; not to look at examples of evolution in dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, but to observe the absence of any examples of radical change; either over a short period of time or at a particular moment, in the manner humanitarian aid has been interpreted over the last thirty years.

4. [Conclusion](#)

Mobilising this kind of “reductionist” method therefore allows to highlight two trends in the way change moves, which might have been more difficult to capture with more traditional methods:

- An interpenetration between dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts.
- A gradual evolution through a limited range of possibilities.

It is important, however, to be careful not to use these processes as a totalising explanation for the evolution of certain conceptual frameworks of thoughts. Indeed, as this research indicates, there are many mechanisms and forces at work in driving change of the humanitarian sector. In this sense, these notions of interpenetration, gradual evolution and limited range of possibilities need to be placed within a wider analysis to think about change in the sense that they come in concert with other mechanisms and forces at work (such as those presented in the previous sections).

TO EXTEND THE REFLECTION

Having discovered and visited some more or less hidden spaces through this speleological exploration for a better understanding of how the humanitarian sector (and more particularly its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts) evolve, can we extend this journey a little further to bring out some reflections and lessons learned?

This is what this final section will focus on.

Continuing in such an approach is above all to share personal reflections, ideas and paths that have accompanied me throughout this research. In this sense, the objective is not so much to issue conclusions that are intended to be as objective as possible, but rather to engage further upstream in paths of reflection without claiming that they have a final destination, to open up additional perspectives that could then be explored in greater depth (or, on the contrary, set aside if they prove to be incoherent), in short, to widen the world of possibilities to be considered.

Such an exercise might seem perilous to some. For my part, it is first and foremost stimulating, as it encourages a certain creativity and flexibility in the way to approach social reality, an exercise that allows us to glimpse new potential passages to extend this exploration into the world of ideas.

1. The *autonomous nature of these forces and mechanisms of change, and the difficult question of the voluntary room for manoeuvre of agents*

The evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector (and therefore of the sector as a whole) would thus be the result of forces and mechanisms of change, that this work has sought to identify the main ones.

Artificially classified into four categories, these include:

- i) Games of interactions between agents.
- ii) Changes in the contextual environment.
- iii) Processes and degrees of internalisation.
- iv) Games of interactions between conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

These forces and mechanisms of change are social constructs, in the sense that they emanate from agents and their interactions. However, they also impose themselves, to different degrees, on agents, and the latter necessarily compose with them (consciously or not).

In a sense, these forces and mechanisms have acquired a certain *level of autonomy*. Even though they are produced by agents and their interactions, they need to be considered in their abstract existence in order to understand how they influence change of the sector and its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. They exist in a way *by themselves* (outside of the agents) and need to be understood as such, like the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector as a *sui generis* object. And this is surely one of the major interests of this research; to approach the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector as a specific object and to reveal the presence of autonomous forces and mechanisms for thinking about their evolution.

The term autonomy - and not independence - is important here because it allows to integrate the dialectical link between these forces and mechanisms on the one hand and the agents on the other (logic of mutual influence and *co-constitution*).

Such a conclusion may seem uncomfortable to some (but will nevertheless not be stranger to many currents in social sciences), as it necessarily requires acknowledging the presence of forces and mechanisms that go beyond the control of agents, as well as social objects that orient their behaviour and ways of thinking. This means recognising that social reality is also constructed and transformed through processes that are autonomous to the agents, which must then be revealed in order to better understand how the social reality is produced and moves.

Confronted with such a conclusion, a legitimate question must be asked: faced with forces and mechanisms of change that have acquired a certain degree of autonomy, what place is left to the agents in the conduct of change?

A constructivist approach such as the one used in this research discredits the notion of a “rational agent”, which would act following a conscious, articulated reflection, tending to be mastered, even if certainly complex, to bring about change.

This capacity for reflection on the part of the agent is not in question here. Each agent is capable of making choices and decisions, which it takes in a reflective manner, which it can explain (a priori or a posteriori). However, an agent, and even more so a group of agents, must also deal with these forces and mechanisms that impose themselves on it (even if they are indirectly constructed “by it and its fellows”), and which in many cases are sometimes unknown to it, or of which it is not really aware.

To what extent, then, do these forces and mechanisms dominate what an agent can think, how an agent behaves and how it can be tempted, in an articulate way, to come up with strategies of change? This question is all the more relevant as this conscious room for manoeuvre is further reduced when we examine the play of forces and mechanisms internal to each agent. This research work has deliberately treated the agent as a unified entity. But this methodological shortcut should not obscure the fact that an agent is not simply influenced in its choices and thinking by its external environment. It also evolves under the impact of internal forces, games and mechanisms which, once again, go beyond the sole will of its leaders and members, with whom the latter must deal (whether consciously or not). It would be interesting to examine these interplay of internal forces specific to agents in greater depth to complete this general picture.

The reflections that have emerged from this research, combined with my own personal experience in the humanitarian sector, lead me to suggest that the voluntary or conscious capacity of an agent or group of agents - the willingness of agents to lead change - is probably overestimated.

What I wish to express here, without questioning the voluntary influence that an agent can have on the evolution of the humanitarian sector (this has already been illustrated many times in the course of this work), is that the change of the international humanitarian system (at least in its current state) and its conceptual frameworks of thoughts is also, and I would say above all, a matter of mechanisms and forces relatively autonomous of agents, which are beyond the control of agents and of which the latter are rarely aware.

We have already cited numerous examples of the willingness of certain agents to bring about change within the humanitarian sector, such as the NEAR network with regard to the localisation of aid or UNHCR in terms of renewing the refugee approach.

But the fact remains that in-depth discussions within the international humanitarian system on mechanisms for change are mostly absent. No broad plan, no strategy, no “theory of change” (as it is commonly called) could be found throughout this work. Certainly there might be ancillary discussions or documents to which this research has not had access. But the simple fact that - if they exist - they cannot find their way (in various forms) to the level of the IASC given the latter’s central space within the international humanitarian system is perhaps a sign that broader thinking about change is

laborious, if not non-existent, and that the forces and mechanisms of change revealed here are probably unknown to some, or not really considered for others.

But then, we are entitled to ask ourselves whether, by being more aware of these forces and mechanisms at play, agents would gain more room for voluntary manoeuvre? Would it be possible to better control some of the modalities of change if some of them were revealed and taken into consideration by the agents? The question, as far as the humanitarian sector is concerned, remains open. Personally, I would tend to think so, but the room for manoeuvre gained might probably not become central to the realisation of change. The “general equation” is so complex, and even elusive (as the following sub-section examines), that it would be particularly difficult, and pretentious, to believe that we could control all aspects of how a sector evolves.

2. On the difficulty of establishing a model for thinking about change

Change in the humanitarian sector, through the evolution of its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, would therefore be a matter of forces and mechanisms relatively autonomous of agents. Would it be then possible to attempt a synthesis of the way in which change in the humanitarian sector take place, to construct a model for thinking about these changes? Would it be possible to imagine a “middle range theory” as Robert King Merton understood it?

This would appear to be very difficult, given the complexity of social reality.

But could we try the experiment with more humble objectives? What could such an exercise contribute without claiming to conclude on a complete general model?

In a way, this is the ambition of this sub-section: to reflect on the possibilities and limits of constructing a model to think about change of the humanitarian sector, not in order to reach this model, but to open up additional avenues of reflection and to highlight issues which are difficult to solve or just waiting to be overcome.

This research has therefore highlighted a number of mechanisms and forces of change which influence the evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector - the humanitarian object - which have already been recalled above.

However, the first major difficulty in thinking about the possibility of a model is that the existence of other mechanisms and forces cannot be ruled out. As already mentioned, a broadening of the material examined for this research (whether through additional documents, interviews or surveys, to name but a few) or complementary or alternative methodologies, would indeed allow new ones to be eventually revealed.

Furthermore, and a new difficulty, it is not simply a question of forces (and mechanisms), it is also a question of “fields of forces”.

These forces and mechanisms are not independent of each other. They intertwine, oppose and complement each other through complex interactions. Their weight and influence fluctuate according to situations.

Attempting to model these interactions and variations of influence in their globality appears very laborious, if not impossible at this stage of knowledge.

Nevertheless, by considering each situation in its characteristics (each evolution of conceptual frameworks of thoughts) it becomes more accessible to perceive certain modalities of these games of interaction and to grasp the relative weight and influence of these forces and mechanisms in action. For example, looking at the emergence of the concept of protection within the humanitarian sector is an opportunity to capture (at least partially) the relative weight and influence of these four

categories of forces and mechanisms, and to reveal some of their interactions (such as the growing proximity between the humanitarian sector and the Human Rights sector in the 1990s, the centrality given to Human Rights within the United Nations, the evolution of the contextual environment as an opportunity to put this issue on the agenda, the operation of adaptation giving rise to the concept of protection specific to the humanitarian sector, etc.).

In this logic, the methodology mobilised for this research, in particular through the construction of this humanitarian object, can certainly be useful, as it facilitates a certain hindsight which is essential for this type of analysis. Firstly, a “spatial” step back which consists of approaching the humanitarian object as a whole, but even more so a “temporal” step back which help to understand a given situation (and this humanitarian object) in its inscription in a long time. This temporal hindsight is all the more essential as it also makes it possible to draw on other existing works dealing with past situations.

Yet, is it possible to understand all of these games of influences and interactions in a given situation? The question remains open, but is still complex.

As for the possibility of capturing these games of influence and interaction in the moment, this is certainly even more difficult. Some observations in the context of this research project do enable us to glimpse potential changes at work, such as the development of multi-purpose cash-based assistance and social protection and their possible impacts on the approach by domains. It is possible to identify some of the forces and mechanisms at play (such as the resistance exerted by the particularly deep degree of internalisation of this approach by domains). However, it seems to me very difficult (if not impossible), in the current state of knowledge, to predict whether and how this new emerging conceptual framework of thoughts will become stably established as a dominant mode of thoughts. At best, potential scenarios could be envisaged.

Finally, and probably the most insurmountable limit, are the components of this field of forces and the very nature of its modalities of realisation not constantly changing?

Indeed, the forces and mechanisms of change revealed here are social constructs. They do not therefore pre-exist and arise from interactions between social agents. And even if they are stable, they cannot be considered as eternal, unchangeable.

In this logic, one must necessarily consider that other forces and mechanisms could emerge, while some could die out. In this same logic, one must also necessarily consider that the modalities of interactions between these forces and mechanisms, also the indirect product of social constructs, may evolve and should therefore not be considered as perpetual. And more broadly, one must also consider the possibility that these social constructs influence each other and that they can create new forces, new mechanisms of change, new modes of interaction.

In a way, the very realisation of change would bring out other modalities of change.

Over a short period of time, such as the last thirty years, such a hypothesis is not easily testable. A longer study period (but also a broader field of study) would perhaps allow it to be explored. But it would still be necessary to devise an appropriate approach and methodology.

Given all the limitations identified here (and certainly that others could be mentioned), the possibility of a model to explain and anticipate change (of the humanitarian sector in our case, and more specifically of its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts) becomes at best elusive in the current state of knowledge, and at worst impossible, thus overcoming any deterministic logic.

But even if a global capture is problematic, the fact remains that certain modalities (even if possibly temporally limited) in the way change takes place can be revealed and examined. And it also how this research can be seen: as an attempt to shed light on some of the processes at work in the evolution of the humanitarian sector, facilitating a more acute understanding of this social construction of reality.

3. What avenues of reflection for thinking about the future of the humanitarian sector?

Having looked carefully at the evolution of the humanitarian sector over the last thirty years, uncovered some autonomous forces and mechanisms of change, and considered the opportunities and difficulties of thinking about the possibility of a general model of change, it is natural to attempt to project ourselves somewhat into the future.

But while the previous sub-section has highlighted the elusive nature of such a potential model, would any attempt at foresight be doomed to failure, would it be a kind of nonsense? Certainly it would if one hopes to define precisely how the idea of humanitarian aid will change over the coming decades.

Nevertheless, this research, its observations and its analyses offer a considerable amount of material to help think about the future of the humanitarian sector. It is some of these ideas that this final sub-section wishes to share. These are based on the importance of interactions between agents in the future development of the sector.

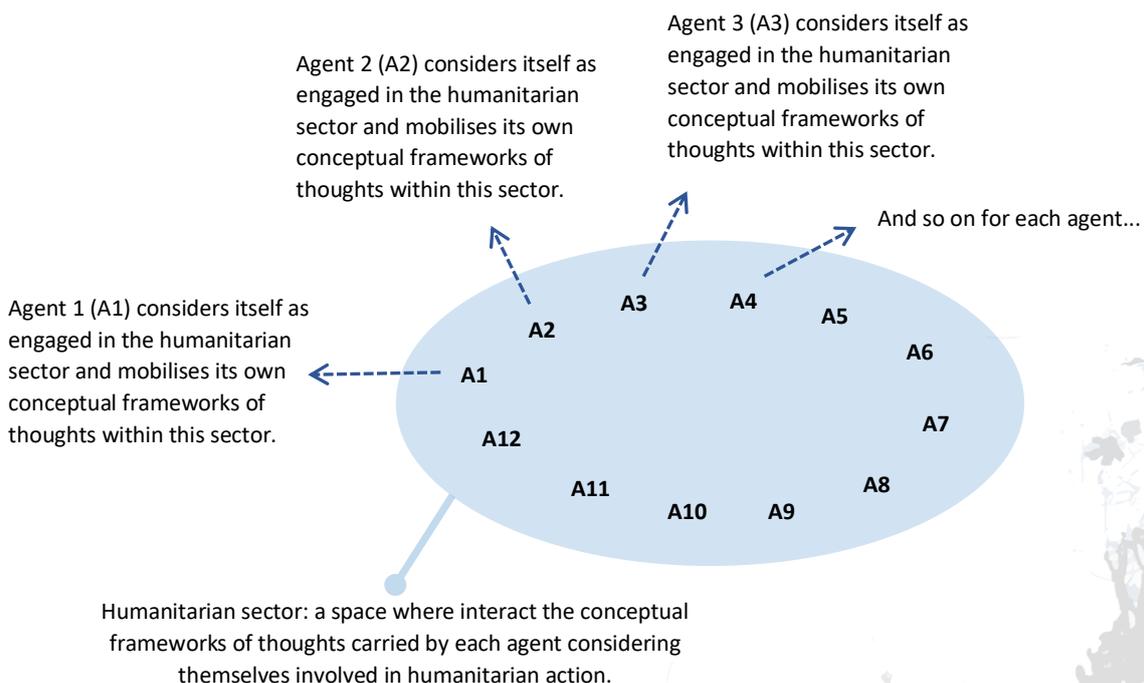
To avoid any misunderstanding, the aim here is not to propose avenues that seek to expose what would be the content of future dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector.

The goal is much more limited. The aim is to identify potential major trends, and in particular scenarios relating to the composition of the humanitarian sector, which would influence the evolution of conceptual frameworks of thoughts, although the latter cannot be predicted here.

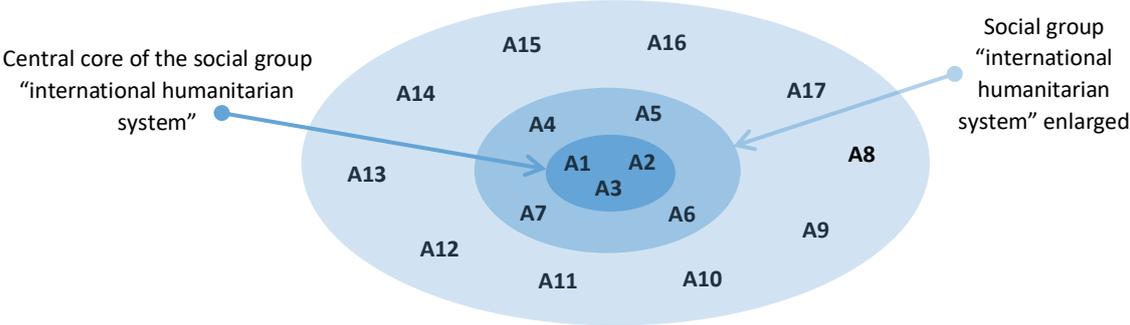
To do this it is necessary to return to the initial definition of the humanitarian sector developed for this research, which is presented at the end of Chapter 1.

The term humanitarian sector has been considered as a space in which any agent claiming to be involved in humanitarian action, even if only partially, operates and evolves. Within this space, each agent mobilises their own conceptual frameworks of thoughts about what humanitarian action means to them.

The humanitarian sector can be visualised as a space where conceptual frameworks of thoughts carried by agents and orienting their operational approaches intermingle, interact and confront each other. It has been given the following shape:



Then, a dominant social group, the international humanitarian system, has been identified and this work has sought to better understand how its conceptual frameworks of thoughts (and the humanitarian sector as a whole through a methodological shortcut) are evolving.



Thus, in order to understand how the humanitarian sector might evolve, it is interesting to look at the evolution of the dominant social groups within the sector, as they shape the sector as a whole. On this basis, three scenarios have been identified, to which a fourth will be added.

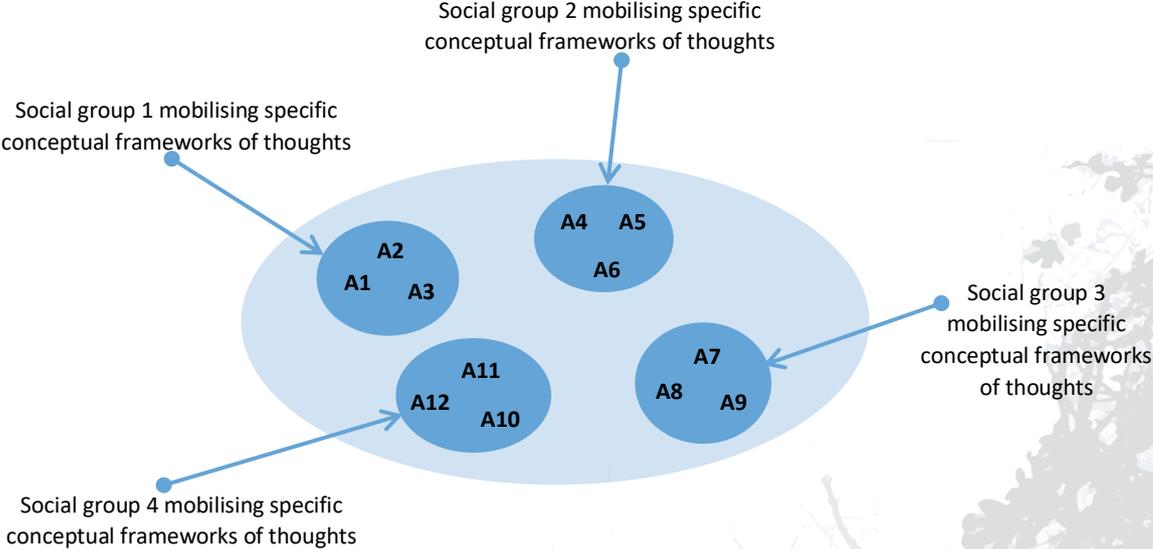
➤ **Scenario 1: the international humanitarian system as the dominant group**

In scenario 1, the international humanitarian system as currently structured remains the dominant social group within the humanitarian sector, and the same patterns apply. Its conceptual frameworks of thoughts will therefore evolve according to a complex (if not elusive) game of forces and mechanisms, some of which have been highlighted in this research.

This scenario could be favoured in the short or medium term, but it might not be possible to project it with certainty over a long period.

➤ **Scenario 2: The absence of dominant groups**

In this scenario, due in part to the increasing diversity of agents involved in the humanitarian sector, the international humanitarian system has lost its position as the dominant group, but no other dominant group has emerged.

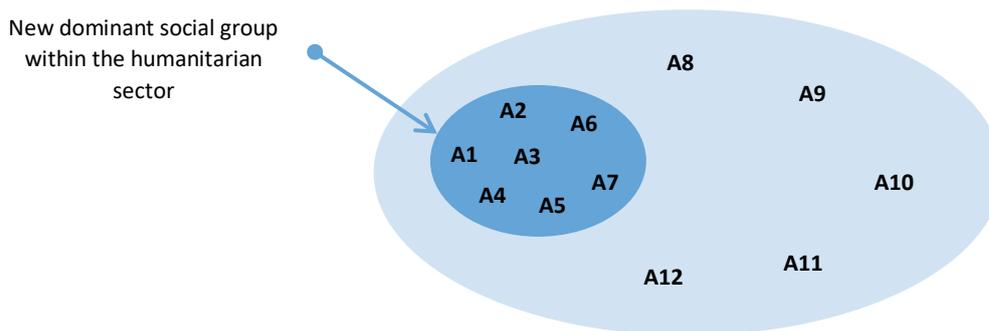


The humanitarian sector is thus stretched in many different directions, reflecting very different and sometimes irreconcilable conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Attempting a synthesis of the conceptual frameworks of thoughts (and the ways in which they evolve) of the sector would be more difficult and would require a focus on each group within it.

➤ **Scenario 3: the emergence of a new dominant group**

In this scenario, the international humanitarian system as currently structured is no longer the dominant social group, and a new one takes its place. The latter's conceptual frameworks of thoughts then guide the evolution of the humanitarian sector as a whole.



This scenario should be considered over a long period of time and certainly in the light of global geopolitical transformations if we assume that the humanitarian sector retains a strong international dimension.

Finally, a last scenario can be envisaged, that of the disappearance of the humanitarian sector, with a somewhat different logic from that of the dominant social groups.

➤ **Scenario 4: the disappearance of the humanitarian sector**

The humanitarian sector is not a pre-existing fact. It has not always existed. It has been socially constructed. As such, it is important to consider that it could very well “cease to be”.

The action it underpins – aid to populations and response to needs - could certainly continue to exist but no longer within the framework of a humanitarian sector considered as a specific sector.

For this scenario to occur, the most deeply rooted, central conceptual framework of thoughts, which goes beyond the logic of a dominant social group, must disappear: the idea of humanitarian aid as an object in itself, which was discussed at the end of Chapter 2.

How such an idea would disappear is unknown, but it could, for example, take the form of an integration of the humanitarian sector into another, a merger between the humanitarian sector and another, or an implosion of the humanitarian sector itself.

All the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector would disappear or be absorbed, integrated by/into other sectors (and thus transformed).

The humanitarian sector would no longer exist, nor would its conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The mode of response to populations’ needs - assuming that a value of solidarity remains - would then be thought out completely differently, through conceptual frameworks of thoughts which are difficult to even imagine.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

Our speleological journey is about to end. During this trip we have crossed many different spaces, coloured in various shades, sometimes winding and narrow or on the contrary, sometimes much wider, enabling us to catch our breath. We also learned to use the tools with which we tried to descend so deeply. And above all we trusted our anchors to secure us throughout this expedition.

But what should we remember about this exploration? What memories should we take with us from this journey?

Perhaps the following three key elements:

The first is to remember that change cannot be approached without looking at the world of ideas. The world of ideas shapes the way reality is interpreted and constructed. It significantly guides the behaviours of agents and the transformations of a sector. In developing this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts, the aim was to capture some of the main collective ideas about how humanitarian aid is thought about.

The second element refers to the continuous evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. Collective representations of humanitarian aid are not pre-existing and are not fixed. They are constantly evolving, continuously transforming the sector. There is no “one” original humanitarian aid that has evolved and that we should find again, as some would like. The idea of humanitarian aid is plural over time and space and is inherently changing.

The third element is that the change of the humanitarian sector, and more specifically of its conceptual frameworks of thoughts, is the result of a social construction. At the heart of this construction are forces and mechanisms of change which intertwine through complex modalities of interactions which are difficult to grasp as a whole. These forces and mechanisms are themselves also the result of this social construct. However, they would have acquired a certain degree of autonomy and would therefore go beyond the sole will of agents; a major paradox (but one that is nonetheless familiar to social sciences) while they are precisely the fruit of interactions between agents. The conscious room for manoeuvre of agents in terms of their capacity to control this change must therefore be put into perspective, even if it is by no means a question of erasing it. Such a conclusion might seem uncomfortable to some, but it nevertheless allows us to better understand the construction and transformation of social reality.

Furthermore, as an extension of this speleological exploration and the memories that each of us will have retained, what could we share with others when we return to the surface? What contributions could this trip make to the humanitarian sector and social sciences?

For the humanitarian sector, decoding some of these mechanisms of change might help to navigate them better, and thus give the sector and its agents some keys to thinking about and participating in a more conscious construction of change.

Such an excursion could also be useful to foresight exercises which consider possible scenarios for the future of humanitarian aid and, on this basis, adapt the strategies of agents and the

sector. This contribution to such exercises would be beneficial from both a methodological and a content point of view.

Moreover, for each agent, this exploration can also be a way of thinking differently about their positionings within a sector which is constantly evolving.

But, perhaps most importantly, this speleological journey is an opportunity to become aware of the influence of our conceptual frameworks of thoughts on the way we think about and undertake humanitarian aid. To become aware of this is to open the door to a new world of possibilities. It is to realise that our own conceptual frameworks of thoughts are as necessary to enable us to take action as they are limiting in the way we approach the world. To become aware of this is to allow ourselves to question them, to revisit them, to explore new ways of thinking and doing. It is the possibility of taking this play dough representing this humanitarian object and play with it, modify it, try out “some thought experiments” on what humanitarian aid could be if we revisited some of our conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

On an individual level, this is possible and particularly stimulating, even if it can be sometimes destabilising.

On an organisational scale it may be more difficult. But it is an opportunity to identify the very foundations of an organisation's approach to the idea of humanitarian aid and its translation into action. It is an opportunity to open up debates and spaces for discussion and reflection, enabling this new world of possibilities to be explored.

At the level of the sector, a degree of complexity is added to carry out such an exercise, as the diversity of agents (and their perspectives) and their interactions can interfere with a process of collective reflection which should be as open as possible.

Nevertheless, in this spirit of debate, of open reflection, of broadening the ways of thinking, one element is key: diversity. A closed social group, formatting its members in a logic of social reproduction and integration - or integrating mainly members it considers similar - will indeed tend to simply reproduce the same conceptual frameworks of thoughts (even if through somewhat different narratives on the surface). But to open up, to show diversity in the manner of welcoming new ways of thinking and doing, is to seize the opportunity to engage with this new world of possibilities, to redesign the shape and characteristics of this humanitarian object, to imagine new ways of acting and thinking. Of course, the perspectives on what this humanitarian object could and should become will vary according to individuals and agents. However, this diversity is necessary to ensure that humanitarian aid can adapt to the wider changes it faces.

Concerning the field of social sciences, as mentioned in the introduction, this theme of study has become over the course of this work an accessible object for deeper reflection on the ways in which social reality is explored, constructed and transformed. In addition to this focus on the humanitarian sector, this research can thus also be read as a broader contribution to social sciences.

Firstly, it hopes to contribute to reflections on how to approach the change of social reality. More specifically, through the socio-phenomenological approach adopted, it has sought to highlight the need to examine the world of ideas in the realisation of change. Certainly, other approaches could have underscored other processes to explain change. But the fact remains that thinking about change could not be done without this link to the world of ideas; or at least this is one of the conclusions that this work wishes to emphasise, following on from many others that have taken this route.

In addition, it attempts to propose an original concept and methodology that is intended to be useful in understanding the realisation of change.

The notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts as defined here appears to be relevant to describing and capturing the evolution of the idea of humanitarian aid.

From a methodological point of view, the constitution of a humanitarian object to be considered as a *sui generis* object, as well as the shortcut taken through the identification of a dominant social group, is also a valuable aid in trying to reveal the forces and mechanisms at work behind these transformations.

It is then natural to wonder about the application of such a notion and methodology to other objects of study. Could this work, in addition to many others and on the basis of the theoretical framework mobilised, be used to think the evolution of other sectors? Would this approach be appropriate, for example, to examine change in the development, peace and Human Rights sectors, given their proximity to the humanitarian sector? And more broadly, how can we capitalise on this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts and finetune it further? In what circumstances would it be appropriate to mobilise it? There are certainly many points concerning this notion, and more broadly the general approach used, which need to be explored, dissected and extended in order to establish such a method more firmly.

This speleological journey also opens doors for further exploration. Apart from the possibility of revealing other spaces (other forces and mechanisms of change), or even of completing the analysis as to the possibility of constructing a model of change, it would surely be interesting to reach greater “granularity”. For example, to better understand how an idea, a conceptual framework of thoughts, takes shape in an agent (before possibly extending it to an entire social group or sector). Or to examine more upstream the characteristics of a given situation in order to better understand the processes involved. We could also look at ways of articulating this approach by conceptual framework of thoughts with other ones (based on different theoretical currents or complementary methodologies) to shed light on processes of change as a whole. One could also try to understand how these conceptual frameworks of thoughts fit together, not only at the level of a social group or agent, but also at the level of the individual. In short, there are many possibilities to extend this speleological exploration.

But certainly the main theoretical issue of this research is around the nature of these notions of forces and mechanisms of change as much as that of conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

Three main questions, left open until now, must be asked.

The first relates to the very notion of forces and mechanisms. These terms have been chosen because they seem to me to illustrate in a relatively simple and clear manner the processes (or at least some of them) at work in the evolution of this humanitarian object constructed here. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to specify what they are really about. Would other terms or concepts be more appropriate to describe what this work seeks to reveal? These terms - or at least what they refer to - would certainly need to be explored further.

The second question is whether these forces and mechanisms of change - or whatever terms might be used - would apply only (or mainly) to the humanitarian sector or whether they could be transposed to other objects of study. Of course, the forces and mechanisms presented here do not come out of nowhere. Many of them have their origins in social sciences (e.g. the *norm life cycle*, the process of internalisation, the logics of social reproduction and integration, etc.). But it would be appropriate to examine in greater depth the circumstances in which they are deployed, or how their respective weight and influence evolve according to situations.

Finally, the third question concerns the autonomous existence of forces and mechanisms of change as well as the one of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The existence and degree

of autonomy are useful methodological and theoretical tools for understanding how change of the humanitarian sector takes place. However, could these autonomous existence be seen as a necessary element in the understanding of social reality? It would no longer be a question of simply referring to these autonomous existence in order to more easily understand social reality, but rather to consider them as constituent elements of social reality. Acting on such autonomous existence would require overcoming a kind of paradox: A phenomenological approach is instrumental to underline the centrality of the world of ideas in the way to read reality. However, it also means recognising its intersubjective character and, as Husserl proposed, “suspending” the question of the existence of a reality external to the individual. How then, on the basis of these same theoretical foundations, can we assert the existence of these elements as existing precisely in themselves and “outside the individual”?

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- **ASEAN** : Association of South-East Asian Nations
- **BRIC**: Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC countries)
- **CAP**: Consolidated Appeals Process
- **DAC**: Development Assistance Committee
- **ECOSOC**: Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
- **HC**: Humanitarian Coordinator
- **HCT**: Humanitarian Country Team
- **HRP**: Humanitarian Response Plan
- **FAO**: Food and Agriculture Organisation
- **IASC**: Inter-Agency Standing Committee
- **ICRC**: International Committee of the Red Cross
- **ICVA**: International Council of Voluntary Agencies
- **IDP**: Internal Displaced Person
- **IFRC**: International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Croissant
- **IOM**: International Organisation for Migration
- **MSF**: Médecins Sans Frontières
- **NGO**: Non-Governmental Organisation
- **OCHA**: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- **OHCHR**: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **RC**: Resident Coordinator
- **SCHR**: Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response
- **UN**: United Nations
- **UNDP**: United Nations Development Programme
- **UNFPA**: United Nations Fund Population Fund
- **UNHCR**: United Nations High Council for Refugees
- **UNICEF**: United Nations Children Fund
- **WFP**: World Food Programme
- **WHO**: World Health Organisation
- **WHS**: World Humanitarian Summit

